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From resource scarcity to digital leverage: A framework for sustainable technology and circular-economy-oriented social entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper introduces the theory of Digital Resource Leverage (DRL) to explain how social entrepreneurs transform resource scarcity into digital opportunity within the context of sustainable economic systems. Building on and extending the Resource-Based View and bricolage theory, the paper argues that digital transformation reshapes the logic of resource strategy from ownership to orchestration in circular and inclusive economic models. Social ventures increasingly mobilize accessible, modular, and non-owned digital tools - ranging from no-code platforms and open data infrastructures to collaborative online networks - to achieve frugal yet scalable innovation and contribute to sustainable development and the circular economy. The DRL framework conceptualizes this process as a distinct resource logic that enhances entrepreneurial efficiency, innovation, legitimacy, and systemic economic inclusion in under-resourced contexts. The paper contributes to entrepreneurship and sustainable technology literature by integrating digital bricolage into a strategic model of resource configuration and by reframing digital resourcefulness as a dynamic capability supporting inclusive economic growth. Practical guidance is provided for entrepreneurs, educators, and policymakers seeking to align social innovation initiatives with the Sustainable Development Goals and circular economy principles. This study thus offers a digitally grounded roadmap for sustainable, inclusive, and economically transformative entrepreneurship in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Social entrepreneurship continues to be a vital mechanism for addressing grand societal challenges, especially in environments where institutional voids, market failures, and systemic inequalities intersect (Mair & Martí, 2006; Dacin et al., 2010; Saebi, Foss & Linder, 2019). From rural telemedicine startups in East Africa to community-based circular economy ventures in South Asia, social entrepreneurs are building creative solutions where traditional welfare systems and private markets fall short. However, these ventures frequently operate under severe resource constraints - lacking access to capital, technology, and specialized human talent (Di Domenico, Haugh & Tracey, 2010; Sengupta & Sahay, 2017; Dimitrov, 2021).

The Resource-Based View (RBV), a dominant framework for understanding competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993), has been widely used in entrepreneurship literature (Runyan, Droge & Swinney, 2008; Williams & Shepherd, 2016; Nayak, Bhattacharyya & Krishnamoorthy, 2023). RBV assumes that firms accumulate and sustain VRIN resources - those that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and

non-substitutable - to maintain a competitive edge (Malhotra et al., 2025). However, these assumptions often fall short in the context of social ventures, which typically operate without formal ownership of key resources and rely instead on external legitimacy, fluid partnerships, and improvised practices (Kroeger & Weber, 2014; Battilana et al., 2015; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2022; Mailani et al., 2024). At the same time, the digital revolution is transforming how all types of ventures - especially mission-driven ones - mobilize, configure, and scale resources (Nambisan, 2017; Vial, 2019; von Briel, Davidsson & Recker, 2018; Kraus et al., 2021). The democratization of digital tools - ranging from cloud infrastructure and generative AI to no-code platforms and open-source databases - has unlocked new forms of access, visibility, collaboration (Ghasemzadeh et al., 2022), and recombination for entrepreneurs (Autio et al., 2018; Nambisan et al., 2019; Meurer et al., 2022; Liu, Chen & Li, 2024). Digital technologies no longer simply support operations - they shape how entrepreneurs perceive, assemble, and deploy resources (Nambisan, S., 2017; Ronzhyn, Cardenal & Batlle Rubio, 2023; Zahra, Liu & Si, 2023). Despite this, digital transformation research has largely focused on for-profit startups and scalable tech

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ventures, with limited attention to how social ventures - which often prioritize impact over scale and operate under extreme constraints - strategically leverage digital tools (Zahra, Newey & Li, 2014; Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018; D.A. Shepherd & Majchrzak, 2022; Satar et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic only intensified this urgency, making digital access not a luxury but a lifeline for nonprofits, cooperatives, and grassroots ventures seeking to sustain services and reach underserved populations (George et al., 2020; Kraus et al., 2022; Che, Wen & Wang, 2024).

In this context, bricolage theory has emerged as an important lens for understanding how entrepreneurs “make do” by recombining available resources under constraint (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Bhardwaj et al., 2024). However, classical bricolage is often localized and analog - rooted in physical, relational, and temporal proximity (Desa & Basu, 2013; Fisher, 2012; Glasbeek, 2024). Few scholars have examined how digital affordances enable a new form of bricolage, in which dispersed actors, tools, and data can be recombined at scale with minimal ownership (Lehner, 2021; Bowen & Morris, 2024; Alford & Jones, 2025). The limited theorization of digital bricolage is increasingly problematic. Social entrepreneurs today routinely use tools like Canva, Zapier, Trello, Airtable, and ChatGPT to build and automate services without any in-house development capacity. They use digital storytelling for legitimacy (e.g., impact dashboards, LinkedIn branding), peer-based learning via global communities, and crowdsourced collaboration through digital volunteering platforms (Caridà, Colurcio & Melia, 2022; Chandna, 2022; Talmage, 2021). Yet, these dynamics remain underexplored in mainstream entrepreneurship or hybrid organization theory (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Faro, Abedin & Cetindamar, 2022; Malhotra, Wright & Jarvis, 2025).

To address this blind spot, this paper introduces the construct of DRL - defined as the capacity to access, recombine, and scale impact through digitally enabled, non-owned, intangible resources. We argue that DRL represents a distinct and theoretically significant logic of entrepreneurial action that departs from both traditional RBV and analog bricolage assumptions. Building on the RBV, bricolage theory, and digital affordance theory, we develop a conceptual framework for how social entrepreneurs use digital tools to overcome resource constraints, navigate uncertainty, and amplify mission-driven outcomes. The paper makes four theoretical contributions: (1) it reconfigures RBV for access-based, digital environments; (2) it advances the construct of digital bricolage; (3) it integrates social entrepreneurship and digital transformation literature; and (4) it develops testable propositions for future empirical work. To strengthen the practical grounding of the conceptual model, illustrative examples of social ventures from different regions - including the Global South - are incorporated in the propositions section, demonstrating how the DRL framework manifests in real-world contexts.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of RBV, bricolage, and digital transformation. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework of DRL. Section 4 develops theoretical propositions and implications. Section 5 outlines practical implications for social ventures, support organizations, and policymakers. Section 6 concludes by identifying directions for future research.

Theoretical background

The resource-based view (RBV) and its limitations

The Resource-Based View (RBV) is one of the most influential theoretical perspectives in strategic management and entrepreneurship. At its core, RBV posits that firms gain and sustain competitive advantage by possessing resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable - the so-called VRIN criteria (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). These resources may include tangible assets (e.g., technology, capital), intangible assets (e.g., brand, organizational culture), and capabilities (e.g., managerial expertise), as long as they are firm-specific

and difficult for competitors to replicate (Wernerfelt, 1984; Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Zahra, 2021). While RBV has been widely adopted in entrepreneurship research (Runyan, Droge & Swinney, 2008; Newbert, 2007; Ahn, Kim & Lee, 2022; Kariv, Cisneros, Kashy-Rosenbaum, & Krueger, 2024), its assumptions are often ill-suited for analyzing resource-constrained environments, particularly those inhabited by social ventures. First, RBV typically assumes that firms own or can accumulate key resources internally (Barney, 2001; Lubis, 2022). Yet social entrepreneurs often lack the financial capital, infrastructure, or exclusive access needed to build VRIN resources (Diaz-Gonzalez & Dentchev, 2022). Second, RBV tends to be static, viewing resources as pre-existing assets rather than emergent or co-created configurations (Priem & Butler, 2001; Jyoti & Efraxia, 2023). This perspective limits our understanding of how entrepreneurs in dynamic or uncertain environments improvise and adapt resource strategies over time. Additionally, RBV's traditional focus on competitive advantage underplays the role of mission-driven goals in social ventures (Kroegeer & Weber, 2014; Battilana et al., 2015; Loukopoulos, Papadimitriou & Glaveli, 2024). In such organizations, the primary performance metric is not necessarily profit or market share but social impact, which may be achieved through non-exclusive or collaborative resource strategies that RBV does not account for. Although some scholars have attempted to reconcile RBV with the needs of hybrid or social enterprises (Kuratko et al., 2015; Faruq & Hoque, 2023; Joy, Poonamallee & Scillitoe, 2024), a comprehensive reconceptualization of resource-based logic for digitally enabled, socially motivated ventures is still lacking.

Bricolage theory in entrepreneurship

Bricolage theory emerged as a response to the limitations of RBV in explaining how entrepreneurs operate in extremely constrained environments. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's anthropological work, bricolage refers to “making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (Baker & Nelson, 2005). Rather than relying on pre-owned, rare resources, bricoleurs create value through resource recombination, frugality, and improvisation, often using non-market-based mechanisms (Desa & Basu, 2013; Fisher, 2012; Van Mensel, Dentchev, Yordanova & Diaz Gonzalez, 2025). Bricolage has proven particularly useful for understanding social enterprises in informal economies, crisis conditions, and resource-poor settings (Di Domenico, Haugh & Tracey, 2010; Senyard et al., 2009). It highlights how entrepreneurs build legitimacy, functionality, and resilience without access to traditional financial or institutional support (Williams & Shepherd, 2016; Sunduramurthy, Zheng & Musteen, 2021; Spanuth & Urbano, 2024). For instance, bricolage explains how entrepreneurs repurpose second-hand goods, volunteer labor, or community knowledge to generate social value (Sengupta & Sahay, 2017; Zahra, Gedajlovic, Neubaum & Shulman, 2009; Nakpodia, Ashiru, You, & Oni, 2024). However, despite its strengths, bricolage theory has not evolved to accommodate the digital transformation of the entrepreneurial landscape. Most studies conceptualize bricolage in analog, localized, or physical resource terms - neglecting how digital technologies enable entrepreneurs to “make do” with virtual, platform-based, or digitally distributed resources (Nambisan et al., 2019; Lehner, 2021). Moreover, the concept has been underutilized in theorizing how entrepreneurs combine multiple intangible resources (e.g., APIs, open-source tools, AI models) in dynamic digital ecosystems (von Briel & Recker, 2021; George et al., 2020). There remains a significant opportunity to expand bricolage theory by incorporating digital affordances, especially in the context of social ventures seeking to scale impact without owning core infrastructure or technology. Recent studies have begun distinguishing digital bricolage from its traditional, resource-constrained counterpart. Whereas classical bricolage emphasizes improvisation with physically available and locally bounded resources (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Desa & Basu, 2013), digital bricolage involves assembling, reconfiguring, and scaling intangible digital assets - such as APIs, platforms, and

open-source tools - across spatial and temporal boundaries (Bhardwaj, Bindra, Singh & Sahay, 2024; Glasbeek, 2024; Bowen & Morris, 2024). Digital bricolage thus expands the entrepreneur's "toolkit" from the local to the global, enabling modular recombination and near-zero-cost experimentation in virtual ecosystems.

The present paper extends this emerging stream by introducing DRL as a higher-order construct that systematically captures these digital bricolage mechanisms through four interrelated forms of leverage - Access, Recombination, Visibility, and Collaboration. Whereas prior work conceptualizes digital bricolage primarily as practice or behavior, DRL reframes it as a strategic resource logic, articulating how such digitally mediated resource recombination generates efficiency, legitimacy, and scalability advantages for social ventures.

Digital transformation and affordances for entrepreneurs

Digital transformation has become a defining feature of contemporary entrepreneurship, enabling new forms of venture creation, scaling, and governance (Nambisan, 2017; Kraus et al., 2021; Song, Escobar, Arzubaga & De Massis, 2022). Digital tools - from cloud-based infrastructure and crowdfunding platforms to no-code software, blockchain, and AI - offer affordances that allow entrepreneurs to act in ways that were previously difficult, expensive, or impossible (Yoo et al., 2012; Huo et al., 2024). These affordances include:

- Access: Entrepreneurs can now access computing power, networks, tools, and markets without upfront investment (Autio et al., 2018; Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020; D.A. Shepherd & Majchrzak, 2022).
- Recombination: Digital tools can be combined into modular workflows, allowing rapid prototyping, iterative development, and scale (von Briel et al., 2018; Marion & Fixson, 2021).
- Scalability: Digital ventures can grow with minimal marginal costs, enabling social entrepreneurs to reach underserved populations efficiently (Del Giudice et al., 2021).
- Collaboration: Platforms enable crowd-based collaboration, open innovation, and remote partnerships (Chiambaretto, Massé & Mirc, 2019; D.A. Shepherd & Majchrzak, 2022).

While entrepreneurship scholars have begun theorizing how digitalization changes venture creation (Nambisan et al., 2019; von Briel, Davidsson & Recker, 2018), its implications for social entrepreneurship are underexplored. Most digital entrepreneurship literature focuses on high-growth tech startups or platform businesses, overlooking mission-driven ventures in the nonprofit, informal, or hybrid sectors (George et al., 2020; Zahra et al., 2014). Similarly, research on digital transformation in organizations has prioritized incumbent firms (Vial, 2019), with little attention to how early-stage social ventures or grassroots entrepreneurs leverage digital tools. This paper fills this gap by linking digital affordances with resource mobilization strategies in social entrepreneurship. It argues that digital technologies are not merely tools for efficiency or scale - they fundamentally alter the logic of resources, enabling entrepreneurs to build social value through non-owned, digitally recombined, and externally leveraged assets.

Conceptual framework: digital resource leverage in social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurs have long been celebrated for their ingenuity in operating under constraints. Where conventional firms pursue optimization and efficiency, social ventures often survive by navigating uncertainty and mobilizing non-traditional resources (Di Domenico, Haugh & Tracey, 2010; Desa & Basu, 2013). However, the proliferation of digital tools is beginning to reconfigure what counts as a "resource" and how entrepreneurs engage with them. In digitally mediated environments, entrepreneurs increasingly access rather than own, recombine rather than accumulate, and leverage visibility and collaboration

rather than traditional capital. This shift suggests a need to move beyond the classic Resource-Based View and toward a new, digitally attuned resource logic.

We introduce the concept of DRL to capture this emerging logic. We define DRL as the strategic use of digitally accessible, non-owned, and recombinable tools, platforms, and networks to generate value in social entrepreneurship. Unlike traditional RBV, which emphasizes proprietary control over valuable assets (Barney, 1991), DRL reflects a logic of access, fluidity, and networked configuration - more closely aligned with the operational reality of today's social entrepreneurs. The rise of digital affordances (Yoo et al., 2012; Belitski, Korosteleva & Piscitello, 2023) allows entrepreneurs to act without the same level of tangible capital or internal infrastructure once required to create value. Through tools such as crowdfunding platforms, open-source software, low-code/no-code development environments, and digital storytelling channels, entrepreneurs can reach stakeholders, build legitimacy, and experiment with solutions - all while maintaining a low-cost structure. These developments necessitate a reconceptualization of resource strategy and form the basis of the framework proposed in this paper.

DRL thus builds upon the logic of digital bricolage but extends it beyond improvisational action. It conceptualizes digital bricolage as part of a broader strategic architecture in which social entrepreneurs intentionally orchestrate digital resources across open platforms, rather than merely "making do." This distinction clarifies DRL's contribution as a systematic, capability-oriented framework rather than a situational behavioural model.

While prior frameworks such as the Resource-Based View (RBV) emphasize ownership and control of valuable resources (Barney, 1991) and bricolage theory highlights improvisational "making do" with what is locally available (Baker & Nelson, 2005), neither fully captures how digital environments transform resource logics through access, modularity, and orchestration. Similarly, existing digital-entrepreneurship and affordance models (e.g., Yoo et al., 2012; Nambisan, 2017; von Briel & Recker, 2021) primarily describe enabling conditions of digitalization rather than articulating how these affordances are strategically leveraged under resource constraints. The DRL framework bridges these perspectives by integrating the structural logic of RBV, the improvisational logic of bricolage, and the enabling logic of digital affordances into a single capability-oriented model. Its novelty lies in theorizing DRL as a dynamic process that transforms scarcity into opportunity through systematic orchestration of non-owned, recombinable digital resources.

From scarcity to digital leverage: reframing resource strategy

In the traditional RBV, scarcity is a barrier to entry, and advantage arises from exclusive possession of critical resources. In contrast, the logic of DRL recognizes digital abundance and interconnectedness as opportunity spaces. Social entrepreneurs, particularly those operating in under-resourced or institutionally weak environments, are increasingly capable of leveraging digital infrastructures to amplify their efforts (George et al., 2020; Del Giudice et al., 2021). This shift parallels, but differs from, the bricolage perspective. Bricolage emphasizes creative recombination under constraints (Baker & Nelson, 2005) but remains largely physical and localized in its conceptualization. The emerging practice of digital bricolage - the assemblage of disparate digital tools, data sources, and community assets into coherent, functional solutions - has not been sufficiently theorized. Digital bricolage expands the bricoleur's toolset into the intangible, modular, and globally accessible domain. DRL thus unites these strands, capturing the strategic deployment of digital resources by social ventures in ways that transcend both RBV's ownership model and bricolage's improvisational constraints.

Dimensions of digital resource leverage

Drawing from digital entrepreneurship literature, affordance theory, and empirical patterns in social enterprise practice, we identify four

interrelated dimensions that constitute DRL: Access Leverage, Recombination Leverage, Visibility Leverage, and Collaboration Leverage. Together, these dimensions form the foundation of the proposed framework.

Access leverage refers to the capacity to utilize resources without owning them, made possible by digital infrastructures. This includes cloud services, free platforms, open-source software, and tools available through freemium models. Rather than acquiring or developing proprietary tools, entrepreneurs use what is available to them in the digital commons (von Briel & Recker, 2021). For example, an environmental social venture may build an impact dashboard using free APIs and no-code platforms, avoiding the costs of custom software development. Access leverage marks a departure from RBV's emphasis on internal control. Here, the strategic advantage lies not in ownership but in knowing what to access, when, and how to integrate it efficiently. In digital environments, resources are modular and combinable. Recombination leverage refers to the strategic bundling of tools, platforms, or digital content into novel configurations that create unique value (Nambisan, 2017; Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020). Entrepreneurs can integrate scheduling software with CRM platforms, link payment systems with community apps, or combine mapping tools with data dashboards - often without technical expertise. This dimension connects to bricolage's logic of "making do," but in a digitally scalable and replicable way. It enhances strategic agility, enabling rapid experimentation and continuous improvement, a key feature in socially complex and rapidly changing environments.

Digital visibility - achieved through social media, storytelling platforms, digital PR, and online communities - is increasingly a resource in its own right (Saebi, Foss & Linder, 2019). Visibility leverage refers to the ability of social ventures to gain legitimacy, attract support, and signal credibility through digital presence. In traditional RBV,

reputation is an internal intangible asset. In digital settings, reputation is networked, dynamic, and amplifiable. A well-timed viral campaign, an endorsement from a digital influencer, or transparent data sharing on a website can generate support, donors, or even partnerships with little or no cost. Digital platforms enable new forms of collaboration, including crowdsourcing, digital volunteering, co-creation communities, and cross-sector online partnerships (Chiambaretto et al., 2019). Collaboration leverage reflects the ability to harness collective intelligence and co-develop solutions, distributing effort across a digitally connected network. This dimension reflects an evolved form of social capital - one that transcends physical boundaries and temporal limitations. It is especially powerful in social ventures, where mission alignment often catalyzes volunteer or partner engagement beyond financial incentives (Branzei & Zietsma, 2003; Haigh et al., 2015).

Integrating the framework

These four dimensions do not act independently but are mutually reinforcing. Access enables recombination; recombination increases visibility through innovation; visibility attracts collaboration; and collaboration feeds access to new resources. The framework reflects a cyclical logic of resource creation, rather than a linear model of resource acquisition. Fig. 1 presents the conceptual framework of Digital Resource Leverage, highlighting how access, recombination, visibility, and collaboration interact to transform resource scarcity into strategic outcomes in social entrepreneurship.

In contrast to the RBV, where competitive advantage is protected through exclusivity, DRL is amplified through openness. And unlike traditional bricolage, which is rooted in necessity and often invisible, digital bricolage becomes a deliberate strategic choice - a model for lean, flexible, and high-impact innovation. The following section formalizes

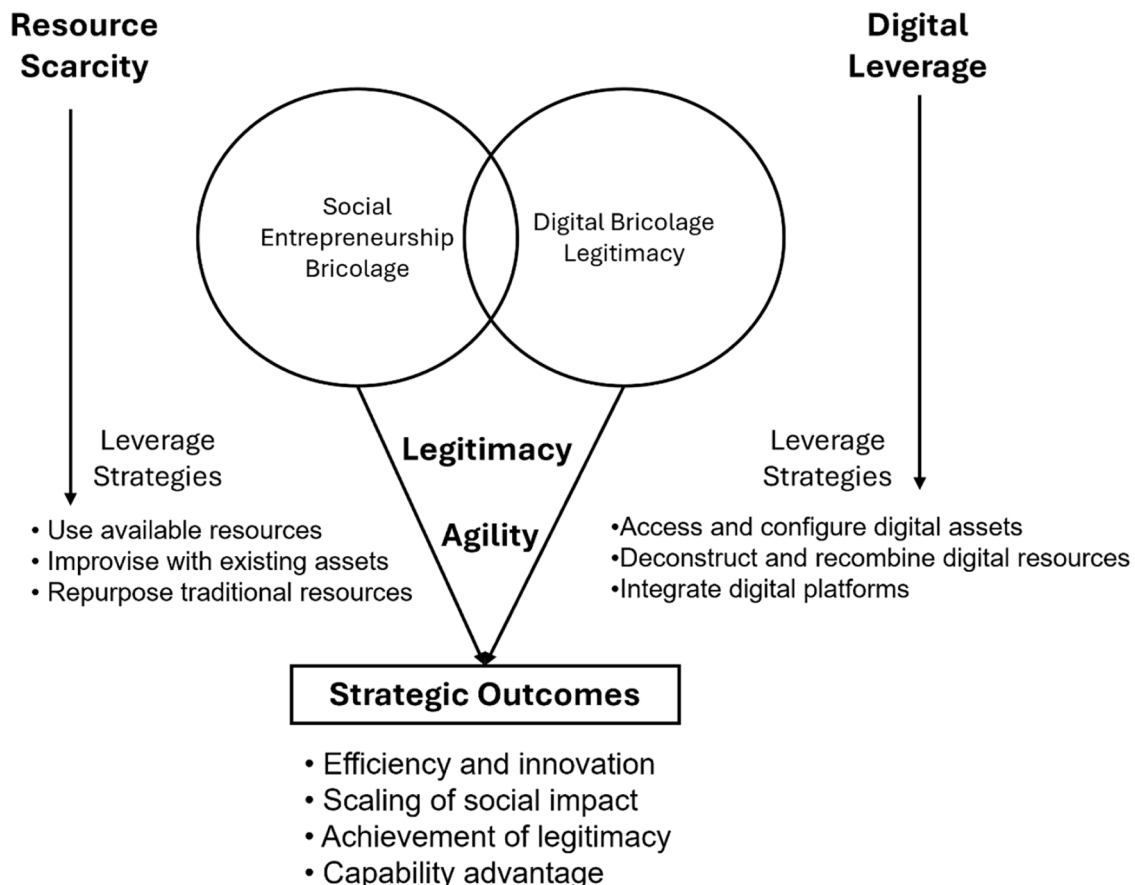


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework: From resource scarcity to digital leverage in social entrepreneurship.

these relationships through six theoretical propositions that connect the four dimensions of DRL to entrepreneurial outcomes.

Theoretical propositions and implications

The proposed construct of DRL offers a theoretical lens for understanding how social ventures mobilize, configure, and scale resources in digitally mediated environments. By challenging the traditional assumptions of ownership and internal accumulation in the Resource-Based View (RBV) and extending bricolage theory to the digital domain, we shift the focus from physical possession to digitally enabled orchestration and improvisation. This section formalizes the key theoretical insights derived from the four leverage dimensions of the DRL framework and articulates testable propositions to guide future empirical work. To illustrate the practical grounding of the theoretical model, each proposition below is accompanied by brief real-world examples drawn from social ventures across different regions and sectors.

Reframing resource mobilization in digital social ventures

RBV posits that sustainable competitive advantage stems from the possession of VRIN resources (Barney, 1991). However, in the digital age, particularly for social ventures operating under resource constraints, strategic access to modular, non-owned digital resources may confer equivalent or even superior value creation potential.

Proposition 1. (Access Leverage: Efficiency Advantage): *Social ventures that strategically utilize non-owned digital resources (e.g., cloud-based tools, no-code platforms) will demonstrate higher resource efficiency and adaptive capacity than those relying on traditional ownership-based strategies.*

For example, rural telemedicine startups in Kenya have adopted open-source health information platforms and low-cost mobile diagnostic tools to deliver medical consultations in remote areas without investing in proprietary hospital IT systems. Such ventures illustrate how access to non-owned digital resources - enabled by public digital infrastructures - can dramatically enhance efficiency and adaptability in resource-scarce environments (George, Merrill & Schillebeeckx, 2020).

Strategic agility through digital recombination

Recombination logic, central to bricolage and digital entrepreneurship, emphasizes the modular integration of digital tools into novel value-creating bundles. This capability is vital for social ventures that must frequently pivot and innovate under resource constraints.

Proposition 2. (Recombination Leverage: Innovation Advantage): *Social ventures that demonstrate a higher degree of digital recombination capability will achieve greater strategic agility and innovation performance than those using rigid, single-purpose systems.*

Illustratively, Indian microfinance platforms have integrated mobile payment gateways, WhatsApp-based client communication, and cloud credit-scoring services to create innovative financial inclusion models without owning core banking infrastructure. This modular recombination of digital tools demonstrates how recombination leverage enables innovation agility under severe resource constraints (Chandna, 2022).

Digital visibility and perceived legitimacy

Digital storytelling, social media presence, and transparent dashboards enhance visibility and legitimacy in ways that traditional certifications and formal assets cannot match in the current entrepreneurial landscape.

Proposition 3. (Visibility Leverage: Legitimacy Advantage): *Social ventures that actively manage their digital visibility (e.g., through online*

storytelling and transparent impact reporting) will exhibit higher perceived legitimacy and stakeholder engagement than those without such practices.

For instance, circular-economy ventures in Indonesia have used Instagram campaigns and open-access impact dashboards to communicate transparency and social outcomes, thereby gaining recognition from local governments and international donors. These examples show how digital visibility enhances legitimacy and trust even when material resources are limited (Caridà, Colurcio & Melia, 2022).

Collaboration leverage and impact scaling

Digital tools allow ventures to access distributed skills, knowledge, and labour through online communities, remote volunteers, and expert crowdsourcing - critical for scaling impact.

Proposition 4. (Collaboration Leverage: Network Advantage): *Social ventures that engage in digitally enabled collaborations (e.g., digital volunteerism, crowdsourced problem-solving) will scale their social impact more effectively than those relying solely on internal or local resources.*

A compelling example comes from African edtech ventures that crowdsourced curriculum translations and digital learning content through global volunteer platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. By engaging distributed collaborators online, these enterprises scaled educational reach across languages and regions with minimal financial input (Nakpodia, Ashiru, You & Oni, 2024).

Synergistic integration of leverage logics

While each leverage type yields independent benefits, their integration produces compounding effects. Ventures that can combine multiple forms of digital leverage are positioned to outperform peers on resilience, speed, and impact.

Proposition 5. (Synergy Effect: Configurational Advantage): *The combined use of access, recombination, visibility, and collaboration leverage will generate nonlinear gains in entrepreneurial effectiveness, especially in dynamic or resource-scarce environments.*

An illustrative case is found in Latin American civic-tech organizations that simultaneously leveraged free cloud infrastructures for data access, combined open-source mapping and reporting tools for real-time monitoring, launched transparency campaigns on social media, and coordinated volunteer coders worldwide. This integrated use of access, recombination, visibility, and collaboration leverage demonstrates how synergistic configurations generate amplified social impact (Meurer, Waldkirch, Schou, Bucher & Burmeister-Lamp, 2022).

Reframing resourcefulness as digital capability

Rather than viewing digital tool use as a technical skill, we propose that resourceful orchestration of digital assets constitutes a dynamic capability in its own right - essential for hybrid, impact-driven ventures.

Proposition 6. (Digital Resourcefulness: Capability Advantage): *The ability to identify, configure, and orchestrate digital tools - digital resourcefulness - will positively correlate with the overall performance and resilience of social ventures.*

For example, Bangladeshi women-led social enterprises have shown remarkable digital resourcefulness by orchestrating mobile payment applications, Facebook storefronts, and remote mentoring networks to sustain operations and expand customer bases despite limited infrastructure or formal investment. These patterns underscore digital resourcefulness as a dynamic entrepreneurial capability fostering long-term resilience (Faruq & Hoque, 2023).

Compared with prior conceptualizations of digital bricolage and access-based resource use, the DRL framework offers an integrated

perspective that systematically connects four interdependent leverage logics - access, recombination, visibility, and collaboration - to entrepreneurial outcomes. While previous models emphasize improvisational behaviour or isolated mechanisms, DRL advances a capability-based architecture that can be empirically operationalized and compared across social-venture contexts.

Implications for theory

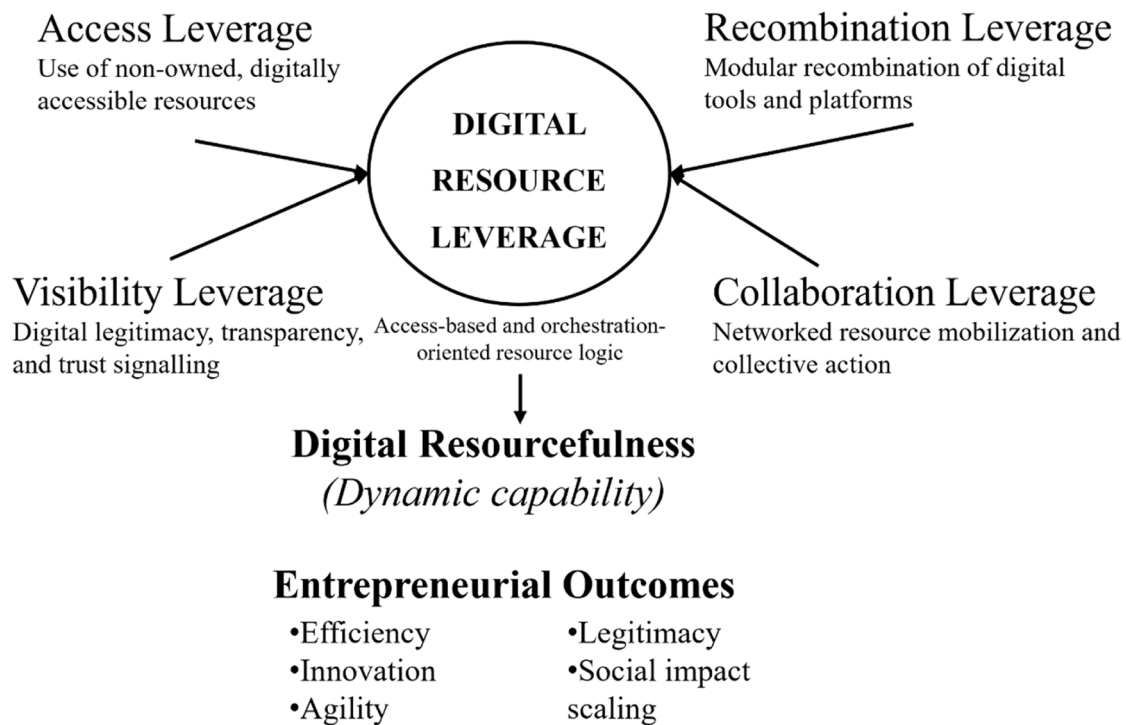
The framework and propositions advanced in this paper contribute to four interrelated streams of literature and offer a foundation for future theoretical refinement:

- 1) Resource-Based View (RBV): We challenge the traditional assumption that sustainable advantage must derive from owned or rare resources. Instead, we introduce access-based strategic advantage as a valid and increasingly relevant alternative in digitally connected, resource-constrained contexts (Autio et al., 2018; Del Giudice et al., 2021).
- 2) Bricolage Theory: We extend bricolage beyond its analog roots by proposing a model of digital bricolage that reflects the tools and configurations used by modern entrepreneurs - particularly those in social ventures (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Desa & Basu, 2013).

- 3) Social Entrepreneurship: We add a missing digital dimension to the literature on resource mobilization in mission-driven ventures. This aligns with calls to embed digitalization into social innovation theory and practice (George et al., 2020; Kraus et al., 2022).
- 4) Digital Entrepreneurship and Affordance Theory: We reconceptualize digital affordances not just as enabling conditions but as building blocks of strategic resource leverage - especially critical in environments of uncertainty, inequality, or underfunding (Yoo et al., 2012; Vial, 2019).

The concept of DRL reframes entrepreneurial resource theory for the digital age by emphasizing access-based and orchestration-oriented logics. As elaborated in Section 3.2, the framework integrates four interrelated forms of digital leverage that collectively shape resource mobilization and opportunity creation in social entrepreneurship. Unlike prior models that treat resource access, bricolage, and digital affordances as separate phenomena, DRL explicitly integrates them into a unified, operationalizable capability framework for social ventures. Fig. 2 presents a visual synthesis of these theoretical relationships, linking the DRL dimensions with entrepreneurial outcomes.

The model also captures the dynamic interactions among the DRL dimensions and their cumulative effects on outcomes such as agility, resource efficiency, innovation, and stakeholder trust, as elaborated earlier. At the centre of the framework lies DRL as an integrative



Theoretical contribution

- Extends Resource-Based View (RBV)
- Expands bricolage theory into the digital domain
- Reframes resource strategy in social entrepreneurship

Practical relevance

- Social entrepreneurs
- Educators and incubators
- Policymakers and ecosystem builders

Fig. 2. Digital Resource Leverage: four leverage dimensions and their strategic outcomes.

capability that bundles access, recombination, visibility and collaboration into a coherent resource logic. Together, these elements offer a foundation for both future empirical testing and practical application across diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Practical implications

The DRL framework does not merely contribute conceptually to the resource mobilization literature; it introduces actionable principles with the potential to reshape how social entrepreneurship is practiced, supported, and governed. Building on existing gaps identified in prior research (Desa & Basu, 2013; George et al., 2020), DRL proposes an alternative path toward scalable impact - one based not on resource ownership but on access, modularity, and digitally enabled orchestration. This section outlines the implications for three key stakeholder groups: social entrepreneurs, support institutions, and policymakers. As shown in Table 1, the four dimensions of DRL contribute to distinct but interconnected Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015).

Taken together, the mappings in Table 1 highlight how Digital Resource Leverage functions as a cross-cutting enabler of sustainability goals rather than a one-to-one intervention. This reinforces DRL's role as a systemic capability rather than a tool-specific mechanism. To enhance practical applicability, this section now provides concrete examples of digital tools, training approaches, and policy initiatives that operationalize the four DRL dimensions for different stakeholder groups.

Implications for social entrepreneurs

For entrepreneurs operating in contexts of resource scarcity or institutional voids, DRL reframes entrepreneurial resourcefulness as a digitally mediated dynamic capability (Teece, 2007; Autio et al., 2018). Rather than pursuing capital accumulation or proprietary technologies, founders can adopt a more frugal, flexible approach - drawing on free or low-cost digital infrastructures such as no-code tools, APIs, cloud-based CRMs, and collaborative platforms (von Briel & Recker, 2021). This digital orchestration not only reduces startup costs and time-to-impact

Table 1
Alignment of Digital Resource Leverage dimensions with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015).

DRL Dimension	Core Mechanism	Relevant SDGs	Illustrative Impact Pathway
Access Leverage	Democratizes entry to digital tools and infrastructures	SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)	Expands inclusion by lowering technological and financial barriers for marginalized entrepreneurs.
Recombination Leverage	Combines modular digital tools for innovation	SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure)	Stimulates frugal, scalable innovation and job creation through open digital ecosystems.
Visibility Leverage	Uses digital storytelling and transparency to build legitimacy	SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)	Promotes accountability and ethical operations via transparent impact communication.
Collaboration Leverage	Fosters cross-sector and global cooperation	SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), SDG 13 (Climate Action)	Enables multi-stakeholder alliances and digital volunteering for collective sustainability outcomes.

but also opens opportunities for inclusive participation, especially for youth, women, or marginalized entrepreneurs who may lack traditional assets (Kraus et al., 2022). Moreover, DRL aligns with new forms of legitimacy-building - where visibility and transparency through digital storytelling or open dashboards can replace the institutionalized signals (such as patents or awards) emphasized in traditional venture creation (Saebi, Foss & Linder, 2019).

In this sense, digital bricolage is increasingly enacted as a deliberate strategic practice, one that allows social ventures to maintain high responsiveness to changing community needs while remaining lean and mission-aligned (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Nambisan et al., 2019). Practical actions include mapping existing no-code or low-cost digital tools (e.g., Notion, Airtable, Trello, Zapier, Canva) against the venture's value-creation activities and selecting those that enable rapid prototyping or automation. Entrepreneurs can also join online peer-learning communities such as TechSoup or Open Social Innovation networks to access shared templates, APIs, and mentorship. Integrating DRL into daily operations thus becomes a structured exercise in resource orchestration rather than ad-hoc improvisation.

Implications for educators, incubators, and support organizations

The DRL framework has profound implications for entrepreneurship education and incubation, which remain largely anchored in Silicon Valley-style startup models emphasizing ownership, pitch decks, and equity funding (Morris et al., 2013). These models often exclude the lived realities of social entrepreneurs, particularly in emerging economies where digital access and informal learning networks are the true lifelines of innovation. Instead, programs should teach digital fluency as a form of strategic literacy - empowering learners to combine modular tools into functioning ventures, test minimum viable solutions, and iterate with real-time stakeholder feedback (Haeffliger et al., 2021). Resource-mapping exercises must evolve to include intangible and networked assets - such as digital reputation, user communities, and open-source knowledge bases.

Studies on digitally enabled entrepreneurship (Nambisan, 2017; Yoo et al., 2012) support the idea that experiential, tool-based learning accelerates venture readiness more effectively than traditional business planning alone. Incubators can play a catalytic role by curating toolkits, facilitating peer exchanges, and promoting a learning-by-doing logic that mimics real-world entrepreneurial environments.

Incubators and universities can translate DRL principles into teaching modules and toolkits. For instance, programs may include hands-on labs using Microsoft Power Platform, Google Workspace, or open-source automation suites to teach digital recombination and access leverage. Educators can design "digital-bricolage sprints" where student teams must prototype a social-impact idea using only free or open tools. Incorporating DRL metrics into mentoring dashboards will help measure digital-capability development among participants.

Implications for policymakers and ecosystem builders

At the macro level, DRL prompts a fundamental rethinking of how innovation ecosystems are constructed - particularly in contexts where infrastructure gaps and digital divides persist. While policies focusing on capital access, tax incentives, or legal formality remain important (Zahra et al., 2009), they often fail to enable entrepreneurial resilience or digital agility. Instead, public policy should aim to foster digital inclusion as entrepreneurial infrastructure - treating broadband access, mobile networks, and public cloud services as foundational enablers, not luxury enhancements (Vial, 2019). Governments can also partner with platform companies to offer social ventures discounted access to AI tools, design suites, or collaborative workspaces. Embedding digital skill-building and strategic bricolage into public programs aligns with broader development agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)

and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). Ecosystem builders can further democratize innovation by supporting cross-sector collaborations that mobilize not just capital, but data, tools, and distributed talent.

Concrete measures include establishing public/private partnerships that provide discounted cloud subscriptions and AI-tool access for social ventures; integrating digital-literacy modules into national SME-support programs; and recognizing DRL-based practices in grant-evaluation criteria. Policymakers can also facilitate open-data exchanges and sandbox regulations to support experimentation without excessive administrative burden. In sum, DRL expands the conventional boundaries of what counts as a resource, who can be an entrepreneur, and how ventures scale impact. It calls on all ecosystem actors to adopt a more flexible, inclusive, and digitally literate understanding of social innovation - one that embraces constraint as a condition for creativity and connection. To clarify how the Digital Resource Leverage framework translates into actionable guidance for different ecosystem actors, Fig. 3 summarizes the practical implications of DRL for social entrepreneurs, educators and incubators, and policymakers.

Table 2 summarizes how the DRL framework can be operationalized by different stakeholder groups, outlining representative tools, activities, and expected outcomes that translate the theoretical dimensions of access, recombination, visibility, and collaboration into practice.

Moreover, national or regional innovation strategies should recognize DRL as a formal pillar of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems, especially in developing contexts where capital is scarce, but creativity is abundant. In sum, this framework provides a pragmatic roadmap for multiple actors seeking to unlock the potential of digital transformation in service of social impact. It highlights not only what is now possible, but what is strategically necessary in an age where entrepreneurial success is increasingly defined by one's capacity to leverage digital abundance in the face of physical scarcity.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a conceptual framework DRL to explain how social entrepreneurs mobilize digitally accessible, non-owned, and recombinable resources to overcome traditional barriers to impact, growth, and resilience. Rooted in a critical synthesis of the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991), bricolage theory (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Desa & Basu, 2013), and digital transformation literature (Nambisan, 2017; Yoo et al., 2012), the framework responds to an urgent theoretical and practical need: how to reconceptualize resource strategy in mission-driven ventures operating under conditions of chronic scarcity and institutional voids. By identifying four interrelated dimensions of DRL, the framework clarifies how digitally mediated

Table 2

Practical operationalization of the Digital Resource Leverage framework for key stakeholder groups.

Stakeholder Group	Example Tools / Actions	Expected Outcome
Social Entrepreneurs	No-code tools (Airtable, Canva, Zapier); Digital communities (TechSoup)	Increased efficiency and scalability
Educators & Incubators	DRL-based curricula; Digital-bricolage sprints	Enhanced digital capability & experiential learning
Policymakers	Subsidized AI/cloud programs; Open-data partnerships	Inclusive digital ecosystems & SDG alignment

access and orchestration shape contemporary resource mobilization in social entrepreneurship. In doing so, it extends the RBV by introducing access-based resource configurations (Autio et al., 2018), redefines bricolage in digitally mediated environments (von Briel & Recker, 2021), and builds bridges between the fields of social entrepreneurship and digital innovation (George et al., 2020; Kraus et al., 2022).

The theoretical propositions derived from this framework offer a basis for future empirical research. We call on scholars to test these propositions through comparative case studies, survey-based research, or configurational approaches (e.g., fsQCA) across different social venture types, industries, and geographies. Longitudinal designs could further explore how DRL evolves over time and under conditions of environmental turbulence, regulatory change, or technology adoption cycles (Vial, 2019). This framework also invites research into the boundary conditions of digital bricolage - when it enables sustainable growth, when it may lead to mission drift, or when it creates new dependencies such as platform lock-in or digital exclusion (Chiambaretto et al., 2019; Saebi et al., 2019). As this is a conceptual study, the propositions and framework presented here are intended to guide future empirical research rather than serve as tested hypotheses. Future studies may validate and refine the DRL model across diverse social-venture contexts.

While the DRL framework offers a promising lens for understanding how social ventures mobilize digital resources under constraint, its applicability is not universal. Several contextual boundaries and potential risks merit further scholarly attention. First, digital inclusion remains uneven across gender, geography, and socioeconomic groups. Entrepreneurs in rural or marginalized communities may lack stable internet access, digital literacy, or the institutional support needed to benefit from access and recombination leverage. Future studies could examine how such divides moderate the relationship between DRL dimensions and entrepreneurial outcomes, particularly in low-

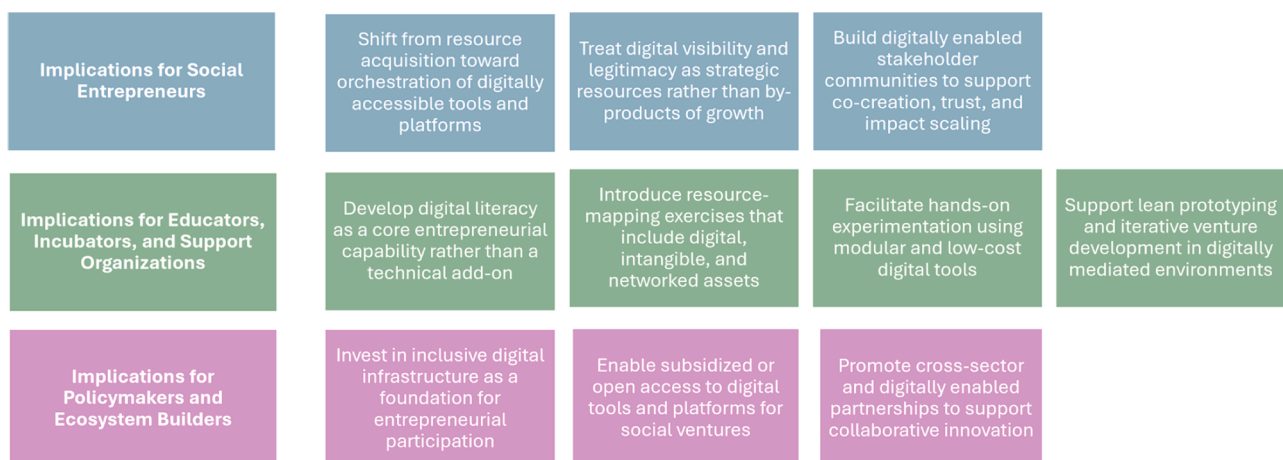


Fig. 3. Practical implications of Digital Resource Leverage for key stakeholders.

connectivity or gender-unequal ecosystems. Second, the growing dependence of social ventures on dominant digital platforms raises concerns about platform lock-in, data dependency, and reduced autonomy. While digital infrastructures enable scalability, they also expose ventures to shifting algorithms, fee structures, and ownership of user data (Chiambaretto, Massé & Mirc, 2019). Scholars might explore governance mechanisms or open-source alternatives that preserve entrepreneurial independence within platform-mediated ecosystems. Third, DRL may also introduce risks of mission drift - when ventures prioritize visibility or rapid scaling at the expense of social goals - and new regulatory constraints regarding data privacy, taxation, or AI ethics (Saebi, Foss & Linder, 2019). Future research could investigate how social enterprises balance digital efficiency with ethical and institutional compliance, ensuring alignment with their founding missions. Addressing these boundary conditions will not only refine the theoretical robustness of the DRL framework but also inform policy and educational interventions aimed at mitigating digital inequality and fostering sustainable, inclusive innovation.

From a broader perspective, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about the democratization of entrepreneurship, the evolution of digital ecosystems, and the development of inclusive innovation models in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). By advancing a digitally grounded theory of resource strategy in social entrepreneurship, it helps reimagine what it means to be resourceful - and impactful - in an age of technological abundance and social need.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-4) solely for minor language editing and for assisting in the visual layout and formatting of non-substantive infographics. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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