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Gender-responsive policies to support women start-ups to make a difference in the world

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Abstract: The 2019 Social Enterprise Promotion Act in Thailand represents a pivotal step towards promoting social enterprises by fostering self-reliance and a fair and sustainable future for the country. Despite their significance, there is a noticeable research gap focusing on the factors that motivate Thai entrepreneurs to venture into social entrepreneurship. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing data from 2000 respondents in Thailand, utilizing linear regression to explore whether the awareness of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the adoption of digital technologies, extrinsic motivations, such as the overall societal view of entrepreneurs, social awareness, and perceptions of entrepreneurial capabilities influence the decision to start a social enterprise. In a gender comparison, our findings reveal that the societal context plays a crucial role for both genders, although in distinct ways: Male entrepreneurs are more influenced by individualistic extrinsic values, with motivations linked to power, respect, and societal recognition. In contrast, female entrepreneurs display a collectivistic orientation, being more likely to be inspired by intrinsic motivations, such as the success and visibility of other successful startups within their society. These findings underline the need for a gender-sensitive approach by government bodies, educational institutions, and other relevant organizations aiming to boost start-up rates of enterprises who “make a difference in the world”. Tailored support and educational programs to address the unique motivations and perspectives of male and female entrepreneurs could play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of strategies designed to promote social entrepreneurship in Thailand and beyond.

Keywords: start-up; social entrepreneurship; SDGs; entrepreneurial capabilities; entrepreneurship education; extrinsic motivations

1. Introduction

Social enterprises are self-sustaining enterprises (ADB, 2019) because they not only address social and/or environmental concerns, but also produce goods and services, thus creating employment (British Council et al., 2021). In addition, these enterprises aim to “make a difference in the world” and pursue both profit maximization and reinvestment towards their social goal (Kim and Lim, 2017). As other entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs tend to be innovative for their social purposes, and thus create new social innovations (Endo and Lim, 2016; Kim and Lim, 2017). In Southeast Asia, only 3.8% of the adult population are social entrepreneurs, the lowest number in a global comparison (Bosma et al., 2016), estimated to account for 500,000 to 1 million social entrepreneurs in the region (British Council et al., 2021). All countries in Southeast Asia lack equivalent support from governments and organizations to help in scaling social enterprises from small start-ups or social

communities or groups to become investable businesses (Lien Centre for Social Innovation, 2014). With regard to policies in Thailand, the legal status of a social enterprise is regulated since 2019, requiring regular reporting and restrictions on dividends (Nuchpiam and Punyakumpol, 2019), whereas main obstacles faced by social entrepreneurs tend to be access to capital, including early-stage and equity funding, and a limited understanding of what a social enterprise really is (British Council et al., 2021).

The increased awareness towards sustainable development and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has seen an increase in entrepreneurship education for the creation of sustainable and social enterprises, targeting both attitudes and aspirations of entrepreneurs towards social concerns (John and Satar, 2016). Another important aspect of social entrepreneurship education is to develop an entrepreneurial mindset for social entrepreneurship activities and the capabilities needed for starting and running these enterprises (Alarifi and Shahid, 2021; Kummitha and Kummitha, 2021). This is supported by British Council et al. (2021), who identified a general lack of business capabilities and knowledge in social entrepreneurs. This included not only general business knowledge but also the lack of an entrepreneurial mindset.

Specifically for Southeast Asia, there is a lack of research concerning motivating factors for the creation of enterprises with a focus on making a social impact. This empirical study addresses this gap by analyzing 2000 randomly selected working-age respondents from Thailand. Linear regression is used to identify predictors that motivate entrepreneurs to create start-ups aimed at making a social difference. These predictors include SDG awareness, increased use of digital tools, extrinsic motivations, social awareness, and own entrepreneurial capability perceptions. Objectives of this exploratory study are:

- (1) To understand the imperatives that drives entrepreneurs to start a business with a social purpose.
- (2) To explore gender differences in these predictors for gender-responsive policy recommendations and entrepreneurship education.

2. Literature review

Within the two domains of academic and practical entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship is positioned at the intersection of not-for-profit organizations pursuing revenue generation strategies and for-profit entities that incorporate social mission driven strategies (Barton et al., 2018). The term “social enterprise” is increasingly being applied by organizations and in policies to describe enterprises that aim to “make a difference in the world”, encompassing both for-profit and revenue-generating operations and inclusive enterprises (Lien Centre for Social Innovation, 2014). Social entrepreneurship refers to entrepreneurs with financially sustainable enterprises that address social and/or environmental problems (Quaye et al., 2024). Some definitions call them hybrid solutions as they combine their social or environmental goals with a market-driven approach for the creation of social value. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, this model has gained traction as a response to limitations in governmental and philanthropic approaches to solve these pressing

issues. Therefore, social enterprises are seen as effective means to achieve the United Nations SDGs. The Asian Development Bank as a principal advocate for inclusive businesses within Southeast Asia acknowledges their capacity for widespread social influence and their role in diminishing poverty. Particularly, when inclusive social enterprises are financially viable entities that deliberately generate beneficial social or environmental outcomes, they are also regarded for their capability to achieve regional development objectives (ADB, 2019). Barton et al. (2018) provide evidence supporting the significant impact of social entrepreneurship on economies, including the creation of new industries, the validation of innovative business models, and the reallocation of resources towards previously overlooked social issues (Barton et al., 2018).

2.1. SDG awareness and social entrepreneurship education

Social entrepreneurship can be characterized as applying entrepreneurial capabilities, leadership, innovation, and creativity to address challenges faced by marginalized socio-economic communities or environmental concerns (Goyal et al., 2021). The awareness for SDGs or “SDG awareness” refers to the general understanding and recognition of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and their importance in promoting global development (Filho et al., 2023). This includes the knowledge about the interconnectedness of the 17 goals, which aim to ensure prosperity for all by 2030. To achieve these targets, businesses, governments and the civil society need to (1) raise awareness and (2) educate about the SDGs and their impact to foster collaboration and targeted initiatives, taking gender differences into account. Kim and Lim (2017) identify various values upheld by social enterprises which play a pivotal role in influencing local and regional developments. These enterprises contribute to “making a difference in the world”, not just through (1) the production of goods and services, thereby strengthening the enterprise itself and giving it a competitive edge, but also through (2) creating employment opportunities for marginalized individuals, encompassing their training and assisting in finding employment. Additionally, they also contribute by (3) facilitating economic and social development via grants, including those provided by foundations, and through microfinance or low-interest loans (Kim and Lim, 2017). To break even or to make a profit lets a social enterprise become more self-sufficient, thus requiring fewer loans, funds or being less dependent on grants or donors. United Nations (2023a) view social entrepreneurship also as an important link between civic society and enterprises to address societal challenges and innovation.

In recent decades, with an acceleration in the Covid-19 pandemic, the sustainable development of enterprises has increasingly come into the focus of entrepreneurs, organizations, and societies. This attention stems from the recognition that integrating sustainable practices into entrepreneurial activities can strengthen the potential for prosperity among individuals and societies alike, promoting continuous, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth across nations and regions (Fleacă et al., 2018).

The SDGs can serve as a critical compass for potential social entrepreneurs, guiding their efforts to align with and contribute to one or more of these goals. On the contrary, social entrepreneurship is also a driver of the SDGs (United Nations, 2023a).

The crucial role of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship in enhancing human wellbeing is recognized and supported by governments and institutions alike. These entities have undertaken proactive measures to foster entrepreneurial thinking, underpinned by the SDGs, especially through educational initiatives (Ashari et al., 2021).

The significance of the education system in promoting sustainable development is summed up in the global objective to provide inclusive and equitable education, together with lifelong learning opportunities for everyone (SDG 4) (United Nations, 2023b). The potentially beneficial effects of entrepreneurship on the social and economic development are recognized by linking SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and foster lifelong learning opportunities for all, with SDG 8, which focuses on advocating for sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, as well as full and productive employment and decent work for all (United Nations, 2023a). We therefore hypothesize, that

H1: For both genders, SDG awareness is a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise.

2.2. SDGs, digital technologies and the circular economy

The United Nations “2030 Vision” is designed to foster collaboration among enterprises, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and governments, providing them with the necessary technologies and resources to achieve the SDGs. The UN 2030 vision aims to enhance its impact through the utilization of Industry 4.0 technologies (also known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution or 4IR) and the principles of a circular economy (Powell-Tuck and Sadowski, 2019). This latest technological industry revolution facilitates interactions of a variety of different physical systems, using advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, Big Data, and the Internet of Things (IoT), among others (Hoosain et al., 2020). In recent years, these advanced technologies have played a crucial role in accomplishing societal objectives, such as combating the COVID-19 pandemic. AI and machine learning have been instrumental in saving lives by applying screening, tracking, and prediction algorithms, and by aiding in vaccine development. Additionally, IoT has enabled remote patient monitoring (Vaishya et al., 2020).

The shift from a linear to a circular economy model has become increasingly prominent in the last few years, providing innovative solutions to some of the most pressing sustainable development challenges. These 4IR technologies are already being applied across various sectors to support the achievement of some of the SDGs (Ashari et al., 2021). As early as the 1970s, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation in the United Kingdom highlighted the connection between sustainability and the circular economy by leveraging digital technologies. Furthermore, the foundation actively promotes to accelerate the adoption of circular economy principles through various initiatives across sectors and partnerships (Sherratt, 2013). The rapid expansion of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, and the consequent increase in global connectivity, will play a significant role in advancing economic and social change across many regions of the world. However, disparities in access to IoT are evident among developing and developed nations, as well as between rural and urban areas, and between genders. This situation calls for an integrated approach that

combines the development of ICT and 4IR technologies towards achieving the UN SDGs (Daskalakis and Demestichas, 2020). We therefore hypothesize, that

H2: For both genders, digital technology use is a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise.

2.3. Extrinsic motivations and social awareness

The impact of mass media on entrepreneurial intentions is less researched (Hoosain et al., 2020) and leads to the question how media coverage about successful social enterprise start-ups may give a perceived social legitimacy to other start-ups and in series—affects their own entrepreneurial start-up activities. Petkova et al. (2013) discovered that start-ups that engage in more intensive and varied sense-giving activities, thereby aiming to launch enterprises that contribute positively to the society, are influenced in their start-up decisions by higher levels of media attention. These media effects or social awareness of like-minded businesses tend to directly influence the human capital of the start-up founders. On the contrary, it has also been observed that engaging in meaningful business ventures can attract greater media interest.

Social entrepreneurs often engage in self-reflection by observing activities of other social enterprises within their ecosystem, as these businesses typically encounter a range of unique challenges. To some degree, social entrepreneurs may also depend on the support of these other enterprises to achieve their business purpose (Dentchev and Diaz-Gonzalez, 2021). Therefore, a prevailing positive attitude towards social entrepreneurship within a society and consequently the ecosystem can be instrumental. The social entrepreneurship ecosystem can be described as being “characterized by a large number of loosely interconnected participants who depend on each other for their mutual effectiveness and survival” (Moore, 1996, p. 26). This supportive environment may enable entrepreneurs to enforce their contributions towards making a meaningful difference in the world.

Past research has highlighted the efforts of economic and social policymakers to cultivate entrepreneurial ecosystems by linking actors, institutions, social structures, and cultural values that are crucial for entrepreneurial endeavors e.g. (Roundy, 2016; Spigel, 2017). However, there is an identified research gap concerning the interactions of social entrepreneurs within clusters that include other entrepreneurs, organizations, institutions, and the overall cultural dimensions of the ecosystem. Consequently, Roundy (2017) discovered that an increase in the number of social entrepreneurs within a society leads to a corresponding rise in similar types of founders, thereby boosting their presence in the ecosystem. Supporting social entrepreneurs and initiatives that focus on making a difference in the world—together with a societal context that encourages social entrepreneurship, e.g., by granting status and respect to successful social entrepreneurs—through media visibility or other extrinsic motivating factors fosters the entrepreneurial ecosystem for social entrepreneurship (Roundy, 2017). Therefore, there appears to be a correlation between positive attitudes towards successful entrepreneurs, such as those social entrepreneurs striving to make a difference or led by intrinsic motivations, and the intentions to start up as a social entrepreneur.

However, previous research indicates gender differences in perceptions and social awareness in the context of social entrepreneurship. The desire to build a professional career and for career achievements are ranked lower for women than for men. Women social entrepreneurs also tend to pursue a greater level of agreeableness than men, indicating more reliance on their peers and their social acceptance by peers (Bernardino et al., 2018). They also seem to be more positively influenced than men by altruistic behavior (intrinsic motivations), whereas men's social entrepreneurial activities are fostered by increased income levels, materialistic objectives, and status (extrinsic motivations) (Khan, 2022). We therefore hypothesize, that

H3: For men, extrinsic motivations are a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise.

H4: For women, social awareness is a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise.

2.4. Entrepreneurial capability perception

Entrepreneurial intentions towards social entrepreneurship are influenced by factors such as prior entrepreneurial experience, entrepreneurship education, and personal attributes like self-efficacy and proactiveness, which are crucial catalysts (Barton et al., 2018). Typically, entrepreneurs have the ability to spot unmet customer needs and market gaps. In social entrepreneurship, the ability to identify opportunities often arises from consumers who are well-educated and prioritize ethics, social values, and environmental sustainability. If social entrepreneurs want to effect meaningful change, they must possess a unique skill set that enables them to balance their social purpose with the financial sustainability of their venture (Klimas and Wronka-Pospiech, 2022). Lacking these essential capabilities, social entrepreneurs may find themselves focusing solely on either their social mission or the commercial and profit-driven aspects of their enterprise.

Smith et al. (2012) identify three interconnected leadership capabilities that are essential for navigating the challenge to balance mission and profit in the social enterprise: “acceptance”, “differentiation”, and “integration” of competing demands. The first capability, “acceptance”, involves recognizing and embracing the two aspects of these demands—mission-driven versus profit-driven. By accepting them, social entrepreneurs can transform potential obstacles into opportunities, fostering innovation through paradoxical thinking and open-mindedness. The second capability, “differentiation”, enables the entrepreneur to acknowledge and appreciate the distinct value of each demand, keeping the business aligned and motivated to pursue both its social and financial objectives. The final capability, “integration”, means the ability to merge these conflicting demands and overcome the conflict between fulfilling a social mission and generating profit. To effectively integrate this, a social entrepreneur must possess advanced interpersonal and decision-making capabilities (Afshar and Polas, 2021).

Few research studies focus on the specific capabilities required by social entrepreneurs who aim to reinvest their profits towards social or environmental purposes. Afshar and Polas (2021) highlight a distinctive finding regarding female entrepreneurs, identifying a positive correlation between their problem-solving skills,

networking capabilities and their entrepreneurial intentions in social entrepreneurship. Problem-solving and networking capabilities not only increased their interest in addressing specific societal issues but also led to a greater societal engagement, both of which is often more associated with women than men. Such enhanced societal awareness, in turn, could contribute to their propensity to start a venture aimed at effecting societal change. We therefore hypothesize, that

H5: For women, capability perceptions are a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise.

2.5. Gender

Contributions of women to social entrepreneurship and the distinctions between female and male social entrepreneurs have been insufficiently explored in existing research, especially with regard to their personal characteristics (Bernardino et al., 2018). Apparently, women social entrepreneurs tend to follow a different approach in starting their social endeavors than men do, as they start their social enterprises as a response to a certain social problem they perceive from a personal perspective (Rosca et al., 2020) or by a general social purpose, pulled by intrinsic motivations. On the other hand, men are more strongly influenced by economic and materialistic goals (Fernández-Guadaño and Martín-López, 2023) and tend to pursue social entrepreneurship stemming from extrinsic motivations, such as higher reward or recognition (Yamini et al., 2022). Policies try to address the specific needs and challenges faced by different genders, mostly addressing women and girls (Filho et al., 2023). These so-called “gender-responsive policies” aim to promote gender equality, contributing to SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Because they often address systemic inequalities or discrimination of women, they have the potential to improve the overall socio-economic development as well as the individual well-being.

Lan et al. (2023) conducted a study among 811 Vietnamese students and found that men and women needed gender-targeted education to enter social entrepreneurship. Female students experienced psychological barriers, such as fear of failure and insecurity, and required training with an emphasis on solutions and creativity. On the other hand, male students did not experience these barriers but needed training in management and entrepreneurship to enter social entrepreneurship in a more planned and calculated way than women, who entered it in a more solution-oriented and creative way (Lan et al., 2023). A study in Spain found that women, coming from previously higher occupational positions, were less likely to enter social entrepreneurship but would rather start social cooperatives (Fernández-Guadaño and Martín-López, 2023). This is consistent with findings by Hechavarria et al. (2019) who found that previous industry experience or entrepreneurial experience of women positively affect business growth of women’s entrepreneurs.

As these gender differences are prevalent in social entrepreneurship, we will control for gender to find gender-related differences in the motivations to start a business to “make a difference”.

2.6. Research framework

The overall research framework is displayed in **Figure 1**.

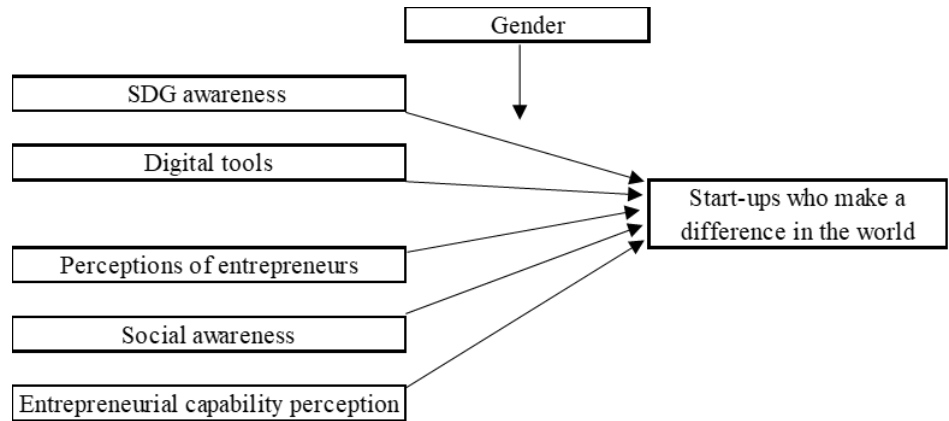


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

3. Materials and methods

Primary data in this study stem from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) project, an annual large-scale entrepreneurship research project. GEM collects data on entrepreneurial activities, aspirations and behavior across many countries globally. Each year, the survey is conducted among a random representative sample of the adult population (age 18 to 64) in each country to identify individuals who, at the time of the survey, owned and managed a business or were in the process of starting one (Bosma, 2013). Each GEM team undertakes two surveys: The Adult Population Survey (APS) and the National Expert Survey (NES).

For the Thailand APS 2023, primary data from a random group of 2000 adults were collected in May and June 2023, thereof 1400 urban and 600 rural. A quantitative structured questionnaire with a time frame of 20 to 30 min per respondent was administered using both face-to-face and CATI (Computer Aided Telephone Interview) for urban samples as interview method. Multi-stage random sampling was applied for the respondent selection. The resulting samples of 202 male respondents and 190 female respondents consist of start-ups and young businesses of up to an age of 42 months ($n = 392$) who answered that their start-up reason was to “make a difference” in the world (dependent variable DV).

Frequency analysis was employed to assess the significance of various questions to the entrepreneurs. To explore whether SDG awareness (2 independent variables IV), extrinsic motivations (3 variables), the adoption of digital technologies (1 variable), social awareness (1variable), and capability perceptions (1 variable) could predict the creation of a social enterprise—aiming to make a positive impact in the world, a linear regression analysis was conducted. In the model summary, the R-Square value served as an overall indicator of the strength of the association, determining the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that could be predicted from the independent variables. The ANOVA test was utilized to assess the predictive power of the dependent or outcome variable, with a p -value of less than 0.05 indicating the statistical significance of the regression model.

DV was “the reason to start a business is to make a difference in the world”. The IVs, “more digital technology use to sell products and services in the next 6 months”, the grouped extrinsic motivation variables (“starting a new business as a desirable

career choice”, “high level of status and respect for successful startups”, and “public media and/or internet coverage about successful startups”), social awareness (“businesses primarily aim to solve social problems”), and “personal perceptions of knowledge, skill and experience required to start a new business”, were answered on a scale of 5 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The SDG awareness variables (“awareness of the 17 UN SDGs” and “identified goals as a priority for business and defined a set of clear objectives”) were dichotomous questions.

4. Results

Awareness of the 17 SDGs within the overall Thai adult population was relatively low with 41.0% of men and 36.4% of women being aware of them. However, within the business community, a significant majority of male and female start-ups and young businesses, defined as being in business for up to 42 months, acknowledged these goals as crucial for their enterprises, including having established clear objectives, actions, and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are aligned with the SDGs (**Table 1**). In addition, three quarters of start-ups, 15% more females than males, anticipated an increased use of digital technologies in their products, services or processes over the following six months. Again, more female start-ups than male start-ups perceived a visibility of other social enterprises in the country. Just over half of the startup entrepreneurs believed they possessed the necessary capabilities, expertise, and experience to launch a business.

Table 1. Frequencies.

	TEA male	TEA female
Awareness of the 17 SDGs	74.5%	79.5%
Identified goals and established clear objectives, actions and KPIs that are aligned with the SDGs	72.4%	78.8%
Increased use of digital technologies in products, services or processes	69.9%	79.4%
Visibility of social enterprises in the country	56.9%	63.8%
Skill perceptions	58.1%	54.3%

The aim of this research was to identify imperatives that drive entrepreneurs to start a venture with a social purpose and to examine gender-related differences in the predictor variables for gender-responsive policy recommendations and entrepreneurship education. Data were normally distributed for each group, as assessed by histograms, and there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene’s test of homogeneity of variances ($p = 0.151$). The overall model was significant for both genders and the R Square values exhibit that a variance of 10.1% (male) and 17.7% (female) in the overall model summary is accounted for by the entrepreneurs to start up a social enterprise with impact. The variables employed in the model deliver only a partial explanation for their start-up reasons, but highlight specific aspects. The ANOVA findings revealed significant results for both genders (male 0.002/female 0.000), yet distinct predictors emerged as relevant for each gender. This highlights the necessity for policymakers and entrepreneurship educators to exercise caution against adopting a universal “one-size-fits-all” strategy, and

underlines the importance of gender-responsive approaches in fostering social entrepreneurship.

Table 2 displays that IV1 of SDG awareness was not significant for both genders, whereas IV2 in this category (Identified goals as a priority for business and defined a set of clear objectives, actions and KPIs) had a negative impact for male startups (−0.174/0.040). Overall, the regression results show 2 significant predictors for Thai male social entrepreneurs and 3 for Thai female social entrepreneurs; however, there is no common denominator for both genders.

Table 2. Regression results.

Predictor Category	Independent Variables	male		female	
		Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
SDG awareness	Awareness of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals	−0.067	0.417	−0.033	0.657
	Identified goals as a priority for business and defined a set of clear objectives, actions and KPIs	−0.174	0.040	0.061	0.409
Digital technologies	Use more digital technologies to sell products or services in the next 6 months	−0.080	0.303	−0.202	0.005
Extrinsic motivations	Starting a new business is a desirable career choice	0.149	0.084	0.071	0.399
	High level of status and respect for successful entrepreneurs	0.192	0.024	−0.067	0.412
	Frequent public media/internet coverage about successful new businesses	−0.100	0.272	0.125	0.108
Social Awareness	High visibility of business with a social purpose	0.094	0.293	0.294	0.000
Capability Perceptions	Own perceptions of knowledge, skill and experience required to start a new business	−0.036	0.672	0.171	0.022

Table 3. Hypothesis testing.

		Supported	Not supported	Comment
SDG awareness	H1: SDG awareness is a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise		X	partially supported for male TEA
Digital tools	H2: For both genders, digital technology use is a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise	X		
Perceptions of entrepreneurs	H3: For men, extrinsic motivations are a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise	X		
Social Awareness	H4: For women, social awareness is a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise	X		
Entrepreneurial capability perceptions	H5: For women, capability perceptions are a significant positive predictor for starting a social enterprise	X		

Table 3 displays that the awareness of SDGs was not significant for female TEA, therefore H1 is only partially supported for male start-ups and only for the fact that they identified goals and set certain objectives and actions with regard to these goals. Similarly, H2 is partially supported as it is significant with a negative impact for women start-ups only (−0.202/0.005). H3 is supported, as the IV 2 in this category (high level of status and respect for successful entrepreneurs) is significant for male start-ups only (0.192/0.024) whereas social awareness and visibility of other social entrepreneurs is highly significant for female start-ups (0.294/0.000) which supports H4. As capability perceptions proved to be significant only for female start-ups

(0.171/0.022), H5 is fully supported in our model with a positive impact for female start-ups.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study's objectives were to identify determinants that foster the likelihood of start-ups aiming to create a significant societal impact and establish sustainable social enterprises, as well as to discover potential gender-related differences in these determinants. Both are crucial for establishing and fostering an inclusive and effective entrepreneurial ecosystem for social entrepreneurship.

5.1. Gender differences in predictors

The finding of two significant predictors for male social entrepreneurs and three different predictors for female social entrepreneurs that positively influence start-up rates of socially driven entrepreneurs is insightful and emphasizes a gender-sensitive approach because of different motivational factors that drive social entrepreneurship. This also underlines the complexity of social entrepreneurship dynamics and highlights the necessity for a gendered approach in supporting policies, mechanisms and educational programs to foster an effective social entrepreneurship ecosystem. The absence of an overlap in significant predictors between both genders suggests that even though both male and female social entrepreneurs are committed to addressing social problems—their pathways and emphasis in creating social value differ markedly. This disparity necessitates interventions that recognize and leverage these differences to effectively support social entrepreneurs of both genders in their endeavors.

5.2. Gender differences in SDG awareness

The observation that SDG awareness and having a structured plan for addressing them can act as a hindering factor for male social entrepreneurs in their decision-making and in their intent to create a social enterprise is an interesting finding. It suggests a distinctive negative relationship between goal-setting and entrepreneurial action-taking in the context of social entrepreneurship. This could be interpreted in several ways:

- 1) Male start-ups might start their social enterprises in any case, even without pursuing these specific goals.
- 2) Male startups might feel overwhelmed by complexities in the start-up process and might perceive inflexibility to align their entrepreneurial start-up actions with SDGs and detailed plans, particularly for those who are in the early stages of their ventures, where despite having big dreams—flexibility and agility are crucial.
- 3) Early stages of a start-up, especially in a nascent enterprise, require entrepreneurs to focus on day-to-day operational problems and pivoting their businesses based on feedback from customers and other stakeholders. Male entrepreneurs might perceive that having detailed plans on SDGs are more likely to constrain their ability to adapt quickly to emerging challenges and opportunities. This preference for agility over structured planning could explain why SDG awareness might deter their start-up intentions.

The difference in how male and female start-ups view the importance and role of SDGs in their entrepreneurial journey could also stem from different motivations and approaches to social entrepreneurship.

- 1) Male entrepreneurs might be motivated by the opportunity to solve operational problems and adapt their business model dynamically. They may view the requirement to align closely with SDGs as a limitation rather than an enabler.
- 2) Societal expectations with regard to gender roles might also play a role in how male and female entrepreneurs perceive the value of SDGs in their business planning. Men might feel pressured to achieve quick successes and demonstrate independence, which could make a detailed planning and long-term focus required for SDG alignment seem less attractive.

5.3. Gender-responsive approaches

For male social entrepreneurs:

With regard to these findings, it becomes obvious that supporting male entrepreneurs in integrating SDGs into their business models without feeling constrained requires a gender-responsive approach, in this case a male-centered approach.

- 1) For male aspiring social entrepreneurs, support programs should focus on demonstrating how SDGs can be aligned with agile business practices, offering flexible frameworks for integrating social goals without compromising operational flexibility.
- 2) Encouraging an overall mindset that lets them view SDGs rather as guiding principles than a strict guideline to follow could also help male social entrepreneurs navigate the start-up phase of their ventures more confidently, ensuring that their ventures remain both impactful and adaptable to changing start-up conditions.

For female social entrepreneurs:

Despite women social entrepreneurs' intentions to incorporate more technology in selling products or services, this displays as a hindering factor in their entrepreneurial endeavors. This suggests that—while digital technologies are well recognized for their potential to enhance business operations and market reach—their role in the foundational motivation and strategic focus of those start-ups who aim to make a social impact might be more complex for women social entrepreneurs. Several interpretations for this finding are possible.

- 1) Female social entrepreneurs might view and use technology primarily as a tool to achieve their goals rather than as a driving force in their venture creation process. Their emphasis might be more on the social purpose itself, and while technology is acknowledged as being useful—its planned increased use may not directly influence their decision to start a social enterprise.
- 2) In Thailand, the use of digital technologies, e.g., in sales and financial processes, was already well established before the pandemic on every level of entrepreneurial activity. Thai women entrepreneurs tend to be more innovative than men when it comes to use newer technologies in day-to-day operations (Guelich, 2018). One explanation could therefore be that women entrepreneurs

were already acquainted with its use and well adapted to digital technologies before they started their enterprises. Therefore, the anticipation of needing to significantly ramp up the use of maybe more complicated—digital technologies might be seen as an unnecessary option because it would require daunting resources to increase an already well-established use of technology.

- 3) Overemphasizing the role of digital technologies might unintentionally shift their focus away from the core social purpose of the enterprise. Women social entrepreneurs might worry that the need to integrate and manage advanced technologies could detract from their ability to concentrate on creating social value.

To support women social entrepreneurs in the early stages of their ventures, organizations and policies should target programs that provide guidance on how a tailored technology integration is seen as a complement to their social purpose, rather than viewing it as a prerequisite for success. Also, and this aligns with the finding that social awareness is a significant fostering factor for women to start a social enterprise, showcasing a variety of successful social enterprises that have effectively used technology at different levels and scales and in different ways, could showcase technology as a supporting force to achieve their social purpose. By addressing these concerns, support programs can help female entrepreneurs leverage technology in a way that enhances, rather than hinders, their journey towards creating impactful social enterprises.

5.4. Gender differences in capability perceptions

Two additional factors have a positive impact on the decision-making process for social entrepreneurs:

- 1) Capability perceptions (for female social entrepreneurs)

The perception of their own capabilities positively affects female social entrepreneurs, supporting the findings of Afshar and Polas (2021) who discovered that possessing the appropriate skills, including problem-solving and networking abilities, enhances societal awareness, subsequently leading to increased intentions to start enterprises to make a difference in their society.

- 2) Extrinsic motivations (for male social entrepreneurs)

The finding that extrinsic motivations are a significant factor for male social entrepreneurs and not for female—portrays the need for gender-responsive measures in the supporting ecosystem. Differing to their male counterparts, women social start-ups were influenced by social awareness and visibility of other social enterprises, not by status and respect towards successful entrepreneurs. This effect appears to stem from a more individualistic viewpoint for men, emphasizing power, respect, and societal acknowledgment, whereas women are more likely drawn by a collective perspective, focusing on the achievements and visibility of other successful enterprises who also aim to make a difference in the world. Women tend to be pulled into social entrepreneurship by other good examples rather than by prestige which draws the male startups.

5.5. Gender-responsive policies

For an increase in these types of enterprises, our insights call for a gender-responsive approach by governments, educators, and institutions aiming to foster social enterprises dedicated to societal impact. This also demands for an emphasis on creating social value as a crucial element for social entrepreneurial activities by boosting social capital and societal linkages.

For women social entrepreneurs, specialized training in essential entrepreneurial capabilities, particularly in problem-solving and networking, is needed, aligning with the findings of Afshar and Polas (2021).

Male social entrepreneurs are triggered by aspects related to extrinsic motivations, such as recognition, status, innovation, market opportunities, or economic incentives, reflecting a more individualistic and perhaps utilitarian approach to social entrepreneurship. Differently, the three significant predictors for female social entrepreneurs include intrinsic motivations, such as societal impact, community engagement, and collaboration, indicating a more collectivistic and relational approach to initiating social ventures.

Policymakers, educators, and support organizations should consider these findings when designing programs and policies to enhance the efficacy of support for social entrepreneurship. Because women and men perceive different benefits from social enterprises, initiatives need to address same-gender examples rather than generic social enterprises.

- 1) Initiatives aimed at male social entrepreneurs might benefit from emphasizing the economic and individual achievement aspects of social entrepreneurship, showcasing.
- 2) Programs for female social entrepreneurs could focus more on community impact, collaborative efforts, and networking opportunities.
- 3) Policies for women entrepreneurs should also consider issues outside the business venture, such as the need to combine work and family commitments of women, as these are still one of the dominant factors why women exit—or do not start—enterprises.

Doing this right, could contribute to a more vibrant, inclusive, and impactful social enterprise ecosystem in Thailand and potentially in other contexts with similar dynamics.

Limitations

Given that our research was conducted in Thailand, it is possible to consider extending our findings to other Southeast Asian countries, where a similar proportion of male and female entrepreneurs are active in the ecosystem. Applying them to different global regions may prove challenging. Furthermore, our data collection was done in 2023, a period during which interest in social enterprises and sustainability awareness has been on the rise. Given the evolving nature of these topics, current and future studies, for which there is a limited amount of up-to-date data and publications, may uncover either varying or comparable insights.

However, the results of this study are valuable for academia, practitioners, organizations and policy makers. The findings that cultural and societal factors serve as predictors for social entrepreneurship, in series affecting the decision of both men

and women to initiate social enterprises, needs additional exploration. It is evident that having products or services in the market is crucial for generating profit, which in turn enables reinvestment to effect positive societal change in the world. Nevertheless, further research is required to specify specific actions within the societal and cultural contexts that can strengthen these observations. Further investigation is needed to explore the relevance of particular capabilities for female social entrepreneurs, potentially enhancing the sustainability of their ventures, since our study merely inquired about general capability perceptions. Future research should also investigate the relationship between attitudes towards successful entrepreneurs (extrinsic motivations) and the SDGs to uncover more detailed motivational factors driving the establishment of social enterprises. Lastly, research into how social enterprises interact with universities, governments, and organizations focused on social initiatives could significantly strengthen the support and elevation of social entrepreneurs within the region.

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