

Yukker: Focus on an Innovative Social Start-Up

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Abstract: **Background:** Innovation is a central topic in social entrepreneurial inquiries and is recognised as playing an important role in successful social experiences. However, the relationship between networks and social venture formation is still an open question.

Research objectives: The study aims to analyse the business model of innovative digital start-ups with social goals and to identify and understand the elements influencing their birth, growth, and business performance.

Research design and methods: The paper uses a single case study research design focused on the innovative social start-up "Muoviti in libertà" and its app – Yukker.

Results: Analysing the Yukker business model has allowed to identify and understand crucial elements influencing innovative social start-ups' birth, growth, and business performance.

Conclusions: It is essential to design a network to increase relationships for entrepreneurship and for performing better in strategic and leading change.

Keywords: Social innovation, start-up, Italy, social start-up

JEL Codes: L31, M13, O35

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1. Introduction

According to the Social Innovation School of Thought on Social Entrepreneurship, innovation is a key feature, one of the two research approaches within the American academic tradition (Dees, 2001). Thus, the relationship between networks and social venture formation is still an open question (Smith et al., 2012). Specifically, prior literature on tie formation and the new venture has neglected the concept development process, which instead is a significant aspect of the entrepreneurial innovation motive and is related to the social entrepreneur activity since the enterprise's inception. The innovative entrepreneur does not act in isolation, and the search for ideas, feedback, and social support could leverage the dynamics of her innovations. Strong relationships at the start-up inception are relevant in obtaining resources, while weak ties facilitate discovering opportunities. Indeed, weaker ties connect far clusters of groups of individuals because non-redundant social ties provide people with novel information facilitating the discovery of opportunities. The change process of a product concept in a radical context occurs through shifts of individual concept components (Purdue, 2001). The dynamics of the tie, forming during the early stages of the new venture, bring in new ideas and cognitive

materials needed to change, adapt, and develop the novel product concepts after the initial idea generation of the entrepreneur.

The paper's objective is to analyse the business model of innovative digital start-ups with social goals to identify and understand the elements influencing their birth, growth, and business performance. Indeed, they synthesise different factors concretely impacting efficiency and productivity.

The current paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the research context and background, Section 3 introduces the materials and methods, Section 4 presents the main findings and discussion of our analysis, and Section 5 concludes and offers some implications.

2. Literature review

Social entrepreneurship and innovation

Social entrepreneurship is a phenomenon with a growing business impact that has attracted the attention of the management literature in the last two decades (Seelos & Mair, 2007; Short et al., 2009). Despite the increasing number of studies on social ventures, the field still suffers from the same definitional uncertainties as the leading entrepreneurship field (Landström et al., 2012; Lundstr & Halvarsson, 2006; Zahra & Wright, 2011; Steyaert, 2007). Despite the efforts of scholars to clearly define the concept of social entrepreneurship and delineate its boundaries, the debate about social entrepreneurship is still open and concerns different issues. The first one regards the extent to which social entrepreneurship is similar to and/or different from commercial entrepreneurship and is a legitimate domain of inquiry in its own right (De Maria, 2014). Scholars in management and organisation science are divided between those who sustain the legitimacy of social entrepreneurship as a domain of academic inquiry and others who remain unconvinced about the need to treat it as a distinct field of research because it is not different from other forms of entrepreneurship (e.g., cultural, institutional, public, corporate) already analysed in the literature. It is not clear how the study of this type of entrepreneurship adds theoretical values (De Maria, 2014). The field of social entrepreneurship has been addressing new topics and opening new lines of research that replicate the recent strings of inquiry of the entrepreneurship domain. At the inception of the research, many contributions centred on a social entrepreneur who – tackling social problems, identifying in them an opportunity, and innovatively exploiting them – provides new solutions to social needs (Mair & Martí, 2006).

More recent contributions shifted the research focus to the venture formation process and dynamics of social enterprises. It has been suggested that a social venture's network of relational ties plays a crucial role in its formation (Waddock, 1991; Sharir & Lerner, 2004; Austin et al., 2006). Other studies have recently highlighted that social innovation is a key feature of new ventures' birth (Kerlin, 2006). Social entrepreneurship (SE) has become a phenomenon with a growing impact due to the increased number of social ventures (Seelos & Mair, 2007; Brooks, 2009; Short et al., 2009). Furthermore, it is consolidating as an emerging research stream (Hemingway, 2005; Tracey & Jarvis, 2007; Zahra et al., 2009). Despite the growing attention by scholars to social entrepreneurship, academic literature appeared still fragmented (Mort et al., 2003), and this fragmentation is mirrored by the variety of definitions of social entrepreneurship (Galera & Borzaga, 2009). Social entrepreneurship is conceived as a process of social value creation, involving the innovative use and combination of resources to address social needs that are not met by traditional organizations. Innovation is a central topic in social entrepreneurial

inquiries and is recognized as playing an important role in the most important and successful social experiences (De Maria, 2014).

Innovative start-ups

Innovation intended as the opportunity of creating new lines of production and unexplored process, by modifying existing ones and finding alternative solutions and resources, is considered a crucial factor to foster development and growth, implementing the challenge of competitiveness, and also favouring social challenges (Gault, 2018). In addition, the expansion of the Internet and related digital technologies play an essential role in reaching global markets in a short time by reducing costs, speeding communication, and helping environmentally correct processes and productions (Amit & Zott, 2001). In this context, innovative start-ups are a key factor due to their dynamism and capacity to renew the local knowledge base, especially if they mainly act in digital technologies, in which business models are enormously digitised (Bradley et al., 2015). Among innovative start-ups, there are ones linked with a social goal, generally intended as firms bringing about a significant, positive change that addresses a social challenge by efficiently impacting the well-being of communities, individuals, and the planet as a whole (Phills et al., 2008).

Innovative entrepreneurship needs to be supported by the Government, which could propose and update the regulatory framework in order to increase their outcomes in terms of economic performance (Wong et al., 2005; Mason & Brown, 2014). More specifically, it is important to consider the chance to access finance and, possibly, promote alternative financing methods and investments in intellectual capital; provide incentives intended as exemptions, deductions and tax credits for investors and similar facilitations for the firms involved (Juma & McGee, 2006).

The Italian “industrial strategy”

Italy was the first European Country to introduce a legal framework targeted in favour of innovative start-ups and SMEs and also devoting significative rules to innovative start-ups with a social goal. According to article 2, paragraph 1 of the Decree-Law no. 155 of 24 March 2006, the latter must operate in specific areas of action: social work, healthcare and social care, education and training, environmental protection, social tourism, undergraduate and postgraduate education, cultural services etc. To obtain recognition of the social and innovative start-up status, they must prepare a “social impact assessment document” and review it annually to maintain the status. As a consequence of being classified as innovative start-ups with a social goal, they can enjoy both financial and legal benefits.

The Italian “industrial strategy” in favour of innovative start-ups is based on the Decree-Law no. 179/2012 on “Further urgent measures for Italy’s economic growth” converted into Law no. 221/2012, and on the following Decree-Law no. 3/2015 – known as “Investment Compact” – devoted to innovative SMEs. It is a mix of several policy instruments: contribution for the acquisition of property, plant, and equipment; credit lines granted to innovative projects based on the use of industrial property rights; more flexible labour laws; facilities to access financial sources such as new Legislation about crowdfunding; exceptions to bankruptcy (Accordino, 2017). The legal framework was issued complying with European Union State aid rules, about which the European Court of Justice is strictly vigilant (Boria, 2015).

Deepening their features, innovative Italian start-ups with social goals are mainly created under the legal form of limited liability company. The mainstream economic literature highlights that, complying with the social context, they mainly propose process and service innova-

tion, while a minor percentage is interested in product innovation. Indeed, they try to meet social needs by finding innovative solutions to implement human environmental and health issues (Gallo & Vannoni, 2021). Due to the Italian general framework, it is also interesting to consider that this kind of start-up usually does not require any form of social lending.

3. Research design and method

Our paper uses a case study approach focused on the innovative social start-up “Muoviti in libertà” and its Yukker app. Through its app “Yukker”, this start-up offers services of intermediation between persons with disabilities and tutors that meet their needs. The choice of this start-up derives from the interest that its presentation aroused in an event at the University of Messina, dedicated to new opportunities for people with disabilities to face and overcome the challenges that their condition. This single case study was considered proper to in-depth analyse the role of social value in the pursuit of business performance and vice versa and answer our research question, which is: how do “Yukker dynamics” could allow firms to achieve business success by satisfying social needs?

Data collection

The main data sources for empirical analysis are direct and indirect. As a first step, we collected data on the company’s website to gather information on the history and the main characteristics of its business model. In the second step, we collected data available online such as documents, articles in newspapers or magazines, reports, and official documents (Kozinets 2002). In the third step, with the help of the information collected and in the light of what has been analysed in the reference context, we have drawn up a series of questions that were presented by administering an interview with an open-ended questionnaire (Harris and Brown, 2010) to the founder of the company Giacomina De Maria. The interview guidelines derive from the qualitative coding of the collected data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) that pinpoint the “key-words” of the company and are summarised in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Summarised keywords of Yukker

Subsequently, the answers were analysed independently by all the research group members who later shared the observations and identified some critical factors that characterise the company's work. The main results were emphasised in the following section.

Case study presentation

Yukker is a specific project born from the idea of Giacomina De Maria (Founder), at the end of a research path started in 2010 with the study of social innovation processes, networking, and social enterprise governance models, carried out as part of a PhD in Management at the Cà Foscari University of Venice.

Table 1. Yukker: main data and facts

Foundation	March 2019
Headquarters	Messina (Italy)
Founder	Giacoma De Maria, project creator. Her activism in associations linked to the disability world, and her direct experience inspired Yukker's idea.
Peculiarity	Yukker is an app and a web platform that offers the possibility of "spot" assistance when needed, fast and everywhere, that is "when" and "where" it is needed.
Services offered	using technology to provide assistance services to people with disabilities and the elderly. For instance, hygiene and care; shopping and errands; transportation by operator's means; transportation by the user's means; assistance and accompaniment for activities outside the home; companionship at home; meal preparation and assistance; housing cleaning; assistance in the use of computers; sign language.
Main phases	
July 2019	With the support of the Nuovi Orizzonti association, "Yukker, Muoviti in Libertà" was selected from over 500 applications as part of the Gaetano Marzotto Award, among the technological projects to be supported with an incubation process.
2021	Call INVITALIA "Smart and Start" and "ON" https://www.invitalia.it/cosa-facciamo/creiamo-nuove-aziende/smartstart-italia https://www.invitalia.it/cosa-facciamo/creiamo-nuove-aziende/nuove-imprese-a-tasso-zero
2022	"Give a Coupon" free subscriptions to Yukker's innovative services to people with disabilities or the elderly ... which are distributed through associations operating in the area.
Revenue model	
Annual subscription	The fee will be paid by each user who intends to use Yukker's services and will give the right of access for one year from the moment of payment of the fee.
Basic training	Each assistant can purchase a "basic" training package at the time of registration which entitles you to a higher rating than your profile visible by users of the service. The training will be online and will have an annual cost for each training module. In the first 6 months of testing the training will be free.
Advanced training	Each assistant will be able to purchase an advanced training package. This training will give the right to a higher "rating" which will be highlighted in the assistant's profile (through a greater number of stars assigned) thus giving a greater chance of being selected for the provision of the service.
Investments	
Implemented	APP and YUKKER platform Communication and recruitment of YUKKER operators Messina is the pilot city of the service which will soon be available also in Padua and Frosinone. The platform is constantly expanding, and the goal is to extend it nationwide

Scheduled	Enhancement of communication activities Strengthening the recruitment and training of operators Enhancement of Yukker APP services
Funding sources	
At the beginning	Crowdfunding
Later	contributions from members, partners, grants

Source: own elaboration based on: Yukker founder interviews and company's website www.yukker.it.

Yukker's goal is to facilitate the independence of people with disabilities and the elderly in carrying out various activities in their free time, study or work, and the need to live their daily lives with the same freedom of choice as other people. Going for a pizza, ice cream or just going for a walk are all activities that most people take as obvious. This is not the case for those who are not autonomous in the smallest daily gestures. Very often the organization of such activities depends on the availability of others, family or friends or assistants available at fixed times. Asking is not easy and creates dependence. For people with disabilities, it is often difficult to find who can assist them to go for a walk, to the bookshop or to the cinema, at a short notice.

Services offered are simple and fast and allow people with disabilities to enter their request for assistance in a large database of selected operators, who will quickly provide their availability for a fee or voluntarily.

People looking for an operator must register and publish the request specifying what is needed; the user will receive the proposals of those who apply to take charge of the service and can view their profiles, reviews for the services already offered, and the price.

People who offer themselves as an assistant are asked for their curriculum vitae, an identity document, and any specific certificates; an interview will then be held, following which, if successful, the profile will be enabled to respond to user requests. The benefits for the operator (who provides assistance) are also several. Yukker helps the operator to be found more easily by those in need of assistance. The operator can propose only the requests that best match their skills and competencies and choose those closest or in the time slots that best meet their needs and work availability.

Direct competitors are companies of social cooperativism (for example, easy care home assistance <https://easycareassistenza.it/>) or non-profit companies (for example, express care of the network for Autonomy – APS <https://expresscare.it/>) who use technology to facilitate the search for personal assistants, carers, and home helps.

Unlike its competitors, Yukker has the specificity of offering the possibility of requesting spot assistance. For example, "tonight I want to go to the cinema, but I have no one to accompany me". I enter my request, indicating the date, place, time, the type of service requested. In real-time, my request is notified to all Yukker operators in the area.

The indirect competitors are the social cooperatives that help through traditional communication channels.

Paying attention to the case study, it is possible to underline that "Yukker" was founded in 2019, and it follows the most selected legal form. It offers services using an app and a web platform, enabling persons with disabilities to find and choose a personal assistant where and when needed, even for a limited time.

The assistance services that can be requested are Hygiene and care; Shopping and errands; Transportation by operator's means; Transportation by the user's means; Assistance and

accompaniment for activities outside the home; Companionship at home; Meal preparation and assistance; Housing cleaning; Assistance in the use of computer; Sign language.

The service offered by Yukker is quick and easy. It allows the person with a disability to enter his or her request for assistance in a large database of operators, selected, who will quickly provide their availability for a fee or voluntarily.

Subscribing to Yukker costs only €9.90 per year, a symbolic price for the user. The operator, on the other hand, subscribes to Yukker for free. The subscription covers the cost of Yukker's mediation service; it does not include the hourly fee due to the operator, which is paid directly each time the operator performs a service.

The operator can offer himself assistance services by charging an hourly fee or voluntarily. To ensure that users receive the best possible assistance, operators are provided with a free three-quarter-hour online introductory course.

Yukker enjoyed many incentives provided by Government. Exemption from the obligation to pay annual fees to the Chamber of Commerce, secretarial fees, with attached stamp duties, due for registrations with the Business Registry. Zero per cent interest financing and non-repayable grant of up to 20% of investment and operating expenses.

The feature that makes it different from many start-ups with a social goal is that Yukker raised the registered capital for the establishment of the company through crowdfunding in 2019. Therefore, investors could benefit from deductions from their income.

4. Findings and Discussions

In the contest highlighted, the start-up under investigation could drive the wave of the phenomenon of digital technologies through the app, which is gaining ground even in the disabilities sector and has the potential to become a driver of change due to the reduction of waiting times, the new ways of booking and paying.

Starting from the idea of speeding up and, simultaneously, customizing the relationship, YUKKER could expand its business, becoming highly competitive in a sector characterised by very stringent constraints.

From our analysis, we have identified three main critical success factors:

- entrepreneur profile,
- value proposition and value creation,
- tax and financial incentives.

The founder and principal shareholder of Yukker represents a strong entrepreneur profile. She is both a leader and a strong motivator who has identified and caught a business opportunity by organising several resources and taking economic and financial risks. She has the characteristics of outstanding commitment, creativity and, novelty, flexibility and is also a skilled organiser.

Yukker's value proposition is realised through key activities, partners, and networks. The key activities, such as Research and Development, represent a strategic factor for the continuous updating of the app and for developing new features necessary to satisfy the demand for new services. Other strategic elements are communication and networking to ensure widespread services knowledge among users and to reach a large number of local assistants. A communication strategy will be implemented via social media and with national and local associations dealing with disabilities.

The core activity is intermediation, but the perception of the quality of the work is based above all on the relationship between the assistant and the assisted and, for this reason, we can distinguish two types of critical resources: the internal ones that are taken care of and updated through the activities of R&D and external R&D, i.e. those who support the people with disabilities and who, in reality, is not a stable part of the company staff. The construction of a capillary network of assistants/volunteers in the area represents a resource that is difficult to reproduce and/or transfer by competitors, as it is based on a fabric of collaboration relationships established with third-sector associations in the specific field of disability, territorial and sponsorships with universities.

This leads to the key partners and networks, such as local authorities or philanthropic institutions, which purchase subscriptions for their users, becoming increasingly important for business. This network makes it possible to overcome the initial barrier of the intermediation service's annual cost, which risks limiting its diffusion. Key partners and networks include the New Horizons international association, Ali Blu social cooperative, University of Messina, Cà Foscari University of Venice, Campus Treviso, Cattolica Foundation and various training institutions for social welfare operators and social health operators.

Concerning tax and financial incentives, it is relevant to underline that the duty of certifying the actual social dimension of the start-up, representing all intents and purposes in an accurate and reliable prediction by exposing qualitative and quantitative data, is a relevant factor to stimulate investors by showing them the potential impact in economic, social, and environmental terms.

Indeed, it is clear that the start-up model with a social goal is based on a mission aimed at creating value beyond mere financial return. Nevertheless, the provision of tax incentives and the opportunity to join public calls for funds, in the circumstances like those pointed out in the case study selected – in which it is possible to offer a clear and complete representation of the actual situation – is an enabling factor suitable to take advantage of alternative sources of financing like crowdfunding, so to solve the difficulties in obtaining bank loans and similar measures.

5. Conclusions

The case study investigated suggests some key interesting conclusions and implications regarding innovative digital start-ups with social goals. Analysing the Yukker business model has allowed us to identify and understand some crucial elements influencing innovative social start-ups' birth, growth, and business performance.

A strong entrepreneur profile is present in the innovative social start-up analysed, involving all requirements based on openness personality, experience, and motivation (Bruni et al., 2004; Poropat, 2009). Previous experience was essential to start Yukker faster than others, with innovative behaviour and readiness to invest in the new company over a lifetime. More willingness to catch new opportunities and self-confidence to overcome the fear of failure are features linked to great entrepreneurial motivation.

Yukker's value proposition integrates operators, customers, and other agents in very innovative ways in relation to the services and, significantly, implements a set of key business activities through internal and external organisations, allowing them to be more efficient, to respond better to all interested parties and thus to create value (Amit & Zott, 2001).

It is essential to design a network to increase relationships for entrepreneurship and for performing better in strategic and leading change. Established new collaborations with third parties have improved the Yukker business model; due to the enhanced duties enabling Yukker to release an effective framework of distinctive features involving social objectives, the firm has significantly increased its chance of success.

The proposed methodology and the focus on a single case do not allow for the generalisation of the results, but the primary purpose of this work was to identify the critical factors of value creation and success of a consolidated, innovative start-up with a social vocation, being this analysis reliable via triangulated results (Kelliher, 2005). This is also a function of a future longitudinal analysis to better identify the organisational dynamics through which the company achieves its economic objectives by explicitly pursuing social goals.

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