

Understanding Public Support for Social Enterprises in The Digital Age : A Sequential Awareness–Trust Framework of Social Media Communication

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ABSTRACT

Social enterprises increasingly rely on social media platforms to communicate their missions, demonstrate social impact, and mobilize public support. Despite this growing reliance, theoretical clarity regarding how social media communication translates into sustained public support remains limited. Much of the existing literature implicitly assumes a direct relationship between communication exposure and supportive behavior, often overlooking the cognitive and attitudinal mechanisms that shape individual responses. Drawing on Social Marketing Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, this conceptual paper develops a sequential awareness–trust framework to explain how social media communication influences public support toward social enterprises. The paper argues that social media communication does not directly generate public support; rather, its influence unfolds through a staged process in which communication enhances public awareness, awareness facilitates trust formation, and trust ultimately drives support intention. By synthesizing prior empirical research and advancing a process-oriented theoretical model, this paper contributes to social enterprise and digital communication literature by repositioning trust as the central psychological catalyst in public engagement. The framework offers a robust foundation for future empirical testing using structural equation modeling and related analytical approaches.

Keywords: Social Enterprises, Social Media Communication, Public Awareness, Trust, Support Intention.

Introduction

Social enterprises have emerged as influential organizational forms in response to persistent social, environmental, and community-level challenges that conventional market mechanisms and public institutions have struggled to address effectively. Positioned at the intersection of social purpose and commercial logic, social enterprises pursue mission-driven objectives while adopting

entrepreneurial approaches to ensure financial sustainability. Their ability to create social value, however, depends not only on operational efficiency but also on sustained public engagement and support. Unlike purely commercial firms, social enterprises rely heavily on public trust, legitimacy, and voluntary endorsement to mobilize resources, build networks, and maintain long-term impact.

In recent years, social media has become a central communication channel through which social enterprises engage with the public. Digital platforms allow these organizations to disseminate information, narrate impact stories, interact with stakeholders, and amplify social causes at relatively low cost. Through posts, videos, testimonials, and campaigns, social enterprises can reach audiences that were previously inaccessible through traditional media. Consequently, social media communication is often portrayed as a powerful enabler of visibility, awareness, and public support within the social sector.

Despite this growing reliance on digital communication, the theoretical understanding of how social media communication translates into public support remains underdeveloped. Much of the existing literature implicitly assumes that exposure to social media content leads directly to supportive attitudes or behaviors, such as advocacy, participation, or endorsement. This assumption is reflected in studies that focus on engagement metrics—likes, shares, comments, and reach—as indicators of success. However, such metrics provide limited insight into the psychological processes that underlie public responses to social enterprise communication.

Empirical inconsistencies further challenge the assumption of direct effects. While some social enterprises achieve high levels of online engagement, they often struggle to convert visibility into sustained public support. In other cases, individuals may be aware of a social enterprise's presence on social media yet remain hesitant to support it due to concerns related to credibility, authenticity, or perceived impact. These observations suggest that visibility and engagement alone are insufficient explanations for public support formation, particularly in contexts where ethical intent and social legitimacy are central.

A critical limitation of existing research is its tendency to treat public support as an immediate reaction to communication exposure, rather than as the outcome of a gradual cognitive and attitudinal process. In socially oriented contexts, individuals often require more than information; they seek understanding, reassurance, and confidence before offering support. This is especially true for social enterprises, whose outcomes are often intangible, long-term, or difficult to verify directly. As a result, public engagement with social enterprises is likely to involve intermediate psychological mechanisms that shape how communication is interpreted and evaluated.

This paper argues that public support for social enterprises emerges through a sequential psychological process, rather than through a direct communication behavior link. Specifically, it proposes that social media communication first enhances public awareness, which enables individuals to understand the mission and role of social enterprises. Awareness, in turn, facilitates the formation of trust, as individuals evaluate the credibility, integrity, and ethical orientation of these organizations. Trust then acts as the decisive attitudinal mechanism that drives public support intention. In this view, social media communication influences public support indirectly, through a staged awareness-trust pathway.

By advancing this perspective, the paper challenges visibility-centric and engagement-centric approaches to digital communication research and calls for a more nuanced, process-oriented understanding of public engagement. Drawing on Social Marketing Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the paper develops a sequential awareness-trust framework that integrates cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions of public support formation. Rather than treating

awareness and trust as parallel or outcome variables, the framework positions them as sequential mechanisms that structure the influence of social media communication.

The contribution of this paper is primarily theoretical. It offers a conceptual model that clarifies why social media communication does not automatically lead to public support and explains the conditions under which digital communication becomes effective in the social enterprise context. By repositioning trust as the central psychological catalyst linking communication exposure to behavioral intention, the paper advances social enterprise and digital communication scholarship beyond simplistic cause-effect assumptions.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews existing literature on social media communication, public awareness, trust, and public support in the context of social enterprises and identifies key conceptual gaps. Subsequently, the paper outlines the theoretical foundations underpinning the proposed framework and develops the sequential awareness-trust model. The paper then discusses the theoretical contributions and implications for future empirical research, before concluding with reflections on the broader relevance of the framework for understanding digital engagement in socially oriented organizations.

Literature Review and Conceptual Gap

Social Enterprises and the Challenge of Public Support

Social enterprises are increasingly recognized as hybrid organizational forms that blend social mission with market-based mechanisms. Unlike traditional nonprofit organizations, social enterprises generate revenue through commercial activities while simultaneously pursuing social or environmental objectives. This hybrid

nature creates both opportunities and challenges. While commercial logic offers financial sustainability, the social mission requires legitimacy, trust, and continued public endorsement.

Public support is therefore not optional for social enterprises; it is foundational. Support may manifest in various forms, including advocacy, word-of-mouth endorsement, participation, and engagement. Unlike purely transactional exchanges, support for social enterprises often involves voluntary and discretionary behavior, making it highly sensitive to perceptions of credibility, ethical intent, and social impact.

Prior research highlights that public support for socially oriented organizations is shaped not only by organizational performance but also by how organizations communicate their purpose and values. In this context, communication becomes a central mechanism through which social enterprises seek to align public perceptions with their missions.

Social Media Communication in Social Enterprise Research

The proliferation of social media platforms has transformed how organizations communicate with stakeholders. For social enterprises, social media offers a particularly attractive communication channel due to its low cost, interactive features, and ability to reach diverse audiences. Research in this area emphasizes the role of social media in storytelling, stakeholder engagement, and visibility enhancement.

Empirical studies suggest that social media enables social enterprises to humanize their missions by sharing narratives of beneficiaries, showcasing impact, and engaging in dialogue with the public. Visual storytelling, emotional appeals, and interactive content are often highlighted as effective strategies for generating online engagement.

However, much of this literature adopts a visibility-centric or engagement-centric perspective, treating metrics such as likes, shares, and comments as indicators of communication effectiveness. While such metrics capture attention and interaction, they do not necessarily reflect deeper psychological outcomes such as trust or willingness to support. As a result, the relationship between social media communication and meaningful public support remains ambiguous.

Limitations of Direct-Effect Assumptions

A notable limitation of existing research is the widespread assumption that social media communication exerts a direct influence on public support. This assumption is reflected in studies that examine linear relationships between communication exposure and supportive outcomes without accounting for intermediate psychological processes.

Empirical inconsistencies challenge this assumption. Some studies report positive associations between social media activity and supportive attitudes, while others find weak or insignificant relationships. These mixed findings suggest that social media communication alone may be insufficient to motivate public support, particularly in socially oriented contexts where trust and legitimacy are critical.

The reliance on direct-effect models overlooks the complexity of public engagement processes. Individuals do not passively accept organizational messages; rather, they interpret, evaluate, and judge communication based on prior beliefs, knowledge, and perceived credibility. This interpretive process points to the need for models that incorporate mediating mechanisms.

Public Awareness as a Cognitive Outcome of Communication

Public awareness is commonly defined as the extent to which individuals recognize and

understand an organization's mission, activities, and societal role. In the context of social enterprises, awareness is particularly important because these organizations often operate in ambiguous spaces that blur distinctions between nonprofit and for-profit entities.

Existing studies recognize awareness as a necessary condition for engagement. Without awareness, individuals cannot meaningfully evaluate or support social enterprises. Social media communication plays a crucial role in awareness creation by increasing exposure and familiarity.

However, awareness is frequently treated as an end outcome rather than as a process variable. Many studies stop at measuring awareness levels without examining how awareness influences subsequent attitudes or behaviors. This approach limits understanding of the role awareness plays in shaping public responses.

Conceptually, awareness represents a cognitive state—an understanding or recognition—rather than a motivational force. Individuals may be aware of a social enterprise yet remain indifferent or skeptical. This suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to explain public support.

Trust and Credibility in Socially Oriented Organizations

Trust has long been recognized as a central determinant of public support in nonprofit and social enterprise contexts. Trust reflects individuals' confidence that an organization is honest, reliable, and committed to its stated mission. In socially oriented organizations, trust is particularly salient because outcomes are often intangible, long-term, or difficult to verify.

Prior research consistently demonstrates that trust reduces perceived risk and enhances willingness to support organizations whose social impact cannot be directly observed. Trust

also strengthens emotional attachment and legitimacy, making it a critical component of sustained public engagement.

Despite its importance, trust is often modeled as an outcome variable in communication studies, rather than as a mechanism linking communication and behavior. This limits the explanatory power of trust and obscures its role in shaping public support.

Relationship Between Awareness and Trust

The relationship between awareness and trust has received limited attention in social enterprise research. Existing studies tend to treat awareness and trust as parallel constructs rather than examining their sequential relationship.

From a psychological perspective, awareness enables evaluation. When individuals possess knowledge about an organization's mission and activities, they are better positioned to assess its credibility and ethical intent. Awareness therefore functions as a cognitive precursor to trust formation.

This perspective suggests that trust does not emerge in a vacuum; it is grounded in understanding. Without awareness, individuals lack the information necessary to form trust judgments. This sequential relationship has not been sufficiently theorized or empirically examined in the context of social enterprises.

Public Support Intention as a Behavioral Outcome

Public support intention reflects individuals' willingness to engage in behaviors that benefit social enterprises, such as advocacy, participation, or endorsement. Unlike transactional behaviors, support intention is influenced by both cognitive evaluations and affective responses.

Existing literature often treats support intention as a direct outcome of communication or

awareness. However, evidence suggests that support intention is more strongly influenced by attitudinal factors, particularly trust. Individuals may be aware of social enterprises and even appreciate their missions, yet refrain from offering support if trust is lacking.

This highlights the importance of examining support intention as the culmination of a multi-stage process rather than as an immediate response to communication exposure.

Synthesis of Literature and Conceptual Gap

The review of existing literature reveals several critical gaps:

1. Social media communication research in the social enterprise context remains visibility-focused, with limited attention to psychological mechanisms.
2. Public awareness is often treated as an outcome rather than as an intermediate cognitive mechanism.
3. Trust is recognized as important but under-theorized as a mediating variable.
4. The sequential relationship between awareness and trust remains largely unexplored.
5. Direct-effect models dominate existing research, despite empirical inconsistencies.

Taken together, these gaps point to the need for a process-oriented, theory-driven framework that explains how social media communication influences public support through intermediate mechanisms. This paper addresses this need by proposing a sequential awareness-trust framework that integrates cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions of public engagement.

Positioning of the Present Study

By synthesizing insights from social enterprise

research, digital communication studies, and behavioral theory, this paper advances a conceptual model that moves beyond simplistic cause-effect assumptions. The proposed framework positions awareness and trust as sequential mechanisms that structure the influence of social media communication on public support.

In doing so, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital engagement in socially oriented organizations and provides a foundation for future empirical research using advanced analytical techniques such as structural equation modeling.

Theoretical Foundations

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Marketing Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Each theory explains a distinct stage of the public engagement process-cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral-thereby providing a coherent theoretical basis for the proposed sequential awareness-trust framework. Rather than applying these theories in isolation, this paper integrates them to explain how social media communication influences public support toward social enterprises through a staged psychological process.

Social Marketing Theory: Communication and Awareness Formation

Social Marketing Theory conceptualizes communication as a strategic tool for influencing socially desirable attitudes and behaviors. Unlike commercial marketing, which focuses primarily on consumer exchange, social marketing emphasizes education, sensitization, and voluntary behavior change. Central to this perspective is the assumption that behavior

change does not occur instantaneously but unfolds through a sequence of stages, beginning with awareness and understanding.

In the context of social enterprises, social media communication serves a social marketing function by introducing individuals to social problems, organizational missions, and impact narratives. Social enterprises often address issues that are complex, abstract, or distant from individuals' immediate experiences. As a result, communication efforts must first overcome informational gaps and limited public understanding. Social media platforms enable organizations to disseminate information repeatedly and interactively, thereby increasing familiarity and recognition.

From a theoretical standpoint, Social Marketing Theory positions awareness as the first cognitive outcome of communication. Awareness represents individuals' understanding of what an organization does, why it exists, and how it contributes to social value. Importantly, awareness is not synonymous with persuasion; it reflects recognition and comprehension rather than motivation. Individuals may become aware of a social enterprise without developing favorable attitudes or intentions.

This distinction is critical for understanding the limitations of visibility-centric approaches. While social media communication may succeed in raising awareness, Social Marketing Theory suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to drive behavioral outcomes. Instead, awareness functions as a necessary cognitive foundation upon which further evaluative processes are built. This theoretical insight justifies positioning public awareness as the first stage in the proposed sequential framework.

Source Credibility Theory: Trust as an Evaluative Mechanism

Source Credibility Theory explains how individuals

evaluate messages based on perceptions of the communicator's trustworthiness and expertise. According to this theory, message acceptance depends not only on content but also on the perceived credibility of the source. In contexts characterized by information asymmetry and uncertainty, credibility judgments become particularly salient.

Social enterprises operate in environments where outcomes are often intangible, long-term, or difficult to verify. Unlike commercial products, whose value can be assessed through direct consumption, the impact of social enterprises is frequently mediated through narratives, reports, and symbolic representations. Consequently, individuals must rely on trust to assess whether an organization is acting ethically, responsibly, and in alignment with its stated mission.

Social media communication plays a critical role in signaling credibility. Transparency in communication, consistency of messaging, responsiveness to public queries, and authenticity of storytelling all serve as cues that influence trust perceptions. Source Credibility Theory suggests that when individuals perceive social enterprise communication as trustworthy and sincere, they are more likely to accept organizational claims and develop confidence in the organization.

Crucially, Source Credibility Theory implies that trust is an evaluative outcome that follows awareness. Individuals cannot assess credibility without first understanding what an organization represents. Awareness enables evaluation by providing the informational basis necessary for credibility judgments. This insight supports the sequential positioning of trust as a mechanism that follows awareness in the proposed framework.

Furthermore, by conceptualizing trust as an intermediate evaluative mechanism rather than as an outcome variable, this paper extends the

application of Source Credibility Theory to explain how communication influences behavioral intention indirectly.

Theory of Planned Behavior: From Trust to Support Intention

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offers a robust explanation of how attitudes and beliefs translate into behavioral intentions. According to TPB, intention is the most immediate predictor of behavior and is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In socially oriented contexts, trust plays a central role in shaping attitudes toward organizations and reducing perceived risk.

Trust toward social enterprises strengthens favorable attitudes by reinforcing beliefs about ethical intent, reliability, and social value. When individuals trust an organization, they are more likely to view supportive behavior as worthwhile and socially meaningful. Trust also mitigates uncertainty regarding the effectiveness and legitimacy of social enterprises, thereby increasing individuals' willingness to offer support.

Within the TPB framework, trust can be understood as an attitudinal determinant that directly influences support intention. Importantly, TPB does not assume that attitudes emerge spontaneously; rather, they are shaped by prior cognitive evaluations. In the context of this paper, awareness enables evaluation, evaluation leads to trust, and trust drives intention.

By situating trust within TPB as a key attitudinal driver, the paper explains why awareness alone may not lead to support intention. Individuals may be aware of social enterprises and even appreciate their missions, yet refrain from supporting them if trust is lacking. This theoretical insight reinforces the centrality of trust in the proposed model.

Integrating the Theories: A Sequential Psychological Process

While each of the three theories offers valuable insights, their integration provides a more comprehensive explanation of public support formation. Social Marketing Theory explains how communication creates awareness; Source Credibility Theory explains how awareness facilitates trust formation; and the Theory of Planned Behavior explains how trust influences support intention.

Together, these theories support a cognitive - attitudinal - behavioral sequence:

1. **Cognitive stage:** Social media communication increases public awareness by providing information and familiarity.
2. **Attitudinal stage:** Awareness enables credibility evaluation, leading to trust formation.
3. **Behavioral stage:** Trust shapes favorable attitudes and reduces uncertainty, driving support intention.

This integrated perspective challenges linear and direct-effect models that dominate existing research. Instead, it positions public engagement as a staged psychological process that unfolds over time.

Theoretical Justification for an Indirect Communication Effect

A key implication of the integrated theoretical framework is that social media communication does not exert a direct influence on public support intention. Rather, its influence is indirect and mediated, operating through awareness and trust. This theoretical position explains why social media visibility and engagement metrics often fail to predict meaningful support outcomes.

By grounding this argument in established theories, the paper offers a theoretically robust explanation for empirical inconsistencies observed in prior studies. It also highlights the importance of examining intermediary mechanisms rather than relying solely on direct-effect assumptions.

Summary of Theoretical Foundations

In summary, the theoretical foundations of this paper rest on the integration of Social Marketing Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Together, these perspectives justify a sequential framework in which social media communication influences public support toward social enterprises through awareness creation and trust formation.

This integrated theoretical approach provides the basis for the conceptual model developed in the next section and positions the paper as a meaningful contribution to theory-driven research on digital communication and social enterprise engagement.

Conceptual Framework and Proposition Development

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous section, this paper advances a sequential conceptual framework explaining how social media communication influences public support toward social enterprises. The framework integrates cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions of public engagement and responds directly to the conceptual gaps identified in prior literature. Rather than assuming a direct effect of communication on support, the framework positions public awareness and trust as sequential mediating mechanisms through which social media communication exerts its influence.

Overview of the Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework conceptualizes public

engagement with social enterprises as a multi-stage psychological process. At the initial stage, social media communication functions as an informational stimulus that increases public exposure to social enterprise missions and activities. This exposure leads to public awareness, defined as individuals' understanding and recognition of the role and purpose of social enterprises.

At the second stage, awareness enables evaluative judgment. As individuals become more informed, they assess the credibility, integrity, and ethical intent of social enterprises. This evaluative process results in trust formation, which reflects confidence in the organization's commitment to its social mission.

At the final stage, trust shapes public support intention, representing individuals' willingness to engage in supportive behaviors such as advocacy, endorsement, or participation. In this framework, trust acts as the central attitudinal driver that converts cognitive understanding into behavioral intention.

The conceptual model can be summarized as follows:

Social Media Communication → Public Awareness
→ Trust → Public Support Intention

Social Media Communication and Public Awareness

Social media communication serves as the primary interface between social enterprises and the public in digital environments. Through informational posts, storytelling, and interactive engagement, social enterprises introduce their missions, values, and activities to individuals who may have limited prior exposure.

Drawing on Social Marketing Theory, communication is expected to first influence cognitive outcomes rather than behavioral responses. Awareness reflects individuals'

familiarity with and understanding of social enterprises, enabling recognition and basic comprehension. Without awareness, further evaluative or attitudinal processes cannot occur.

Importantly, this relationship does not imply persuasion but rather informational sensitization. Individuals may become aware of social enterprises without forming immediate opinions or intentions.

Proposition 1: Social media communication positively influences public awareness of social enterprises.

Public Awareness and Trust Formation

Awareness provides the informational foundation necessary for credibility evaluation. As individuals gain knowledge about social enterprises, they are better positioned to assess whether these organizations are authentic, ethical, and committed to their stated missions.

Source Credibility Theory suggests that trust judgments require information. Awareness enables individuals to interpret communication cues, evaluate consistency, and judge the sincerity of organizational narratives. In the absence of awareness, trust cannot be meaningfully formed.

This perspective positions awareness as a cognitive antecedent to trust rather than as a parallel or independent construct. Trust emerges as a consequence of informed evaluation rather than as an automatic response to exposure.

Proposition 2: Public awareness of social enterprises positively influences trust toward social enterprises.

Direct Influence of Social Media Communication on Trust

In addition to its indirect influence through awareness, social media communication may also exert a direct influence on trust. Communication

characteristics such as transparency, responsiveness, authenticity, and consistency can signal credibility even before individuals develop comprehensive awareness.

Source Credibility Theory supports the idea that trust can be shaped by communication cues embedded in message delivery and tone. For example, ethical storytelling, evidence of impact, and openness to dialogue may foster trust directly.

However, this direct influence is expected to be weaker than the awareness-driven pathway, as sustained trust typically requires informed understanding.

Proposition 3: Social media communication positively influences trust toward social enterprises.

Trust and Public Support Intention

Public support intention reflects individuals' willingness to engage in behaviors that benefit social enterprises, such as advocacy, endorsement, or participation. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, intention is shaped by attitudes and beliefs that reduce uncertainty and enhance perceived value.

Trust plays a central role in this process by strengthening favorable attitudes and mitigating perceived risk. When individuals trust social enterprises, they are more likely to view support as meaningful and worthwhile.

This relationship highlights trust as the primary attitudinal driver of public support intention, surpassing the influence of awareness alone.

Proposition 4: Trust toward social enterprises positively influences public support intention.

Public Awareness and Public Support Intention

While awareness is necessary for engagement, its direct influence on support intention is expected

to be limited. Awareness increases understanding but does not inherently motivate action. Individuals may be aware of social enterprises yet remain hesitant to support them if trust is lacking.

This distinction emphasizes that awareness functions primarily as an enabling condition rather than as a decisive motivator. Any direct influence of awareness on support intention is likely to be weaker than the trust-driven pathway.

Proposition 5: Public awareness of social enterprises has a positive but limited influence on public support intention.

Sequential Mediation of Awareness and Trust

The central contribution of the framework lies in its articulation of sequential mediation. Social media communication influences public support intention indirectly by first enhancing awareness and subsequently building trust. Awareness alone does not drive support; it must translate into trust to produce behavioral intention.

This sequential logic integrates cognitive and attitudinal mechanisms into a single explanatory pathway, addressing the limitations of direct-effect models in prior research.

Proposition 6: Public awareness mediates the relationship between social media communication and trust.

Proposition 7: Trust mediates the relationship between public awareness and public support intention.

Proposition 8: Social media communication influences public support intention through a sequential mediation of public awareness and trust.

Theoretical Significance of the Framework

The proposed conceptual framework advances

theory by shifting the focus from communication exposure to psychological process. It demonstrates that public engagement with social enterprises unfolds through a structured sequence of awareness creation and trust formation, rather than as an immediate response to digital communication.

By articulating explicit propositions, the framework provides a clear roadmap for future empirical research using structural equation modeling, mediation analysis, and longitudinal designs. It also offers a theoretically grounded explanation for why social media visibility does not always translate into meaningful public support.

Transition to the Next Section

The next section discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the proposed framework and outlines directions for future empirical research aimed at testing and extending the sequential awareness–trust model.

Theoretical Contributions and Research Implications

This paper makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature on social enterprises, digital communication, and public engagement. By advancing a sequential awareness–trust framework, it extends existing theories and addresses critical conceptual gaps identified in prior research. Beyond theory building, the framework offers clear implications for future empirical research by redefining how social media communication effects should be conceptualized and examined.

Advancing a Process-Oriented View of Public Support Formation

The primary theoretical contribution of this paper lies in its process-oriented explanation of how public support toward social enterprises is

formed in digital environments. Existing research often treats public support as a direct or immediate outcome of social media communication. Such approaches implicitly assume that exposure to communication content is sufficient to motivate supportive behavior.

In contrast, this paper reconceptualizes public support as the outcome of a multi-stage psychological process involving cognitive and attitudinal mechanisms. By positioning awareness and trust as sequential stages, the framework explains why social media visibility and engagement metrics frequently fail to predict meaningful public support. This process-oriented perspective enriches social enterprise literature by shifting the analytical focus from outcomes to mechanisms.

Reconceptualizing Social Media Communication as an Indirect Influence Mechanism

A second key contribution is the reconceptualization of social media communication as an indirect influence mechanism, rather than a direct driver of public support. Much of the digital communication literature implicitly assumes linear, direct effects between communication exposure and behavioral outcomes.

This paper challenges that assumption by demonstrating that social media communication primarily functions as an enabling stimulus—it creates awareness and signals credibility but does not, by itself, generate support intention. This reconceptualization helps reconcile mixed empirical findings in prior studies and provides a more realistic account of how communication operates in socially oriented contexts.

Positioning Trust as the Central Psychological Catalyst

Trust emerges as the central theoretical construct in the proposed framework. While prior studies acknowledge the importance of trust in social

enterprise and nonprofit contexts, they often treat it as either an outcome variable or a parallel predictor.

This paper advances theory by positioning trust as a mediating catalyst that transforms cognitive awareness into behavioral intention. By doing so, it clarifies the role of trust as the decisive attitudinal mechanism that enables public support. This contribution deepens understanding of trust dynamics in digital communication and highlights why awareness alone is insufficient to motivate action.

Integrating Multiple Theories into a Unified Framework

Another significant contribution is the integration of Social Marketing Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior into a single, coherent conceptual model. While each of these theories has been applied independently in prior research, they are rarely integrated to explain public engagement processes in the social enterprise context.

By mapping these theories onto cognitive (awareness), attitudinal (trust), and behavioral (support intention) stages, the paper demonstrates how they collectively explain the sequential influence of social media communication. This integrative approach enhances theoretical coherence and provides a more comprehensive explanation of digital engagement mechanisms.

Extending Social Enterprise Research into Digital Contexts

The framework contributes to social enterprise literature by explicitly addressing digital communication dynamics, an area that remains under-theorized despite the widespread adoption of social media by social enterprises. By focusing on individual-level psychological mechanisms, the paper complements

organizational-level studies and provides insights into how public perceptions are formed in online environments.

This extension is particularly relevant in emerging economies and socially diverse contexts, where trust and legitimacy play a critical role in public engagement with hybrid organizations.

Implications for Future Empirical Research

The proposed framework offers several important implications for future empirical studies:

- 1. Emphasis on Mediation Testing:** Researchers should move beyond direct-effect models and explicitly test mediation and sequential mediation mechanisms when examining social media communication effects.
- 2. Appropriate Use of Analytical Techniques:** Structural equation modeling, path analysis, and longitudinal designs are particularly suitable for testing the staged relationships proposed in the framework.
- 3. Refinement of Measurement Approaches:** Awareness and trust should be measured as distinct constructs with theoretically grounded scales, rather than being conflated or treated as outcomes.
- 4. Beyond Engagement Metrics:** Researchers should be cautious in interpreting social media engagement metrics as indicators of public support and instead focus on psychological and attitudinal outcomes.
- 5. Contextual and Comparative Research:** The framework provides a basis for cross-cultural, platform-specific, and sector-specific studies that examine how digital communication effects vary across contexts.

Implications for Conceptual and Theory-Building Research

For scholars engaged in theory-building, the framework highlights the importance of sequencing constructs rather than modeling them as parallel predictors. This approach encourages a more nuanced understanding of how communication influences attitudes and behavior over time.

Additionally, the framework invites future conceptual work to explore boundary conditions, such as perceived authenticity, emotional engagement, or social identity, that may strengthen or weaken the awareness – trust – support pathway.

Summary of Contributions

In summary, this paper contributes to theory by:

1. Offering a process-based explanation of public support formation
2. Reframing social media communication as an indirect influence mechanism
3. Establishing trust as the central mediator in digital engagement
4. Integrating multiple theories into a unified conceptual framework
5. Providing a clear agenda for future empirical research

Together, these contributions advance scholarly understanding of how social media communication shapes public engagement with social enterprises and provide a theoretically robust foundation for continued research in this domain.

Conclusion

This paper set out to advance theoretical understanding of how social media communication influences public support toward social enterprises in digital environments. Challenging the dominant assumption of direct communication

effects, the paper developed a sequential awareness–trust framework that explains public support as the outcome of a staged cognitive and attitudinal process. Drawing on Social Marketing Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the framework integrates communication, evaluation, and intention into a coherent theoretical explanation.

The central argument of the paper is that social media communication does not directly generate public support. Instead, its influence unfolds through a sequential pathway in which communication enhances public awareness, awareness enables trust formation, and trust ultimately drives public support intention. By positioning awareness and trust as sequential mechanisms rather than parallel outcomes, the framework offers a more nuanced and realistic account of public engagement with social enterprises.

This conceptualization helps explain persistent inconsistencies in prior empirical research, where high levels of digital visibility and engagement often fail to translate into meaningful public support. The framework demonstrates that visibility is a necessary but insufficient condition for support and that trust functions as the decisive psychological catalyst converting understanding into willingness to act. In doing so, the paper reorients digital communication research away from outcome-centric and metric-driven approaches toward a process-based understanding of influence.

Beyond its contribution to social enterprise literature, the framework has broader relevance for research on digital communication in socially oriented organizations. As public trust becomes increasingly fragile in online environments characterized by information overload and skepticism, understanding how communication builds credibility and confidence is critical. The sequential awareness–trust framework provides

a theoretically grounded lens through which such dynamics can be examined across contexts.

The paper also offers a clear agenda for future research. By articulating explicit propositions and emphasizing mediation and sequencing, it invites empirical scholars to test and extend the framework using advanced analytical techniques such as structural equation modeling, longitudinal designs, and cross-context comparisons. In doing so, the framework serves not only as an explanatory model but also as a foundation for cumulative theory building.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to theory by demonstrating that effective social media communication for social enterprises is not about maximizing exposure or engagement alone, but about building understanding and trust in a deliberate and sequential manner. By foregrounding the psychological processes underlying public support, the study advances a more rigorous and meaningful understanding of digital engagement in the pursuit of social value.

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