

Entrepreneurial Alertness Amid of a Pandemic – Social Enterprise Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial alertness (EA) is the sense of entrepreneurs in recognizing and persuading the opportunities that others un exploit in the business environment (Urban, 2020; Shane, 2000). It is at the heart of the entrepreneurial process that facilitates entrepreneurs to increase their adaptability in different situations (Tang et al., 2012). Consequently, EA influences entrepreneurs' judgments, decisions, and actions in environmental disruptions (Tang et al., 2021). Social entrepreneurs are considered the creators and transformers of organizations that act on their social vision. They are being alert to recognize potential opportunities in the underdeveloped social problems and create strategic fit (Urban, 2010). Similarly, they discover opportunities based on their past experiences and present actions in these emerging environmental changes (Daniel et al., 2021).

Covid-19 outbreak created havoc on businesses and disturbed economies and societies all around the world (Giones et al., 2020). This unanticipated catastrophe both hampered and presented new opportunities for entrepreneurs. Similarly, on the basis of Urban's (2020) explanation, EA signals the possible opportunities in the uncertain context of decision-making and it is above-average level in social enterprises (Mair & Noboa, 2006). However, the involvement of EA in the process of opportunity identification is still a point of contention in social enterprises (Tang et al., 2012; Mair & Noboa, 2006). Hence, the literature emphasized the need to comprehend EA's position in the context of social entrepreneurship (Mair & Noboa, 2006). In addition, the minimal empirical studies in the literature on EA in a crisis have offered a new research avenue (Mitchell et al., 2007; Tang, 2008). As a

result, the objective of this research is to look into the role of EA within the framework of social entrepreneurship during the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The entrepreneurial alertness concept deals with how new ideas of entrepreneurs are initiated and pursued. Kirzner (1979) explains EA as an individual's ability to identify market opportunities. Moreover, according to McMullen and Shepherd (2006) alertness frequently deals with movement towards action. Through social enterprise context, EA provides insight to identify social problems which will hinder the new opportunities to the entrepreneurs. According to the social enterprise perspective, alerts on entrepreneurial opportunities will create a platform to capture unaddressed social problems. Previous studies measured EA under different categories: sensing and searching (Tang et al., 2012; Brockman, 2014; Samo, 2016), cognitive ability (Tang et al., 2012; Valliere, 2013; Puhakka, 2011), and knowledge and experience (Tang et al., 2012; Valliere, 2013; Karabe & Bingol, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative technique, which was determined to be the most appropriate research strategy for the investigation (Dana & Dana, 2005). The sampling frame of this study covers 24 social enterprises from the population in the Sri Lanka. The study used the maximum variation sampling technique as it aids in determining the maximum variation of SEs operating in Sri Lanka; as a result, they differ in operational scopes, size, target markets, products or services, and annual income levels (British Council, 2018). Consequently, the small and medium social enterprises used in the study belong to different sectors such as service and manufacturing. They were adopted to the pandemic while catering to both local and international customers in the market. The owner-managers or senior managers of the social enterprises were considered the key informants of the study as they are best suited for gathering information from businesses with common features (Hasle et al., 2012). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected through semi-structured interviews, which produced reliable and insightful results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially,

becoming familiar with the depth and breadth of the transcriptions is crucial. Accordingly, different codes were identified to develop thematic patterns. The study followed a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis approaches. Thus, this allows deriving new themes from the gathered data while using the previously established theory, framework, or other study emphases.

FINDINGS

The study focused on the social entrepreneur's context in a pandemic era. Based on the thematic analysis, the study revealed four themes: a) scanning, b) association and connections, c) evaluation and judgments, and d) self-experimenting. The results of the study revealed that self-experimenting and scanning are highly stimulating for the growth of social enterprise compared to association and connections plus evaluation and judgments. The responses of participants clear highlight that in the pandemic situation, social enterprises are much more concerned with the uncertainty that is associated with the development of social problems. Social entrepreneurs expressed that they scan the environment with the help of social media content based on the internet. Simultaneously, they expressed those digital tools enable them to create more awareness of the outer environment. Further, they have used the lockdown period to search for market trends and opportunities. Due to the limited external environmental exposure of organizations in the pandemic period, social entrepreneurs were unable to evaluate the performance of social enterprises. Moreover, they expressed that they have to deal with the artificial business environment created by the pandemic. Similarly, self-experience has been identified as the next critical factor to be on alert in the market. Their previous experience in the community and learning has created a great sense of opportunity in identifying opportunities to be alert in the market. Moreover, based on the personal experiences in their life lessons, there was stimulation among social entrepreneurs to identify more avenues in business. Furthermore, owners of social enterprises expressed that personal sense and external pressure motivated them to create an expanded view of their business scope.

Based on all the analysis, it can be concluded that self-experimenting will have the greatest impact on the EA of social enterprises, while it will become the newest theme introduced through this research to the literature. Due to the pandemic, most of the social entrepreneurs suggested that they engaged in personal assessments regarding the business, and it made sense for business opportunities for improvement. Concurrently, it has been concluded that the EA created a higher contribution to the business growth of social enterprises in post-disaster situations, extraverterted from literature and empirical observations.

CONCLUSIONS

This empirical research of this nature contributed to the situational analysis in the research context. It eventually proposes a framework of EA that contains four themes that emerged at the business level: scanning, association and connections, evaluation and judgments, and self-experimenting. Furthermore, the study proposes to extend the qualitative study by validating the qualitative approach. Moreover, this research will introduce new thoughts to future research about the contribution of self-experimenting businesses to creating EA simultaneously as suggested by Tunde et al. (2020) in their research.

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