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Exploring the social and spatial role of social media for community entrepreneurship

Josefina Jonsson 

Department of economics, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of online community entrepreneurship, using a rural grocery store as a case study. I examine the role of social media in community entrepreneurship, revealing insights into the interplay between social interactions, spatial factors, and the entrepreneurial process. The case account outlines a process where online communities turn ideas into actions and shape local environments. Social media acts as a platform for collective effort, resource allocation, and coordination, challenging traditional notions of localized entrepreneurship. Three key themes emerge: social media facilitates communication and collaboration; collective agency empowers online communities for change; and the dynamic nature of context blurs the boundaries between local and online. I introduce the concept of 'online community entrepreneurship', which connects participants based on shared interests, promoting social goals and asynchronous engagement. This research enriches an understanding of community entrepreneurship by highlighting the transformative impact of online communities.

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1. Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of modern society, connecting billions of individuals across the globe and empowering them to exchange information, establish connections, and express their perspectives (Terren and Borge-Bravo 2021). Consequently, an ongoing discourse has developed regarding the transformative effects of social media on social power dynamics (Haji Ali et al. 2019) and the ways it influences what is local, online, or in between (Lindell 2016). Moreover, as social media has disrupted conventional modes of communication, reshaped social interactions, and redefined the concept of community (Matthews 2016), it has also become increasingly relevant to discuss its role in entrepreneurship.

Social media is said to play a vital role in supporting entrepreneurship and organizations in various ways (Briones et al. 2011; Campbell, Lambright, and Wells 2014; Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton 2012; Nah and Saxton 2013; Olanrewaju et al. 2020). This can include marketing, crowdfunding, and networking, to name a few. Other benefits concern how entrepreneurship is cultivated through active engagement on social networking sites, where entrepreneurs seek, receive, and provide assistance (Vershina, Phillips, and McAdam 2022). Recent research has also highlighted the pivotal role of online communities in fostering the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunities, by providing feedback, emotional support, and helping to reduce uncertainty (Schou and Adarkwah 2023). Consequently, online communities can be regarded as both a tool for business development (e.g. marketing or crowdfunding) and a part of the social processes that surround entrepreneurship (e.g. provision of emotional support, assistance, or feedback).

CONTACT Josefina Jonsson  josefina.jonsson@slu.se  Department of Economics, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala 75007, Sweden

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Entrepreneurship is a social phenomenon (Anderson, Drakopoulou, and Jack 2012) which can be understood by examining it within a particular place (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016). According to Welter (2011), the spatial context in which entrepreneurship is shaped is important for understanding the process. Thus, when studying community entrepreneurship, a geographical place often becomes the starting point (Fortunato and Alter 2015). Community entrepreneurship is characterized as organizations initiated and managed by individuals within a local community, delivering various benefits (Buratti, Sillig, and Albanese 2022). While the current literature emphasizes the significance of the geographical, spatial, and social contexts in community entrepreneurship, little remains known about how online communities relate to the spatial and social contexts. Given that online communities serve a dual purpose – functioning both as tools for fostering business development and as a part of the social process – this paper uses social media interactions as empirical material to explore community entrepreneurship. Gaining insights into social media's role in community entrepreneurship can help to harness the potential of online communities to support and enhance community entrepreneurship initiatives.

While the emergence of social media has posed challenges to established entrepreneurship theories, empirical studies frequently overlook the online realm. To address this gap, this paper examines the two-year development of a grocery shop in a rural Swedish village, using content from two Facebook groups as the primary source of empirical material. Additionally, the paper departs from theories on community entrepreneurship and social/spatial context(s). This paper sets out to ask: *How do social media interactions influence the process of community entrepreneurship?*

To answer this question, I address three key themes in the discussion: the impact of social media on community entrepreneurship, collective agency, and social and spatial contexts. Section 5.1 highlights social media's role as a vital tool for communication and resource allocation within online communities, facilitating community entrepreneurship. Section 5.2 explores the concept of collective agency, emphasizing the collaborative nature of online communities and the challenges of diversity and inclusivity. Section 5.3 underscores the dynamic nature of contexts shaped by entrepreneurial activity, with a focus on the interplay between online and local social-spatial contexts in community entrepreneurship. These three themes collectively led to proposing the concept of 'online community entrepreneurship' as a framework for examining asynchronous, online collaboration among individuals, for the purpose of local change. Further, this work disrupts the previous understanding of social and spatial contexts as concepts connected only to physical place, and shows that they can also be connected to online spaces.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Community entrepreneurship

At its core, Buratti et al. (2022) state that there are three basic characteristics of community entrepreneurship. First, community enterprises are created by people who live or work in a particular local community. Second, they have multiple goals, including economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Third, the management of these organizations involves local individuals, and sometimes the entire community, as well as other partners who work together to make their activities successful. Anderson and Gaddefors (2016) acknowledge that rural communities possess unique strengths, assets, and resources which can be harnessed to address local challenges and drive change. Welter (2011) highlights the significant advantages for the broader community and even the pursuit of non-profit objectives in community entrepreneurship. Vestrum (2014) has made a similar argument, describing the transformative impact of a community entrepreneur who infused novel ideas and vitality into their local community, leading to significant social change. Moreover, her study emphasizes the interconnectedness between entrepreneurship, relationships, and specific geographical contexts, shifting the focus away from the individual entrepreneur as the sole explanatory factor for entrepreneurial development.

In studies of community entrepreneurship, the concept of 'place' has been central. Place can be regarded as a dynamic space that includes meanings, emotions, and values, forming social and cultural bonds that link entrepreneurs to their surroundings (i.e. embeddedness) (Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015; McKeever, Jack, and Anderson 2015). Furthermore, place encompasses the spatial positioning of a community within a given geographical context, along with its integration and interconnectedness within the social framework (Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015). Communities often establish their unique identity within a specific 'place' (Lyons et al. 2012), which subsequently influences and assumes a fundamental role in the entrepreneurial process (McKeever, Jack, and Anderson 2015). Entrepreneurial engagement with a rural place, and the interactions forged with individuals, underscore the intrinsic interconnectedness and fluidity of social, spatial, and economic processes (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016).

Thus, community entrepreneurship is dependent upon both the social and spatial dimensions in a community. As such, the next section will discuss the local social and spatial contexts.

2.2. Local social and spatial contexts

Entrepreneurship is socially situated and socially enacted (e.g. James, Xiong, and Anderson 2022). Indeed, the social is more than simply a background or enabling mechanism: a social perspective views entrepreneurship as arising from within the social context, through the social, as enacted by social individuals, in a social milieu (Korsgaard and Anderson 2011). These connections, commonly referred to as embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Jack and Anderson 2002), have gained recognition in scholarly research. Individuals, and entrepreneurs, vary in the degree to which they are embedded or dis-embedded in their contexts (Jack and Anderson 2002). For entrepreneurs, their embeddedness determines the opportunities and limitations they encounter in their actions (Welter 2011). Consequently, the process of embeddedness becomes crucial for business operations, as it dictates the access, or lack thereof, to various contexts. This acknowledges entrepreneurship as deeply influenced by and inseparable from its surrounding context (Baker and Welter 2020); entrepreneurship should be regarded as interactions within contexts (Baker and Welter 2020), rather than viewing context as a static background. As such, context is constructed and enacted through the actions of the entrepreneur (Griffin, 2007).

Contexts in entrepreneurship include: 'business, which has been the default context for most entrepreneurship research; social (networks, households, and families); spatial (urban versus rural places or communities); and institutional' (Baker and Welter 2020, 10). The spatial context is often used as a research focus by viewing entrepreneurship in place: we can acquire a broader view of entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon when we look at the places in which it develops (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016). Entrepreneurs utilize the social and spatial resources of a local place to influence and transform their contexts, thereby generating innovative business opportunities (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018).

Often, people in a geographically bounded community have a shared history, culture, identity, laws, and possibly socioeconomic status or religious affiliation, a form of *gemeinschaft* (Tönnies 1957). In a recent study, Haugh (2022) set out to understand the role of place for community entrepreneurship. She found that in various locations, local community action is intertwined with and influenced by the unique characteristics of the historical and spatial context, forming an essential component of community entrepreneurship. This builds on the results of studies on, e.g. entrepreneurial embeddedness (Jack and Anderson 2002), structures in place (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016), and place (Anderson 2015; McKeever, Jack, and Anderson 2015).

As shown above, prominent studies of community entrepreneurship often take the geographical area as the point of departure. However, with the development of online communities, it is motivated to look more deeply into their role in community entrepreneurship development. As such, the next section will examine the online social and spatial contexts.

2.3. Online social and spatial contexts

Members participating in online communities can experience sociality online (Martin and Rizvi 2014) and partake in a dynamic community with structuring characteristics (Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob 2006). Often, online communities consist of individuals who come together around shared interests or activities (Faraj et al. 2016).

Notably, many entrepreneurs often seek advice from these online communities, even more than from their own family and friends (Kuhn, Galloway, and Collins-Williams 2017). In a similar vein, Schou et al. (2022) have demonstrated how entrepreneurs acquire knowledge vicariously by engaging in conversations within these digital communities. Schou and Adarkwah (2023) also show how online communities play a crucial role in fostering the development of entrepreneurial opportunities, by offering valuable feedback, and emotional support, mitigating uncertainties in the entrepreneurial process. However, it is important to recognize that due to their digital nature, online communities operate in distinct ways compared to physical communities, which requires careful consideration when researching them (Faraj et al. 2016).

Information systems research acknowledges that online communities offer certain features arising from their design, including low entry barriers, enabling easy and widespread participation (Hwang, Singh, and Argote 2015). Furthermore, these online communities facilitate broader knowledge sharing and storage capabilities compared to their physical counterparts (Leonardi 2014). Nevertheless, online communities are not without their downsides, such as the potential for trolling, disruptive behaviour, and destructive interactions, which are often facilitated by the anonymity provided by these online spaces (Etter and Albu 2021).

However, the digital sphere in general, and social media in particular, can be described as a total social fact (Fish et al. 2011); sociality can be constructed both online and in person through online and face-to-face interaction (Martin and Rizvi 2014). Online communities, then, are social phenomena. Therefore, I will now turn to their spatial characteristics.

Contemporary studies acknowledge how a place is materially anchored in a geographically defined place, but interpreted, negotiated, and socialized through online communities (Waite 2020). Digital place-making (Basaraba 2021) views place as a relational construct, where place is produced through the fact that 'human beings are always conjoined, enmeshed, and immersed in their world' (Seamon 2012, 4). Concepts like 'net locality' (Gordon and Silva 2011) seek to make sense of the mixture of digital information, and the online connections, with local places.

Online communities hold the potential to enhance the adaptability of local communities by enabling entrepreneurs to utilize the disparate and distributed resources that exist or lie dormant in them (Sankaran and Demangeot 2017). Through online interactions, the spatial context is mediated and materialized in digital realms (Lundgren and Johansson 2017). While urban places are the focus of most studies on digital media and place-making processes (Özkul and Humphreys 2015), Lundgren and Johansson (2017) examined the use of digital media outside the city. They identified a 'co-construction of place', where rural residents used online spaces to gather, share experiences, and recreate and recognize their rural identities. As such, online communities can be viewed as a social arena, with both social and spatial characteristics.

2.4. Summary

So far, I have discussed the local social context, as embeddedness (Jack and Anderson 2002) in a place, consisting of structures (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016). I have also discussed online communities as an online social context, where members can experience relationships online (Faraj et al. 2016). The spatial context refers to a geographical place with local structures (Gaddefors and Anderson 2017; Giddens 1984), but can also mean a representation of a place that is constructed and interpreted on social media (Waite 2020). The theoretical framework, as presented above, is summarized in Table 1. At the nexus of social-local context, there are the members of a local

Table 1. A framework for understanding the four different contexts in this paper.

	Social	Spatial
Local	Local individuals <i>Embeddedness</i> (Jack and Anderson 2002)	Given geographical place <i>Structures</i> (Giddens 1984)
Online	Online communities <i>Sociality online</i> (Martin and Rizvi 2014)	Constructed <i>Co-construction of place</i> (Waite 2020)

community. This comprises, for example, family or local networks, which are experienced and acted upon in the local place. On the other hand, there are social relations online, in the social-online context. Here, individuals experience and construct social relations through interactions on social media. The local-spatial context is defined in this paper as the geographical place, where the local place is experienced and acted upon in situ.

Before presenting the analysis of the case, the next chapter describes the procedures and methods used in this paper.

3. Methods

In order to understand how social media can matter for community entrepreneurship, this study examines online traces from social media. Often, qualitative entrepreneurship research is conducted based on ethnographic work (Johnstone 2007), but this has its drawbacks for understanding the online sociality. This study followed a netnographic approach as a method for exploring the online traces and using them in social science qualitative research (Kozinets 2019).

The research design consisted of three distinct steps, as outlined in Table 2. In Stage 1, an initial orientation phase was conducted, involving observation of the village's Facebook group. This process facilitated identification of the case – specifically, the grocery store.

Stage 2 involved the review and selection of online discussion threads, employing a more systematic sampling approach. To examine engagement patterns more closely, elements of netnography, a research methodology introduced by Kozinets (2019), were utilized. This approach was deemed appropriate for collecting and analysing data pertaining to social processes, as it offered valuable insights into critical sociocultural patterns. In this stage, 112 posts were collected from the village's Facebook group and 105 from a second group dedicated specifically to the grocery store. Each post is connected to additional comments, likes and shares, which are important for creating an understanding of the discussion.

Finally, Stage 3 encompassed a coding process, and temporal bracketing analysis, which contributed to the development of a comprehensive understanding of the overall research process. Further details regarding each of these stages are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Stages of the research process.

Step 1: Orientation	December 2020	Observation of the village's Facebook group. Case selection.
Step 2: Selection and collection of data	October 2022	<i>Ravenville Facebook group</i> 1,600 members. Created in 2009. Keywords: Store; Goods; Market; Grocer* (*y/ies). Number of analysed posts: 112 <i>Grocery store's Facebook group</i> 716 members. Created in 2021. Number of analysed posts: 105
Step 3: Analysis	November– December 2022	Stages of the development were defined in an iterative process. The three phases were titled: brainstorming, mobilization, and realization. Subsequently, thematic coding.

As this study includes content spanning a two-year period, and aims to study online interactions as they occur, the steps described above helped in providing real-time data, capturing the dynamic nature of online communities and their evolution over extended periods. This enabled a deep understanding of how entrepreneurship evolved over time and provided valuable insights into the changing dynamics of the selected communities.

3.1. Orientation

The present research is part of a larger longitudinal study on a rural village called Ravenville. The choice of a rural setting is motivated by the characteristics of rural areas, where smaller, tightly-knit communities are more common, in stark contrast to urban environments. The social bonds and relationships that take root within these rural communities become intertwined with the rural landscape itself, affecting how both residents and visitors engage with the place (Anderson and Gaddefors 2016). Consequently, I was particularly interested in rural areas serving as the empirical focus of this study, as they present a distinctive opportunity to explore the intricate interplay between social and spatial contexts in community entrepreneurship. Place is an important contextual dimension for community entrepreneurship development (e.g. Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin 2022; Welter 2011), but during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not able to visit the site. Instead, I began investigating the Facebook group belonging to the village. The triggering event (closure of the previous grocery store) sparked an interest in exploring how social media interactions influence the process of community entrepreneurship. For this purpose, the grocery store in Ravenville was identified as an interesting case.

I observed online traces from multiple individuals with the aim of understanding the entrepreneurial process surrounding the new grocery store. In this way, the case was viewed on two different levels. First, the development of the grocery store was treated as a single case and the focus of this analysis. Second, by examining online traces from multiple individuals who are embedded in that single case, it became possible to analyse how social media interactions influence the process of community entrepreneurship.

3.2. Selection and collection of data

This study followed an investigative procedure, which indicates a selective approach where researchers 'choose from among the vast and ever-increasing wealth of informational traces created in the act of communications between people on social media platforms, and saved in archives and real-time recordings of social media interaction' (Kozinets, 2019, p. 193). In this study, the intentional selection of two Facebook groups constituted a narrowing down of the field. Both groups are anchored in a rural village in Sweden, Ravenville, with around 200 inhabitants. The first Facebook group, the official group for the village, was created in 2009 and has around 1,600 members. The second group was created in 2021 for the purpose of organizing the development of a local grocery shop, and has roughly 716 members.

For selecting topic-relevant posts in the Facebook groups, a set of keywords was selected: Store; Goods; Market; Grocer* (*y/ies). This enabled sorting out posts relating to discussion of the grocery store. A total of 112 posts were gathered from the Ravenville Facebook page, and 105 from the grocery store's page. Each post is linked to additional comments, likes, and shares, which play a crucial role in comprehending the discussion. When collecting the online data, the selection of posts from the Facebook groups was downloaded using the NCapture plugin from NVivo, without any personal information or identities being included. It is the content of the discussion that is of interest for the study, and not the individuals involved. For the next step of the analysis, the content was imported into NVivo.

Table 3. Examples from the material corresponding to the different phases.

Examples from the material	Timing	Phase	Facebook group
"Thank you for all these years, now we have decided to close the shop"	December 2020	Triggering event	Village's
"Do we need a new store? What do you think?"	January 2021	Brainstorming	Village's
"I have looked at different solutions. What do you think about [examples]?"	January 2021		
"Welcome to a first online meeting where we can exchange ideas"	February 2021	Mobilisation	Village's
"Answer the survey below"	March 2021		
"We will have an online meeting on Thursday to discuss this further. Welcome"	April 2021		
"We have decided upon an unmanned store. More information in the next meeting!"	November 2021		
"We have created an economic association and a new Facebook group, devoted to the grocery store".	December 2021		
"We need experts! Does anyone know about rental agreements? Or building permit applications?"	January 2022	Realisation	Grocery store's
"We have a rental agreement in place!"	April 2022		
"Who can help with painting this weekend?"	August 2022		
"Welcome to the opening of the grocery store!"	October 2022		

3.3. Analysis

As the focus of this study is on how entrepreneurship develops, the method of temporal bracketing analysis was used as a first step (Langley 1999). Dividing the material into periods allows for analysing how actions taken in one period result in a shift in context that affects actions in subsequent periods. This makes it possible to sort the empirical material into a cohesive story, and present the events as they unfolded over time. The netnographic method allows researchers to capture not only the content of *what* is happening in the dataset but also information concerning *when* it is happening (the time stamp). This helped to ensure accuracy regarding the order in which events occurred.

I identified three phases in the process of establishing the grocery store: brainstorming, mobilization, and realization. In this paper, brainstorming is defined as generating ideas and exploring possibilities, mobilization includes gathering resources and preparing for action, while realization is the implementation of plans or ideas. Each stage plays a crucial role in the overall process, contributing to the successful completion of a sub-project or the resolution of a problem. Examples are shown in Table 3. The phases are not mutually exclusive; some events are located at the nexus of two periods.

The next step was coding as a core element of the continued processing of the material (e.g. Saldaña 2015). In the first cycle of coding, an inductive process was followed. Process coding is especially suitable for those interested in 'ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often to reach a goal or handle a problem' (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 96–97).

The cycle of coding included pattern coding, where patterns across the material were identified. Pattern codes can be defined as 'explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful [...] unit of analysis as a sort of meta-code. Pattern Coding is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs' (Miles and Huberman 1994, 69). Here, the themes regarding the role of social media were developed. The steps taken in the analysis helped develop an understanding of how social media interactions influence the process of community entrepreneurship.

4. The development of a grocery store

The development of the grocery store is divided into three stages. The initial stage is named *brainstorming*, and focuses on the initial efforts to understand the implications of the existing grocery shop's closure. The next stage, *mobilisation*, illustrates the transition to allocating resources and forming the Facebook group as a business context. Finally, the *realisation* stage involves turning

the group's ideas, resources, and efforts into a concrete physical store. The three stages are presented separately below to show how the events unfolded over time. To conclude the chapter, the outcomes of the overall process are discussed.

4.1. Brainstorming

In 1988, two residents in Ravenville opened a small grocery shop. They both had other jobs and ran the shop part-time. They offered a basic supply of pantry items, a small range of chilled goods, and fresh seasonal vegetables through partnerships with local farmers. The store also functioned as a meeting place for people in the village; they could stop in for a cup of coffee and a chat with the owners when they were passing by. The store was mostly open during afternoons, evenings, and weekends, but the residents of Ravenville could also pass by the shop when it was closed and pick up a newspaper, leaving money in a jar. However, at the end of 2020, the owners of the only grocery store in Ravenville announced its closure in a post to the village Facebook group:

For a long time, we have been fighting against a declining turnover, but we have been able to balance this fairly well with lower costs. But this year sales have completely collapsed, they have fallen by 25% and costs have also increased significantly. It is mainly sales of traditional foods that have disappeared. With a quarter of sales gone, there is no longer any opportunity to run a store in Ravenville. This has resulted in that after almost 32 years we have made the sad but inevitable decision to close our little shop. We would like to thank everyone, both individuals and organisations, who supported us throughout and who made it possible for us to run our business for as long as we did. If anyone has any questions or just wants to talk, you are welcome to come into the store. (Grocery store owner on Facebook, 1 December 2020)

The closure can be seen as the triggering event which resulted in the start of the brainstorming phase. The closure came as a surprise to many of the residents, who posted their comments: 'What has happened? This is yet another example of the decline of rural areas' (FB user). 'What do we do? We need to survive in this village!' (FB user). Many expressed feelings of gratitude: 'You have done so much for the village during all these years!' (FB user); 'How very sad. You will be greatly missed, but many thanks for all the years you been open!' (FB user). As many shared their memories of the store, residents also began a discussion about the future: 'You've probably seen warning signs. We need new ideas. We have ideas!' (FB user); 'I think we should look at how others have solved the issue through a digital shop' (FB user); 'How about a milk subscription or similar?' (FB user).

In the discussion that followed, residents oscillated between attempting to understand how life in the village would change and posing questions about the opportunity to develop something new based on collective effort. In this stage of brainstorming, they developed a structure on social media for organizing ideas, meetings, and information, thereby coming to an understanding of the implications for the village.

4.2. Mobilisation

Following the brainstorming phase, efforts shifted to trying to organize people to come together. The shift from sharing general ideas to gathering input in a survey and organizing meetings marked the transition between the two phases. In March 2021, a discussion was initiated in the village Facebook group about how a new store concept could be developed. Members collected input through an online survey, which received over 135 responses, and indicated that three-quarters of respondents were interested in continuing to develop the business idea. Others discussed alternative concepts or wrote petitions to the municipality for aid. 'Please answer the survey! It takes 2 minutes and can get us a good insight into the conditions for a new shop!' (FB user). The survey received replies from summertime residents and regular visitors as well as from permanent residents: 'I am only in Ravenville during the summer, but if you open a shop I will be a strong supporter!' (FB user). During this period, the village Facebook group also received attention from different commercial actors who wanted to establish working relationships: 'We have a modern unmanned store you can rent! Please get in touch if you are interested!' (FB commercial user).

A smaller group of individuals began to hold more concrete discussions about how they should continue with the development based on the feedback from the survey. In this phase, they proceeded with an offer from one commercial actor working in entrepreneurial development in rural regions. With their help, the group started holding more regular Zoom meetings. To some of the online meetings, they invited representatives from the county administrative board and the municipality to inform them about possible financial support and conditions for a grocery shop. They continually updated members of the Facebook group on the progress of the venture and asked for feedback and suggestions. The online meetings were positively received and well attended: *'Good and constructive meeting. I think this will be good!'* (FB user); *'Wow! A big thank you to everyone who attended! We have a record number of interested people!'* (FB user).

The next step was to create a formal organization, *the Ravenville Trade Association*, which would lead the work. Members of the Facebook group could register their interest if they wanted to become a member of the board and participate more actively in the planning. The trade association appointed a board of seven individuals to formally drive the development. To streamline their communication and coordination, they started a new Facebook group dedicated solely to the new grocery store, *Ravenville Trade*: *'Everyone is welcome to the group – both members of the association and others. Here you can follow the work on starting a new unmanned grocery store in Ravenville. You will receive ongoing information and are welcome to make suggestions and comments'* (FB user).

4.3. Realisation

The creation of the economic association and new Facebook group marked the transition from mobilization to realization. Once the Ravenville Trade Association had decided on an unmanned grocery shop as a suitable concept, they proceeded in realizing it. In the new Facebook group, they asked for help regarding different resources such as knowledge or funding: *'Calling all experts! Is there a person who is knowledgeable in any of these points, and has an opportunity to help us with this particular issue? Ventilation? Fire protection / Business law?'* (FB user). They received responses from individuals who possessed the desired knowledge or contacts. Creating an inventory of skills, monetary resources and people's availability, as well as the coordination of tasks, was central to this stage. The association was then able to delegate and coordinate the work that needed to be done: *'Premises – We have been promised by the church to rent a space downstairs in the parish yard at a turnover-based rent of 1.5%. However, we do not have a rental contract ready yet. Can anyone help us with writing up a contract?'* (FB user). People reached out to help and posted positive feedback: *'I am so glad to see all who are helping! Together we are strong!'* (FB user); *'You guys are amazing! Of course, we will join in and support in the way we can (even though we are not in Ravenville!'* (FB user). The new Facebook group contained positive and encouraging comments and demonstrated a willingness to help the local group. This willingness to help was shown through reactions, comments, and knowledge and information shared by members.

The trade association opened up for people to become members: *'There is great interest in becoming a member of the Ravenville Trade Association – it is really fun to see and you should know that the work is progressing!'* (FB user). People signed up to become members, and simultaneously the physical inventories of the store needed to be transported to Ravenville: *'We now have two refrigerators, a larger model, which we can bring over from [a town in the north of Sweden]. We are calling for, either: help to transport them or help moving them from the truck if we pay for transport. We believe that they will be too heavy to move alone'* (FB user). In the end, a resident with a tractor helped to transport the fridges to Ravenville and put them in place.

When the rent agreement was in place and they had gained access to the building, the trade association could start putting out calls for volunteers to help with the actual building of the shop. They reached out to shops in the municipality regarding building materials, paint, furniture, etc. Many decided to sponsor the little shop with paint, materials such as wood, or inventories needed. On Facebook, a schedule was posted with time slots for the construction work: *'This weekend, it's time*

to paint the walls in the room, so I'm calling for a bunch of happy people who want to join in and help. We will start on Saturday at 10 am and run as long as we can. Who wants to join?!" (FB user). Even though some members of the Facebook group could not join in to help, they provided support in the form of encouraging comments: 'Good luck with your work today, you are doing a great job! Greetings from Stockholm!' (FB user). Those who were able to help out in person shared pictures of how the work was progressing in the Facebook group and received positive comments and reactions. This stage was about ideas being realized, resources being converted into values, and collective efforts.

The grocery store opened in the autumn of 2022. The trade association posted a statement on Facebook and sent it out as a press release titled 'The revenge of the rural – makes society come alive again'.

The residents of Ravenville take matters into their own hands and open their own business. When the old store that had been around for decades closed, it became empty. In many places around the country, villages and small communities lead a waning existence as services disappear and are closed down. A living village needs a meeting point and service for the most basic amenities. In Ravenville, associational life is rich and now there is a new addition – the economic association Ravenville Trade where 270 members own the business together. [...] A collective contribution together with our members' efforts became the basis for the business. The hardest part was finding the right venue. [...] The store will be a modern, unmanned store, open around the clock, where you enter using your mobile phone and bank ID. Certain times will of course be staffed, mainly by the association's members who will be responsible for unpacking goods and interacting with customers. The idea is that you should be able to sit down for a while, browse recipe books, read a newspaper, and maybe heat a frozen pizza in the microwave. Furthermore, you will be able to pick up your packages. The range will be developed in collaboration with the association's members. On the wish list are locally produced goods as well as a wide range of basics. You should be able to buy everything you need to cook dinner. As the store will be open around the clock, it will be easy to buy something you have forgotten at any time or take a trip to the store when the sweet craving sets in. (Post by Ravenville Trade)

4.4. Outcomes

Each of the stages presented above resulted in different kinds of outcomes, both locally and online. In terms of the local social context, the new grocery store became a meeting place, a social hub in the village. The process led to local community development through coordinated efforts, feelings of belonging, and a desire to create something good together. The small village also received support from people in surrounding villages. Another more formal social outcome is the creation of the Ravenville Trade Association, which became a new forum for sustaining the grocery store's development. In terms of the local spatial outcomes, there is the physical grocery store. It has become a landmark in the village as a successful rural development project. Moreover, the online social context has expanded, as more people joined the Facebook groups and participated in discussions online. Some individuals contributed with their knowledge or support. In the process of opening the grocery store, the story of Ravenville went from being a place in decline to becoming a symbol of resistance and rural development. Table 4 presents the different outcomes identified as a result of the process.

Table 4. Online and local social and spatial outcomes of the process.

	Social	Spatial
Local	Local community development. New meeting place for residents. Support from surrounding towns and villages. Ravenville Trade Association.	Grocery shop (physical location).
Online	Increased number of members in FB groups. Expanded network.	Increased visibility for Ravenville through number of shared posts. Ravenville is described as a thriving place.

5. Discussion

Entrepreneurship research is increasingly acknowledging that understanding entrepreneurship requires consideration of its contexts (e.g. Anderson, 2000). These contexts offer opportunities and constraints regarding individuals' actions (Welter 2011). While examining the development of a rural grocery store is informative on its own, it also helps to conceptualize relationships between social and spatial context and embeddedness in place and online, and how these relationships motivate and shape community entrepreneurship.

The development process outlined above begins with the negotiation of economic and social relationships through compliance with established local norms and processes. The original grocery store had been an integral part of the local environment for over three decades, making the sudden decision to close surprising. The online community discussions revolved around the implications of this decision and the potential for initiating something new. As ideas poured in, the growing number of suggestions within the Facebook group formed into an asynchronous brainstorming session, wherein existing structures that could support or hinder the venture were discussed. In the subsequent phase, individuals organized these ideas, defined potential opportunities, and structured the available resources (such as skills, finances, time, and coordination tasks). The third phase represents the realization and coordination of efforts to convert these ideas and resources into a physical store in Ravenville. The online community collaborated to coordinate the renovation of the building and form the organization around it. In this manner, the community reshaped the social structures and relationships entrenched in the local place. The account thus encapsulates a process that unfolds online and contributes to the shaping of context.

The analysis gives rise to three distinct themes, which are discussed below.

5.1. *The influence of social media*

In the case above, social media can be seen as a way of communicating, allocating resources, and coordinating efforts. The members of the Facebook group participated in creating an online community while developing and sustaining relationships online. As such, the account shows how online communities can influence the structures for organization.

Collective efforts (Welter 2011) have often been discussed in terms of individuals meeting in the 'real' world, while the account above emphasizes efforts made online. Through their asynchronous, online collective efforts, the group organized meetings, carried out surveys, reached out for resources, and coordinated help. The online community enabled individuals to utilize the disparate and distributed resources that existed or lay dormant in them. Resources and support came through the online community; individuals could post in the group to get feedback on ideas or locate items needed for the shop, and they gained access to economic resources from people outside Ravenville as well as specialist knowledge and information that helped them continue the development. The online community was constructed and enacted through the actions of the members of the Facebook group, and together they created a structure for organizing their thoughts and ideas.

Another aspect in this study, concerns how the business context is created through interactions on social media. The case shows how the online social context was transformed into a business context in which elements, often referred to as business-related, were enacted online. The group organized meetings, created schedules for the construction work, and discussed how to write a rental contract. As such, this study elaborates on Baker and Welter (2020), and adds to how the process of context formation takes place online. The account above shows the online and local communities as contexts, which allow individuals to move into more agentic roles by themselves, becoming, in the process, participants in entrepreneurship.

5.2. *Collective agency*

The process of the store's development shows collective agency at work as the online community's combined intentions, beliefs, and efforts of members. It involves a shared sense of purpose and the capacity to collaborate and coordinate towards the goal. The online community acted as co-creators, where the mass of individuals had agency in the process and affected what was discussed and what ideas were realized. The actions taken (e.g. a comment, like, or share) are small for each individual, but on social media, when a large number of people engage with a certain topic, it becomes significant in that context. The Facebook groups linked to the grocery store are grounded in a shared sense of purpose, and objectives that members of the group agree upon; they define what is important or relevant. Collaboration is also essential here; the members work together in a cooperative manner, pooling their knowledge, skills, and resources to achieve their shared objectives.

The fusion of collective agency and the entrepreneurial process leverages the power of networks and collaborations, enabling aspiring entrepreneurs to tap into a vast pool of knowledge, skills, and experiences. In this digital era, where information flows seamlessly and borders are virtually eliminated, individuals can transcend geographical constraints to form online communities. These communities foster the exchange of ideas, offer mentorship, and provide critical feedback, acting as catalysts for refining business concepts and strategies.

However, the concept of collective agency also involves challenges in the digitalized entrepreneurial landscape. Navigating the vast sea of information and managing the dynamics of multiple collaborations can be complex and overwhelming. Ensuring equitable participation, particularly for underrepresented groups, requires deliberate efforts to bridge digital divides and promote inclusivity.

5.3. *Entrepreneurship in context – online and local*

Contexts are constructed and enacted through the actions of the entrepreneur (Griffin, 2007). Hence, to understand the development of a grocery store (in this case) as a community enterprise, one needs to consider how the social and spatial contexts are constructed not only locally, but also online. This is the new reality for entrepreneurs, bringing both opportunities and challenges. Contexts are not fixed entities in which entrepreneurs act, but rather something dynamic that is created when people engage in and act upon their contexts (Baker and Welter 2020). In this sense, social media has provided individuals with a platform for creating a context for entrepreneurship development.

Establishing and maintaining social relationships is a key resource in the process of launching a new venture (e.g. Greve and Salaff, 2003; Anderson et al., 2012). However, the case study shows how individuals actively work to form relationships online with the aim of developing a new grocery shop and enabling more resources for the local community. In contrast to Haugh (2022), the community action in this case is separated from the historical and spatial context; it is formed online around the core issue (i.e. opening a shop) and the online community welcomes all types of input and support. This questions embeddedness in entrepreneurship (Jack and Anderson 2002) as well as place (Anderson 2015; McKeever, Jack, and Anderson 2015). Although the actions in the realization phase were carried out by local people, the process was shaped by a diverse group of individuals, defined by their emotional connection to the issue. However, it can be seen in the material that the external commercial actors received fewer responses and interactions on their posts and comments, while people using private accounts had a higher level of interaction. This can be viewed as another form of online embeddedness, which creates a threshold for being a part of the online community.

The spatial context is materially anchored in a geographically defined place, but interpreted, negotiated, and socialized through the discussions in the online communities (Waite 2020). Through each stage in the account above, individuals engage in the Facebook groups and express their interpretation of the place. These interpretations are reinforced by others via likes, shares, and comments. In this dynamic process, people online are forming the context.

Table 5. A framework for understanding the online and local social and spatial contexts in entrepreneurship.

	Social	Spatial
Local	Social benefits for people living and/or working within a geographically defined place. Entrepreneurship was created with the participation of residents and other stakeholders.	Changes in the local place. Entrepreneurship engages with and affects the local place.
Online	Social benefits for people engaging in the online community. Entrepreneurship is created with the participation of a diverse set of actors.	Changes in the perception of the local place. Entrepreneurship engages with and affects the online spatial constructs of a local place.

Some members are embedded within the local community, Ravenville, while the majority have an interest in the place but do not necessarily live or work there. At the time of the material collection, the village Facebook group had 1,400 members, while the residents number fewer than 200. There was a great interest in helping to develop the grocery store, despite the majority of the online community not living in the area. A large amount of support from the online community, combined with a smaller local group made it possible to structure the plans into actions. The process was managed mainly through the participation of residents: the initiatives came from residents, while a large amount of input was also provided by non-locals. The Ravenville Trade Association had 270 members at the time of the material collection, despite the village having under 200 residents. There is thus a clear interest in supporting this local initiative, even among those who do not live or work there.

As such, the different dimensions of context are constructed in different ways in the process. [Table 5](#) presents a framework for understanding the online social and spatial contexts in entrepreneurship. This is important, as sociality can be constructed both online, and in person through online and face-to-face interactions (Martin and Rizvi 2014). By using the theory of entrepreneurship and context, observing social media can contribute to understanding the process of entrepreneurship development. Nevertheless, it is not only social relations that change in a digitalized society but also how individuals construct, perceive, and act upon their spatial context. When they engage in and create an understanding of a local place on social media, individuals in that place can change how they act upon and engage in it. The local and online, social and spatial contexts are interlinked, and not separate from each other, which is important for understanding entrepreneurship.

5.4. Proposing a definition of online community entrepreneurship

The above discussion indicates that there is a need to define online community entrepreneurship. Considering the role of social media in the context of community entrepreneurship adds a new dimension to existing theories, enhancing an understanding of contemporary societal dynamics. [Table 6](#) illustrates the key attributes of online community entrepreneurship, as discussed in the case study, in comparison to the existing literature on community entrepreneurship.

The first attribute, bond, pertains to individuals sharing common interests and belonging to the same virtual group. Unlike traditional entrepreneurship, this form operates within the digital realm, enabling people from various geographical locations to connect and communicate through online platforms. The goals of online community entrepreneurship encompass establishing a social network, generating value, and providing shared benefits to participants. The management of these online communities involves a diverse group of actors. In terms of accountability, the reach of potential connections extends globally (in theory), as online activities are visible to friends and contacts across multiple social media platforms. Regarding communication channels, participants engage in asynchronous interactions according to their convenience. These interactions predominantly rely on written communication and occur through digital mediums such as discussion forums, social media platforms, video chats, and instant messaging. Concerning duration and persistence, online communities of this nature tend to be relatively transient and dynamic. Members frequently

Table 6. Conceptualization of online community entrepreneurship in relation to community entrepreneurship.

	Community entrepreneurship (e.g. Buratti, Sillig, and Albanese 2022; Welter 2011)	Online community entrepreneurship
Bond	People living and/or working within a geographically defined community. Participants are embedded in the local community.	People who share an interest. Members in the same group online.
Physical presence	Consists of people who live in the same area, neighbourhood, or town and interact face-to-face. They can gather for events, meetings, and activities, and build relationships based on personal interactions.	Exists in a virtual space, where individuals from different geographical locations connect and communicate primarily through the internet.
Goals	Independent organization Pursues multiple goals Long-term benefits for local citizens	Social network Influences society Creates multiple kinds of value Social benefits for participating individuals
Actors	Managed with the participation of residents and other stakeholders as a collective process	Managed with the participation of multiple, diverse actors
Accountability	Accountable at the local level	Accountable at a global level (<i>what one does online can be seen by one's friends on social media</i>)
Communication Channels	Relies on in-person communication and various traditional channels, such as community centres, local meetings, town halls, or neighbourhood gatherings. These channels often involve direct interaction, body language, and real-time conversations	Members can participate asynchronously, at their convenience, and often rely on written communication Communication primarily takes place through digital mediums like discussion forums, social media platforms, video chats, or instant messaging
Duration and Persistence	Local communities often have a longer history and a sense of continuity due to their physical presence in a specific area over time. Relationships and social structures within local communities can evolve and endure across generations	Can be relatively transient and dynamic, with members joining and leaving more frequently. Often formed around specific interests or causes, and lifespan may be influenced by the popularity of the topic or the success of the community in achieving its objectives

join and leave these communities, which usually coalesce around specific interests or causes. The longevity of these communities can be influenced by the popularity of the subject matter or the achievement of the community's stated objectives.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study delved into the intricate dynamics of online community entrepreneurship within the context of a rural grocery store development. The research emphasized the significance of understanding entrepreneurship within its multifaceted contexts, which encompass both spatial and online dimensions. The study's aim to explore how social media interactions influence the process of community entrepreneurship led to insightful findings on the interplay between social interactions, spatial factors, and the entrepreneurial process. The case study illuminated how online communities operate as frameworks for collective effort, resource allocation, and coordination. The analysis revealed three central themes. Firstly, social media played a pivotal role in facilitating communication, resource sharing, and collaboration among online community members. Secondly, the concept of collective agency emerged, underscoring how online communities can aggregate individual contributions into a powerful force for change. Thirdly, the study illuminated the dynamic nature of context, with both local and online dimensions intertwined in the entrepreneurial process. This research introduces the concept of online community entrepreneurship, characterized by participants who connect based on shared interests rather than geographical proximity. It highlights the social nature of their goals, the diverse and asynchronous nature of their participation, and the global accountability that arises from their online interactions.

This study enriches an understanding of entrepreneurship by highlighting the transformative role of online communities, transcending traditional boundaries and forging a new path for entrepreneurial endeavours. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, recognizing and comprehending the intricate relationships between online interactions and physical contexts becomes paramount for grasping the full spectrum of entrepreneurial activities in contemporary society.

7. Implications

While the study offers valuable insights into the role of online communities in entrepreneurship, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and consider the managerial, practical, and policy implications in order to maximize the positive impact of online community entrepreneurship on local economies. The study's findings might be specific to the context and may not be applicable to other industries or contexts. The dynamics of online community entrepreneurship could differ across various sectors. Given the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies and online communities, the findings might become challenged as the digital landscape continues to change.

Practically, enhancing digital literacy and community support through policies and education empowers individuals. Policymakers could support positive local contributions from online communities via funding or infrastructure.

Policy-wise, regulating online interactions, safeguarding user rights, and ensuring fair competition could be needed. Enhancing rural digital infrastructure could support community growth.

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ORCID

Josefina Jonsson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9063-8443>

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