

Communicating the Dual Mission: Analysis of Websites of Finnish Social Enterprise Mark Holders

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Abstract: Social enterprises are defined as organizations that prioritize social goals over profit maximization. However, to sustain these goals, they must also remain economically viable. The tension between social and commercial logics, and the ways organizations manage this balance, is a central theme in social enterprise research. Despite this, little attention has been paid to how such tensions are communicated externally. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the websites of 157 Finnish limited companies that have been awarded the Social Enterprise Mark. The study examines how these firms communicate the two main criteria for receiving the mark: generating social good and allocating a significant share of profits toward that goal. Additionally, the analysis explores whether and how companies incorporate commercial aims—such as growth and profitability—into their strategy and mission statements. The findings identify three distinct ways in which social and commercial logics are combined, resulting in a typology of three company types. The first type, labeled “idealists,” emphasizes social impact as the primary purpose of the organization and does not explicitly address commercial aspects. Some even rhetorically distance themselves from traditional business language, presenting themselves as communities rather than companies and referring to customers as partners. The second type, “pragmatists,” presents profitability as a means to achieve social objectives. These organizations—often owned by municipalities or non-profit entities—highlight cost-efficiency and financial sustainability as necessary conditions for fulfilling their social mission. The third type, “legitimizers,” communicates social goals in very broad or unclear terms and does not explicitly state how profits contribute to social purposes. As a result, these firms are difficult to distinguish from conventional companies based on their external communications. The study contributes to academic discussions by demonstrating that organizations labeled as social enterprises vary significantly in how they interpret and communicate compliance with certification criteria. Practically, the findings offer insights for organizations responsible for awarding social enterprise labels, particularly in evaluating how clearly and consistently such criteria are communicated.

Keywords: Social Enterprise, External Corporate Communications, Social Goals, Commercial Aims, Social Enterprise Mark

1. Introduction

Social enterprises (SE) have become in the recent quarter of a century acknowledged players in the global economy, representing three per cent of all enterprises in the world and generating ca. two per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP) (Schwab Foundation and WEF, 2024). Similarly, research on social enterprises has burgeoned. Although there is no unanimously agreed definition of the SE, engagement in business activities to achieve social goals is commonly recognized as its *raison d'être* (Saebi et al, 2019). Correspondingly, balancing of social and commercial goals has persisted as one of the key themes in social enterprise research (Li and Bosma, 2025). Scholars have addressed it in terms of identity dimensions of entrepreneurs establishing SEs (Moura-Romero and Pertuze, 2026), of organizational identities (Cornelissen et al, 2021) and strategies for dealing with the sources of potential conflict between social and commercial logics (Civera et al, 2020).

An emerging area of research is corporate communications, where the SE needs to find a balance of showing its social impact whilst also coming across as a professional business (SE forum, 2026). Research on the topic has addressed this issue from the perspectives of social value communication in social media (Wang et al, 2025), gaining legitimacy in the eyes of different stakeholders (Bergfeld et al 2021) or using narratives in brand building (Nicholls 2009). Interestingly, social enterprise marks (SEM) granted by various national organizations are mentioned by communication professionals as means for showing SE legitimacy as social actor and as business enterprise (SE Forum, 2026). There is, however, scant research on how such marks are actually used in the external communication of SEs (cf. Sutton et al, 2018 on higher education institutions), or how well they reflect the reality of social enterprises in general (Ridley-Duff and Southcombe, 2012).

This paper contributes to filling this research gap by exploring how 157 Finnish Limited Liability Companies (Ltd) which have received the national SEM communicate the two main criteria for getting the Mark: The goal of generating social good on the one hand, and the use of a major share of the profits to promoting this goal. In addition, it is depicted whether and how companies have included their commercial aims, such as business growth, cost-efficiency, or profitability, into their strategy and mission statements. Theoretically the paper positions itself in the constantly growing SE literature which uses an institutional-theory based approach (Li and

Bosma, 2025). It views the communication statements as representation of the two competing institutional logics: social logic and commercial logic (Bruneel et al 2020).

The paper identifies three types of companies: The “idealists” emphasize only the social aims of the company without mentioning the commercial or financial aspects. The “pragmatists” report that the purpose of their company is to operate in a profitable and cost-effective manner to serve its social aims. The “legitimizers” formulate their social aim very broadly or not at all, and do not explicate how they distribute the profits. Enterprises in this category are as a matter of fact difficult to distinguish from “ordinary” enterprises operating solely on commercial logic.

The paper is of interest to academics, because it shows how companies “labeled” as social enterprises may interpret and communicate their meeting the criteria for this mark very differently. The practical value of the paper lies in the applicability of its results by organizations granting such marks. The results raise the question whether the mark criteria should include the demand for transparently communicating how the other key criteria are met.

2. Theoretical Background and Analytical Framework

This paper positions itself and contributes to the constantly growing literature which applies institution-theory based perspective to approach various dimensions of SE (Li and Bosma, 2025). The starting point of the research is that the SE needs to balance its social and commercial goals, which has persisted as one of the key themes in social enterprise research (ibid). The paper applies the concept of institutional logics (Thornton et al 2012) which focuses on how broader belief systems shape the cognition and behaviour of actors (Thornton, 2004). Such belief systems operate at multiple levels of the society from economic and political systems to professions and communities (Thornton et al, 2012). In organization studies the concept of institutional logics has mainly been applied to analyse tensions between competing logics (Greenwood et al 2011) such as the social logics and commercial logics in the case of SE, often applying methods borrowed from discourse theory and relying of textual sources (Thornton et al 2012). According to a recent review (Li and Bosma, 2025) on institutional-theory based SE research, prior research on the manifestation of competing logics in SE has addressed it on different levels including organizational responses to macro-level institutional complexity (e.g. Zhao and Lounsbury, 2016), or tensions on managerial level (e.g. Liu et al, 2016) or in inter-organizational and stakeholder relations (e.g. Huybrechts et al, 2017).

This paper applies the concept of institutional logics to study how the competing social and commercial logics manifest in the ways in which SE formulate their mission and strategy in their external communication. The analysis is based on publicly available textual data, namely the websites of holders of the Finnish Social Enterprise Mark (SEM). The Mark holders were selected as representatives of SE because there is no commonly accepted definition of SE in Finland, and the Finnish legislation does not recognize SE as a legal entity (Kostilainen and Pättiniemi 2016). The SEM holders can thus be considered as representing the most institutionalized SE form in Finland (ibid).

The paper advances research knowledge on corporate communications of SE, which has largely focused on the communication of the social value only (e.g. Wang et al, 2025; Cornelissen et al 2021; Nicholls 2009). The few studies addressing whether and how SEs communicate their commercial value show that they may consciously avoid commercial terminology to retain legitimacy in the eyes of their some stakeholders (Bergfeld et al 2021), but also tactically use commercial language in order to convince others, such as potential funders of their entrepreneurial efficiency (Dey and Teasdale 2016). Interestingly, SEM granted by various national organizations are frequently mentioned by communication professionals as means for showing SE legitimacy as social actor and as business enterprise (SE Forum 2026). There is, however, scant research on how SEs actually use SEM in their external communication (cf. Sutton et al, 2018), or how well they actually capture the characteristics of social enterprises (Ridley-Duff and Southcombe, 2012).

The analytical framework is constructed by using the criteria which the granting organization of the Finnish SEM applies when considering the applications for the Mark. The Mark can be granted to an enterprise which employs in Finland, and which has been established to solve social or environmental problems. The social dimension of the two competing institutional logics is reflected in the primary criteria for granting the mark. These criteria implies that the purpose of the SE is to generate social good, and that the major share of the profits are used to advance this purpose. The commercial logics is captured in the secondary granting criteria which emphasizes that both the business and communications about it are transparent and open.

3. Data and Methods

The data was compiled from the list of Finnish Social Enterprise Mark holders, available at the website of the granting organization “Finnish Work” (Finnish Work, 2026). The list includes 346 organizations, and we selected into the dataset those organizations whose legal entity form is Ltd (Oy in Finnish). This limitation was made because the Finnish legislation defines the primary purpose of the Ltd (Oy) as the generation of profits to its shareholders. Hence, it can be assumed that such SE face more prevalent pressure to follow commercial logics than SE whose legal form is for example a non-profit organization.

The dataset consists of 157 SEs which represent a variety of sectors and types of ownership. The largest group, ca. a third of the SEs operate in the healthcare and social services sector, maintaining for example care homes or providing other types of social care services. The second largest group, ca. 20% is the category other services which includes for example different consultancy SEs. Education services and waste management services comprises ca. 10% of the SEs each. As to the ownership structure, the largest group is private ownership (66) which includes entrepreneur-led and family SEs, as well as other types of private companies. 45 SEs can be characterized as the “commercial arms” of non-profit organizations such as registered associations (25) or foundations (20). 39 SEs are in public ownership, owned by municipalities or joint municipal authorities in education or healthcare and social sectors. The rest are in mixed ownership, or no ownership information is given on the website.

The data collection started from accessing the websites of the SEs between 1 January – 31 March 2026. The Finnish version of the website was analyzed when available. English version was used only in case the company did not have Finnish version (only 3 cases). Sections relevant to the research problem, i.e. strategy and mission were reviewed, in addition to which data on the ownership of the company and use of profits were searched. The relevant pages were archived. The sample included some cases where the mark holder was a subsidiary of a larger group. If the subsidiary had its own website, it was used as data, otherwise the data was retrieved from the group website. This was the case mainly for SEs owned by large non-profit foundations which organize their for-profit activities into different companies. Relevant pieces of text were extracted into a Word document containing the SE name, sector, type of ownership, website address, and access date.

The next stage of analysis was to reduce and organize the textual data into a data table (Table 1) as deduced coding according to a codebook, in which the codes and their descriptions represented first, the criteria for the Mark (social goal and use of profits), and second, commercial goals. Unavailable or ambiguous information was coded as N/A or with a brief description of what constitutes the ambiguity. The data was coded and analyzed by the sole author of the paper. Single-coder validation was followed by ensuring intra-rater reliability (Mackey and Gass (2005) by coding the whole data and then and -recoding part of it after few weeks. The validity of the coding process was assessed by “peer checking” (Cresswell, 2012), i.e. writing the conference paper at hand.

In the codebook, the **social goal** was defined as the social or environmental challenges which the SE aims to solve, or benefits that its mission orients to bring. Examples include social inclusion, employment of disadvantaged groups, or promotion of circular economy. The **use of profits** was defined as statements on how the SE uses its profits, or what kind of use is excluded. Examples include development of operations, making charitable donations, or not paying dividends to owners. The **commercial goal** was defined as aspiration to maintain financial sustainability and thereby enable the SE’s meeting its social goals. Examples include expressions related to profitability, competitiveness, or cost-efficiency.

Table 1: Excerpt from the data table

Name	Sector	Ownership	Social Goal	Use of Profits	Commercial Goal
2M-IT	Media, ICT	Municipal	To develop healthcare solutions which improve wellbeing of people	We do not seek profits, but promote the interest of our owners as we are publicly-owned company	To operate in a cost-effective manner
Asuntosäätiön Asumisoikeus Oy	Construction services	Foundation	To provide affordable and sustainable housing	We do not aim at quick profits or economic benefits. Income from the activities is used to maintain and construct housing	To operate effectively, economically sustainably, and to be competitive based on price-quality ratio.

Name	Sector	Ownership	Social Goal	Use of Profits	Commercial Goal
AtCare Oy	Healthcare and social services	Private	To search for new, accessible solutions to prevent and treat mental health problems	According to company statutes 51% of profits is used for developing new services or supporting initiatives promoting mental health	Financial profitability (operating as Ltd) is the most effective way of promoting our social goals.

As shown in the table, the dataset includes SEs which duly meet all essential criteria for the SE Mark by openly communicating their social purpose and use of profits for advancing this purpose. In addition, their business principles are openly stated. The compiling and initial organization of the data revealed that this was, however, not the case for all SEs included in the dataset. Therefore, the next step of the analysis was to organize the data into subcategories based on the availability of information on the three analytical dimensions of social goal, use of profits and commercial goal (Table 2).

Table 2: Data subcategories based on availability of information

Category	No. of SEs
Hybrid dimensions a: Social goal, use of profits, commercial goal	25
Hybrid dimensions b: Social and commercial goals	24
Social dimension a: Social goal and use of profits	28
Social dimension b: Only social goal	59
Commercial dimension: Only commercial goal	8
Data not available	13

As shown in the table, minority of the SEs actually report only on their meeting of all criteria for the SE Mark, and some enterprises in the sample do not even explicitly formulate what the “social” dimension of their operations constitutes as a factor distinguishing them from “ordinary” business enterprises. The final step of our empirical analysis was to take these subcategories as a basis for constructing different types of SEs along the social-commercial continuum and the different combinations of the two competing logics.

4. Results: A Typology of Social Enterprises

This section presents the findings of the paper by identifying three types of SE among the SE Mark holders: The “idealists” emphasize only the social aims of the company without mentioning the commercial aspects. The “pragmatists” report that the purpose of their company is to operate in a profitable and cost-effective manner to serve its social aims, or report transparently how they use the (potential) profits to advance its social aim. The “legitimizers” formulate their social aim very broadly or vaguely, if at all, and do not explicate how they distribute the profits or what the “social” actually means for them. Enterprises in this category are as a matter of fact difficult to distinguish from “ordinary” enterprises operating solely on commercial logic. This category also includes enterprises which reveal practically no information on their operations, including why they are qualified as SE Mark holders.

4.1 Idealists: Social Logic as the Overriding Principle

The first type of SEs, idealists, comprises enterprises which emphasize in their communication the social goal of the enterprise and do not discuss the commercial aspects of the enterprise. Only part of them reveals how they use the potential profits of the operations. This group is heterogeneous in terms of sector and ownership, including both private and publicly owned enterprises. Some of the SEs represent ideology-driven social entrepreneurship as they are based on the owner’s vision of doing good, whereas others operate in sectors such as healthcare and social services, where the philanthropist tradition and participation of non-profit actors are strong. Some SEs even rhetorically distance themselves from commercial activities by speaking about themselves rather as communities than as companies, and of their customers as partners.

The “social” manifests in the company websites in different ways and on different levels. Some refer to their social aim in a rather abstract manner, stating for example as “*to advance sustainable development and circular economy*”, whereas others refer concretely to how their operations contribute to solving societal or

environmental problems. This include statements such as *“To provide a novel technology for recycling of biowaste”*. Most SEs fall somewhere in between by describing the social or environmental problem their business addresses, including social goals such as *“To advance employment of disadvantaged groups”*. Interestingly, some of the publicly-owned SEs in this group seem to define “social” in terms of “societal”, as they formulate their goal as supporting the public sector to function and to produce services to citizens in, for example, as follows: *“To provide secure and safe ICT solutions to the public sector”*.

In sum, this type of SE perfectly qualifies with the first part of the primary criteria of the SE Mark by clearly stating its social goal, but often fails in meeting the second part which is the openness of the use of profits for advancing this goal. When looking at the profiles of the SEs, a minority of SEs of this type explicitly describes that they invest the profits to the development of the operations, although this is likely the general principle for other SEs of this type as well.

4.2 Pragmatists: Combining Social and Commercial Logics

The second type of SEs, pragmatists, represents hybrid enterprises combining social and commercial logics. They communicate their social goal and ca. half of them also reveals how their profits are used. This group differs from the previous one as to the commercial logic which is reflected in statements illustrating the business principles of the SE. Similarly to the previous one, this group is heterogeneous in terms of sector and ownership, including both private and publicly owned enterprises.

The social logic manifests on the company websites in a rather similar way as for the previous group, including expressions such as *“Our aim is to advance circular economy and to provide employment for disadvantaged groups”*, or *“Our mission is to contribute to the production of impactful municipal services to citizens”*. The commercial logic is visible in expressions and terms rooted in the business vocabulary. These includes highlighting cost-efficiency and profitability as guiding principles of the SE. Interestingly, there are multiple cases in which the SE combines the two logics into one statement. This is done by highlighting financial sustainability as a precondition for advancing the social goals: *“Profitable operations enable doing social good”*, or by viewing social and economic dimensions as equally important: *“Financial sustainability is as important as environmental one”*. Interestingly, some SEs make a distinction from purely commercial firms by stating that they aim at economic sustainability and efficiency, but not to profit maximization.

To sum up, all SEs of this type qualify with the first part of the primary criteria of the SE Mark by clearly stating its social goal, but half of them fails in meeting the second part which is the openness of the use of profits for advancing this goal. In addition, they use rhetoric rooted in business to describe the commercial aims of the SE, and view economic and financial aspects as precondition for achieving the social goals.

4.3 Legitimizers: Absence of the Social Logics

The final type of SEs in our data comprises enterprises which rarely qualify as social enterprises based on the information provided on their public websites. This is the smallest group in our data, comprising mainly service companies which seem to have applied for the SE Mark for image or branding purposes only. The strategy and mission statements do not explicitly refer to the social dimension of their operations or do it in a very vague and general way. An example is a company which declares its mission as *“To accelerate growth of digital commerce in Finland”*. Through this mission the company aims to *“contribute to the competitiveness and growth of Finnish companies”*. The aim itself is important in the big picture for the economic sustainability of the Finnish society, but it is relatively loosely connected to the idea of a SE. Hence, when reflected against the criteria for the SE Mark, such firms practically meet none of them.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Finnish limited companies holding the Social Enterprise Mark (SEM) communicate their social aims, commercial aims and the use of profits on their websites. By applying an institutional logics perspective, the paper sheds light on how competing social and commercial logics are reflected—or omitted—in external corporate communications. The findings reveal substantial variation in how SEM holders interpret and communicate the core criteria of the Mark, despite their shared formal status as “labeled” social enterprises.

The identification of three types of enterprises—idealists, pragmatists, and legitimizers—illustrates that the coexistence of social and commercial logics does not materialize in a uniform or standardized manner in SE

corporate communications. The idealists represent organizations which strongly emphasize social or environmental goals while largely neglecting commercial considerations. This finding resonates with earlier studies suggesting that strong normative commitment to social goals may lead to the under-communication of economic rationality in social enterprises (Nicholls, 2009). The avoidance of commercial terminology may also be a deliberate choice to retain legitimacy in the eyes of those stakeholders which emphasize social logics (Bergfeld et al 2021).

The pragmatists, by contrast, most clearly reflect the hybrid organizational ideal described in the social enterprise literature. Their communications integrate social and commercial logics by framing economic sustainability, efficiency, and profitability as enablers of social impact rather than as ends in themselves. This rhetorical strategy aligns with research suggesting that successful hybrid organizations often articulate a hierarchy or complementarity between competing logics instead of treating them as contradictory (e.g. Civera et al, 2020). On the other hand, existing research suggests that the pragmatists may also tactically use commercial language in order to convince others, such as potential funders of their entrepreneurial efficiency (Dey and Teasdale 2016). However, even within this group, only about half explicitly describe how profits are allocated to advance social goals, indicating that hybridity in purpose does not automatically translate into transparency in financial narratives.

The legitimizers constitute the most problematic category from both a theoretical and a practical standpoint. Their mission statements either define social goals in extremely broad and generic terms or omit them altogether, making it difficult to distinguish these enterprises from conventional for-profit firms. From an institutional theory perspective, these organizations appear to adopt the SEM primarily as a symbolic device to gain legitimacy, without substantively reflecting the social logic that the Mark is intended to signal. This finding echoes earlier critiques of certification and labeling schemes, which may be subject to decoupling between formal compliance and actual practices (Ridley-Duff and Southcombe, 2012). The presence of this group raises concerns about the credibility and signaling function of the SEM if its holders do not consistently communicate the core criteria on which the Mark is based.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while the SEM represents an important institutional mechanism for recognizing social enterprises in a context lacking a formal legal definition, its meaning is actively constructed and negotiated by its holders through external communications. Therefore, variation observed in this study contributes to institutional-theory-based SE research by demonstrating how micro-level communication practices mediate macro-level institutional arrangements such as certification schemes.

The study has its limitations which also provide avenues for future research. The data was collected and analyzed by a single author in one country, and the purpose was to demonstrate how the social and commercial dimensions show in SE external communication. The analysis of organizational determinants such as company size, sector or ownership accounting for variety in the dataset was beyond the scope of this paper. The dataset can be utilized in future research for such analysis. Future research is also invited to depict the reasons for the variety in communication strategies by collecting interview data from the SE in the dataset.

Finally, the study has practical implications for organizations granting social enterprise marks and labels. The results raise the question of whether the criteria for granting such marks should place greater emphasis on transparent external communication, particularly regarding the use of profits for social purposes. Without clearer communicative expectations, there is a risk that the Mark's signaling value may erode, potentially undermining trust among stakeholders.

In conclusion, the paper demonstrates that balancing social goals and business profitability is not only an operational challenge for social enterprises but also a communicative one. How social enterprises articulate this balance publicly plays a crucial role in shaping their legitimacy and in defining the meaning of social entrepreneurship more broadly. As social enterprise marks continue to gain prominence as tools of recognition and governance, greater attention should be paid to how their criteria are interpreted, enacted, and communicated by the organizations they are intended to represent.

Ethics Declaration

I declare that ethical clearance for the research referred to in this paper was not needed. The research is based on publicly available data only.

AI Declaration

The AI tool Microsoft Copilot was used in the development of the paper as supportive tool for identifying relevant research, and for assisting in drafting the discussion and conclusion section. The accuracy of the research references provided by the AI was verified by the author from the original articles. The final version of the discussion and conclusion section was produced by the author. Text generated by the AI was edited and some of its suggestions were rejected.

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