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The magical language of un-realistic venture ideas in social entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

As social entrepreneurship gains maturity, research has begun to explore the less alluring aspects of the field, including the heroic stance of social entrepreneurs, the assumed moral superiority of their intentions, and the misleading emphasis on solutionism. In this paper, we explore a central component of this criticism, which is the construction of un-realistic venture ideas in social entrepreneurs' pitches for social change. We analysed social venture business plans and the written feedback provided by judges during a social venture competition, and we used speech act theory to analyse the claims and promises triggering judges' disbelief. We discovered three linguistic artefacts that underlie the construction of un-realistic venture ideas in social entrepreneurship, which we label holism, devotion, and enlightenment. While these artefacts trigger disbelief, they also play an expressive role as they channel both contestation and dreams. We leverage magical realism to forward an alternative explanation of how venture ideas in social entrepreneurship can act as a cultural form of social protest, which can be seen as a historically contingent, modern revolution.

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Introduction

Social entrepreneurship is full of conflicts and contradictions (Diochon and Anderson 2011). There is a bright side, with research highlighting the role of prosocial values in motivating social entrepreneurship and the collective capacity of social entrepreneurs to address deep social needs (Hockerts 2017; Bacq and Alt 2018). Yet there is also a dark side, with research raising concerns about the heroic stance of social entrepreneurs (Papi-Thornton 2016) as well as the assumed moral superiority of their intentions (McMullen and Bergman 2017; Kimmitt and Muñoz 2018), egoism (Zahra et al. 2009), reductive tendencies (Gras et al. 2020), and the misleading emphasis on solutionism (Chalmers 2020). This tension surfaces in the construction of social change narratives through which social entrepreneurs criticize the present, imagine new worlds, and tell stories about a better tomorrow. These are promising stories, but they can also be seen as irrational fantasies – too heroic to be true. While the bright and dark sides of social entrepreneurship have been explored, we have yet to understand what underlies the conflicting construction of those imagined worlds in venture development.

As social entrepreneurs use words to construct the worlds they envision (Liuberté and Dimov 2021; Nouman, Anderson, and Abdullah 2018), we explored how social entrepreneurs use language to construct ventures for social change. To do so, we analysed the textual conversations between social venture business plans and judges' feedback given during a social-venture business-plan competition. By tracking these textual conversations, we were able to capture stories of promise and

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provocation. We analysed the text using speech act theory, which offers a theoretical framework for analysing the intentionality of ‘doing things with words’ used to affect the ‘feelings, thoughts, and actions’ of others (Austin 1962, 101).

We discovered three linguistic artefacts triggering disbelief and enthusiasm, which we label *holism*, *enlightenment*, and *devotion*. Social entrepreneurs used these linguistic artefacts as resources to critique reality, promise new realities, and affect social change. They engaged the linguistic artefacts to forward their passion and ideological stances of a world constituted by dystopias (exaggeration of the world as is) and utopias (exaggeration of the world as it should be). The linguistic artefacts triggered reactions of disbelief as neither dystopias nor utopias appear to be true, thus forming the linguistic structure of what we call un-realistic social venture ideas. Yet, at the same time, *holism*, *enlightenment*, and *devotion* play an expressive role in constituting a narrative approach that enables rhetorical resources and fosters enthusiasm for social transformation, however unrealistic it might be seen. Against current understandings of conflicts and contradictions, un-realistic venture ideas suggest a constructive dialogue between what is both promising and ominous about social entrepreneurship. It is this dialogue of tension, we argue, where social entrepreneurship manifests as a cultural expression of social protest.

To make sense of our findings, we leverage magical realism, a fictional genre that rose to prominence in mid-century Latin America as the literary arm of social movements protesting cultural and economic colonialism (Zamora and Faris 1995; Ahmad, Afsar, and Masood 2012; Angulo 2018). Magical realism uses hybrid narratives of fantastical characters and events intertwined with conventional landscapes (Ganzin, Islam, and Suddaby 2020) to confuse readers’ taken-for-granted reality, critique social injustices, and manifest social transformation (Flores 1955). Its hybridity of real and extra-real possibilities resembles the un-realistic venture ideas social entrepreneurs construct in their pitches for social change. Inspired by magical realism, we theorize language’s role in constructing un-realistic venture ideas that social entrepreneurs use to affect stakeholders. We argue that social entrepreneurs are not only seeking resources and legitimacy through their rhetorical documents but are also proselytizing and provoking social change in their engagement with judges as gatekeepers of reality.

This paper contributes to narratives in venturing for social change by adding how social entrepreneurs use real and extra-real linguistic artefacts to construct social venture ideas in their efforts to challenge and transform the status quo. We offer a contextualized view of how entrepreneurs construct worlds through words, which could be simultaneously utopian and dystopian. Leveraging magical realism, we also advance an alternative explanation of how un-realistic venture ideas can act as a cultural form of social protest – provoking and proselytizing readers when seeking nonmaterial resources and transformation. Thus, this paper connects social venturing to social activism (Vedula et al. 2022) where business plans are declarative doctrines of social change. We also contribute to social entrepreneurship practice, particularly to processes of stakeholder engagement.

Background

Dark side of promising to save the world

As the research field of social entrepreneurship matures, the conversation broadens to include critical insights attempting to explore the meaning and role of ‘social’ without assumptions of ‘goodness’ (Santos 2012; Chell et al. 2016). Explored as the ‘dark side of social entrepreneurship’, scholars have surfaced assumptions underpinning social entrepreneurship. The more critical turn has highlighted the role of egoism involved in changing the world through entrepreneurial efforts (Zahra et al. 2009) and that social entrepreneurs’ ‘fantasy-laden attachments to ideals of pro-social work’ (Kenny, Haugh, and Fotaki 2020) and solutions to other people’s problems (Kimmitt and Muñoz 2018; Chalmers 2020) may manifest in unrealistic ventures with unintended consequences

(McMullen and Bergman 2017; Koehne, Woodward, and Honig 2022). Social entrepreneurs may be a 'genus of entrepreneurship' (Dees 1998), but they are not inherently more moral (Dey and Steyaert 2016).

In many ways, social entrepreneurs' path parallels the path of their commercial kin; they may also seek creative destruction in their will to found a new kingdom (Schumpeter 1934, 93). Along their journeys of grandiose thinking and ideological convictions (Brownell, McMullen, and O'Boyle 2021), they may also 'lose sight of reality' as they 'idealize some and vilify others' in 'distrust for the world around them' (Vries 1985, 162). In contrast to commercial entrepreneurship, the heroic story of seeking opportunities and embarking on missions to rewrite social wrongs spins a unique tale, potentially laden with assumed moral superiority (McMullen and Bergman 2017; Kimmitt and Muñoz 2018). Consequently, it is critical to understand 'heropreneuship' (Papi-Thornton 2016) narratives constructing un-realistic ventures over-promising social change.

However, we sense, if the pendulum swings too far to either the bright or the dark side, we may miss the richness located between possibilities (Dodd et al. 2021). To better understand pitching for new realities, we need to look at how social entrepreneurs construct worlds through words.

New worlds through words

Ventures draw on context and imagination in their visions of changing the future. They are expressions of embeddedness (Jack and Anderson 2002; Fletcher 2006; McKeever, Jack, and Anderson 2015) with ideas developing through an iterative process contextual to one's environment, e.g. the ecological, relational, social, cultural, political, and economic milieu. They are also future-oriented conceptions imbued with potentiality, an ephemeral state that is not actualized until an entrepreneur constructs a course of action to change the status quo (Hunter 2013). Bringing venture ideas into existence requires imagination to conceive a potential future state and to make the unknown, known (Vaghely and Julien 2010; Hunter 2013). Envisioning an entrepreneurial future in an ever-fickle environment is akin to a fantasy where entrepreneurs imagine a future not yet materialized (Rindova and Martins 2021) and, against conventional wisdom and the absence of objective evidence, venture forward anyway. Suddaby, Bruton, and Si (2015) theorize venture ideas as an internal dialogical process where boundaries of time and space are perceived as malleable, bending to inner world interpretations and imaginations as entrepreneurs envision 'alternative social, economic, and political arrangements' (Suddaby, Bruton, and Si 2015, 8).

Language provides the structure for entrepreneurs' imaginative ways of knowing and changing the world as well as for imaginatively actualizing venture ideas for others by stimulating audiences' intellectual and emotional responses (Kier and McMullen 2018; Dimov 2020). Language constitutes a performative power in the statement of claims, pronouncements, and promises made used to construct a venture idea and affect others, and it reflects one's beliefs about reality while shaping others' perceptions of reality (Austin 1962). Thus, to observe world construction and its effect, we need to go beyond cognitive framing and signalling 'truths' and turn our theoretical orientation towards the use of language in constructing social reality and change (Smith and Anderson 2004).

Social entrepreneurs articulate the worlds they envision in visual and textual artefacts designed to persuade readers (Gruber 2007; Berglund, Bousfiha, and Mansoori 2020). As prototypical artefacts constructing worlds, business plans symbolize a play unfolding reality as they turn words into worlds and imaginations into innovations (Anderson 2005; Roundy 2021). Business plans entail a process of co-production between a venturing author's risk and imagination and a judge's volunteerism and expertise. Intentionally designed as intertextual documents, business plans create spaces for the negotiation of constructed 'truth claims' where 'audiences are invited' to both join and appraise the performance' and imagined future (Anderson 2005; 598; Anderson and Smith 2007, 172). Consequently, business plans both codify and perform speech acts by affecting readers through the intertextual readings, revisions, and reproductions of their content (Montesano Montessori 2016). They are documents of deliberation as well as the price of admission for entering business

plan competitions (Stephan, Patterson, and Kelly 2015; Gamble and Muñoz 2021). Consequently, social business plans represent both artefacts of desired change as well as artefacts of cultural context, and like a sermon, political speech, or any other linguistic rallying cry for a new reality, they can be linguistically analysed for implicit nuances and contextual insights.

Speech acts

Speech act theory argues that language constructs society and that intentions can be interpreted based on the structure of language used and the context in which communication occurs (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Speech act theory challenged the mid-century positivist view of language as merely reflecting an objective reality and heralded an appreciation of language's performative power in shaping perceptions of reality (Lorino 2014; Christensen, Morsing, and Thyssen 2017). The theory takes an interpretive approach to language based on context and the empirical observation that 'words do things' as carriers of intention and that doing things changes reality in the transformation from 'words into worlds' (Austin 1962; Strauss and Feiz 2013; Green 2021). According to Austin (1962), words carry an emotional force affecting the listener's heart and mind, actions, and outcomes.

Speech act theory offers a framework for analysing 'doing things with words' where language's context, intention, and effect on reality are explicated in the constructs of locution, illocution, and perlocution (Austin 1962). Locutionary acts are utterances, words strung together to form phrases and sentences. An illocutionary act, hereon referred to as a 'speech act', occurs when a speaker or writer employs utterances intending to create a goal-orientated effect (Korta and Perry 2007). Austin argued that speech acts are performed by 'design, intention, or purpose' to produce an intended consequence and that 'saying something will ... produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons' (Austin 1962, 101). Even 'misfires' between an intended effect and an actual effect produce 'consequences, results, [and or] effects' on reality (Austin 1962, 17). Perlocutionary acts, hereon referred to as 'consequential effect', represent the effect that occurs when a speaker or writer communicates intending to affect another's 'feelings, thoughts, or actions' (Austin 1962, 101). Essentially, the theory of speech act foregrounds language's ability to influence others and shape reality.

Searle (1969) furthered Austin's work, arguing for language's fundamental role 'in the creation, constitution, and maintenance of social reality' (Searle 2008, 444). Focusing on speech acts as the primary unit of analysis for understanding an intent to affect consequences, Searle developed a theoretical taxonomy of speech acts defining commissives (promises), declarations (statements), directives (requests), expressives (feelings), and representatives (claims) as the linguistic structures used to express intention. For an utterance to become a speech act, a speaker or writer must sincerely intend an utterance to be understood by a hearer or reader. The hearer or reader must also understand the utterance's meaning, whether stated directly or indirectly (Strauss and Feiz 2013), where meaning represents the speaker's or writer's sincere intention to affect action in a culturally shared context. For example, the oft-cited utterance 'brrr, it's cold' said alone in a hot room is a meaningless utterance, but if said among people in a cold room, the utterance becomes a speech act, indirectly requesting someone to shut a door or window. Context matters and understanding intention requires context.

Methods and data

In speech act theory and other traditions of pragmatics, 'the critical question is not are you representing reality adequately, but what are you trying to do with the language you are using?' (Knight and Tsoukas 2019, 8). Inspired by previous entrepreneurial studies analysing text-based speech acts (Haines 2021; Liubertè and Dimov 2021), we sought to understand what social entrepreneurs were 'trying to do with the language' they were using and to reveal what underlies the

construction of un-realistic venture ideas. Our qualitative approach was guided by speech act theory's systematic method of locating language's intentions and effects (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), and we used thematic analysis to code the textual data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Historical context

Our data range from 2011 to 2012, a time when businesses were struggling, and homeowners were being evicted during the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Beyond the economic hit, the crisis was seen as the failure of capitalism as the prolonged crisis event cascaded into subsequent events (Rauch and Hulsink 2021). The financial crisis triggered social discontent, channelled through multiple social movement demonstrations against Wall Street, the unresponsiveness of governments, austerity agendas, and widespread social inequalities. These social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Dreamers, were led by a new political generation (Milkman 2017) who helped fuel the rapid growth of social entrepreneurship.

From a historical point of view, social entrepreneurship can be seen as an integral part of social movement initiations with many organizations launching or scaling in response to the global financial crisis (Nicholls 2009), e.g. social impact accelerators (Uncharted, WJF, Hult Prize, Halcyon, SocialLab, and Conscious Venture Lab), training programs (Ashoka's changemakers and AshokaU), and certifying organizations (B Corps). The above represents some of the outcomes initiated by ideologically-motivated social reformists (Jarrodi, Byrne, and Bureau 2019) responding to the crisis. Our study is situated in this historical context of social crisis and mobilization for change. The nascent social entrepreneurs we study represent some of the many who organized in response to the crisis and entered one of the era's burgeoning business plan competitions aimed at funding social change.

Research setting and participants

Competition process

The dataset comes from an annual business-plan competition hosted by a social-venture incubator in Northeastern USA. The competition aims to develop for-profit social ventures where social value is created either with or for beneficiaries (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019). It targets early-stage ventures seeking their first professional investment and requires contestants to pay an entrance fee to ensure the quality and seriousness of their intentions. The competition occurs over four rounds with the first three rounds based on text, which are managed over a digital platform, enabling international entrants and an international panel of judges to participate.

At each round, finalists enter an increasingly resourceful pipeline of social venture networking and support. The competition begins with an open call for business plan abstracts where organizers select the top 25% of abstracts to proceed. The second round requires a short 5-page business plan, which is assessed by judges who select the top 33% to enter the full-plan third round. At the advanced stage of a full-plan round, promises of opportunities are meant to reflect real possibilities where ventures are vying for mentorship, exposure to the wider network of stakeholders such as potential partners, board members, funders, and a chance to be selected into the final live presentation round where they compete for professional investment, 120,000 USD, and in-kind professional services.

Judges are recruited based on expertise and social impact values, and they receive mentorship, thus creating panels friendly to early-stage social ventures. They are provided plans that do not represent a conflict of interest and are invited to choose plans they wish to review, enabling judges to select ventures they have an affinity for launching. In contrast to the theatrical atmosphere and limited time given to social entrepreneurs and judges during a typical '3-minute' pitch fest, the text-based review occurs over several weeks, allowing judges to respond thoroughly. Judges' feedback reports follow the incubator's business plan structure: market problem and need, product or service solutions, financials, team, social impact, and funding request, thus producing a mirrored critique of

the social change plans. The reports conclude by assessing a venture's 'current viability' from poor to outstanding on a scale from 1 to 5. The social venture competition process is found in Appendix A, [Tabel A1](#), and reports according to the incubator's scorecard are found in [Appendix A, Table A2](#).

Ventures

We analysed ten business plans submitted to the 2011 and 2012 third rounds. These plans represent a competitive set as they were selected to advance beyond rounds one (400 abstract submissions per year) and two (100 short-plan invitations per year). Business plan submissions included both social and environmental ventures with business models based on sectors of manufacturing, agriculture, hospitality, technology, silviculture, services, aquaculture, and sustainable energy. Founders either had higher education degrees or professional experience in finance, non-profit, management, technical, and service sectors. Ventures originated from Africa (Nigeria), the Americas (Brazil and US), Asia (Bangladesh), and Europe (Germany and France). The ventures included 24 founders, and based on first names and pronouns used, we assume 79% were male and 21% were female. Business plans averaged a score of 3.35, between fair and good viability. While some ventures fared better than others and continue to exist, it is important to note that we focus on the language constructing un-realistic social venture ideas related to social change and not on language related to securing funding or venture growth. Profiles of the selected ventures can be found in [Table 1](#).

Judges

The panel of judges in our dataset include seven academics (social and commercial entrepreneurship, finance, marketing, and natural sciences), 22 CEOs (entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs, and small business owners), 11 consultants (marketing, strategy, product development, and rural and community development), six directors (B-Corp, Fair Trade USA, quality control, and academic programs), seven executives (finance and development), five managers (sales, finance, operations, international business), and 11 venture capitalists (social and sustainable entrepreneurship, impact, communications, energy, and international trade) as well as other categories such as eight professionals working in sectors ranging from NGOs to social activism. Judges came from Africa (Nigeria and Sudan), the Americas (Brazil, Chile, Panama, and US), Asia (Bangladesh), and Europe (Spain and UK) with 86% having international business expertise. Based on the first names reported, we assume 31% of the judges were female and 53% were male, while 16% chose to remain anonymous. Except for the anonymous judges, all judges provided direct contact information and reported being open to ongoing mentorship.

Data collection

The second author of the paper volunteered as one of the 75 judges during the 2011 and 2012 competitions, allowing us access to this unique set of archival data while also providing a nuanced insider's understanding of incubating social entrepreneurs. Due to the context of the global financial crisis, the 2011 to 2012 competition business plans represent artefacts of an extreme case showing how social entrepreneurs construct social change during a prolonged crisis; thus, the business plans best highlight the theoretical construct of un-realistic social venture ideas (Eisenhardt 1989). The dataset includes 312 pages of feedback written by 75 judges responding to 160 pages worth of business plans. Each business plan received an average of 31 pages of feedback from an average of nine judges, with each judge providing an average of 3.4 single-spaced pages of structured feedback per plan. While the dataset comes from one incubator, the ten social ventures and 75 judges represent a diversity of backgrounds. Thus, each business plan and feedback combination represents a unique data point, providing ample variation and material to analyse. Details of the focus of the business plan assessment can be found in [Appendix A, Table A3](#).

Table 1. Profiles of the ventures.

Venture sector	Key promises and venture location	Team	Qualifications and experience listed in business plans
<i>Agriculture^a</i>	To hire locals to farm and produce foods in Brazil for export to the US	Derek	Sustainable venture capitalist
<i>Agriculture^b</i>	To farm and manufacture food in poor, urban spaces in the US	Alejandro	Undergraduate degree in business administration; Financial analyst; Foundation Chair
		Nikhil	Undergraduate degree in political science; Non-profit regional and international community development; Business consulting
<i>Agriculture^c</i>	To train women in Bangladesh to manage and sell sustainable fertilizers	Shahidul	Undergraduate degree in management
		No name	Undergraduate degree in marketing
<i>Aquaculture</i>	Provide farmed fish at a low cost, and high nutritional value in Nigeria	No name	Undergraduate degree in chemical engineering
		Kevin	Undergraduate degree in project management technology; Project management; Fish farming
		Innocent	Undergraduate degree in project management technology; Accounting; Micro finance
		Charles	Undergraduate degree in electrical engineering; Engineering; Software development; Management
<i>Energy</i>	To create biofuels for industrial application in the US	Lawrence	MBA; Biofuels and bioenergy consultant; Investment banking
		Andreas	PhD in biology and natural Sciences; Masters in biology; Engineer; Operations management; Biofuel and biotechnology consultant
<i>Hospitality</i>	To create social spaces in the US where people can discuss philosophy, art, and politics	Todd	Social venture consultant; Social incubator co-founder
		Ryan	Restaurant manager
		Kevin	Architect
<i>Laundry</i>	To create a zero-carbon footprint laundry service and hire long-term unemployed people in the US	Sophia	Community organizer
		Gabriel	Undergraduate degree in economics; Manager of urban public transportation; Non-profit Executive Director in community development
		Joel	Undergraduate degree in journalism; Manager of medical waste
		Troy	MBA; Undergraduate degree in environmental studies; Sustainable business network
		Geraldine	Hospitality
<i>Silviculture</i>	To sustainably farm and harvest tree resin for export to European perfumeries and offer fair wages in Cambodia	James	Undergraduate degree in biology
		Neil	Management
<i>Software</i>	To gamify and lessen energy consumption in Argentina and abroad	Sylvia	Community development
<i>Textile</i>	To empower Bangladeshi clothing manufactures by producing sustainable clothing at a fair wage and to supply the US market demand for stylish, Fairtrade clothing	Innocent	Undergraduate degree in project management technology; Accounting; Micro finance
		Charles	Undergraduate degree in electrical engineering; Engineering; Software development; Management

Data analysis

We used an abductive coding approach and observed our data through the lens of speech act theory. This theory suits the analysis of the linguistic construction of venture ideas on the premises that: (1) words are tools of action; (2) meaning is context sensitive and can be interpreted from literal and non-literal talk and text; and (3) language is intentionally used to produce consequential effects (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Strauss and Feiz 2013).

Typical of most entrepreneurs, the business plans made claims of innovation, effectiveness, and readiness to act on an opportunity. However, we drill down on the claims and promises unique to social entrepreneurship to analyse how social entrepreneurs use words to construct social change

through ventures and to understand the intentions underpinning those new realities. We began by identifying judges' reactions of disbelief, such as 'Based on what I have read so far, this is not realistic', stated by a CEO and co-founder of an ethical apparel company. Because the reports mirrored the business plan structure, we were able to locate and match business plan claims and promises with judges' feedback, section by section, and identify speech acts triggering disbelief. We traced statements of disbelief to the source material in the business plans and analysed the patterns of speech acts according to Searle's (1969) taxonomy (Table 2). The taxonomy provided an understanding of the rhetorical patterns of intentions and a method of interpreting the venture ideas triggering disbelief (Liubertè and Dimov 2021).

We looked at how social entrepreneurs used speech act types according to various business plan goals. For instance, the greatest concentration of speech acts occurred in the market, product or service, and social impact sections; these were the sections where social entrepreneurs framed the market as dystopian, promised solutions, and pledged their commitments to overcome suffering through the utopias they aspired to manifest. They used representative claims to establish credibility in possessing market knowledge when communicating their claims about market conditions and needs. Commissive promises became pronounced in product and service sections as social entrepreneurs made pledges to solve social needs and create change. As their plans and storylines moved further from what might be common ground knowledge, social entrepreneurs increasingly used a wider range of speech acts, with speech acts becoming most diverse in the social impact section as they conceptually moved into an abstract future. As the speech acts are contextualized to a high-level business plan competition, they satisfy the condition of being sincere in their intention to cause an effect.

After gaining insight into the intentions of the speech acts used to affect judges, we preceded to analyse the tensions occurring between the social entrepreneurs' intentions and judges' disbelief (Table 3). We then moved from focusing on specific speech acts to looking at the plans holistically to make sense of the tensions between judges' disbelief and enthusiasm. The first author coded the data thematically with code definitions being refined as a team through deliberation (Braun and Clarke 2006). Paying close attention to the language fuelling tensions, we continued coding, moving from descriptive analysis to interpretive analysis. Through a coding process of interpreting and refining the complex tensions, we discovered three thematic categories of linguistic artefacts, *holism*, *enlightenment*, and *devotion*. These linguistic artefacts were created through an interplay between social entrepreneurs' speech acts to affect the imaginations, emotions, beliefs, thoughts, and or actions of judges, and the actual consequential effects on judges. For instance, the linguistic artefacts represent social entrepreneurs' claims and promises such as to deliver 'peace of mind', to employ 'happiness gurus', and to give '75% of revenues' to their social change missions along with judges' responding sentiments of disbelief. Table 3 shows examples of the empirical data and a description of the tensions, and Table 4 shows examples of the data analysis stages moving from codes to theoretical themes.

Table 2. Speech act taxonomy.

Speech acts	Definition and example
Commissives	Commissives commit the speaker to some future course of action. Examples: promising, vowing, swearing, threatening, pledging, offering
Declaratives	Declarations result in the immediate change of a circumstance or official state of affairs. Examples: resigning, firing, hiring, excommunicating, declaring war, appointing, bequeathing, christening, ordaining, establishing an official role
Directives	Directives involve attempts by a speaker to get a hearer to do something. Examples: requesting, suggesting, commanding, asking, ordering, questioning, seeking confirmation, seeking information, how-to-instructions, rhetorical questions.
Expressives	Expressives communicate the speaker's psychological or emotional state. Examples: apologizing, welcoming, congratulating, thanking, cheering
Representatives	Representatives commit the speaker to something being the case, to the truth of a proposition. Examples: asserting, reporting, informing, claiming, fact stating

Source: Strauss and Feiz (2013). *Discourse analysis: Putting our worlds into words*. Routledge.

Table 3. Examples of empirical data and description of the tensions.

Speech acts of	Consequential effects of	
un-realistic social change venture construction: Empirical data of belief	un-realistic social change venture construction: Empirical data of disbelief	This tells us nascent social entrepreneurs practice X while judges practice Y causing tension in un-realistic social change venture construction Description of tension
... individuals and group leaders have accepted the status quo.	You continue to state that civic participation and connection has broken down in this country, yet this doesn't seem to be backed up by any solid statistics. I would like to see more hard data	Social entrepreneurs practice holistic thinking where all things are urgent and interrelated, including dystopia and utopia with the potential to unlock destruction or abundance versus judges who practice linear managerialism needing to know specifics on moving from point A to point B.
... a global food-related illness crisis accounts for 11 M annual deaths (22% of all), with diabetes near 10% in the US, 70% of the population overweight, and cancer reaching 0.5% per year.	What are the 1–2 things you want to do very well? Focus on those. I am not sure if they completely understand how much competition there is.	
... catalyse the Amazon rainforest bioeconomy, creating value for a standing rainforest and generating income for the local river people.	There's so much missing in the plan that could tell me if the aspiration and values can be channelled into preparing to meet the very real challenges of fast-growing business. Based on the lack of specifics.	
... beneficiates the environment improving environmental caring culture.	It was not mentioned specifically how benefits would be measured and verified, or how those benefits (i.e. energy savings) would be monetized or relate to their revenues, which is very important in the energy efficiency industry. There are no metrics provided for how much their application will help improve efficiency and no metrics on how much is needed to reach their goals. I would like to see a lot more information on the early activity on the website/apps to have a clearer idea about the early state of play.	Social entrepreneurs strive to create value inclusive of humanity's psyche, drawing on esoteric resources versus judges who seek to improve humanity's physical needs, requiring empirical resources.
Happiness gurus On a deeper level, many adult urban residents desire a-sense-of-belonging, greater-trust, and increased connection-to-community.	What is a 'happiness gurus'? To me, that sounds like the clichéd complaint of citizens of a democracy since time immemorial – 'it was better in the olden days'. ... seems to be not focused on rigorous data.	
... plant-based superfood alchemies that generate vibrant planetary and human health.	The lack of information leads me to assume the company is unprofessional and not serious about the business. I think from an investor's standpoint, you have to be able to translate that into the bottom line. I understand that they have multiple components – eco-farm, manufacturing, etc. but I don't really know how these fit together.	

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

<p>We intend to invest our profits into building the capacity and size of our global production partners to create sustainable economic growth in their local communities, fostering improved quality of life in those communities.</p>	<p>... if not enough people want your 100% organic cotton apparel, that is 100% waste. I'm unclear ... it's hard to quantify. A serious sales plan with real industry sales knowledge would be very helpful.</p>	<p>Social entrepreneurs are forwarding a manifesto of social transformation through resource distribution and continuous mobilization towards an ideal state versus judges who seek a plan explicating the details of achieving and sustaining social (material) need alleviation as an end in itself.</p>
<p>Some of the most devoted customers will seek opportunities to take leadership roles in helping us evolve and grow.</p>	<p>I would like to see more hard data As it is unclear on the unique selling proposition (beyond being more responsible) it is hard to understand exactly to whom they will sell and how they will get their attention.</p>	
<p>... continually push the urban gardening and growing your own food movement!</p>	<p>What I would like to see more of is how you plan on marketing your story to the end consumer?</p>	
<p>... pursue his passion for sustainability, job-creation and economic development through creative solutions.</p>	<p>Your philanthropic strategy needs to be better aligned with your business.</p>	

Table 4. Examples of data analysis stages.

<p>Description of the tension: This tells us nascent social entrepreneurs practice X while judges practice Y causing tension between belief and disbelief in un-realistic social change venture construction</p>	<p>Essence of the tension</p>	<p>Expression of the tension</p>	<p>Themes</p>
<p>Social entrepreneurs practice systems thinking with an extreme approach where all things are urgent and interrelated, dystopia and utopia, with the potential to unlock destruction or abundance versus judges who practice linear managerialism needing to know specifics on moving from point A to point B.</p>	<p>Dystopia/utopia Cyclical/linear Holistic/ concreate</p>	<p>Combining opposites creates a continuity of interconnectedness.</p>	<p>Holism</p>
<p>Social entrepreneurs strive to create value inclusive of humanities psyche, drawing on esoteric resources versus judges who measure opportunities improving humanity's physical needs, requiring empirical resources.</p>	<p>Psyche/physical Esoterism/ empiricism Righteousness/ humility</p>	<p>Suprasensible esoterism and empirical grounding work to create a middle way.</p>	<p>Enlightenment</p>
<p>Social entrepreneurs are forwarding a doctrine of social transformation through resource distribution and continuous mobilization towards an ideal state versus judges who seek a plan explicating the details of achieving and sustaining social need alleviation as an end in itself.</p>	<p>Continuous work/ finite goal Doctrine/plan Ideological/ logical</p>	<p>The continuous work towards an ideological goal countered by logical action steps transforms a doctrine of beliefs into planned devotion.</p>	<p>Devotion</p>

Findings

We infer that the linguistic artefacts, *holism*, *enlightenment*, and *devotion* were used to forward social entrepreneurs' ideological stances and affect the 'feelings, thoughts, and actions' (Austin 1962, 101) of judges, and not just to achieve tangible outcomes. While the linguistic artefacts were met with disbelief, their social change intention was embraced with enthusiasm. This complex tension of disbelief and enthusiasm, energized through a textual co-creation of reality, underlies the construction of un-realistic, yet inspiring social change venture ideas.

In the following, we show how social entrepreneurs construct un-realistic venture ideas through *holism*, *engagement*, and *devotion*. We define the codes, show the pattern of use in business plans, present the linguistic structure of un-realistic venture ideas triggering disbelief, and then explain their expressive role, enabling extra-realist resources and inspiring enthusiasm. We then leverage these insights and magical realism to theorize un-realistic social venture ideas, explaining how they are constructed and how they can act as a cultural form of social protest and affect change.

Holism in the construction of social venture idea

Holism represents a boundless interconnectedness for all that exists in the world, inclusive of physical, social, and spiritual states of being, both good and bad, across space and time, which affected audiences with disbelief and enthusiasm. Social entrepreneurs used *holism* in their representative claims about the existing market needs with emphasis placed on their product and service solutions and resulting utopias.

They displayed the linguistic structure of *holism* by rhetorically establishing a thread of interconnectedness between dystopian present states and utopian future states, inferring an ability to choose between those realities. The structure was created by first asserting the present market reality as dystopian in its entirety through such claims as ‘the food machine is destroying’ (*agriculture^a venture*) the biosphere. Vivid urgency would then be followed with a solution and potential for transformation. Continuing with dystopian market claims, *agriculture^a venture* demonstrated the tendency towards spiralling boundaries where all concerns interrelate:

The traditional ‘food system’ is making the planet and people sick. The Amazon is being lost to giant infrastructure projects and extractive activities, soy, and cattle farmers, as well as deforestation from subsistence farmers, the latter via wood extraction and burning forest to plant crops such as cassava. With 20% of the Amazon rainforest already lost, a tipping point is projected at 25%, that will catalyse an ecosystem collapse whereby 60% will be lost by 2050, with consequences that threaten humanity: loss of oxygen, climate change, rainfall reduction, and loss of biodiversity.

The above example illustrates a holistic problem identification connecting anthropogenic activities to ecosystem collapse and threats to humanity, compressed into two sentences. The pithy and bleak forecast follows with a utopian solution based on a ‘nutritious sorbet’, imbuing special powers onto their solution’s ability to overcome the portrayal of spiralling darkness. Complexifying the interconnectedness of all that is bad and good while simplifying solutions triggered disbelief. For example, the following social venture investor and mentor stated:

Their problem statement is very broad – from ‘food system’ making people and planet sick – to destroying habitats and poisoning rivers to causing diabetes and cancer etc. However, their product, which is a nutritious sorbet is not fully addressing all the issues they stated in their problem statement.

The language of *holism* was ill-received by judges as they sought to untangle the holistic interconnectedness of everything and to replace the holistic frame with claims and promises that were identifiable and tangible.

After asserting a current reality of lack and despair, social entrepreneurs would make utopian claims such as ‘production practices, transparency, and participatory nature give our customers a peace of mind’ (*textile venture*). Others claimed to unlock the latent potential of ‘abundance’ (*agriculture^a venture*) when providing solutions. However, judges sought quantifiable, concrete measures versus uncountable claims of peace and abundance. As the following marketing consultant admonished, ‘How do you measure “peace of mind”? What does it look like?’ Judges echoed concerns comparable to a Fairtrade director’s following criteria, ‘I would like to see more depth on most things in the plan’ because it ‘can make your business more tangible and credible to potential contributors’. Despite judges reacting in disbelief to *holism*, it also enabled extra-realist resources and positively affected judges.

In its expressive role, *holism* connects entrepreneurship to a process of transformation. By combining dystopian and utopian storylines into an interconnected ‘this or that’ destiny, social entrepreneurs express a cyclical sense of time and space that is both intergenerational and global, sentient and non-sentient. An interconnected transformation was woven through the dystopia and utopia frames where the ‘destruction of the biosphere’ could be healed through an ‘abundant trade model’ (*agriculture^a venture*). Judges responded enthusiastically such as when a COO of a fair-trade organization proclaimed, ‘I love the systems approach they are taking’, indicating the enthusiasm judges had for ventures seeking interconnectedness and transformation.

A state of interconnectedness also expresses global fraternity, where humanity holistically shares in the pain and suffering as well as in the peace and joy that ‘beneficiates the environment improving [an] environmental caring culture’ (*energy venture*). *Holism* self-assigns moral legitimacy through being intimately connected to an existing social need as well as being connected to the source of knowing how to resolve the need. Judges provided feedback such as ‘highly innovative, holistic’ stated a business owner or as in the following ‘The idea of having an organization that meets the needs of both the consumer and humanity is a win-win. Not just providing a value add but addressing a human rights issue’ offered by a global marketing judge.

Enlightenment in the construction of social venture ideas

Enlightenment refers to righteously knowing the physical, social, and or spiritual needs of others without feeling required to provide evidence of the claims made. Instead of basing knowledge on empirics, knowledge acquisition appears suprasensible, thus sharply affecting judges’ disbelief. Nonetheless, *enlightenment* still sparked enthusiasm. Social entrepreneurs favoured using *enlightenment* language with representatives and commissives, with most using representatives when making claims to have intuitive and non-quantifiable knowledge about the market needs and their corresponding product or service solutions.

The structure of *enlightenment* tended towards a tone of indoctrination, edifying readers by ‘opening their eyes’ and providing deeper insights into the workings of the world, and the solutions it needs. For example, a *hospitality venture* professed to know a deep societal need to connect with others, claiming the market lacks:

Opportunities to learn, to gather and to get to know others who care about ‘stuff that matters’ over food and drink are relatively ad hoc and scattered. Those in our market struggle to find places to gather; many don’t even try anymore.

The above quote reveals *enlightenment* used to serve the whole human, including psychological needs. The quote also illustrates a willingness to draw on nontangible, esoteric resources such as intuition and righteous inspiration when making statements and claims.

Judges did not respond as if feeling enlightened by the claim. Instead, they provided feedback such as “‘stuff that matters’ seems too vague’ (operations manager), and they repelled the text’s ‘moralizing tone’ (academic). Others rebuked the *enlightenment* language as follows: ‘I would focus more on the amenities that encourage social interaction . . . and less on alleviating existential angst’, criticized a judge who identified as being a social activist. For judges, the aim was to evaluate objective facts applied to addressing a social need as testified by an operations manager and sustainability strategist asking, ‘Can you narrow this down at all to more realistically convey who your potential customers may be?’. Whereas social entrepreneurs were not averse to employing suprasensible resources of esoterism when conveying their reality, judges demanded more than prescient sources of know-how. Despite judges reacting in disbelief to claims of *enlightenment*, it also enabled extra-realist resources and positively affected judges.

Enlightenment plays an expressive role as it rhetorically establishes social entrepreneurs’ righteous knowledge and a suprasensible way of knowing. The rhetoric calls to awaken others to a similar knowing by proselytizing social entrepreneurs’ mission for a morally transformed, utopian future.

The following quote illustrates a suprasensible source of knowledge, 'On a deeper level, many adult urban residents desire a sense-of-belonging, greater trust, and increased connection-to-community' (*hospitality venture*). Judges responded with enthusiasm as in a communications consultant's feedback, 'It was a pleasure to read this plan. . . . Thanks for allowing me to participate'.

Calling on a higher source of knowledge to express a 'deeper level' of values, as if they were facts, functions to assert a divinely appointed authority authorizing the moral enterprise. Aligning esoteric and empirical realities on one plane, a 'heaven on earth' utopia, enables social entrepreneurs to draw on both forms of realities and their resources. Judges expressed enthusiasm while pushing ventures to provide concrete details. For example, a product development manager wrote:

I would like to see an incarnation of this plan that still includes the emotion and passion that is clearly evident but is more succinct and clearly lays out 'hard' information for potential investors to assess. You have a mountain to climb here, and I think this team can do it!

While judges continued to require empirical evidence, they also expressed 'It's inspiring to read about lofty goals' as noted by a restaurateur.

Devotion in the construction of social venture ideas

Devotion represents an extreme commitment that, due to an ideological component, surpasses the notion of an unwavering commitment to seeing an objective completed and, instead, takes on a tone of resolute zealotry, affecting both disbelief and enthusiasm among judges. *Devotion* was widely used in the articulation of venture ideas across the various business plan sections. The language of *devotion* also used the greatest variety of speech acts, using not only representative claims and commissive promises but also directives requesting support, and expressives offering sentiments. While *devotion* was used throughout the business plans, it was particularly used in framing social impact.

The structure of *devotion* exhorts conviction. *Devotion* is seen in a *textile venture's* promise to 'invest a minimum of 75% of its profits into its production partners to expand their capacity (i.e. skills and capital) . . . [and] their ability to take on more workers (i.e. fairly employ more people)' as their social impact pledge. The pledge of devotion did not inspire judges' belief. As noted by a judge with international business expertise, '75% profit margin to production partners – great concept. Very drastic amount'. The devotional promise discredited the business plan, placing the commitment to social change into the drastic, fantastical category. A *hospitality venture* used *devotion* when defining 'enlightened hospitality', stating that it represents 'honouring our guests under all circumstances and bending over backwards to show them we care and to make sure they have a positive experience'. Unbounded devotion triggered judges' disbelief and chagrin as they quipped snarky feedback as if to bring social entrepreneurs back down to earth. For instance, a judge with experience being a successful social entrepreneur remarked, 'Are you going to be identified as non-ideological? Do you have limits as to who you would host for parties? Tea party in NYC? Neo-Nazis?', sarcastically alluding to the need to think rationally through the claim of what total devotion might entail.

The structure of *devotion* also connects ventures to a social movement, which was echoed throughout plans in such claims as the 'movement [is] going mainstream' (*agriculture^b venture*). Judges responded with statements such as 'seems to be not focused on rigorous data' as judged by a venture philanthropist. Judges' critical feedback indicates impressions of frivolity as opposed to garnering belief in social entrepreneurs' devotedness. Social entrepreneurs' ideological devoutness surpassed a rational demonstration of integrating social mission objectives into business plans and failed to gain judges' belief in a plan's viability. Despite judges reacting in disbelief, *devotion* rhetorically provided extra-realist resources and positively affected judges in its expressive role.

Devotion plays an expressive role in showcasing social entrepreneurs' conviction in an ideological cause, such as a social movement. For example, the quote 'seeks to inspire a global movement' (*agriculture^a venture*) promises an enduring passion for a higher-purpose cause, while 'growing a food

movement' (*agriculture^b venture*) expresses momentum in the becomingness of a transformed society, and 'contributing to a social movement for a better' (*textile venture*) society works to engender a sense of action already taking place. Judges commended and praised *devotion*, as indicated by a human capital strategist's comment, 'You clearly have a passion for environmental and social causes'.

Devotion also testifies to possessing not only convictions but also more tangible resources, such as a network of people and momentum in a movement of social change. For example, 'We are uniting numerous ... global citizens into this movement' (*laundry venture*) expresses global access to people united through an ideological movement. Effectively, *devotion* functions to reinforce the message that the mission is beyond the self and that the social entrepreneur is a devotee connected to a higher-purpose calling as well as higher-purpose resources, with judges endorsing ventures commitment such as 'I commend the efforts and passion', stated by an apparel co-founder. Judges also wanted to know how *devotion* would be reinforced, offering critical encouragement as stated by a global sales and marketing representative, 'Yes, Yes, Yes! Great mission and values. Great story. How will the mission be preserved if the company grows fast and has big capital needs?' Overall, while the linguistic artefacts triggered rational disbelief, they also rhetorically created extra-realist resources and positively affected judges in noncognitive ways, providing sentiments such as a corporate executive in financial services stating, 'I'd love to see them succeed'.

We know that social entrepreneurs who create detailed plans and enter start-up competitions display actions showing a serious commitment and motivation to launch a social venture and that the lower-level competitions vetted their abilities. Based on the actions of constructing business plans, we assume cogency. On a superficial reading, their actions counter the dominant theories of behaviour found in instrumental rationality, claiming rational agents perform actions that best meet their goals. The perplexing puzzle of social entrepreneurs constructing un-realistic venture ideas triggering tensions of disbelief and enthusiasm inspired us to conduct a deeper interpretation of their intentions. Assuming social entrepreneurs are rational and their actions intentional, we sought to understand the intentions driving their rhetorical actions.

Theorizing the magical language of un-realistic venture ideas

While we were initially problematizing constructing un-realistic venture ideas, we came to realize that it can be both darkly deceptive and brightly magical. In this intriguing tension, we discovered a constructive narrative between what is promising and ominous about social entrepreneurship. It is this narrative, we argue, that allows social entrepreneurs to protest reality, provoke audiences, and affect social change.

With the dark and bright duality of *holism*, *enlightenment*, and *devotion* in mind, we paid particular attention to the historical context in which the business plan narratives were constructed. The aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse was a time of crisis, and it was also a time of passion and mobilization led by a new political generation. This poignant period inspired the use of distinct rhetoric to break from convention and invoke alternative social organizations. The linguistic artefacts articulated in the business plans are historically situated in the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the time, revealing context's power in shaping entrepreneurial movements and the entrepreneurial agents' intention for shaping context (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson 2007).

Magical realism

The structure and expressive role of the linguistic artefacts resemble magical realism's use of narrative to critique injustices and provoke new realities through social transformation (Ahmad and Afsar 2014). The unconventional storytelling is presented matter-of-factly, while the comfort of convention is removed without explanation. As magical realism's defining trait, it intertwines the real and extra-real to suspend readers in a tension of belief and disbelief (Hegerfeldt 2005). It defamiliarizes readers in order to unravel their assumptions while its fantastical elements symbolize wicked

problems and the potential to change. As the Latin American political activist, Alejo Carpentier, states, '[magical realism] arises from an un-expected alteration of reality . . . the unexpected richness of reality or amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity . . . leads it to a kind of extreme state' (cited in Zamora and Faris 1995, 86). The stories confuse and delight readers till the tension of disbelief and belief shifts, allowing for a new reality to emerge.

We draw from magical realism's hybridized narration of the real and extra-real used to critique rationalized injustices and provoke social change, and we leverage it to theorize the role linguistic artefacts play in constructing un-realistic venture ideas as well as the role un-realistic ventures play in society. Ganzin, Islam, and Suddaby (2020) used magical realism to theorize entrepreneurs' incorporation of spirituality in sensemaking, providing insights into entrepreneurial cognition. Here, we argue social entrepreneurs' use of language resembles magical realism's role in social critique and transformation. Leveraging magical realism, we argue *holism*, *enlightenment*, and *devotion* are extra-realist artefacts used as resources to critique reality and affect social change. While the linguistic artefacts may differ according to historical context, using unconventional language to achieve nonmaterial objectives represents a perennial approach. They do this in three ways.

Holism's interconnectedness for all that exists resembles literary features in magical realism. In magical realism, not only are time and space nonlinear, but reality itself is also fluid, symbolizing the potential metamorphosis of social reality; what is socially constructed can be socially deconstructed. The fluidity of the real and extra-real represents one of magical realism's most salient themes – hybridity. *Holism's* quality of interconnectedness forecasts dystopia while simultaneously connecting readers to a utopian source of abundance and regeneration. Magical realism's embrace of the disturbing and divine builds a crescendo of tension and then shocks readers out of passivity and into a state of engaged alertness, which provides insights as to why social entrepreneurs might create tensions of disbelief and enthusiasm in their narratives.

Enlightenment's righteous ways of knowing and selective use of empirical evidence evoke magical realism's hybridity of the real and extra-real, which allows for other than material worlds to coexist with socially constructed realities. These suprasensible realities represent a source of knowledge used to enlighten the reader to new ways of perceiving reality. Magical realism also employs techniques of metafiction, bringing attention to itself and its intention to evoke catharsis and metanoia. As with magical realism's use of metafiction, the linguistic artefact of *enlightenment* brings too much attention to its unconventional nature, intentionally perplexing the reader just enough to be simultaneously disturbing and intriguing.

Devotion's ideological convictions in social causes connect to magical realism's social change intentions. Stories of change, through pen and plan, construct new social realities as cultural expressions protesting the status quo. The thrust of social change ventures and magical realism is born out of contexts of injustices and convictions in flourishing realities. These narratives are not stories romancing the individual but are instead rooted in the broader social collective. Consequently, both social entrepreneurship and magical realism represent powerful forms of 'indirect political resistance' (Bowers 2004, 39). While *holism* is all-encompassing and *enlightenment* has a cerebral element, *devotion* channels an extra-real source of guidance and applies it to transformation. It channels a zeitgeist of change in motion, directing action where a fantastic reality may occur.

As with magical realism, *holism*, *enlightenment*, and *devotion* allow social entrepreneurs to create narratives that critique society, disturb status quo realities, and provoke reactions in their declarations of change. They do this by (1) moving in dark and light spaces within a seamless sense of time and sentience; (2) drawing from supra sources of knowledge when proselytizing a social mission; and (3) connecting with an ideological cause, such as a social movement and its momentum of people and change. These narratives channel extra-realist knowledge, guidance, networks, and momentum, providing social entrepreneurs with unique resources to affect audiences' 'change of heart' and enlist support for their quest towards social change.

Discussion

In this study, we looked at social entrepreneurs' use of language in the portrayal of social change ventures. Our intention was not to understand how social entrepreneurs could use language more effectively in achieving financial outcomes but to understand the in-between spaces of dark and bright social entrepreneurship where social entrepreneurs use language to construct social change ventures and to understand the intentions underpinning those ventures. We drew on the social construction of language and the performative power of speech acts to interpret social entrepreneurs' use of words as tools to affect judges and manifest their intentions.

We discovered three linguistic artefacts, triggering both disbelief and enthusiasm: *holism*, *enlightenment*, and *devotion*. These linguistic artefacts produced tensions of disbelief and enthusiasm while also creating rhetorical resources. *Holism's* interconnectedness for all that exists, both dystopian and utopian realities, expresses a transformative process and self-assigns entrepreneurs' moral authority for that process. *Enlightenment's* suprasensible ways of knowing draw on both esoteric and empirical sources of knowledge, with entrepreneurs acting on behalf of what is divine and beyond reproach. *Devotion's* zealotry provides resources of total conviction, while also tapping into a network and momentum of mobilized others with the venture sheltered by a higher purpose calling. The tensions and resources created by the linguistic artefacts symbolize what is promising and ominous about social entrepreneurship, allowing them to protest reality, provoke audiences, and affect social change.

The linguistic artefacts used to construct un-realistic venture ideas resemble magical realism's distinct narrative style that intentionally leads readers on a defamiliarized journey, which is simultaneously disturbing and intriguing. As with authors of magical realism, social entrepreneurs draw on social context and convictions to venture into fluid temporal spaces, creating new realities and using narratives to create tension where confusion may transform into cathartic new understandings. We leverage magical realism to make sense of the linguistic artefacts used in constructing un-realistic social venture ideas. We offer a summary of the above in [Table 5](#).

Through the lens of venturing narratives, this study strives for a holistic conversation, inclusive of light and dark aspects, regarding the 'social' in social entrepreneurship (Steyaert and Katz 2004; Hjorth 2013; Kimmitt and Muñoz 2018)

Entrepreneurial narratives on venturing for social change

This study advances entrepreneurial narratives by revealing a linguistic approach to venturing for social change. We show language's performative power in creating dark and bright narratives of tension and potential used to construct un-realistic ventures. Anderson (2005, 590) wrote of entrepreneurial narratives as 'fact and fiction', representing a performative tension, in his work on the theatricality of the entrepreneurial process. However, language in entrepreneurship is generally understood to create clarity and continuity (Discua Cruz, Hamilton, and Jack 2021). Liuberté and Dimov (2021) suggest entrepreneurs use language in their business plans to make the unfamiliar familiar and seemingly un-realistic venture ideas realistic. Whereas we discover the opposite with social entrepreneurs, as they make the familiar unfamiliar when constructing seemingly un-realistic social change ventures. Instead of using language to create clarity and familiarity, social entrepreneurs used language to distort reality and create a confusing tension in order to open up cathartic spaces, provoke metanoia, and affect change.

The linguistic artefacts in our study allowed social entrepreneurs to express their devotion and leverage interconnectedness informed through suprasensible insights without being constrained to a heroic role. This finding supports Parkinson and Howorth's (2008) study showing social entrepreneurs reject the heroic discourse, embracing instead a pragmatic dedication to get the work done and affect change in a manner akin to 'messianism without the messiah' (Dey, Steyaert, and Teasdale 2012). Contrary to using a saviour's individualistic language, social action entrepreneurs call on the

Table 5. Overview of findings and theorizing.

Linguistic artefact	Definition	Disbelief	Enthusiasm	Role of magic
Holism	Social venture ideas offer a boundless interconnectedness for all that exists in the world.	The simplicity of a venture idea cannot deal with interconnectedness, nor solve all the bad in the world.	<i>Holism</i> connects the venture idea to a wider process of transformation and a sense of being a part of a global movement.	Combining the disturbing and divine shocks readers out of passivity and into a state of engaged alertness.
Enlightenment	Social venture ideas engage the divine in seeking transformation.	Mystical, prescient knowledge cannot solve practical needs.	<i>Enlightenment</i> connects the venture idea to alternative sources of reality.	Suprasensible realities enlighten the reader to new ways of perceiving reality.
Devotion	Social venture ideas espouse ideologies and commit the organization to enacting social change.	Devoutness for the unknown other over self-interest is not rational.	<i>Devotion</i> affirms the venture ideas convictions while connecting the venture to social movement resources.	A zeitgeist of mobilized others conscripts readers to consider and join the cause.

collective, using a greater purpose narrative and ‘common enemy framing’ during times of crisis (Stroe et al. 2022). One-dimensional characterizations of the hero are replaced by the dark and light, rule-conforming and breaking metanarratives of fact and fiction to achieve their goals (Dey, Steyaert, and Dahles 2010; Melin, Gaddefors, and Ferguson 2022). Thus, creating rhetorical tension and proselytizing social change through normatively rich, poetic, and provocative language where the social entrepreneur is both hero and agitator represents a rhetorical approach to make uncertain social change possibly more realized.

Social entrepreneurship as social protest

Our contribution to entrepreneurial narrative provides a frame for understanding social entrepreneurship as an expression of social protest. As cogent agents entering a high-level competition, social entrepreneurs used extra-realist language to reconstruct a market embedded in extended socio-economic crisis. While the construction of un-realistic venture ideas may be an attempt to manage and reduce complex social problems (Gras et al. 2020) into utopian and dystopian frames, we discovered that the linguistic artefacts play a role in the attempt to launch a morally ‘authenticated’ venture of social change in response to one’s socio-economic context (Anderson and Smith 2007).

Through alternative venture models and call-to-action language, social entrepreneurs help stimulate societal metanoia by allowing others to see socio-economic life differently while substantively affecting needed macro and micro change (Nicholls 2010; Melin, Gaddefors, and Ferguson 2022). Consequently, social entrepreneurship can be seen as a progeny of the progressive social movement spillover (Meyer, Whittier, and Robnett 2002; den Broek et al. 2012) that permeates all spheres of cultural life, including the economic, working to transform systems of injustices. As imperialism and other dark forms of capitalism seek conquest of the ‘other’ through the diffusion of values carried in cultural outlets (Said 2012), entrepreneurship drawing on real and extra-real imaginations of a transformed social and economic lifeworld begins to appear contextually appropriate.

Social entrepreneurship represents a cultural expression of social protest where socioeconomic reform supersedes instrumental rationality, which can be seen as a historically contingent, modern revolution (Melin, Gaddefors, and Ferguson 2022). While social movements represent ‘sustained collective engagement by multiple participants, typically involving counter-hegemonic or extra-institutional activities, aiming to effect change within society’, entrepreneurialism serves a ‘broader view of human agency’ regarding collective action (Novak 2021). Social change through the socio-economic sphere

historically required charismatic heroes and revolutions, yet social entrepreneurs work within a system, antagonizing and disrupting a dystopian status quo while forwarding provocative imaginations of utopia.

Combining social change ventures with social movement (Hockerts 2006) characteristics marry the traits inherent in the two approaches: creativity, imagination, and a fluid sense of space and time with passion, ideology, and social justice convictions, which are especially pronounced when striving to manifest a new social reality. By further advancing the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as an extension of social movements, we open new lines of inquiry while challenging established assumptions (Kimmitt and Muñoz 2018; Chalmers 2020). For instance, conceiving social entrepreneurship as a form of social movement would challenge the economic-based assumption of scale as a signal of success, and would instead shift the conversation to incorporate social movement theories of growth and stability through organizational splintering and diffusion of cells. In doing so, this paper provides insight into the possibilities of an interdisciplinary conversation of entrepreneurship and social movement theory, thus adding to the call for research on the intersection of those two fronts (Vedula et al. 2022).

Through our findings and theoretical development, we contribute to social entrepreneurship literature by advancing our understanding of un-realistic social venture ideas as a narrative for social change. By contextualizing how entrepreneurs construct worlds through words, which could be simultaneously utopian and dystopian, we add the vital and missing component of how and why un-realistic venture ideas are constructed as a social phenomenon. We detail the rhetorical tension between critiquing the world as is and promising the world as it should be, affecting audiences' disbelief and enthusiasm. We put forward an alternative explanation of how constructing social-change ventures can act as a cultural form of social protest, provoking and proselytizing action and norms when seeking nonmaterial resources and transformation. Further, we show the theoretical implications of bridging social entrepreneurship and social movement theory. Regarding the dark and bright side of social entrepreneurship, our contribution supports current understandings of social entrepreneurship's prosocial motivations, without detracting from the importance that critical insights may have for improving the field, as social venture opportunities and creations are not without threats.

Practical implications

This study also yields practical implications, particularly to processes of stakeholder engagement and education. Regarding stakeholder engagement, it might behoove social entrepreneurs to consider their immediate needs and greater goals and to employ strategic thinking (Ramoglou, Zyglidopoulos, and Papadopoulou 2021) regarding audiences' needs when constructing venture ideas and seeking engagement. Likewise, it may behoove incubators to prepare judges to anticipate unconventional rhetoric and to foster tolerance for extra-realist language where social entrepreneurs might include a mix of provocation, poetry, and evidence when advocating social change. Perhaps, provocation and poetry in social change language should not necessarily trigger disbelief and discredit a plan. Additionally, this study is relevant for educators and incubators as both co-creators and gatekeepers in constructing social entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon with a business model or an economic phenomenon with a social mission or both (Steyaert and Katz 2004). A nuanced approach might help sculpt both realistic and un-realistic social venture ideas as levers affecting social change.

Limitations and future research

We focussed on the tension of disbelief and enthusiasm discovered through the mirrored dyad of business plans and judges' feedback, and we used speech act theory to interpret the intentionality expressed in the business plans, thus limiting our analysis to archival text. While our analysis gained nuance throughout the study, our research design and early analysis assumed judges' frame of reality in identifying un-realistic venture ideas. Future research could problematize this assumption and explore the various roles of judges, including the role of judges as gatekeepers, potentially

maintaining society's status quo by suppressing socially-driven creative destruction. For instance, future research focussing on judges' influence goals could build on Radu Lefebvre and Redien-Collot's (2013) study on the use of criticism and provocation in shaping venture ideas.

We also need longitudinal studies to understand the long-term impact of overpromising social change in social entrepreneurship. Longitudinal studies could empirically verify if venture ideas expressed by social entrepreneurs in their business plans are realistic or un-realistic in constructing new realities and affecting social change. We hope this study stimulates future longitudinal research on social entrepreneurship's impact on change, both ominous and promising.

Celebrating Alistair Anderson

In closing this paper, we want to celebrate the life and work of Alistair Anderson, who served as an inspiration not only to us, the authors of this paper, but to an entire generation of entrepreneurship scholars. This paper is a testament to Alistair's legacy. Our discoveries and theorizing were inspired by his work on entrepreneurial narratives, social value creation, moral spaces, and social embeddedness. Alistair's work encouraged us to go beyond conventional theories and embrace contexts, collective imagination, and historically situated literary movements to explain what our data was beginning to reveal.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A. Competition process

Table A1. Social venture competition process.

Venture stage	Competition round	Submission type	Criteria	Benefits
Venture idea	Abstract	<500 words	Open to the public	Opportunity to advance to next level
Venture idea	Short plan	5-pages	Invitation only	Opportunity to advance to next level Feedback
Venture phase	Full plan	~25 pages	Invitation only	Opportunity to advance to next level Detailed developmental feedback Ecosystem networking Exposure to investors Mentorship
Venture phase	Presentation	Live pitch	Invitation only	Ecosystem networking Exposure to investors Cash and in-kind prizes

Table A2. Scorecard.

Score	Numeric value	Definition
No score provided	0	This is for if the judge does not feel qualified to respond in this area. It will not affect your score.
Poor	1	If this area is not addressed, they are concerned that the business will probably not succeed.
Adequate	2	While this area is a weakness, it probably won't disrupt the entire business.
Fair	3	This area will neither hurt the business nor will it provide a competitive advantage.
Good	4	This is the level they would want to see in a business before going to work there themselves.
Outstanding	5	You got this area spot-on or have a new and interesting approach to this challenge.

Table A3. Focus of assessment.

Section of business plan (venture)	Focus of assessment (judges)
Market	Are they clear about who their paying customers are/will be, how they will reach them, and how they will engage with them before, during, and after the sale?
Product/service	How well do you understand the products or service they are offering?
Financials and Investment Information	Do their financials seem realistic and appropriate?
Team	Do they have the staff, board, partners, and champions they will need?
Social, Environmental, and/or Community Impact of this Business	If this company is successful, what benefits will they provide to their customers, partners, employees, community, and/or the environment? Are these benefits achievable? Are they measurable?
Viability	Do you think this is a viable business in its current form?