

# **Digital Technologies, Social Entrepreneurship, and Resilience during Crisis in Developing Countries: Evidence from Nigeria.**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Social entrepreneurship (SE) is a complex phenomenon designed to resolve numerous societal challenges while remaining economically viable. However, how social entrepreneurs in developing countries have deployed digital technologies to address communal challenges during the Covid-19 crisis is largely undocumented. This research examines social entrepreneurs' adoption of digital technologies, the multi-level organisational conditions, and associated innovative outcomes of engaging digital technologies.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Based on the organisational resilience theoretical framework, this research employs a qualitative methodology, comprising 38 semi-structured interviews with Nigerian SE firms, to investigate social entrepreneurs' engagement with digital technologies.

**Findings:** Our findings reveal 19 pathways through which digital technologies enabled organisational resilience outcomes by Nigerian SE firms during the Covid-19 pandemic. This allows us to show, via a 3x3 matrix, how social entrepreneurs deploy digital technologies to build proximate, dynamic, and continuous resilience in a weak institutional context.

**Originality:** Our findings enable us to advance the SE - digital technologies - resilience scholarship in a developing economy.

**Keywords:** Social entrepreneurship, digital technologies, resilience, developing economies.

## **1.0 Introduction**

Social entrepreneurship (SE) encompasses a range of activities relating to societal trends, organisational forms and structures, and individual initiatives (Corner & Ho, 2010). It is an arrangement where entities (e.g., individuals and entrepreneurs) aim to address societal issues to sustain economic and social development (Donaldson, 2003; Nicholls, 2010). Unlike traditional business entrepreneurship that focuses on meeting market demand for goods and services, SE seeks to solve social problems and serve communities (Mair & Martì, 2006). However, the concept has attracted criticisms, including a lack of operational efficiency, performance-monitoring problems, high coordination costs, utopian orientation, and a bias

towards pro-social entrepreneurial activities (Boone & Özcan, 2016; Kenny et al., 2020). Moreover, inconsistencies in SE operationalisation across varieties of capitalism have been reported. While social entrepreneurs in developed economies exhibit a distinct social orientation that emphasises collective organising for community benefit (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013), their counterparts in developing countries encounter challenges, such as institutional weaknesses (Kaufmann et al., 2008) and limited support, which impedes their capacity to acquire resources and adapt (Muñoz, Kimmittl & Dimov, 2020). Furthermore, weak institutional contexts are characterised by poor regulatory quality, high corruption levels and low government effectiveness (Kaufmann et al., 2008). These institutional challenges in developing economies necessitate the adoption of nuanced approaches to SE. To navigate these issues, a body of literature (e.g., Cavallo et al., 2019; Chandna, 2022; Osabohien, Worgwu & Al-Faryan, 2022; Ramos-Villagrasa, Passos & García-Izquierdo, 2019) suggests that digital technologies can help SE firms to remodel their businesses, strategies, and build resilience, particularly in challenging circumstances such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The utility of resilience in analysing survival and continuity in the face of significant threats makes it a valuable construct for scholarship (Williams et al., 2017). Crisis and resilience are closely related. As such, in the wake of Covid-19, the capacity of SE firms to survive is linked to their operational resilience (Mishra, 2023). During crises, the knowledge and goals shared by actors in realising desired outcomes in local communities present a strong foundation for building resilience (Williams et al., 2017; Salvato et al., 2020; Bell, 2019). Therefore, when faced with adverse situations (e.g., Covid-19), SE organisations are more likely to adapt their operations (e.g., processes) to address social challenges (Muñoz et al., 2019). Adaptations include how organisations rely on their internal capabilities and how external support is deployed to address emergent gaps in internal capabilities (Mithani, 2020). Adaptations in SE manifest through their diverse leadership skills, experience, understanding of social problems, and management of organisational tensions (Muñoz et al., 2020). Digital technologies facilitate such adaptations (Schiuma et al., 2022), helping to overcome turbulent and uncertain times (Troise et al., 2022; Zhang, Long & von Schaewen, 2021). In this respect, digital technologies profoundly impact SE firms' adaptiveness, enabling more sustainable resilience (Saqib and Zhang, 2021; Iyortsuun, 2016).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, digital technologies helped SE firms to manage disruptions, resolve societal problems, and build resilience (Odonkor, 2022; Zhang, Long & von Schaewen, 2021). Digital technologies consist of multi-layered solutions that offer centralised technology

support for firms' decision-making and processes (Beliaeva et al., 2020; Secundo, Rippa, & Meoli, 2020). However, research examining how digital technologies facilitate resilience through adaptation among SE firms, especially in developing economies, is scarce. On this premise, we adopt Mithani's (2020) organisational resilience theoretical framework, which notes that resilient outcomes are underscored by avoidance, absorption, elasticity, learning, and rejuvenation adaptations, to address the question:

*How did SE firms in a weak institutional environment deploy digital technologies to build resilient outcomes during the Covid-19 crisis?*

We employ a qualitative methodology comprising 38 semi-structured interviews with SE firms to analyse multi-level firm conditions and associated outcomes (Tsoukas, 2017). The empirical setting for this study is Nigeria, the largest economy in Africa (based on Gross Domestic Product). Like many countries, the country faced significant challenges during Covid-19 that required resilient solutions (Ashiru et al., 2022). For the SE sector, the lockdown restrictions prompted by the pandemic posed a heightened threat to the sector's ability to respond to stakeholders, notably in deprived and remote communities. Thus, we argue that Nigeria offers a robust context for understanding resilience and the role of digital technologies among SE firms in response to the adversity triggered by the pandemic.

The study makes important contributions. First, this research establishes the resilience and digital technologies nexus in the SE scholarship. Specifically, we identify 19 pathways that inform how digital technologies facilitate internal and external firm resilient outcomes in Nigeria's SE sector during the Covid-19 crisis. Second, we contribute to the current understanding of resilience building in a developing economy, focusing on digital technology (e.g., Schiuma et al., 2022; Muñoz et al., 2020; Sengupta et al., 2021; Troise et al., 2022). We theorise that SE firms utilise digital technologies to build proximate, dynamic, and continuous resilience to overcome crises in weak institutional contexts. We develop a 3x3 matrix, showing how digital technologies support resilience building. Lastly, we show that digital technology encourages the sustainability of SE by developing inclusive learning and bridging the inequality gaps in developing contexts.

The rest of this study is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical and literature underpinning the research. We then present the study methodology in Section 3, while findings and discussions are detailed in Sections 4 and 5. Section 6 reflects on the research contributions and policy recommendations, while Section 7 concludes the paper.

## **2.0 Theory and Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Social Entrepreneurship (SE)***

The lack of unanimity in descriptions of SE (Choi & Majumdar, 2014) informs why scholars continue to describe the phenomenon in a variety of ways, some of which are similar and others less so. Weerawardena and Mort (2006) explain that SE involves being proactive and the ability to manage risk within the limits of the environment, sustainability, and a social mission. Alvord et al. (2004) note that SE delivers ground-breaking interventions to resolve social problems to engender sustainable long-term (positive) social transformations. Peredo and McLean (2006) depict SE as the inventive creation of social value, incorporating a willingness to spread social value regardless of associated risks and perceived lack of resources. Other descriptions (Doherty et al., 2014; Santos, 2012; Iyortsuun, 2016) suggest that financial sustainability and a social purpose are fundamental motivations of SE.

An alternative recurring theme in SE research is sustainable development (Lubberink, 2019; Mendez-Picazo, Galindo-Martin and Castano-Martinez, 2021; Al-Qudah, Al-Okaily & Alqudah, 2022). While Al-Qudah et al. (2022) claim that SE plays a role in sustainable development, Mendez-Picazo et al. (2021) affirm that SE exhibits a direct relationship with sustainable development. They seek to propose sustainable solutions to the problems they address, as against seeking a sustainable advantage for their firms (Santos, 2012). Therefore, as social entrepreneurs endeavour to support society (Peredo & McLean, 2006), they focus on local issues with global relevance while proposing sustainable resolutions (Santos, 2012). In achieving these objectives, they encounter multiple organisational and operational challenges (Doherty et al., 2014; Méndez-Picazo et al., 2021). Hence, the prospect of being unsustainable and irresilient can be challenging, as survivability is a concern for SE, particularly in the initial stages of growth (Smith, 2021). This challenge becomes even more pronounced during crises, as witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this study, we opine that SE accommodates profit-making or commercial exchange activities, but the primary goal is to serve the community and society (Mair & Martí, 2006; Peredo & McLean, 2006), and to address societal issues in the service of pursuing and sustainable economic and social development (Donaldson, 2003; Nicholls, 2010). From this perspective, social entrepreneurs are more sensitive to social changes than governments (Torres & Augusto, 2020). To sum up, a robust SE narrative should logically draw on entrepreneurial

processes that require opportunity exploitation and resource (re)combination processes (Newth & Woods, 2014) to create and distribute social value (Lubberink, 2019).

## ***2.2 Social Entrepreneurship and the Covid-19 Crisis***

The Covid-19 crisis unfolded in December 2019, leaving considerable human loss, economic collapses, border closures, and several other consequences (Ashiru et al., 2022). The pandemic exacerbated existing social problems and created new ones (Weaver, 2020), impacted businesses and disrupted industries (Khlystova et al., 2022) and prompted food and housing shortages. While these challenges encouraged a swift response by governments (Bieber, 2022), the role of SE firms in rebuilding society cannot be understated (Bacq & Lumpkin, 2020). Understanding how SE firms perform their functions is vital, considering the impact of Covid-19 on SE (Ruiz-Rosa et al., 2020). Indeed, the pandemic meant that SE firms encountered various challenges, including maintenance of communication networks within the value chain, adjustment to new technologies, accepting new modes of working and dealing with lockdowns, restricted movement, and withdrawal of services (Oberoi et al., 2021; Green, Tappin & Bentley, 2020).

Despite these challenges, SE firms were well-placed to tackle the problems triggered by the pandemic (Weaver, 2020), given their capacity to access key stakeholders (governments, markets and institutions) and offer platforms that coalesce the motives of stakeholders (Bacq & Lumpkin, 2020; Simonovic & Arunkumar, 2016). SE entails a more complex relationship among several actors whose core responsibility is to drive positive social change but post Covid-19, a higher complexity for SE is anticipated. In this regard, it is noteworthy that SE firms have recorded encouraging results from the Covid-19 crisis. Ratten (2020) highlights how they deployed resources to benefit the vulnerable in society and how they modernised their service delivery. These efforts birthed new forms of SE, such as digital social entrepreneurship (DSE) (Ghatak, Chatterjee & Bhowmick, 2020; Ibáñez et al., 2022), which helped generate responses to social issues through technological interventions (Ibáñez et al., 2022; Simonovic & Arunkumar, 2016). Nonetheless, the institutional support that SE firms receive and technology usage differ across countries (Cunningham et al., 2022).

### ***2.3 Social Entrepreneurship and Institutional Environment***

The influence of SE on communities' social and political economy cannot be ignored (Oberoi et al., 2021; Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021). SE offers a channel that allows social entrepreneurs to create social value through entrepreneurial activities in particular contexts (Peredo & McLean, 2006). As such, previous research suggests that institutional environments can explain SE emergence and the variations in their practice and outcomes (De Beule, Klein, & Verwaal, 2020; Torres & Augusto, 2020). Surprisingly, while SE has gained traction among developed economies, it is yet to be sufficiently investigated in developing economies. This explains why Bansal et al. (2019) express the need to redirect SE research towards developing contexts to solve social problems, including security, inequality, and poverty.

Per institutional proponents, weak institutions where governments cannot respond to the needs of the people provide conditions under which SE thrives (Stephan, Uhlaner, & Stride, 2015), as such institutional voids produce opportunities for social entrepreneurs to intervene (Urban & Kujinga, 2017) and implement a profitable strategy (De Beule et al., 2020). However, the institutional supportive perspective argues that SE thrives on more robust institutional support (Hoogendoorn, 2016), where governments allocate resources to social enterprises and partner with them to deliver goods and services to the community (Korosec & Berman, 2006). In essence, institutional contexts are crucial to the effectiveness of social entrepreneurs.

However, evidence of interactions between institutional environments and SE is mixed, reinforcing the conflicting views of advocates of institutional frameworks regarding SE. For instance, in a study to understand the link between SE and the institutional environment in Portugal, Bernardino, Santos and Ribeiro (2016) conclude that a favourable institutional environment has minimal importance in the emergence of SE, implying that SE can flourish even in weak institutional contexts. But an alternative stream of research investigating the link between institutional environments and SE in developing economies suggest that institutional environments have a positive and significant impact on SE (Urban & Kujinga, 2017; Littlewood & Holt, 2018). Bhatt, Qureshi and Riaz (2019) further observe that institutional challenges in China explain the country's low SE presence and activities. Given these contradictions, it is unsurprising that calls persist for SE scholars to pay more attention to institutional and environmental attributes (see Mair & Marti, 2006; Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Bansal et al., 2019) to deepen our understanding of the relationship.

#### ***2.4 Social Entrepreneurship in Nigeria during the Covid-19 Crisis***

The pandemic was more pronounced in developed countries, but some developing countries (e.g., Brazil) also experienced high mortalities (Ratten, 2020). Nigeria did not record similar mortality levels compared to other countries (Ohia et al., 2020), but it encountered substantial socio-economic effects. Many businesses, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), reported sharp reductions in revenue, forcing many to cease their operations. Many firms also failed to meet their maturing obligations, including loan repayments, business premises rentals, and staff wages and salaries (Aladejebi, 2020). These problems explain the rising unemployment, worsening insecurity, food shortages and poverty in the country (Enesi & Ibrahim, 2021). Considering the social challenges in Nigeria, which worsened during the pandemic, the role of SE post-pandemic is critical, especially when the government's response has been deemed unsatisfactory. This raises the stake for social entrepreneurs, particularly in a context that lacks incentives to support their corporate objectives.

In Nigeria, SE is still in its infancy. There is no formal definition of SE by the country's regulators, despite sustained calls for its recognition as a unique business model that solves societal challenges but with profitable and sustainable underlining (British Council, 2022). Indeed, it is unsurprising that SE firms have fared poorly in Nigeria. Of the 515 firms that fulfil the SE criteria, 26% recorded losses in the year before the pandemic, increasing to 33% during the pandemic, evidencing the pandemic's adverse impact on the country's social enterprises ((British Council, 2022). As Covid-19 effects linger, the likelihood of government or institutional support for social entrepreneurs is remote, compelling social entrepreneurs to activate adaptive strategies and interventions to build their resilience as they strive to remain in business and actualise their corporate goals.

#### ***2.5 Social Entrepreneurship and Digitalisation during the Covid-19 Crisis***

SE firms identify social, cultural, or environmental challenges and propose appropriate solutions to such problems (Corner & Ho, 2010). To attain this objective in the contemporary business world, the impact of digitalisation is invaluable. Indeed, in recent times, digital technologies, platforms and infrastructures have directly impacted how we live and work, with most organisations adopting digital technologies in their operations (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021). Digitalisation refers to deploying digital technologies to undertake tasks and enabling

changes to an existing business model to produce alternative revenue and value-producing opportunities (Torres & Augusto, 2020; Hanafizadeh, Shafia and Bohlin, 2021). It has spurred new activities, including the creation of digital products, services, and platforms, which provide easy access to new markets (Nambisan, 2017; Hanafizadeh, Shafia and Bohlin, 2021) and public services for well-being (Galindo-Martin et al., 2019) as well as enhance users' satisfaction (Dong, 2019). Digitalisation profoundly influences business operations to ignite firm performance (Fitzgerald et al., 2014), adapt business processes (Denner, Püschel & Röglinger, 2018), minimise product variation costs (Pesch, Endres & Bouncken, 2021), and meet changing consumer behaviour and needs (Li et al., 2018). Torres and Augusto (2020) add that digitalisation, combined with an educational system, governance, and a philanthropic financial system, is central to promoting national well-being.

Entrepreneurship (particularly SE) is essential to minimise the harmful effects of crises (Doern, Williams, & Vorley, 2019). Existing research documents that SE minimise the effects of crises by supplying resources needed in the aftermath of crises (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2008; Linnenluecke & McKnight, 2017; Morrish & Jones, 2020), filling institutional gaps where disaster recovery systems fail (Williams & Shepherd, 2016), reconfiguring social and economic infrastructure (Dutta, 2017), and building positive emotions for community well-being in post-disaster recovery (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2008). Still, these studies primarily focus on entrepreneurship's role in building resilience for post-disaster recovery. Little insight has been offered to understand how SE firms (typically small enterprises) cope with disruptions. The literature suggests that, unlike large enterprises, smaller enterprises demonstrate greater creativity, adaptability, and flexibility when responding to crises (Kuckertz et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2017). The capacity of smaller entrepreneurs to respond to crises depends on their relational capabilities (Kuckertz et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2017; You & Williams, 2023). This underlines the need for SE firms to deploy a combination of resources to react to emerging problems and opportunities while broadening the social improvisation concept (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Morrish & Jones, 2020). Consequently, social entrepreneurs have relied on digital resources.

Chandna (2022) emphasises how SE firms utilise digital platforms to overcome legitimacy issues and funding limitations and how it expedites the adoption of novel ways of doing things. This is critical for SE, because crises drain resources and impact resilience. Prodanov (2018) agrees with Chandna (2022) and Brown et al. (2022) that digital technologies create fresh opportunities for SE that benefit all, especially those in need. However, Prodanov (2018)



expose a contrasting view, suggesting that digital technologies are a principal reason for widening inequalities and wage gaps. To understand the adverse impact of digital technologies per Prodanov (2018), Nagy and Samosi (2022) demonstrate that differing levels of digital transformation across countries influence the capacity for SE. Therefore, a country's progress in the digital space strengthens its social intervention capability. In recognising how interactions between SE and digital technologies could benefit stakeholders, Pappas et al. (2017) highlight the need to institutionalise adaptation through digitalisation and SE to achieve social good and sustainable changes. Nonetheless, less is known regarding to what extent entrepreneurs and decision-makers utilise digital technology (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2023). Thus, the link between (digital technology) innovation and SE resilience deserves greater attention (Sukumar et al., 2022).

## ***2.6 Theoretical Framework: Organisational Resilience and Social Entrepreneurship***

Organisational resilience explains an organisation's capacity to withstand changes over time (Gover & Duxbury, 2018). It draws on the effective management of complex, unpredictable risks that continually afflict organisations (Miceli et al., 2021). An organisation is resilient if it survives a crisis or where fundamental changes are required (Holling, 1996; Bell, 2019). Resilience demands that organisations implement adjustments during challenging conditions that allow them to adapt and, in some cases, emerge from those situations better (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). The adaptations firms need to implement depend on efficient combinations of tangible (e.g., non-current assets) and intangible (e.g., intellectual property and creativity) resources. Although scholars (e.g., Barney, 1991; Carney et al., 2019) have investigated the roles of these factors on firm competitiveness, the knowledge of how these organisational resources lead to organisational resilience remains narrow (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Hence, the call for a theory of organisational resilience persists (Gover & Duxbury, 2018).

The resilience theorisation is examined from various lenses. Walker et al. (2004) and Young & Kim (2015) articulate four internal resilience dimensions, namely latitude (the degree of allowable changes before reaching a threshold and cannot recover), resistance (the ease or difficulty of altering an existing system), precariousness (the closeness of the current state of the system to the limit), and panarchy (the vulnerability of changes in the larger systems in which the system of interest is embedded). While, Giustiniano et al. (2018) demonstrate how, across four incremental phases, organisations can develop their resilience competence before,

during and after a significant economic disruption. The four stages are foresight (anticipate challenges), insight (interpret the situation and respond appropriately), oversight (review interventions), and hindsight (learn from the experience). Consistent with various descriptions of organisational resilience (see Gover & Duxbury, 2018; Miceli et al., 2021; Mithani, 2020), both perspectives recognise that an event does not define resilience building. Instead, organisations must establish (pre- and post-disruption) frameworks that help anticipate and cope with potential adverse occurrences. Other studies (e.g., Apostolopoulos, Newbery & Gkartzios, 2019; You & Williams, 2023) advocate external strategies for building resilience.

Barring a few studies (e.g., Mithani, 2020; Ashiru et al., 2022) which focus on organisational resilience through adaptations to social disruptions, most theories of organisational resilience are dominated by concerns about how organisations adapt to economic and technological threats (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010; Mithani, 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that there is little research on resilience in the SE literature. This omission is critical because the implications of the crisis in any socio-economic environment are qualitatively different from those of economic and technological threats (Park, Seager, & Rao, 2011). The preceding informs our study's reliance on Mithani's (2020) organisational resilience theoretical framework. The framework highlights the major differences between life-threatening events and traditional environmental challenges; the suitability of resilience for discussing life-threatening events; the various modes and approaches associated with resilience; and synthesising mechanisms that contribute to organisational resilience.

Besides, Mithani's (2020) resilience framework describes five distinct modes of resilience (avoidance, absorption, elasticity, learning, and rejuvenation) portrayed through static and dynamic resilience. Static resilience is more suited for one-off threats, while dynamic resilience is suited for recurring threats. Static resilience is conceptualised as a "return to the previous equilibrium" (Meerow & Newell, 2015, p. 237). On the one hand, static resilience re-establishes the status quo (Giustiniano & Cantoni, 2018). Earlier research on organisations adopted this lens of static resilience (Linnenluecke, 2017; Williams et al., 2017; Mithani, 2020). Dynamic resilience, on the other hand, "postulates that bouncing back to a previous equilibrium may be impossible in complex ecosystems because they can shift between multiple stable states" (Meerow & Newell, 2015, p. 237). For example, an empirical study by You and Williams (2023) shows a complex interaction of relational attributes that contribute to different types of organisational resilience depends on the nature of disruption. The effect of a crisis leads to long-lasting changes (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). Thus, organisational resilience

manifests as bouncing back under static resilience or bouncing forward under dynamic resilience (see Aldrich, 2012; Mithani, 2020, You & Williams, 2023).

Following this, we argue that Mithani's resilience framework (2020) offers a theoretically grounded understanding of various types of adaptations associated with resilient outcomes, which can be applied in the context of SE operating in weak institutional environments. Consequently, we rely on the resilience framework to theorise SE's adaptations during the Covid-19 pandemic. Businesses (e.g., social enterprises) face significant operational and survival threats during crises. These situations bring SE firms' resilience into increased focus, given reservations about their capacity to successfully navigate crises. Resilience capabilities provide a strategic resource with which social entrepreneurs cope with crises such as Covid-19. Resilience intersects an organisation's internal capabilities and environment as a continuous process of protection, assessment, and improvement (Mithani, 2020), especially in weak institutional contexts (Ashiru et al., 2022). Digital technologies are resources that can enhance organisations' internal capabilities and assist in the intersection with the external environment, but the literature exploring how digital technologies have assisted organisations in dealing with crises and, more crucially, helped them to deepen their resilience competencies is scant. Therefore, we ask: *How do SE firms in a weak institutional environment deploy digital technologies to build resilient outcomes during the Covid-19 crisis?*

### **3.0 Research Methodology**

This paper responds to the need for more empirical research into how social entrepreneurs engage with digital technologies to generate resilient outcomes during a crisis. Consistent with prior digital technologies and the SE scholarship (e.g., Sengupta et al., 2021), a qualitative interpretivist methodology offers a valuable method for exploring social entrepreneurs' use of digital technologies (see Littlewood & Holt, 2018; Bhatt et al., 2019). This approach allows us to understand Nigerian social entrepreneurs' experiences, resilience, and use of digital technologies during the Covid-19 crisis.

#### **3.1 Case Context**

SE in Nigeria presents a practical research context for investigating SE organisational activities and resilience during a pandemic. While the British Council (2022) reports that there are 515 SE firms in Nigeria, Osabohien et al. (2022) inform that SE accounts for a meagre 3.15% of

entrepreneurship in the country. Considering Nigeria's status as a developing economy, these firms played key roles during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ashiru et al. (2022) revealed how Nigerian organisations deployed emerging digital technologies to carry on their entrepreneurial engagements with customers (B2C) and businesses (B2B) during the crisis. Osabohien et al. (2022) also demonstrate that SE is a significant and positive driver of future employment in Nigeria. Given Nigeria's low literacy levels and informal business traditions, for consistency, this research focuses on organisations captured in the formal sector that comply with the country's Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) business registration laws.

### ***3.2 Data Collection***

Data collection was undertaken over two phases. In the first phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews to uncover the extent to which social interventions occur in Nigeria and the outcomes of such interventions. This phase aims to assess the extent of social entrepreneurial participation during the Covid-19 crisis. Between February and April 2021, we interviewed individuals from organisations that address social issues to sustain economic and social development (Donaldson, 2003). Individuals interviewed in this phase were drawn from SE-driven organisations registered with the CAC.

Interviewees with the requisite profile were contacted via emails, WhatsApp messages, and telephone calls with an outline of the research agenda. During this phase, twenty-five (25) interviews were conducted via Zoom<sup>1</sup> until saturation<sup>2</sup> was achieved, but we conducted four (4) additional (Zoom) interviews to confirm data consistency. All interviews were recorded, with a duration of 60-70 minutes. In total, twenty-nine (29) individuals from twenty-two (22) organisations (18 from the service sector and 4 from the manufacturing sector) were interviewed. The selected organisations have been operating for two (2) to forty-four (44) years. (See Table 1 for participants' details).

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of data collection, most restrictions had been lifted, but social distancing and other health concerns meant that face-to-face interviews were not advisable.

<sup>2</sup> The qualitative research literature suggests that 'how many' is not what matters (Mason, 2010). A researcher should satisfy himself/herself that he/she has learned and understands the phenomenon enough to permit knowledge generation. We relied on this proposition to determine the number of interviews in this study.

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The second phase of interviews allowed us to use findings from the first set of interviews to provide a thorough understanding of the research focus. We were interested in the strategies adopted by organisations engaged only in SE to build resilience; the outcomes of implementing these strategies; and, more importantly, how threats of crisis, resilience strategies and outcomes are interrelated. As such, we interviewed nine (9) SE firms (see Table 2). All interviews in this phase were also conducted via Zoom and recorded. The interviews ranged from 45-60 minutes. In total, 38 interviews were conducted. Our methodology is consistent with previous interpretivist studies on resilience and crises (e.g., Ashiru et al., 2022 which conducted 42 interviews and Williams & Shepherd, 2016 which relied on 6 case studies).

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**Insert Table 2 here**

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We adopted a fair and balanced approach to conduct the interviews to ensure diversity and an unbiased representation of participants' comments considering their diverse sectoral backgrounds and roles. This enhanced the collection of rich data that benefits from participants' distinct perceptions, opinions, and beliefs about the issues under investigation. Before the interviews, participants were promised confidentiality to encourage unbiased responses, which explains why we anonymised participants' identities in this research. This facilitated the generation of answers reflecting participants' corporate and personal experiences (Sewell, 2008).

The interviews were undertaken using an interview guide (Appendix 1). The interview guide was sent to participants to help them prepare for the interview. While Fox (2006) discusses the problem of this approach, Sengupta et al. (2021) explain that interviews seek to find the most suitable candidate for the research. Therefore, sharing questions with interviewees before the interview allows them to determine if they consent to participate and assists them in curating robust answers to questions. Fox (2006) also suggests that providing questions in advance allows interviewees to prepare thoroughly for the questions. This approach encouraged respondents to discuss issues broadly, leading to in-depth responses (and data) beyond the 'confines' of the questions asked.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The recorded interviews were transcribed using the Otter.ai transcription software. The software is a speech-to-text transcription and translation application that uses artificial intelligence and machine learning. Otter.ai offers simultaneous transcription while interviewing through Zoom (Ashiru et al., 2022). Subsequently, the transcribed information was manually reviewed and corrected to aid ‘data immersion’ – a process involving rereading the transcribed text to understand the data better (Bradley et al., 2007). The transcribed interview data generated 532 pages of text, which were analysed using the NVivo program, which permits the subjective interpretation of text data through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes and patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Following data transcription and input into NVivo software, we embarked on two levels of data analysis. The first stage focused on a reductionistic analysis to develop a category structure for the data, relying on an open coding procedure to generate sub-categories in order to make sense of the data. This stage assisted in classifying transcribed materials into smaller content categories (Weber, 1990) to generate themes that summarise participants’ comments. The second data analysis encompassed the axial coding strategy where the sub-categories were grouped under higher-order headings (Burnard, 1991) (generic categories) to identify differences and similarities among the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Relying on a merging and eliminating procedure that Miles et al. (2014) recommended, we condensed the sub-categories to gain acceptable consistency and thematic categorisation levels. This procedure produced three high-level categories, i.e., SE initiatives, resilience strategies and strategy outcomes (see Figure 1). To improve data trustworthiness, researchers independently reviewed the data coding and the assignment of codes to categories (Campbell et al., 2013). Researchers discussed codes, meanings, and categorisation until we achieved acceptable consistency in thematic categorisation. Wherever there was a disagreement, categories were modified to maximise inter-coder reliability (Gioia et al., 2013).

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**Insert Figure 1 here**  
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## 4.0 Findings

To unpack how digital technologies enabled resilience among social entrepreneurs in a developing context during the Covid-19 crisis, we present our findings along the themes of the impact of digital technologies on SE Leadership, SE Organizing Capabilities, and SE Processes. Each theme is further categorised under three resilience outcomes, i.e., proximate, dynamic, and continuous. Proximate resilience outcomes are the immediate reliance triggered by digital technologies for SE performance, while dynamic resilience outcomes epitomise forward-looking, progressive changes prompted by digital technologies in the SE space. Continuous resilience typifies the endless possibilities digital technologies activate in the SE field. Overall, we reveal 19 pathways describing how digital technologies enable resilient outcomes through various SE mechanisms (see Table 3).

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### *4.1 Impact of Digital Technologies on SE Leadership*

Interviewees confirmed that digital technologies influenced their leadership styles during the Covid-19 pandemic. Digitally informed leadership styles sustained impactful communal interventions during the pandemic. Digital technologies aided resilient (proximate, dynamic, and continuous) outcomes.

#### *Proximate Resilient Outcomes for SE Leadership*

During the crisis, digital technologies allowed SE leadership to have an immediate resilient impact through (a) Improved Communication, (b) Deeper Empathy and (c), Reduced Anxiety.

**Improved Communication.** Interviewees opined that acquiring digital communication technologies were necessary during the crisis. Consequently, interviewees note that communication with relevant stakeholders improved. According to R3 and R31:

*“Surprisingly, communication was less affected and, in fact, improved due to the use of group chats on WhatsApp. We probably had more immediate meetings” (R3).*

*“We had to report and communicate more among ourselves. We also had to communicate with our stakeholders, especially our community. This would have been impossible without digital technologies” (R31).*

**Deeper Empathy.** There was an increasing need for leaders to empathise with stakeholders during the crisis. Digital technologies facilitated this emotional connection between leaders, staff, and the community. According to R24:

*“At the start of the pandemic, many people and homes were affected, but the government did not intervene early enough. Digital technologies assisted in identifying and reaching out to support homes or businesses that needed our intervention. Digital technologies meant we could show empathy to people, including staff. It meant a lot to the people.”*

**Reduced Anxiety.** Most interviewees report increased anxiety in society. The information provided by digital technologies

*“helped reduce the tension and allowed leaders to give assurances to their staff and community” (R10).*

### **Dynamic Resilient Outcomes for SE Leadership**

Digital technologies permitted the leadership of SE to have a dynamic resilient impact through (a) Authentic Influence and (b) Increased Trust.

**Authentic Influence.** Beyond the immediate crisis period, our interviewees assert that digital technologies facilitated dynamism in their leadership, allowing internal and external stakeholders to identify with SE objectives and values. This authenticated their leadership. R30 puts it thus:

*“Digital technologies made us authentic and more resilient. It made them (SE stakeholders) continue to buy into what we were doing. It gave them a sense of what we want, how they can be part of it and made them identify with our values”.*

**Increased Trust.** The use of digital technologies allowed external stakeholders to trust SE interventions. According to R32 and R34:

*“This is one of the areas where digital technologies have immensely helped. How we plug into our external parties’ plug-in tools; you have to think about every step of the way” (R32).*

*“... as a systemic way of sustaining our operations, we used (digital) technology. We find that the private sector will trust us more to deliver on our promises” (R34).*



### ***Continuous Resilient Outcomes for SE Leadership***

Many interviewees assert that digital technologies aided the recognition of endless possibilities. The data shows this occurs through (a) New Products Development Incubation and (b) Varying Idea Adaptations.

***New Product Development Incubation.*** Social entrepreneurs have become leaders in product development due to digital technologies. R31 puts it thus:

*“Through digital technologies, we developed a new product which is solving problems in education. This is remarkable because, after one year of deploying the new technology, the state recorded the highest pass rate in the national exam”.*

***Varying Idea Adaptations:*** The use of digital technologies meant that social entrepreneurs could adapt their intervention solutions. Per R29:

*“I think (social) entrepreneurs have learnt to thrive in communities through adaptations made possible by digital technologies. It assisted in coping with the minor and major crises we encountered during Covid-19”.*

### ***4.2 Impact of Digital Technologies on SE Organizing Capabilities***

Data analysis revealed that digital technologies influenced SE organising capabilities during the Covid-19 crisis. Organising capabilities refer to social entrepreneurs’ ability to organise their activities to achieve their corporate purpose, drawing on their culture for adaptation. Relying on the data, we present the resilient (proximate, dynamic, and continuous) outcomes that digital technologies prompted in SE organising capabilities.

#### ***Proximate Resilient Outcomes for SE Organizing Capabilities***

During Covid-19, digital technologies allowed social entrepreneurs to build on their organising capabilities by enhancing (a) Relationship Building and (b) Organisational Flexibility.

***Relationship Building.*** Interviewees affirm that digital communication technologies became necessary during the crisis as it was vital to reinforce relationships with stakeholders. This compelled them to seek and implement digital technologies to retain communication with clients during the period. According to R33 and R36:

*“Our company essentially aimed to strengthen relationships with local communities. The use of digital technology helped us to cope reasonably even when face-to-face contact was impossible” (R33).*

*“(Digital) technology helped us reach a wider range of people and build robust relationships with many media houses during the crisis” (R36).*

**Organisational Flexibility.** Our interviewees believe their activities became more flexible during the pandemic, as they note that flexibility boosted their resilience to the pandemic effects. Interviewees state further that digital technologies activated their flexibility. According to R35:

*“I believe we are more resilient in dealing with and confronting our business challenges. The flexibility that digital technologies afford our organisation is boundless.”*

#### ***Dynamic Resilient Outcomes for SE Organizing Capabilities***

Digital technologies permitted social entrepreneurs to exhibit a dynamic resilient impact through (a) Rapid Interconnectedness and (b) Lower Overheads.

**Rapid Interconnectedness.** A dynamic capability that digital technologies offered was interconnectedness, as they could stay connected on current knowledge and other impactful pro-social activities during the pandemic. According to R37:

*“On our side, just the integration within our staff, our service providers, our partners, how we connect with them is down to digital technology”.*

**Lower Overheads.** Interviewees note that the dynamism that digital technologies afforded SE reflected in lower overheads, despite engaging with broader stakeholders. For example, R8 and R16 offered that:

*“Automating our activities ensured a wide reach, yet we did not need so many staff. We realised we can do more with less” (R8).*

*“We became more dynamic during Covid-19. We spent a lot less. We were also more efficient, with everyone pulling their weight. Moreover, the nature of our intervention means we have now adopted this less costly way of organising our activities (R16).*

### ***Continuous Resilient Outcomes for SE Organizing Capabilities***

The data further suggest that digital technologies improved social entrepreneurs organising capabilities, enabling them to recognise endless possibilities through Networking.

**Networking.** The Covid-19 crisis put a strain on the organising abilities of social enterprises. In this sense, digital technologies opened networking opportunities for social entrepreneurs. Digital technologies allowed them to share their visions with a broader network, building a resilient future for community SE activities. According to R31 and R34:

*“Digital technologies now have a worldwide reach where an interested individual can contribute to eradicating social problems. For example, in our health program, anyone can, through our digital platforms, be responsible for a sick person’s hospital bill. These ideas accelerated during Covid-19” (R31).*

*“Many community women do not have the right social network to support their growth. Our network acts as a shield for them. Those in our network can mentor women without meeting them physically. Digital technologies thus ensured community women could set a path to their own goals” (R34).*

### ***4.3 Impact of Digital Technologies on SE Processes***

In this research, we refer to SE processes as actions social entrepreneurs pursue to build resilience by leveraging digital technology. We uncover how digital technologies impacted pathways for social enterprise actions and resilience.

#### ***Proximate Resilient Outcomes for SE Processes***

During Covid-19, digital technologies empowered SE processes to have impactful resilient outcomes through (a) Effective Planning and (b) Process Flexibility.

**Effective Planning.** Digital technologies ensure effective monitoring and planning of the business processes of social enterprises. For social entrepreneurs, digital technology is *like a gatekeeper that watches and tracks what everyone is doing, ensuring that tasks are*

*accomplished as scheduled* (R31). This ensured that social enterprises could achieve their social interventions during crises. As R31 and R6 note:

*“Digital technologies have made us very efficient. Our switch to digital technologies for our processes meant some people left the company because they could not cope, but most people stayed on, and we kept at it. We now have a department that monitors crisis developments* (R31).

*“Before Covid-19, our interventions had to be physical. But during Covid-19, we switched to Zoom and other related technologies for meetings, interventions, and campaigns. Our process received a massive boost, and immediately we had a better monitoring and processing system, leading to better interactions with the community. Our process became more efficient and trustworthy”* (R6).

**Process Flexibility.** Covid-19 encouraged process flexibility among social entrepreneurs. Process flexibility allowed them to respond to external factors such as Covid-19 disruptions and shifting demands of their clients where social interventions were required. Digital technologies empowered this flexibility, offering a platform for social entrepreneurs to deepen their resilience. R19 and R2 offer that:

*“The pandemic was sudden. Without our flexibility, we would not have been able to attend to our community needs. This was a period when more people needed help which the government was not providing”* (R19).

*“We changed our delivery mode. We got people to contact us digitally. We changed our staff resumptions to be flexible to suit them. This made them more efficient, and even after Covid-19, we have kept a flexible working pattern”* (R2)

### ***Dynamic Resilient Outcomes for SE Processes***

With digital technologies, SE processes experienced a dynamic resilient impact through (a) Improved Security, (b) Extensive Learning and Knowledge Sharing, and (c) Cost Saving.

**Improved Security.** According to interviewees, one primary benefit of the Covid-19 disruption was the dynamic ways their process security improved. As R22 and R36 notes:

*“Nigeria is not a very secure environment even during normal times. Covid-19 prompted greater security concerns. During the period, we were able to secure our documentation as we used Cloud platforms more”* (R22).

*“The integrity of our system has improved; for me, that is resilience. Because by building security digitally, we are building our resilience as a company. This will have benefits for our social community” (R36).*

**Extensive Learning/Knowledge Sharing.** For interviewees, social entrepreneurs developed their processes through knowledge sharing. The use of digital technologies *enabled knowledge to be obtained from partners both with and outside Nigeria* (R9). Furthermore, interviewees assert that digital technologies ignited dynamic knowledge-sharing in the community. R34 and R36 state that:

*“We passed messages to the community through different channels, not just through one channel that we were used to. Even reaching our staff on the field depended on the digital channels” (R34).*

*“Our business model changed based on the knowledge we obtained externally during Covid-19 and the subsequent processes we had to follow” (R36).*

**Cost Savings.** Although Covid-19 brought unprecedented business interruptions, most interviewees acknowledge its cost-saving attributes. Interviewees alluded to process efficiency at reduced costs, attributing this to the increased use of digital technologies. R22, a social entrepreneur involved in capacity building and training, informs that:

*“We had to upload documents digitally for clients to access. This reduced our cost considerably as we did not have to print materials anymore” (R22).*

### ***Continuous Resilient Outcomes for SE Processes***

The data indicate that continuous resilient process outcomes for social enterprises emerge through (a) Process Adaptations and (b) Less Costly Idea Variations.

**Process Adaptations.** From the data, it could be deduced that digital technologies enabled social entrepreneurs to adapt their processes to cope with the crisis and be better prepared for the future. R1 highlights these adaptations thus:

*“For example, I asked my clients If I automate my existing process, would they like it? Most of them said yes. And that is what we have done. It is about listening, adapting, and providing solutions”.*

**Less Costly Idea Variations.** The use of digital technologies assisted social entrepreneurs in adapting their intervention solutions with less costly implications. As R36 and R25 explain:

*“We used virtual focus group discussions, revolutionising how we develop some of our products and implement our activities. Digital technologies have helped reduce costs and enabled us to record our activities and ideas” (R36).*

*“With digital technologies, ideas creation, solutions for socio-economic interventions can be varied and debated with minimal cost implications” (R25).*

## **5.0 Discussion**

Primarily, this research sets out to understand how SE firms in a weak institutional environment draw on opportunities provided by digital technologies to generate resilient organisational outcomes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital technologies enhanced Nigerian SE firms’ resilience as they helped them recover from or cope with Covid-19 adversities. Relying on Mithani’s (2020) theoretical framework of organisational resilience, we engage three levels of resilience (proximate, dynamic, and continuous) to reveal nineteen (19) pathways. These pathways show the impact of digital technologies on three less researched areas in the SE literature, i.e., SE leadership, SE organising capabilities and SE processes (Table 3) in Nigeria.

First, our findings uncover how digital technologies impact SE leadership, shape their motivation for adaptation during the pandemic and reveal how specific factors facilitate *proximate* (improved internal and external communication; deeper empathy; and reduced anxiety), *dynamic* (authentic influence, and increased trust) and *continuous* (new product development incubation; and varying idea adaptations) resilience of SE leadership. SE firms employed digital technologies to reinforce their proximal influence over family, friends, and the community. This resonates with the findings of Nambisan (2017), Dong (2019) and Cavallo et al. (2019). For instance, digital technologies such as WhatsApp allow SE firms to engage with their customers, facilitating the continued provision of goods and services (Dong, 2019). Similar to Chamlee-Wright and Storr (2008), digital platforms also aided SE firms in offering

emotional support to reduce anxiety as well as assuage pandemic pains. This finding is important as the Nigerian culture emphasise social bonding and togetherness. We also find sufficient evidence demonstrating how social entrepreneurs deployed authentic influence and increased trust to build *dynamic* resilience during the pandemic. Dynamic resilience assists in establishing proactive and reactive responses to a disturbing (e.g., Covid-19) event that traditional measures cannot achieve (Simonovic & Arunkumar, 2016). In this sense, SE firms' capacity to interact with clients on projects using digital technologies improved clients' trust as it eliminated the time lag between sending messages and receiving feedback. Such practices also prompted greater value chain collaboration. New product development incubation and varying idea adaptations assisted SE firms in building *continuous* resilience. By seeking continuous resilience, SE firms develop a mindset that accommodates complexity, continuous improvement, and the acceptance of challenges (Morrish & Jones, 2020). Such a mentality helps SE firms to anticipate business challenges through effective monitoring and response to issues (Linnenluecke & McKnight, 2017).

Second, this research unpacks how digital technologies influence SE firms organising capabilities, emphasising how SE firms build their strategies and develop a culture for adaptation. This finding emerges from proximate (relationship building; organisation flexibility), dynamic (rapid interconnectedness; lower overheads) and continuous (networking) resilience interactions (See Table 3). Our data reveal how social entrepreneurs deploy digital technologies to build relationships to broaden their market presence and extend their services across communities. Consistent with Dutta (2017), this opportunity allowed social entrepreneurs to redefine social and economic entrepreneurial infrastructure (in a traditional society) that encouraged greater utilisation of digital technologies compared to the pre-Covid-19 era. With the growing reliance on digital technologies, social entrepreneurs have become increasingly flexible to cope with less-predictable customer expectations (Weaver, 2020). Fitzgerald et al. (2014) and Cavallo et al. (2019) demonstrate the nexus between digital technologies, organisational flexibility, and firm profitability, stressing that firms maximise their payoffs when using digital technologies to flex their operations. The role of digital technologies in firm flexibility is critical (Weaver, 2020), especially during crises when resource availability rests on the swiftness (an essential attribute of digital technologies) with which firms respond (Linnenluecke & McKnight, 2017).

Our data also indicate that digital technologies facilitated interconnectedness and minimised overheads among SE firms, offering tools to build their organisations' dynamic resilience

(Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2008). Our findings show that in Nigeria, like most contemporary business environments, access to data and information embodies a critical resource for organisational survival and resilience (Zhang, Long & von Schaewen, 2021). Participants reflect on how digital technologies gave access to real-time market information, enabling them to connect with broader stakeholders. This ensured a seamless SE business-to-customer (B2C) operation, promoting speedier service delivery and waste minimisation. In addition to SE B2C, our data show that digital technologies enhanced SE business-to-business (B2B) contacts as businesses could link their supply and value chains with minimal fuss.

Our data further show that digital technologies assisted SE firms in networking to develop their continuous resilience. Continuous resilience embraces complexity and continuous improvement and recognises that failures are inevitable hence actors are motivated to anticipate failure and monitor and respond to emerging issues (Linnenluecke & McKnight, 2017; Morrish & Jones, 2020). Respondents suggest that engaging their networks helped them anticipate failure as their networks offered initial information on shifting market conditions (Li et al., 2018). As a result, robust engagement with networks via digital technologies meant that Nigerian SE firms could collaborate with their networks to identify adverse market developments, sidestep institutional weaknesses, and implement corrective measures. This finding links with Hanafizadeh et al. (2021) and confirms social media utilisation in granting organisations access to and sharing knowledge, establishing relationships with customers, developing products, and communicating with stakeholders to create value.

In addition to SE Leadership and SE Organising Capabilities, our data allows us to articulate how digital technologies impact SEs' processes, outlining how distinct forms of resilience (i.e., proximate, dynamic, and continuous) activate SEs' actions. Table 3 shows that digital technologies offer process flexibility and effective planning, allowing social entrepreneurs to strengthen their process (proximate) resilience. According to our data, despite limited institutional support, digital technologies enabled real-time tracking of market behaviour and reactions to the pandemic while motivating the implementation of reactive plans and updated processes to accommodate non-physical contact with customers. This is noteworthy, as firm unpreparedness, technological limitations, and social isolation concerns (Green et al., 2020) compelled organisations to adapt in response to the suddenness of the pandemic. Process flexibility and planning are evident in SE firms relying on digital technologies to establish new working arrangements to deal with lockdowns (Oberoi et al., 2021; Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021).



We further articulate elements demonstrating how social entrepreneurs use digital technologies to strengthen their processes' (dynamic) resilience. These include improved security, knowledge sharing and cost savings (see Table 3). Organisational resilience, especially in weak institutional environments, fluctuates because it encompasses how actors react to emerging scenarios over time (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). By engaging digital technologies to counter Covid-19 security concerns, acquire and share knowledge, and improve operational efficiency (thereby minimising operational costs), SE firms were able to fortify themselves against failure. Dynamic resilience positions SE firms to cope with current and potential challenges triggered by the pandemic. This links with Weaver (2020), suggesting that firms should implement short and long-term resilience and crisis management strategies to reinforce resilience and adaptation.

Our respondents also reflect on how they engage digital technologies to accelerate their processes' continuous resilience. We observe how SE firms draw on 'process adaptations' and 'less costly idea variations' to build sustainable process resilience. Regarding process adaptation, processes are informed by customer preferences (following a listening process) that subsequently assist in altering existing practices and delivering appropriate solutions. This connects with Ramos-Villagrasa et al. (2019), which emphasises the idea of adaption as a process, and Denner et al. (2018), investigating how organisations exploit digital technologies to adapt business processes. Our findings detail how the robustness and variety of digital technologies in facilitating process adaptation minimised product variation costs (Pesch, Endres & Bouncken, 2021).

## **6.0 Contributions and Policy Recommendations**

The study makes several significant contributions. First, this research contributes to the nascent literature investigating how social entrepreneurs deployed digital technologies to confront Covid-19 difficulties (Brown et al., 2022; Mishra, 2023). We identify nineteen (19) pathways that inform how digital technologies inspire internal and external resilient strategies among Nigerian social entrepreneurs during the Covid-19 crisis. A review of the existing literature indicates that this research represents the first attempt at employing resilience categorisations (proximate, dynamic, and continuous) to generate insights into resilience-building strategies by SE firms in response to crises. It is also noteworthy that while the literature focused on either internal (Young & Kim, 2015; Littlewood & Holt, 2018) or external strategies

(Apostolopoulos, Newbery & Gkartzios, 2019) to explore resilience, this study combines both strategic sources to understand resilience building among social entrepreneurs in a weak institutional setting.

Second, the extant literature typically focuses on how organisations use digital technologies to develop resilience during economic crises (Prodanov, 2018; Chandna, 2022). However, Covid-19 presented unprecedented challenges compared to conventional crises. Existing SE firms have yet to deal with a pandemic of this magnitude. Based on our pathways, this study uncovers dynamic and sustainable contemporary strategies to help social enterprises circumvent the distinct and fluid Covid-19 challenges. These less-researched digital technology-enhanced adaptation strategies that support social entrepreneurs in developing resilience during crises include *deeper empathy*, *inclusive learning*, *reduced anxiety*, and *increased trust*. Our findings enable us to depart from the resilience theorisations of Walker et al. (2004), Young & Kim (2015) and Giustiniano et al. (2018), which focus on economic and technological threats and disruptions. Instead, we contribute to the burgeoning resilience literature (e.g., Mithani, 2020), which theorises social disruptions.

Third, we contribute to the current knowledge of resilience building in less-researched contexts, focusing on digital technology (Osabohien et al., 2022). While digital technology usage in developing economies is rudimentary (Ashiru et al., 2022), governments, businesses, and individuals in these settings have renewed interest in engaging more with digital technologies (Bansal et al., 2019). This is consistent with our finding, as we demonstrate that, in a developing country, SE firms utilise digital technologies to build proximate, dynamic, and continuous resilience during crises. We employ a 3x3 matrix to exhibit how digital technologies support resilience building. Furthermore, given the widespread socio-economic inequalities among developing economies (Kaufmann et al., 2008), we show that digital technologies can encourage inclusive learning to bridge the inequality gaps in these contexts.

Fourth, the findings align with the dominant standpoint of organisational resilience theory (Gover & Duxbury, 2018; Miceli et al., 2021), which emphasises that, during a crisis, organisations identify and implement changes (Holling, 1996) that maximise their survivability potential (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). This study shows that Nigerian SE firms pay greater attention to the *resistance* dimension (Walker et al., 2004; Young & Kim, 2015), as their Covid-19 coping strategies emphasise the ease or difficulty of altering existing operations. As the 3x3 matrix indicates, social enterprises' strategic responses mainly emerged from reworking

current systems, e.g., the improved use of digital technologies in internal and external communications. We further observe evidence of the *insight* phase (Giustiniano et al., 2018) when dealing with crises. Nigerian social entrepreneurs do not have sophisticated mechanisms or resources to anticipate problems (i.e., the *foresight* phase), exposing a poor disposition to pre-disruption mechanisms. We could not assess the *oversight* and *hindsight* phases (Giustiniano et al., 2018) as data was collected towards the end of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study offers important recommendations for policy and practice. In many developing economies, an enabling environment for SE remains a mirage. While this study further exposed the economic significance of social enterprises in Nigeria, there is no dedicated legislation for SE in the country (British Council, 2022). The lack of regulation diminishes its legitimacy, stifling the ability to attract investments (Iyortsuun, 2016). Enacting regulations will accelerate collaboration and partnership between SE firms and the government (political institutions) in addressing social problems. The lack of collaboration accounts for the dearth of information on Nigeria SE and the low scalability of adaptive remedies for resolving social challenges (Iyortsuun, 2016).

## **7.0 Conclusion and Areas for Further Research**

Relying on the Nigerian context, this article sought to understand how digital technology facilitated resilient outcomes among SE firms during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the data reveals, digital technologies assisted SE firms in strengthening their resilience while offering alternative practices to survive the effects of the pandemic. The data shows that leadership, organising capabilities, and processes represent three organisational areas that allowed Nigerian SE firms to navigate Covid-19. SE firms reflect on how they embraced *leadership* forms incorporating digital technologies to communicate and influence their stakeholders. The digitally enhanced leadership maximised the *organising capabilities* of SE firms by allowing them to leverage their innate competencies, evident in relationship-building strategies, speed of interconnectedness, and broader networking opportunities. The blend of (digital) leadership and adaptive capabilities meant that SE firms' *processes* were leaner and more responsive to clients' demands. The data indicate that their processes benefit from effective planning, increased flexibility, improved security, knowledge sharing and cost minimisation.

Given the study's findings and contributions, it is necessary to highlight the paper's limitations. While this research explores how SE firms stayed resilient during Covid-19, this study did not

engage with objective resilience measures. Rather, we assume that businesses that overcome crises employ resilience strategies that allow them to survive (Bell, 2019). Also, this research's inductive, qualitative nature exposes generalizability concerns considering its single-country context. However, generalizability is not our goal. Instead, our objective was to capture the strategies adopted by SE firms in a manner that may be transferable to similar settings (Gioia et al., 2013). Employing quantitative information (e.g., financial metrics) could have enhanced the study's findings.

The above limitations help outline suggestions for future scholarly work in the SE literature, particularly during crises and economic uncertainty. Considering the relative infancy of the SE literature and practice, scholars are invited to investigate SE firms' responses post-Covid-19. Also, robust knowledge will profit from a multi-country study. While this research uncovered resilience strategies that Nigerian SE firms implemented to overcome Covid-19 challenges, variations in institutional environments could shape resilience approaches and limit the generalisation of the strategies uncovered in this research. Multi-country (or single-country) studies would shed insights into alternative resilience approaches and their success drivers and aid the analysis of commonalities and inconsistencies in resilience strategies across varieties of capitalism. Lastly, the SE literature will gain from deductive and quantitative methodological approaches investigating the connections between resilience metrics, firm performance measures and the findings (strategies) reported in this study.

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## Appendix 1. Interview Questions Guide

1. What exactly does your organisation do?
2. What is the culture/values of your organisation?
3. How does your organisation function? Do you use technology in your organisation? If you do, what type of technology and how do you use them?
4. How do you organise and shape your activities normally?
5. How is the Nigerian environment for business? Which states/communities do you operate in? Do you operate differently in states/communities and why?
6. How does your organisation cope and survive in the Nigerian environment?
7. Do you get any incentives from the government?
8. Do you do business outside Nigeria?
9. Were your activities impacted by the recent COVID-19 crisis? How did you cope?
10. How did you organise and shape your community/state activities during the COVID-19 crisis?
11. How did you lead your organisation during COVID-19? Was your leadership style different during COVID-19 than during your normal business activities? How?
12. Can you explain the factors that ensured you continued in business during the COVID-19 crisis?
13. Can you tell us more about your processes and how they shaped your response to the COVID-19 crisis? Did you use any form of technology to shape your response?
14. Did your organisation innovate or have to change its processes during the COVID-19 crisis?
15. How were the culture/values of your organisation affected by the COVID-19 crisis? Did technology help shape your strategy, culture or values?
16. How do you look to improve your ability to cope with the crisis? How prepared are you for future crises?
17. Is there anything you want to tell me about technology, your operations or activities that I have not covered in this interview?

Thank you for your time.