

Prosocial skills development in children and social value creation during COVID-19

Ahmad Arslan¹ | Lauri Haapanen¹ | Shlomo Tarba²

¹Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

²Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Correspondence

Ahmad Arslan, Department of Marketing Management & International Business Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland.

Email: ahmad.arslan@oulu.fi

Abstract

Development of prosocial skills in children in their middle childhood and the role of computer games is analyzed in our case study based on an entrepreneurial venture (School of Gaming, Oulu). This venture was launched almost at the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic hit the globe. It has operated successfully during COVID-19, not only in Finland but also has expanded to Indonesia in this limited time period. It created social value by offering the children a possibility to be with their friends during the lockdown as well as develop skills like empathy, sharing, and trust. The case study further revealed that affordable pricing, the use of professional gaming instructors and adaptation played an important role in organizational success during this tough time period.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, education, entrepreneurship, Finland, prosocial skills, social value creation

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, there has been significant research in entrepreneurship and management studies addressing a range of topics (e.g., Ratten, 2020a; Ratten & Jones, 2020). Due to a multitude of economic, social and health challenges emanating from this ongoing crisis, several scholars have highlighted the importance of social value creation by the organizations during this time (e.g., Ratten, 2020b; Reese, 2020). Social value creation or value co-creation (as some scholars refer to it) incorporates all the organizational activities, which ensure fulfilling certain social and societal objectives alongside the business activity (e.g., Kroeger & Weber, 2014). Prior research has offered significant evidence on a different kind of social value creation activities of organizations, including reducing health disparities, female empowerment, contribution towards nutrition and overcoming hunger, skills

enhancement and basic infrastructure (energy or sanitation) development activities (e.g., Bento, Jacquinet, & Albuquerque, 2019; Datta & Gailey, 2012; Dembek, York, & Singh, 2018; Goh, Gao, & Agarwal, 2016; Gölgeci, Arslan, Khan, & Kontkanen, 2021). Out of all these social value-creating activities, skills development and enhancement are perhaps the most important ones as they are related to human capital development in society (Gölgeci et al., 2021; Lenihan, McQuirk, & Murphy, 2019). Furthermore, increasingly there is a recognition in extant literature that traditional education (whether primary or tertiary) is not fully able to inculcate 21st-century working environment and associated societal (soft) skills in the students (e.g., Teng, Ma, Pahlevansharif, & Turner, 2019; Tsirkas, Chytiri, & Bouranta, 2020). Hence, academic interest in alternative education and skills development ventures has increased in recent years. It has further been found that educational possibilities have significantly been enhanced by the popularity of the

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Internet and online learning tools (Tsirkas et al., 2020). Consequently, for many educational providers, physical distance is no longer a barrier to offer educational and skills development courses to the interested audience even though they may be in foreign countries (Amaral, 2016; Mishra, 2017). These developments have meant that several online educational providers have emerged during the last decade or so. However, most of them tend to be either established universities or large training organizations. At the same time, small entrepreneurial firms are also emerging in this field; some are successful due to their unique approach and customized offerings (e.g., Kumar, Kumar, Palvia, & Verma, 2017; Orr, Weller, & Farrow, 2018).

It is further important to mention that a key feature of COVID-19 pandemic in the context of education (at all levels) has been the shift to online learning in almost all parts of the world. This online learning has become an important part of "new normal", its prominence is likely to stay visible even after the pandemic ends due to a range of benefits like access, cost savings, and customization offered by this educational delivery mode. Our paper attempts to contribute to this relatively new research area by specifically analyzing an online learning focused entrepreneurial venture. Our case organization is School of Gaming, Oulu (Finland), hereafter SOG, which creates social value by developing prosocial skills (like empathy, group work, better communication, problem-solving, etc.) using computer games in children between the age of 6 and 12 (i.e. in their middle childhood). The case organization is established by a serial social entrepreneur who had social value creation as the primary goal in all his previous ventures. The case organization came into being almost at the same time when COVID-19 pandemic hit globally as it formally started operations in January 2020. The pandemic forced the case organization to readjust its plans and shift all its operations online, which proved to be a great blessing in disguise. Online operations and affordable pricing helped the case organization to grow quickly and it has already run successful pilot operations in one international market (Indonesia) as well. In this paper, we offer an exploratory assessment of the case organization's social value creation during COVID-19.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section offers a brief contextual overview of computer (video) games in children's prosocial skills development. This overview is followed by the description of the case organization and background information on the serial social entrepreneur. The next section presents a specific discussion on the dynamics and practicalities of prosocial skills development in children by the case organization during COVID-19. The paper ends with conclusions and implications.

2 | CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Scholarly debate on social value creation by the firms gained a significant pace since the seminal article by Porter and Kramer (2011), which specifically suggested organizations to move towards creating a shared (social) value. They defined it as "policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the

communities in which it operates" (Porter & Kramer, 2011:66). This concept explicitly recognizes an organization's business aims whilst being incorporated in its core purpose and subsequently informing its activities (Porter & Kramer, 2011). However, even before this research, the social value in some way or the other has been addressed in extant management studies under different banners, including corporate social responsibility. However, a key element of social value creation was explicit visibility of this aspect in organizational goals and strategies (e.g., Leposky, Arslan, & Dikova, 2019). A relevant aspect of social value creation is that it has been mostly linked to knowledge acquisition (Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Yamin, 2014) and skills development (Gölgeci et al., 2021) by prior scholars.

In the specific context of knowledge delivery (education) and skills development, it has been highlighted that due to social and technological changes, many children in their middle childhood can perhaps improve in their prosocial skills like empathy, sharing and teamwork (e.g., Groeben, Perren, Stadelmann, & von Klitzing, 2011; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014). Interestingly, such kinds of soft skills have been highlighted by studies on the future of work and workers as essential to survive in the emerging high-tech and increasingly connected economies (e.g., Arslan, Ruman, Naughton, & Tarba, 2021). There is a recognition in the educational literature that traditional classroom teaching, even though still beneficial in several ways, is failing to address such skills development demand (e.g., Clark, Tanner-Smith, & Killingsworth, 2016). It has further been argued that a significant number of children in middle childhood (7–12 years) have an interest in computer games and play them as a hobby in developed and increasingly in developing countries (e.g., Parsons, Karakosta, Boniface, & Crowle, 2019). Hence, scholars are increasingly encouraging, incorporating the learning element for these children in such games (Parsons et al., 2019; Stefanidis, Psaltis, Apostolakis, Dimitropoulos, & Daras, 2019). Specifically, games such as Minecraft have been commended for offering such skills development opportunities for the children playing them (e.g., Nebel, Schneider, & Rey, 2016). Increasingly, there are several other video games and virtual reality-based programs offering similar learning opportunities to the children.

In the context of such learning games and similar virtual tools, the researchers have highlighted the importance of developing prosocial skills in the middle childhood kids (e.g., Blumberg et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2016). Prosocial skills have been defined in various ways; however, most of the definitions include positive social behaviors like trust, empathy, cooperating, turn-taking and helping (Parsons et al., 2019). Prior behavioral research has further established that such prosocial behavioral traits are linked to positive long-term academic, professional and social outcomes (Bierhoff, 2002; Slattery, Finnegan, & Vidgen, 2019). However, at the same time, lack of such prosocial skills has negative influences on academic, social and professional life and at a personal level (e.g., Goldstein and McGinnis, 1997). The role of digital and video games has been studied by scholars using a variety of analytical and theoretical tools. Such studies have highlighted that in the specific context of the development of prosocial behavior, digital tools like video games are far more

successful in behavior change and development of collaborative skills than traditional classroom-based teaching (Clark et al., 2016; Harrington & O'Connell, 2016; Nebel et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2019). However, most of such studies have focused on traditional education providers (like schools) and took a psychological perspective in analyzing prosocial skills in the children.

It has been mentioned earlier that online education delivery resulted in the rise of small entrepreneurs who specialized in specific skills development in different target groups (Kumar et al., 2017; Orr et al., 2018). However, empirical research on such entrepreneurial ventures and their strategies and survival, especially during COVID-19 pandemic, are rare. Hence, our paper looks at SOG Oulu, which started operating when COVID-19 related restrictions started to appear globally, including in Finland. Furthermore, as the case organization is established by a serial entrepreneur who has vast experience in skills development in the sports sector, this case can enrich the research on the dynamics of prosocial skills development in children using video games, and social value creation entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next section presents the background of the case organization and the description of the serial entrepreneur with whom we undertook detailed interviews and discussions during October and November 2020. Furthermore, we have studied the entrepreneur's activities for some time, and our earlier research on his ventures, has been published as well (e.g., Arslan et al., 2020).

3 | BACKGROUND OF THE CASE ORGANIZATION AND SERIAL SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

SOG Oulu started operating in January 2020, Oulu, Finland. It was founded by Mr Mikko Perälä, who has his background in high technology firms and talent scouting in Africa. Mr Perälä has been a founder and a co-founder in several software start-up firms, both domestic and born globals. Besides, he has been supporting many entrepreneurs in setting up their firms. The first organization established by this entrepreneur was a software firm, which employed developers in Bangladesh. Perälä explains, *"The aim was to establish jobs in Bangladesh in order to prevent local brain drain abroad."* Since his first firm, all his start-up firms have had a strong social value creation initiative, employing over 200 local people in Uganda, Vietnam, and Bangladesh. Hence, this specific entrepreneur has been involved in social value creation in multiple forms stressed by prior studies (e.g., Gölgeci et al., 2021; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Sinkovics et al., 2014).

Besides his impressive track record in high technology firms, Mr Perälä has been heavily involved with football. In this respect, one of his firms has been scouting young promising players in Africa for the professional European football clubs through his ventures like Topspot and Player Accelerator (Arslan et al., 2020). Moreover, during his studies in the Oulu University, Mr Perälä founded a football club, JS Hercules, which has during the past 20 years grown to a serious

club with more than 2,500 players, making it the biggest football club in Northern Finland. The mission of JS Hercules is to organize free of charge activities locally, to get the local people to do sports together, and in doing this, to increase social activity between people. Mr Perälä highlights the social value of the JS Hercules, *"Well, that is the only value I see a sports club should have. The entertainment value and the sports business value are highly debatable. [...] I think sports clubs should only look at themselves as social organizations – social enterprises – and that is how we want to do it in Hercules. [...] As an organization, we only exist for the community around us."*

Owing to JS Hercules' social benefits, Mr Perälä has received a Sports Equality Award from the Northern Ostrobothnia Sports Federation. Mr Perälä is stressing the role of communities, *"I think every club need to define their own role in that very community where they live in – and what are the problems in that particular community."* He has been closely working with local international communities. He continues, *"We have been working with immigrants, organising them activities together with local people to offering them a possibility to establish contact with each other. So, we have been organising activities near where the people live so they can participate together as a family together with neighbors, that not only increases their physical activity, but it also increases the social activity between people."* These comments are in line with some prior studies, where sports-based ventures have been highlighted as useful tools of social value creation due to their ability to break barriers and develop bonds among people from different backgrounds (e.g., Ratten, 2011; Sacco, Ferilli, & Tavano Blessi, 2018).

Over the years, JS Hercules has been gaining remarkable visibility, and Mr Perälä has exploited JS Hercules brand in his e-sports start-up firm. Hercules Esports is a combination of Mr Perälä's passion in technology, sports, and social value creation. Hercules Esports is an e-sports club for kids enhancing communication, group-working skills, and emotional skills. Currently, Hercules Esports has its facilities in Oulu, a space with 25 computers and physical exercise space. Mr Perälä notes that people often have a limited view of e-sports; they consider e-sports as computer gaming with players just sitting in front of their screens. Mr Perälä has a broader perspective, *"I would say that the future of sports is digital, there will be a lot of virtual reality and augmented reality devices that are going to come in."* He notes that the physical aspect is lacking from the current e-sports; moreover, e-sports involve more mental stress that players need to fight against, and in doing this, players' good physical condition helps. Mr Perälä predicts that *"In the future, the physical part will be more in focus [...] interesting games are taking over. The traditional sports will have to compete against those, and eventually, some of them probably lose."*

Whereas Hercules Esports utilizes physical spaces, its spin-off, SOG, is being run completely online. SOG started operating in January 2020. The original idea was to provide face-to-face prosocial skills teaching. However, COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a blessing in disguise, as switching to online (remote) teaching made the operations significantly more scalable. SOG is a remote game-based learning concept, hence, not an e-sports concept, *"We try to distance ourselves*

from e-sports, we are using games to teach kids the 21st century (prosocial and others) skills," as Mr Perälä notes.

4 | PROSOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT, AND VALUE CREATION BY THE CASE ORGANIZATION DURING COVID-19

SOG Oulu was set up as the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread. The founder states that "SOG has constantly been growing in Finland during 2020. There are currently more than 200 paying customers, which is quite fine for a start-up." Along with starting its operations in Finland, SOG could internationalize right away after inception as it has run pilot projects successfully in Indonesia.

Mr Mikko Perälä, the founder of SOG, explicitly highlighted that development of prosocial skills had been a key element in setting up this specific organization, as he observed the relative lack of kids' empathy skills and emotional control being rather problematic. He points out, "We have observed so far that computer games are excellent tools to teach communication and group-working skills. Also, we have seen that emotional skills, like empathy skills or emotional control [...] gaming, inflicts more like bad emotional control but when you play together under game educator, they are able to control their feelings better." In the long run, SOG aims to harness game-based education to improve children's critical thinking and problem-solving under the supervision of game educators. "I would like to call us as the scouts of the internet age. Internet is our forest," as Mr Perälä phrases the organization's role and its vision. This specific quote is in line with prior studies where skills like empathy, teamwork and sharing have been highlighted as the needed prosocial skills in children (e.g., Merrell & Gimpel, 2014). Furthermore, referring to the virtual world as a forest is an interesting analogy. Scouting organizations have been very good in developing such skills in children (e.g., Asensio-Ramon et al., 2020).

Children's safety is on the highest priority. Mr Perälä explains, "We are building a gaming environment that is open and safe and secure for kids to come and play together under supervision, but it is not exactly a learning by gaming or game education as such, but it is a safe place to let kids roam around." The SOG has 11 game educators, or Gedus, as SOG calls them. Game educators are teachers, youth instructors, or persons with a gaming background, even one with a background in children's theater. Mr Perälä is looking for the best game educators out in the world, and he states, "I want to create a training certificate for them, which they go through before they can join us. [...] And then we share, it is more like a revenue sharing based method. In this way, I can hopefully find the best ones in other countries." Local newspaper, Kaleva, has also praised SOG's safe online environment with professional game educators recently (Kaleva, 2020). SOG realizes that there is a stigma associated with computer games in the mind of many people. Hence, the founder believes that the promotion of "quality gaming" is a social value creation activity as the computer games are here to stay, so why not positively utilize them. This focus on quality gaming supports the notion in prior studies where the need for highlighting such

positive opportunities associated with computer games has been stressed (e.g., Nebel et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2019).

The founder mentions that students' age in the SOG varies from 6 to 12 years (middle childhood). In this respect, he says that "Our focus currently is on this age group. Currently all over the world, basically, we have lots of Finnish speaking kids from foreign countries [...] parents think that when their kids are speaking Finnish, they do not forget the native language even if they are living abroad." The focus on this age group is in line with prior studies which have highlighted the importance of prosocial skills development in children during this period (e.g., Blumberg et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2016). He further explains that prosocial skills are also important for the parents enrolling their kids in the SOG. In this regard, the SOG has received positive feedback from parents, "How great is it, a child who has had problems in other hobbies dares to join and in doing this, gets new friends," Mr Perälä shares. Besides, due to COVID-19 restrictions or some other illnesses, kids join the SoG to be with friends. Mr Perälä considers that also learning of prosocial skills is highly important. It is important for the parents that their kids enjoy themselves; however, parents are more far-sighted, prosocial skills are the skills of the future labor market, especially the programming skills.

Regarding the cultural differences, Mr Perälä notes that compared to Finns, "Families in Indonesia appreciate more educational aspects and learning of concrete skills, which may yield better jobs and higher social status." He continues, "We just wanted to try in a developing country [...] which was quite easy. [...] We found out that sort of soft skills that we have been emphasizing here in Finland is not the kind of skills that the parents in Indonesia, and probably in other developing countries, appreciate as much as kind of hard skills that we could also learn. We are now building a concept around Minecraft and programming; we are teaching programming through Minecraft. I think the parents in Indonesia, and hopefully also in other developing countries, understand this concept better than teaching empathic skills and teaching soft skills. This is something they connect directly to future educational opportunities or job opportunities." These findings show that despite cultural differences concerning children's skills development expectations, there is an appreciation of such services in both cultures. Furthermore, SOG's plan to develop a learning program combining programming skills with prosocial skills is an excellent depiction of understanding of changing dynamics of future working life and combination of hard and soft skills needed to survive in it (Arslan et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2019; Slattery et al., 2019).

Along with these prosocial skills' development, a key aspect of SOG is its affordability, as the founder had this goal always in mind that social ventures in sports should be accessible. Regarding this aspect, he says that "Monthly fee starts from 39 euros. My idea here is to make some money but also give an opportunity to the poor. I would like to open, with the money that we are making in Europe and maybe in other countries that have money to pay, we can then start doing these things in developing countries." These comments are in line with some earlier research on social value creation, where the organizations helped one section of the community that could not afford those products or services by keeping the prices low.

A good example is of Grameen Dannon, which offers highly nutritious but affordably priced yoghurt cups in rural areas of Bangladesh where the urban sales arm for the product was used to offset losses in the rural market, where it wanted to create social value (Kuratko, McMullen, Hornsby, & Jacson, 2017). Finally, the discussions with the founder revealed that this venture saw potential for itself to internationalize further, and in this concern, one pilot project is being done in Spain, and also other pilot projects are planned. It is expected that future internationalization will include other developing countries as well.

5 | CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

A key conclusion drawn from our study relates to the need for prosocial skills development in children, especially those in their middle childhood and the important role that computer games can play in this concern. COVID-19 pandemic has made the virtual world ever more important, and with currently no end in sight. It is reasonable to expect that online learning will remain visible in one way or another, even after the pandemic ends. At the same time, an increasing interest of children in computer games from an early age is a reality. If that interest can be channeled to develop the needed prosocial skills, it is a worthwhile achievement. Our findings also show that COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shift to online operations was a blessing in disguise for the case organization, which was planned to be established as a physical school of gaming. Well planned and efficiently executed online operations mean that customers can be sought globally, making the pricing of such learning services affordable. This phenomenon was visible in case of SOG, which received Finnish children across the globe as students and received interest from Indonesia as well. Another conclusion from our study relates to an increased importance of the internet generally and online education specifically, which are expected to remain so, even during post COVID-19 times. This increased reliance on the internet has been termed as a major social change, where aspects like “working from home” and “online education” have been referred to remain significantly visible even when the pandemic ends (e.g., Teräs, Suoranta, Teräs, & Curcher, 2020; Yawson, 2020). However, these social changes are not without their problems, and concerns have been raised regarding the risk of increased inequality and loss of jobs. Hence, social value creation ventures focusing on “skills development” can potentially contribute to offsetting some of these negative influences by focusing on the adult population segment and tailored programs linked to the labor market needs.

Despite being a single case study, our study offers certain implications as well. The first implication relates to the need for the theorization of education, learning and skills development research from small entrepreneurial firms' perspective, along with the focus on traditional modes (schools, colleges and universities). Access to the internet globally and increased emphasis on online learning during COVID-19 means that small entrepreneurial ventures that develop programs

incorporating needed skills may become more visible globally. Hence, researchers need to develop frameworks and paradigms, which incorporate specificities of such ventures concerning education and learning services offered by them to the different groups. A critical practical implication relates to the importance of “skills development” as a social value creation mechanism. Although this specific aspect has been gaining researchers attention for some time, the focus has been on employed workers in most cases. Increased digitalization and use of artificial intelligence mean that skills set needed for jobs will be different in the coming years. The importance of soft skills in this context has been highlighted already. Hence, businesses and entrepreneurial ventures focusing on social value creation via “skills development” need to incorporate children in these activities, whether in the form of online learning, practical traineeships or close collaboration with educational institutions (and other knowledge delivery services). The policymakers should also consider this specific aspect as children getting exposure to the activities that develop prosocial and other needed skills will help them to survive in the future working life.

Finally, we acknowledge that a major limitation in our study is that it is a single case study, which hampers generalization of the findings. However, it offers an interesting perspective on prosocial skills development in middle childhood kids, and what role entrepreneurial organizations can play in this context. It further highlights the potential of online learning platforms and computer games in developing the needed skills in children, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic where lockdowns have made physical contact limited. Future studies can build on our paper to go further in-depth and analyze different dynamics associated with learning focused entrepreneurial ventures in different contexts, as well as highlight the specificities (including the challenges) in development of prosocial skills in different age groups and cultural contexts.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Ahmad Arslan is currently working as an Associate Professor at Department of Marketing, Management and International Business, Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Finland. Previously, he has worked in academia in different universities in the UK and Finland. He has so far published over 25 papers in well-reputed academic journals and has also contributed several chapters to different edited books. He is a senior editor of *International*

Journal of Emerging Markets and holds several editorial board memberships.

Lauri Haapanen is Assistant Professor of International Business at the Oulu Business School, Finland. He has more than 20 years of international management experience, including CEO, COO, CFO, and board memberships in fast-growing firms from start-ups to multinational firms. His main research interests reside in firm key functions and digital marketing. In particular, he has been studying how the interplay between R&D, sales & marketing, and top management influences SMEs' international expansion, cross-border mergers and acquisitions, and MNEs' performance at international markets.

Shlomo Tarba is a Chair (Full Professor) in Strategy & International Business, at Birmingham Business School, University of

Birmingham, the UK. He is currently Co-Editor-In-Chief of *British Journal of Management*. He is a member of editorial boards of the *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of World Business*, *International Business Review*, and *Long Range Planning*. He has published over 60 papers in highly ranked academic journals, as well as has edited several special issues.

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