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Resource Bricolage, Organizational Legitimacy, Ecosystem Support, and Social Enterprise Sustainability among China-based Nascent Social Enterprises and Social-purpose Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex relationship between resource bricolage and the sustainability of nascent social enterprises and social-purpose organizations in China. While resource-constrained creativity is often viewed as a core entrepreneurial asset internally, it can appear informal, under-professional, or difficult to understand to external stakeholders. Drawing on bricolage, organizational legitimacy, and ecosystem-support theories, this research proposes a conditional mediation model. It posits that resource bricolage directly affects sustainability, and indirectly affects it through the crucial mechanism of organizational legitimacy. Furthermore, perceived ecosystem support is hypothesized to moderate the link between bricolage and legitimacy. Data were collected from 481 decision-makers, including founders, executives, and project managers of Chinese social enterprises. A composite-based PLS-SEM workflow was used for analysis. The measurement model demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability, discriminant validity, and indicator reliability. The structural model results fully supported the direct pathways: resource bricolage positively relates to both sustainability and organizational legitimacy, while legitimacy drives sustainability. Crucially, organizational legitimacy mediates the relationship between resource bricolage and sustainability. Additionally, perceived ecosystem support positively moderates the bricolage-legitimacy path; thus, the indirect effect of bricolage on sustainability strengthens significantly when ecosystem support is high. This study importantly contributes to social enterprise literature by demonstrating that bricolage becomes most relevant for sustainability when successfully translated into stakeholder legitimacy, particularly when the environment provides strong policy, partnership, and recognition infrastructure. Finally, the findings caution against blindly assuming resourcefulness is a universally desirable skill within the Chinese social-enterprise ecosystem without considering how external stakeholders interpret and institutionalize these actions.

Keywords: Resource Bricolage, Organizational Legitimacy, Social Enterprise Sustainability, Ecosystem Support, China, PLS-SEM
JEL Classifications: M10, M15, O32, O33

1. INTRODUCTION

Newly formed social enterprises and social-purpose organizations are expected to do more than just solve social, environmental and community issues; they are expected to be sustainable. This expectation puts them in a structurally challenging position as they are expected to not only deliver a return on investment, but to also maintain a level of integrity in their mission, to maintain trust among stakeholders and to demonstrate public value in a context of uncertainty (Austin et al., 2006; Saebi et al., 2019).

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Social enterprises are hybrid organizations that are simultaneously defined by social-purpose and operating logics: In order for them to survive, stakeholders must see the hybrid activity as credible, useful, and normatively acceptable (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Doherty et al., 2014).

It is a challenge particularly for start-up organizations. Early-stage social enterprises can often function before the social enterprise has a stable funding base, formal partnerships, established governance processes or established social enterprise identities. They might be subjected to pressure from beneficiaries, funders, community players, local government, business partners and service users at the same time, and lack the resources typically needed to meet all these demands (Dacin et al., 2011; Ebrahim et al., 2014). Thus, the central empirical question is not just whether or not social enterprises have resources, but how they do and how they do that is understood by stakeholders (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Hota et al., 2019). Theoretically, the "make do" idea of resource bricolage is useful in the context of this problem as it suggests that organizations combine resources available to them, mobilize resources that are underutilized, and act in the absence of ideal resources (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Davidsson et al., 2017). In social-enterprise contexts, bricolage can help organisations to sustain operations, address the issues of beneficiaries, leverage community relationships and continue mission related activities in the face of financial and operational limitations (Desa and Basu, 2013; Di Domenico et al., 2010).

But recent bricolage studies also warn that resourcefulness does not always yield good results: Bricolage can result in second-best routines or informal practices, or in interpretive ambiguity, unless it becomes a credible organizational capability (Steffens et al., 2023). Legitimacy is an important aspect of bricolage for social enterprises as they rely heavily on it. Organizational legitimacy is the extent to which stakeholders believe that the actions of the organization are desirable, proper or appropriate in a socially constructed system of norms, values, and meanings (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is not just a symbolic label, but it can also help stakeholders to grasp the organisation, accept the social-commercial mix, cooperate with the organisation and support its activities (Pache and Santos, 2013; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024). So, even if a social enterprise is resourceful, it needs to convince stakeholders that it is competent, mission-relevant and responsible, and not an ad hoc or amateurish approach to the use of resources. That is the interpretive problem that is explored in this study in the context of nascent social enterprises and social-purpose organizations in China.

China offers a theoretically interesting context as the social-enterprise sector is institutionally diverse and lacks a single national legal form that is specifically geared towards social enterprises (Li et al., 2022). They can be enterprises with a clear social purpose, social service organisations, social groups, projects that are affiliated to a foundation, cooperatives, community social enterprises or early-stage projects. This heterogeneity is particularly notable as stakeholder recognition is a key element in the formation of organizational identity, which can be achieved by legal form, mission claims, local recognition, certification, partnership history, and community credibility (Li et al., 2022; Zhao, 2012). New regulatory developments in China also reinforce the importance of considering legitimacy and support of the ecosystem. In 2024, the first complete guidelines for naming social organizations were issued, in the official reporting of almost 900,000 social organizations, while in 2026, the regulations on the administration of the registration of social organizations were revised (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024, 2026).

The governance, accountability, recognition and legal landscape for charitable and public-interest work is also a focus of attention, with the amended Charity Law, which is to enter into force in September 2024, being passed in December 2023. These developments do not result in a single legal form for social enterprises, but they do demonstrate that social enterprise organizing has a context of a changing institutional landscape of recognition, naming, registration, and public accountability. In this context, perceived ecosystem support is not just a "background condition." The literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems highlights that the institutional environment, support organizations, networks, cultural-cognitive environment, and resource providers influence ventures (Spigel, 2017; Stam, 2015). More recent ecosystem scholarship suggests that there is a need for greater focus on mechanisms in the field rather than considering an ecosystem as a broad list of contextual factors (Wurth et al., 2022).

Ecosystem support can take the form of local certification and recognition channels, foundation and philanthropic resources, CSR partnerships, incubators, universities, advisory organizations, community collaboration or government-purchase/public-service opportunities for social enterprises (Roundy, 2017; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024). The main thesis of this research is that ecosystem support is an interpretive infrastructure. It assists stakeholders in appreciating the nature of a social-purpose organization, the legitimacy of its hybrid activity, and the responsible adaptation of resource-constrained practices that can be seen as less than uncontrolled improvisation. Support of this kind can be more readily translated into the recognition of stakeholders; its absence can result in the same bricolage practices going unrecognized, being misunderstood, or even considered as evidence of informality. This is important because bricolage can be an institutionally legible form of sustainability action, but it can also rely on an institutionally legible resourceful environment (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024).

In this paper, we propose and examine a conditional mediation model with resource bricolage, organizational legitimacy, perceived ecosystem support and social enterprise sustainability. The internal resourceful behavior is set as the main bricolage of resources. Bricolage is made sustainability relevant by means of legitimacy-seeking via the stakeholder-recognition mechanism of organizational legitimacy. Perceived ecosystem support is placed in the boundary condition which enhances the conversion of bricolage into legitimacy. Social enterprise sustainability is thought of as being multi-dimensional, such as financial viability, mission continuity and operational resilience (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014).

This study contributes in three aspects. First, it builds on the bricolage theory and demonstrates that resource bricolage is not necessarily a positive capability but rather one that can be interpreted differently and legitimized by stakeholders in order to become a positive capability for sustainability (Davidsson et al., 2017; Steffens et al., 2023). Second, it helps to understand organizational legitimacy and hybrid organizing research by proposing that legitimacy can be understood as a mediation process between action that is constrained by internal resources and continuity of the organization in the outside world (Pache and Santos, 2013; Suchman, 1995). Third, it further advances the research on social-enterprise ecosystems by theorizing perceived ecosystem support as interpretive infrastructure, which helps to legitimate the pathway from bricolage to sustainability in the institutionally heterogeneous context of the Chinese social-enterprise ecosystem (Li et al., 2022; Wurth et al., 2022).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. China-based Nascent Social Enterprises as Hybrid and Institutionally Ambiguous Organizations

Social enterprises are generally thought of as business or operating organizations that have a social or environmental mission. What sets them apart is not only that they have an economic or operational logic and that they create revenues, but that they integrate social-purpose and economic or operational logics in a way that challenges conventional notions of charity, business, and public service (Austin et al., 2006; Doherty et al., 2014). This broad view is also consistent with social entrepreneurship research emphasizing diverse forms and motives (Mair and Martí, 2006; Zahra et al., 2009). This hybridity brings both opportunity and tension: on the one hand, social enterprises can leverage a range of resources and fill unmet social needs, but on the other hand they have to deal with conflicting expectations regarding efficiency, accountability, impact and mission integrity (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014).

Social enterprises are hybrid enterprises, which makes the sustainability study more complicated than study of the sustainability of conventional entrepreneurship. Sustainability can't be about profitability alone because an organisation can be profitable but be losing its mission, and it can't be about mission commitment alone because an organisation can have strong mission values but fail operationally due to lack of resources, routines and stakeholder support (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Smith and Besharov, 2019). In this study, social enterprise sustainability is thus understood as a multi-faceted continuity, which is the capacity to sustain the enterprise financially, mission and operationally over time. For nascent social enterprises, this is a much more challenging variant of this issue. They are characterized by incomplete routines, limited formal recognition, fragile networks, unstable income and uncertain stakeholder expectations, which are common traits of early-stage organizations (Dacin et al., 2011; Saebi et al., 2019).

Until they have the long track record that can help build trust, they need to convince stakeholders that they are worth supporting. This poses a legitimacy problem because not only do the activities of the organization need to be meaningful, responsible and understandable to maintain continuity, but the actions of the organization must also be interpreted as such (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). This theoretical challenge is complicated by the fact that China's nascent social enterprises and social-purpose organizations are institutionally heterogeneous and are based in China. More broadly, social entrepreneurship research shows that entrepreneurial action can be shaped by institutional gaps and constraints (Mair and Martí, 2009). There is no specific legal form that is dedicated to social enterprises in China, and social enterprises can be established under existing legal forms and can be certified or recognized as social enterprises (Li et al., 2022).

This implies that organizations are judged by stakeholders by a combination of positive and negative cues such as legal registration, mission statements, certification, partnerships, local government and community recognition, foundation support, CSR partnership, and tangible service delivery. The institutional ambiguity is not an indication that China is an improper place to do social-enterprise research. Instead, it makes China a valuable context for the analysis of the process of internal practice to external legitimation. The recognition, accountability and regulatory legibility of social-organizations are still key features of the Chinese public-interest ecosystem, as evidenced by recent developments in social-organization naming, administration of registration and governance of charities (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024, 2026; China Development Brief, 2024).

Even then, in a context like this, resourceful organizations working in constrained environments need to be intelligible to the stakeholders who may not have a consistent definition of "social enterprise." The empirical population is thus defined in this study as China-based nascent social enterprises and social-purpose organizations. This also applies to those organizations that have a social or environmental mandate, but also have activities that generate income, operations, services or mobilize resources. The language is not predicated on a single legal form, but rather captures the plural organization picture in the scholarship on China (Li et al., 2022; Zhao, 2012).

2.2. Resource Bricolage as Resourceful Action under Constraint

Bricolage is defined as "making do" (Baker and Nelson, 2005) which involves using combinations of available resources to address new problems and opportunities. The idea is a challenge to the resource-acquisition models of entrepreneurship which take the premise that organizations need to have the ideal resources before they can do something. Rather, bricolage is about action under constraint, organizations' re-combining of what is already available, the use of overlooked resources, mobilization of local knowledge and the creation of workable solutions from imperfect inputs (Davidsson et al., 2017; Baker and Nelson, 2005).

Bricolage has been particularly significant in the study of social enterprise, where the lack of resources is not unusual, but a common characteristic of mission-oriented organizing. Di

Domenico et al., (2010) broaden the bricolage concept to social entrepreneurship by demonstrating that social bricolage consists of making do, stakeholder involvement, persuasion and social value creation. Similarly, Desa and Basu (2013) suggest that bricolage can be a way for a social entrepreneur to deal with the problem of lack of resources when optimization is not possible. These studies point to the fact that bricolage is not just a minor operational tactic, but rather a logic of resource construction that informs the practice of constrained organizations to create and sustain social value. Resource bricolage is especially pertinent to the case of new social enterprises as they often lack stable funding, experienced staff, formal partnerships and institutional recognition. If left under these conditions, waiting for ideal resources can result in delays and mission delivery can be hampered. Resourceful organisations can also choose to leverage existing skills, mix formal and informal networks, repurpose existing spaces, leverage community relationships, and/or use small-scale experiments to continue activities (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Hota et al., 2019).

In this way, bricolage is connected with agency of the organization as it enables the organization to act in the face of structural dearth. But bricolage has its boundaries, too. Bricolage may not seem to be conventional to outsiders, as Baker and Nelson (2005) point out, it can be confrontational to the institutional definitions and constraints. Recent evidence of the boundary conditions for bricolage also indicates that bricolage may be more beneficial for early-stage ventures that seek to develop and grow than for organisations that make compromises and get stuck in inferior routines (Steffens et al., 2023). This warning is crucial for social enterprise research as bricolage is not unlimited creativity but rather a practice that takes place in a context that relies on organizational discipline and stakeholder interpretation.

For this study, resource bricolage is defined as constrained internal resourceful behaviors. The construct is the making do, the recombination, the action under constraint, the use of resources at hand, the responsible improvisation, the adaptive recombination and the constraint-based creativity. This definition is intentionally vague when it comes to stakeholder approval and support from the ecosystem, to keep bricolage analytically separate from organizational legitimacy and perceived support from the ecosystem (Davidsson et al., 2017; Hota et al., 2019).

2.3. Resource Bricolage and Social Enterprise Sustainability

The process of resource bricolage is likely to have a positive relationship with social enterprise sustainability as they are able to recombine available resources, enabling them to sustain their activities when formal resources are limited. Sustainability is not just a function of financial performance, but of ongoing service provision, mission maintenance and adaptation of operations for nascent social enterprises (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014). Bricolage can facilitate these dimensions, by enabling programs to persist, unexpected problems to be solved and resource limitations to be used as a spur to adaptive problem-solving (Desa and Basu, 2013; Di Domenico et al., 2010).

Bricolage might be helpful in the financial aspects of sustainability, as organizations with limited resources can make the most of what they have and can also mix and match revenue, grants, volunteer time and partner contributions in various ways. The mission dimension might be strengthened as it is able to continue to provide services to the beneficiaries despite the volatility of external funding. The operational-resilience dimension might be positively impacted, as recombination and responsible improvisation help organizations to be ready to change routines when uncertainty arises (Hota et al., 2019; Steffens et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, the proposed relationship is to be taken with a pinch of salt. Resource bricolage is not necessarily assumed to be sustainable or as a substitute for the formal resource development process. Rather, it is argued that resourceful action is a greater chance for organizations to continue to operate and pursue their missions under constraint in the nascent stage. This aligns with the perspective of bricolage as being particularly helpful when an organization faces a lack of resources and has to act before it can access the resources they desire (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Davidsson et al., 2017).

- H_1. Resource bricolage is positively associated with social enterprise sustainability.

2.4. Organizational Legitimacy as Stakeholder Recognition

One of the major means of achieving acceptance and continuity of social-purpose organizations is through organizational legitimacy. Legitimacy is a generalized perception that an organization's actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate in light of the socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs and definitions (Suchman, 1995). This definition is especially relevant for the study of social enterprises as it considers the enterprise to be assessed not only based on its efficiency, but also on its mission fit, moral appropriateness, public value, and identity clarity (Dacin et al., 2011; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024).

The legitimacy in this study is defined as perceived stakeholder recognition on pragmatic, moral and cognitive aspects. Pragmatic legitimacy is the perception on the part of the stakeholders that the organization is useful and valuable. Moral legitimacy is the perception of stakeholders whether the organization is doing the right thing, the right way and has the right social-commercial mix. Cognitive legitimacy is about the understanding of the organization, what it does and why it is important (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). These dimensions are helpful because they distinguish usefulness, ethical acceptability, and understandability from the unhelpful notion of legitimacy as popularity or reputation. Legitimacy is a critical aspect of hybrid organizations. Social enterprises are a blend of institutional logics that are sometimes assessed using distinct metrics, including social, market, community, legal, and organizational (Besharov and Smith, 2014; Pache and Santos, 2013).

This mix can be understood by stakeholders and supported by them when it is consistent, but may be called into question when it is not. In this way, legitimacy can serve as a link between internal practices

within the organization and acceptance by external stakeholders. The notion of legitimacy is of particular significance in the Chinese context, as social-purpose organizations can take on more than one organizational form or avenue for recognition. Existing research on legal aspects of social enterprises indicates that many social enterprises in China are not established as a specific legal form of social enterprises, and certification and recognition systems are used to establish the identity of social enterprises in practice (Li et al., 2022). Thus, when assessing organisations, stakeholders might rely on a mix of perceived usefulness, moral suitability, believability, familiarity and ecosystem cues.

2.5. Resource Bricolage and Organizational Legitimacy

Resource bricolage can help to legitimate the organization when stakeholders see it as a sign of competence, commitment to the mission, and ability to solve problems. A group that can effectively "recombine" resources, may seem pragmatic in that they can get value from limited resources. Bricolage can seem like the right thing to do if it is for the sake of the mission delivery and not for one's own benefit. It can be cognitively more comprehensible if resourceful practices are expressed in a clear manner, as part of a coherent social-purpose strategy (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Suchman, 1995).

But the link between bricolage and legitimacy is not a given one. What is the same practice can be understood differently by different stakeholders. While some beneficiaries or community partners might consider these adaptations to be mission-driven and informal use of available resources, others – funders, regulators, or institutional partners – may perceive a lack of accountability as informal, risky, or under-professionalized (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Steffens et al., 2023). This interpretive ambiguity is the reason that legitimacy is needed: resource bricolage needs to be made into action in the organization that is recognizable and credible.

The literature on social bricolage already indicates that the process of persuasion and participation of stakeholders are part of the viability of the resourceful social entrepreneurial activity (Di Domenico et al., 2010). That is, social enterprises not only need to be able to recombine resources within themselves, but they also need to be able to convince stakeholders that the recombined resources create meaningful and responsible social value. This persuasion can be done via stakeholder feedback, foundation or CSR collaboration, community acceptance, government-purchase or service partnerships, local certification or advisory support in a China-based social-purpose setting.

Thus, it is hypothesized that there will be a positive relationship between resource bricolage and organizational legitimacy. The hypothesis does not mean that each improvised practice is necessarily legitimizing. Rather, it suggests that organizations with high resource bricolage will be better able to demonstrate to stakeholders that they are able to act creatively, responsibly, and effectively within constraints, and thus that they have pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024).

- H_2. Resource bricolage is positively associated with organizational legitimacy.

2.6. Organizational Legitimacy and Social Enterprise Sustainability

The legitimacy of the organization should have a positive association with social enterprise sustainability since legitimate organizations are more likely to be able to secure cooperation, recognition and continuity opportunities. Legitimacy can ease the uncertainty of stakeholders, enhance access to resources and enable the organizations to gain the support of funders, beneficiaries, communities, partners and public-service actors (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). For young social enterprises, such forms of support are particularly significant as they may not have extensive track records or be well-established. Legitimacy is also crucial as the sustainability of social enterprises is multi-dimensional.

Financial viability is dependent on access to funding, revenue, partnerships and resource commitments. Continuity of mission is dependent on the extent to which beneficiaries, communities and partners still consider the organisation to be mission consistent and socially appropriate. The key to operational resilience is whether stakeholders are willing to cooperate in times of uncertainty (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Smith and Besharov, 2019). Legitimacy is likely to enhance each of these conditions, and thus should be positively related to sustainability.

Legitimacy might be especially relevant in China-based social-purpose organizations as stakeholder recognition can help organizations deal with the institutional ambiguity. Stakeholders' sense of the organization's identity and the acceptance of the organization's mission-operating balance can help the organization obtain more stable cooperation opportunities even in the absence of a single social-enterprise legal form (Li et al., 2022). Weak legitimacy, on the other hand, can make even the most resourceful organisation vulnerable as stakeholders may not be certain about the credibility, accountability or worthiness of the organisation.

- H_3. Organizational legitimacy is positively associated with social enterprise sustainability.

2.7. Organizational Legitimacy as a Mediating Mechanism

The model also suggests that there is a mediating link between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability, namely organizational legitimacy. Resource bricolage can have a direct contribution to continuity through the effectiveness of scarce resources, but the sustainability value should also be based on whether or not the stakeholders consider resourceful action as useful, appropriate and credible (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Suchman, 1995).

The mediating logic moves the discussion from "bricolage is good for sustainability" to "bricolage can be good for sustainability if it is legitimate." This mediation mechanism is of theoretical significance as it helps to avoid the bricolage theory turning into an overly internal one. A social enterprise can be very resourceful,

but if its bricolage is not visible, is not well communicated or is seen as ad hoc improvisation, this might not be enough to create the necessary support among stakeholders for continuity. Conversely, resource bricolage can be viewed as responsible problem-solving and commitment to the mission, which can boost legitimacy and consequently enhance sustainability potential (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024).

Hybrid organizing theory is also consistent with the mediation hypothesis. The legitimacy of hybrid organizations is always in the process of being justified, as it is part of a legitimacy process (Pache and Santos, 2013; Battilana et al., 2017), and they must always explain how their work is a mixture of social and operating logics. Bricolage can be a means for organisations to show adaptive capability and legitimacy can be a means to turn adaptive capability into sustained stakeholder acceptance in a nascent social-enterprise context.

- H_4. Organizational legitimacy mediates the relationship between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability.

2.8. Perceived Ecosystem Support as Interpretive Infrastructure

Entrepreneurial ecosystem research highlights that entrepreneurial ventures are part of systems of actors, institutions, networks, resources and cultural-cognitive conditions (Spigel, 2017; Stam, 2015; Mason and Brown, 2014). Ecosystems are not just a set of resources, but also influence the opportunities, constraints, meanings and support systems in which organizations evolve. Recent ecosystem scholarship focuses on shifting away from descriptive lists of ecosystem elements and towards identifying how ecosystems impact the entrepreneurial processes and outcomes (Wurth et al., 2022).

Ecosystem support is not just about VC, markets or overall entrepreneurship policy for social enterprises. This can include foundations and philanthropic avenues, public-service procurement, CSR partnerships, incubators, universities, advisors, community organizations, local recognition systems, certification mechanisms, and public-interest networks (Roundy, 2017; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024). These actors and structures can offer resources, but also categories and language that can help stakeholders to understand what social enterprises are and why their activities are important. In this study, perceived ecosystem support is thus considered as interpretive infrastructure. The word highlights the importance of ecosystem support to help translate organizational practice into recognizable meanings. Policy clarity, local certification, partnership platforms, advisory support and public recognition not only provide material resources, but also help to make social purpose organizing more visible, credible and explainable (Li et al., 2022; Wurth et al., 2022).

This is particularly relevant in China, where social enterprises might be operating under existing business legal structures and have access to local certification and/or recognition processes instead of a national social-enterprise form (Li et al., 2022). Ecosystem support is a different concept from organizational legitimacy. Legitimacy is a stakeholder's recognition of a particular organisation. Ecosystem support relates to the external supports that are perceived to be available, accessible and clear to the organizations. A supportive ecosystem can help to facilitate understanding of the resourceful action, but it is not stakeholder approval. This distinction helps the model to avoid construct overlap and explains why the support of the ecosystem is considered as a moderator and not as another dimension of legitimacy (Spanuth and Urbano, 2024; Wurth et al., 2022).

2.9. Moderation and Conditional Indirect Effects

The relationship between resource bricolage and organizational legitimacy is expected to be stronger when there is perceived support from the ecosystem. Ecosystem support is likely to cause resourceful action to be understood in familiar terms, like social innovation, community collaboration, public-interest service, mission-driven enterprise, or responsible adaptation. Finally, organizations can be supported by actors in their ecosystem to document their activities, link with partners, communicate impact and get recognized (Roundy, 2017; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024).

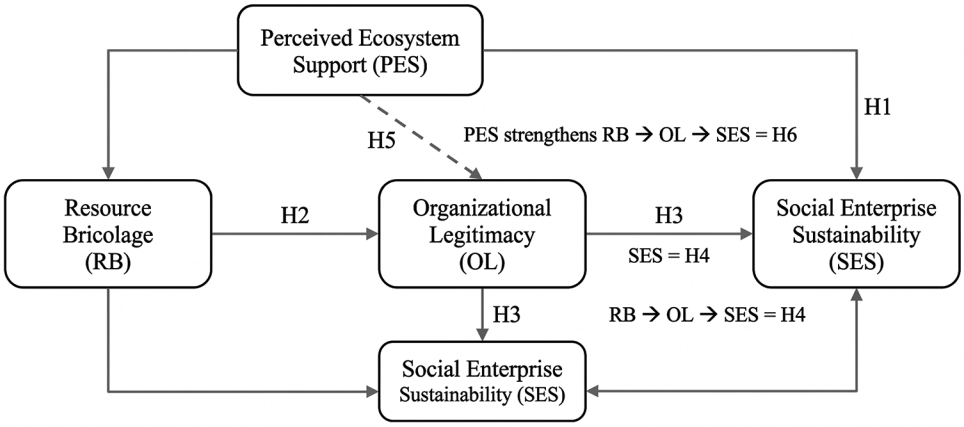
However, resource bricolage may continue to be challenging for stakeholders to understand when the support from the ecosystem is weak. Few support channels, unclear recognition systems, limited advisory platforms and weak partnership infrastructure may result in constrained action, informal, temporary and/or not sufficiently professional by stakeholders. In this context, bricolage can still be used to address problems at hand, but may not be as effective in the creation of legitimacy (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Steffens et al., 2023).

This moderation logic also suggests that there is a conditional indirect effect. The relationship between resource bricolage and sustainability should be indirectly stronger when the perceived ecosystem support is high, if organizational legitimacy is a mediator between resource bricolage and sustainability and if the support of the ecosystem strengthens the bricolage–legitimacy association. The argument of conditional mediation is used to connect internal resourceful behavior, stakeholder recognition and the interpretive infrastructure at the ecosystem level within a single model (Suchman, 1995; Wurth et al., 2022).

- H_5. Perceived ecosystem support positively moderates the relationship between resource bricolage and organizational legitimacy.
- H_6. The indirect association between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability through organizational legitimacy is stronger when perceived ecosystem support is high.

Based on the above arguments, the conceptual framework as presented in Figure 1 is arrived at. The figure illustrates that resource bricolage is the focal antecedent, social enterprise sustainability is the outcome, and perceived ecosystem support is the moderator of the resource bricolage–legitimacy path. The framework also maintains the direct link between resource bricolage and sustainability as resourceful action can also help to

Figure 1: Conceptual framework. RB: Resource bricolage, OL: Organizational legitimacy, PES: Perceived ecosystem support, SES: Social enterprise sustainability. Solid arrows indicate hypothesized direct or mediated associations. The dashed arrow indicates the moderating role of perceived ecosystem support on the RB→OL path



Note. RB = resource bricolage; OL = organizational legitimacy; PES = perceived ecosystem support; SES = social enterprise sustainability. Solid arrows indicate hypothesized direct or mediated associations. The dashed arrow indicates the moderating role of perceived ecosystem support on the RB→OL path.

Table 1: Measurement constructs, dimensions, items, and source logic

Construct	Dimensions	Items	Source base	Boundary protection
Resource Bricolage	Making do; resource recombination; action under constraint; use of resources at hand; responsible improvisation	7	Baker and Nelson (2005); Di Domenico et al. (2010); Desa and Basu (2013); Davidsson et al. (2017); Hota et al. (2019)	Internal resourceful behavior; excludes stakeholder recognition wording.
Organizational Legitimacy	Pragmatic legitimacy; moral legitimacy; cognitive legitimacy/credibility	9	Suchman (1995); Spanuth and Urbano (2024)	Perceived stakeholder usefulness, moral appropriateness, credibility, and comprehensibility.
Perceived Ecosystem Support	Policy/institutional support; funding/philanthropy; network/advisory; recognition/certification; partnership; interpretive support	7	Entrepreneurial and social-enterprise ecosystem literature adapted to China-context external support	External support condition; not stakeholder approval, trust, or legitimacy.
Social Enterprise Sustainability	Financial viability; mission continuity; operational resilience	12	Battilana and Lee (2014); Desa and Basu (2013); Di Domenico et al. (2010)	Perceived continuity; not objective performance unless objective records are collected.

All constructs were operationalized as reflective perception-based measures. Source logic was adapted for China-based nascent social enterprises and social-purpose organizations

achieve continuity prior to the realization of all the stakeholder-recognition effects.

Figure 1 highlights that resource bricolage is not assumed to be a good thing. The model rather sees bricolage as a resourceful action and consequently its sustainability relevance is dependent on the legitimacy of the stakeholders and the support of the ecosystem that makes the resourceful action more understandable, recognizable and credible.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Empirical Setting

The study was conducted using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to test a conditional mediation model based on a theory between China based nascent social enterprises and social-purpose organizations. The unit of analysis was the organization, and one knowledgeable respondent provided data on the organizational resource practices, stakeholder legitimacy signals, perceived support of the ecosystem, and sustainability conditions. The design is suitable since the study is about latent perceptions and organizational level interpretations which can't be easily captured from public records alone. But, as the data are cross sectional and perception based, the analysis can only provide association and conditional mechanism evidence but not causal proof.

The setting of this study was mainland China. Sampled organizations were those with a social or environmental mission and those engaged in income-generating or operational activities for <1 year, 1-2 years, or 3-5 years. The target respondent was a founder, co-founder, executive director, senior manager, department or project manager with strategic responsibility or equivalent decision maker. This respondent criterion was applied to guarantee that the respondents possessed a sufficient knowledge of the organizational resources, the relationships with stakeholders, the support of the ecosystem and the conditions for sustainability.

3.2. Data Collection and Screening

The data was gathered by an online questionnaire and QR-based distribution process in the period of June 2025 to May 2026. All participants were initially asked to fill out consent and screening

questions. The inclusion criteria were that respondents had to be at least 18 years old, be in a strategic or managerial position, be from an active social-purpose organization, and have had at least 3 months of experience with the organization, and indicated that the organization's primary operation, service delivery or stakeholder engagement was in mainland China.

Five hundred eighty-three (583) invitations or distributed questionnaire links were recorded. A total of 511 responses were received (87.7% return rate). There were 481 usable responses after screening and data quality procedures (94.1% return rate). Failure of eligibility screening, failure of the attention check, completion time that was too fast, duplicate review, and patterned-response screening were the exclusion checks. The attention-check item asked for a response on a 7-point scale with "Agree" as the response.

3.3. Measurement Instrument

Seven-point Likert-type items were used to measure all main constructs ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Resource bricolage was assessed by items that tapped the concepts of making do, recombination, action under constraint, use of resources at hand, responsible improvisation, adaptive recombination, and constraint-based creativity. Organizational legitimacy was assessed in terms of perceived stakeholder recognition in pragmatic, moral and cognitive/credibility legitimacy. Perceived ecosystem support was an indicator of the perceived availability, accessibility, and clarity of China-context external supports, such as policy and institutional support, funding and philanthropy, advisory networks, certification and recognition infrastructure, partnership opportunities, and interpretive support. Social enterprise sustainability was assessed by the perception of continuity of the social enterprise in terms of financial viability, mission continuity and operational resilience.

Same organization anchor was used for the instrument. The respondents were asked to respond for the same China based organization and its activities in the previous 12 months. Legitimacy items were grounded in stakeholder feedback, interactions, partnership decisions, communications, funding or partner responses, community reactions, policy or certification interactions and other stakeholder signals that were observable. This design helps to distinguish between organizational legitimacy and founder self-confidence and it distinguishes between perceived ecosystem support and stakeholder approval. The measurement details are summarized in Table 1.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was carried out along the lines of a PLS-SEM evidence-chain logic, which consisted of the following steps: respondent profile, data-quality checks, measurement model assessment, discriminant validity assessment, structural collinearity, path analysis, explanatory power, effect size, predictive relevance, model fit diagnostics, mediation, moderation, conditional indirect effects, and hypothesis judgment. Indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability, average variance extracted and HTMT ratios (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2015) were used to assess reflective measurement quality. Standardized path coefficients, t-values, P-values, confidence intervals, R^2, f^2 and Q^2 were used for evaluating the structural relationships. The indirect effects and index of moderated mediation were assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. All of the coefficients of the cross-sectional perception data were interpreted as theory-based associations, not causal effects. Procedural remedies were used to deal with common method bias, including: Anonymity, Item separation, and Full-collinearity VIF diagnostics (Kock, 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 2: Respondent and organizational profile (n=481)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Respondent role	Founder	117	24.3
	Co-founder	91	18.9
	Executive director	56	11.6
	Senior manager	134	27.9
	Department/project manager with strategic responsibility	83	17.3
Gender	Female	232	48.2
	Male	232	48.2
	Non-binary/prefer to self-describe	3	0.6
	Prefer not to say	14	2.9
Age group	18–24	49	10.2
	25–34	166	34.5
	35–44	163	33.9
	45–54	73	15.2
	55 or above	22	4.6
	Prefer not to say	8	1.7
Education	Secondary or below	20	4.2
	Diploma/certificate	39	8.1
	Bachelor's degree	242	50.3
	Master's degree	141	29.3
	Doctoral degree	27	5.6
	Other	12	2.5
Experience in social enterprise/ nonprofit/ entrepreneurship work	<1 year	66	13.7
	1-3 years	146	30.4
	4-6 years	107	22.2
	7-10 years	102	21.2
	>10 years	60	12.5
Organizational form	Company/enterprise with explicit social mission	69	14.3
	Social service organization	101	21.0
	Social group/social organization	42	8.7
	Foundation-affiliated organization/ project	45	9.4
	Cooperative or community enterprise	58	12.1
	Community social organization	54	11.2
	Locally certified social enterprise	58	12.1
	Informal/early-stage initiative	27	5.6
	Other	27	5.6
Operating age	<1 year	76	15.8
	1-2 years	168	34.9
	3-5 years	237	49.3
Full-time employees	0-2	79	16.4
	3-5	101	21.0
	6-10	127	26.4
	11-20	98	20.4
	21-50	59	12.3
	More than 50	17	3.5

(Contd...)

Table 2: ***(Continued)***

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Current stage	Idea/pilot	77	16.0
	Early operation	198	41.2
	Growth/expansion	149	31.0
	Stabilization	57	11.9
Mission sector	Education	77	16.0
	Health	56	11.6
	Rural revitalization/community development	90	18.7
	Environment	65	13.5
	Employment/inclusion	77	16.0
	Elderly care/disability services	43	8.9
	Culture/creative/community services	44	9.1
	Other	29	6.0
Income/resource model	Sales/service revenue	85	17.7
	Grants/donations	73	15.2
	Foundation/philanthropic support	59	12.3
	Government-purchase/service contract	63	13.1
	CSR/business partnership	55	11.4
	Hybrid revenue and grants	92	19.1
	Membership/community support	24	5.0
	Other	30	6.2
Regional scope	Single province/municipality/ autonomous region	228	47.4
	Multiple mainland China regions	137	28.5
	Nationwide/online platform-based	83	17.3
	Other/specify	33	6.9
Annual operating budget/resource scale	<100,000 RMB	122	25.4
	100,000-499,999 RMB	116	24.1
	500,000-999,999 RMB	78	16.2
	1,000,000-2,999,999 RMB	67	13.9
	3,000,000-9,999,999 RMB	42	8.7
	≥10,000,000 RMB	18	3.7
	Prefer not to disclose	38	7.9
Recognition/ certification status	Locally certified social enterprise	52	10.8
	Awarded/recognized social enterprise or public-interest project	92	19.1
	Registered as social service/social organization	126	26.2
	Registered enterprise with explicit social mission	121	25.2
	No formal recognition yet	66	13.7
	Not sure	24	5.0

Percentages are based on 481 retained responses. Categories follow the questionnaire coding scheme

Table 3: Indicator reliability

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Loading²	Decision
RB	RB1	0.797	0.635	Retained
RB	RB2	0.814	0.663	Retained
RB	RB3	0.838	0.702	Retained
RB	RB4	0.822	0.675	Retained
RB	RB5	0.808	0.653	Retained
RB	RB6	0.815	0.664	Retained
RB	RB7	0.802	0.643	Retained
OL	OLP1	0.734	0.539	Retained
OL	OLP2	0.774	0.599	Retained
OL	OLP3	0.715	0.511	Retained
OL	OLM1	0.724	0.525	Retained
OL	OLM2	0.724	0.524	Retained
OL	OLM3	0.732	0.535	Retained
OL	OLC1	0.737	0.543	Retained
OL	OLC2	0.722	0.521	Retained
OL	OLC3	0.719	0.517	Retained
PES	PES1	0.823	0.677	Retained
PES	PES2	0.832	0.692	Retained
PES	PES3	0.802	0.643	Retained
PES	PES4	0.782	0.611	Retained
PES	PES5	0.820	0.672	Retained
PES	PES6	0.814	0.662	Retained
PES	PES7	0.816	0.666	Retained
SES	SESF1	0.698	0.487	Retained; marginal loading
SES	SESF2	0.698	0.487	Retained; marginal loading
SES	SESF3	0.680	0.463	Retained; marginal loading
SES	SESF4	0.698	0.487	Retained; marginal loading
SES	SESM1	0.721	0.519	Retained
SES	SESM2	0.727	0.529	Retained
SES	SESM3	0.713	0.509	Retained
SES	SESM4	0.732	0.536	Retained
SES	SESR1	0.675	0.455	Retained; marginal loading
SES	SESR2	0.697	0.485	Retained; marginal loading
SES	SESR3	0.647	0.419	Retained; marginal loading
SES	SESR4	0.718	0.515	Retained

Loadings are standardized item–construct loadings based on the retained reflective indicator matrix. Loadings below 0.70 were reviewed for content coverage before retention

4. RESULTS

4.1. Respondent Profile

The respondent and organizational profile retained is shown in Table 2. The sample comprises founders, co-founders, executives, senior managers and strategic project managers, aligning with the necessity of having someone in the sample with organization-level knowledge. The retained organizations were also spread throughout a variety of organizational forms, stages, mission sectors, and resource models, which meant that the sample was relevant to the topic of China-based nascent social-purpose organizing.

As revealed in the respondent profile, 42.2% of the respondents were founders or co-founders and 56.8% were executive/ senior management or project-management positions with strategic responsibility. This role composition helps to support the assumption that the respondents were able to report on organizational resource practices and stakeholder relationships. The sample also reflects the diversity of the social purpose organizations in China: Social service organizations, mission-driven enterprises, certified social enterprises, cooperatives, community social organizations, foundation affiliated projects and early-stage social enterprises are all included.

4.2. Measurement Model

Prior to the interpretation of the structural paths, the measurement model was evaluated. The four steps of assessment were indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. This sequence is crucial as it would lead to less valid interpretation of path-coefficients and mediation results if the validity of the measures was not supported.

4.2.1. Indicator reliability

Standardized loadings and squared loadings were used to check the reliability of the indicators. The majority of the indicators were above the desired 0.70 level. Several social enterprise sustainability indicators were slightly below 0.70, but were retained because the construct was designed to be financial viability, mission continuity and operational resilience as separate indicators of sustainability, and not as repeated indicators. The standardized loadings and retention decisions are reported in Table 3.

4.2.2. Internal consistency reliability

Cronbach's alpha, rho_A and composite reliability were used to determine internal consistency reliability. All constructs were above 0.70 as shown in Table 4. Reliability was below the excessive 0.95 level so there was not a great deal of concern about the measures being the same with different wording.

Table 4: Internal consistency reliability

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	Decision
RB	0.915	0.932	0.932	Acceptable
OL	0.891	0.912	0.912	Acceptable
PES	0.914	0.932	0.932	Acceptable
SES	0.905	0.920	0.920	Acceptable

Table 5: Convergent validity

Construct	AVE	√AVE	Decision
RB	0.662	0.814	Acceptable
OL	0.535	0.731	Acceptable
PES	0.660	0.813	Acceptable
SES	0.491	0.701	Marginal; retained for content validity

Table 6: Discriminant validity: HTMT matrix

Construct	RB	OL	PES	SES
RB	—	0.428	0.062	0.420
OL	0.428	—	0.333	0.537
PES	0.062	0.333	—	0.201
SES	0.420	0.537	0.201	—

HTMT values below 0.85 indicate conservative discriminant validity. RB: Resource bricolage, OL: Organizational legitimacy, PES: Perceived ecosystem support, SES: Social enterprise sustainability

Table 7: Structural collinearity assessment

Endogenous construct	Predictor	VIF	Decision
OL	RB	1.002	Acceptable
OL	PES	1.004	Acceptable
OL	RB×PES	1.002	Acceptable
SES	RB	1.175	Acceptable
SES	OL	1.175	Acceptable

VIF values below 3.3 are conservative; values below 5.0 are generally acceptable in PLS-SEM reporting

4.2.3 Conver1gent Validity

Average variance extracted was used to assess the convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The three constructs—resource bricolage, organizational legitimacy and perceived ecosystem support—showed values above 0.50 AVE. Social enterprise sustainability was 0.491, which was on the margins of sustainability. Its composite reliability was acceptable, and the indicators were considered to be theoretically important aspects of financial viability, mission continuity and operational resilience, so the construct was kept, with a content-validity caution. The convergent-validity results are reported in Table 5.

4.2.4. Discriminant validity

HTMT ratios were used to check the discriminant validity. The values of all HTMT were below 0.85, which is considered to be acceptable. The highest of the ratios was the OL-SES ratio, which is a theoretical possibility as legitimacy can support sustainability, but was still under the conservative threshold. The HTMT matrix is reported in Table 6.

4.3. Structural Model

The structural model was assessed following the measurement model assessment. The structural analysis included collinearity, direct paths, explanatory power, effect sizes, predictive relevance, model fit diagnostics, mediation, moderation and conditional indirect effects.

4.3.1. Collinearity assessment

VIF values were used to check the structural collinearity prior to the interpretation of path coefficients. All the VIF values in Table 7 were well below the conservative value of 3.3 and permissive value of 5.0, which means that collinearity did not pose a problem for the structural estimates.

4.3.2. Path analysis

The path analysis confirmed the positive relationships postulated. There was a positive association between resource bricolage and organizational legitimacy, and social enterprise sustainability. The other factor positively associated with social enterprise sustainability was organizational legitimacy. The interaction term RB × PES was positive and significant, thus supporting the moderating role of the perceived ecosystem support. The standardized path estimates are reported in Table 8.

4.3.3. Coefficient of determination (R^2)

The results for the endogenous constructs' coefficients of determination are reported in Table 9. The model accounted for 25.7% of the variance in organizational legitimacy and 27.8%

Table 8: Path analysis

Path	β	SE	t-value	P-value	95% CI	Decision
RB→OL	0.400	0.040	10.124	<001	[0.322, 0.478]	Supported
PES→OL	0.321	0.040	8.113	<0.001	[0.243, 0.399]	Supported
RB×PES→OL	0.090	0.040	2.269	0.024	[0.012, 0.167]	Supported
RB→SES	0.231	0.042	5.479	<0.001	[0.148, 0.314]	Supported
OL→SES	0.393	0.042	9.327	<0.001	[0.310, 0.476]	Supported

Coefficients are standardized. The interaction term tests whether perceived ecosystem support strengthens the resource bricolage–organizational legitimacy association

of the variance in social enterprise sustainability. These values represent significant explanatory power for an organizational survey in a heterogeneous field setting based on perception.

4.3.4. Effect size (f^2)

Effect size analysis was also used to gain a deeper understanding of the substantive contribution of each predictor. The effects of resource bricolage on organizational legitimacy, organizational legitimacy on social enterprise sustainability, and the other effects were medium, small and very small, respectively, but theoretically significant. The effect-size results, interpreted using conventional thresholds, are reported in Table 10 (Cohen, 1988).

4.3.5. Predictive relevance (Q^2)

Cross-validated Q^2 values were used to evaluate the predictive relevance. The Q^2 values for both endogenous constructs were greater than zero, suggesting that the model had predictive relevance for the two constructs of organizational legitimacy and social enterprise sustainability in the analytical dataset that was retained for analysis. The Q^2 results are reported in Table 11 (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974).

Table 9: Coefficient of determination

Endogenous construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Interpretation
Organizational legitimacy (OL)	0.257	0.252	Moderate explanatory power
Social enterprise sustainability (SES)	0.278	0.275	Moderate explanatory power

R^2 indicates in-sample explanatory power and should not be interpreted as out-of-sample predictive accuracy

Table 10: Effect size assessment

Endogenous construct	Predictor	f^2	Interpretation
OL	RB	0.215	Medium
OL	PES	0.138	Small
OL	RB×PES	0.011	Very small
SES	RB	0.063	Small
SES	OL	0.182	Medium

Interpretation follows Cohen's conventional thresholds: 0.02=Small, 0.15=Medium, 0.35=Large

Table 11: Predictive relevance

Endogenous construct	Q^2	Decision
Organizational legitimacy (OL)	0.244	Predictive relevance
Social enterprise sustainability (SES)	0.272	Predictive relevance

Q^2>0 indicates predictive relevance

Table 12: Model fit and diagnostic assessment

Diagnostic	Value	Recommended guideline	Decision
SRMR	0.024	<0.080	Acceptable
Maximum structural VIF	1.175	<5.000	Acceptable
Maximum full-collinearity VIF	1.515	<3.300	Acceptable

SRMR is reported as a supplementary approximate fit diagnostic. Full-collinearity VIF is used as a common method bias diagnostic

4.3.6. Model fit assessment

Model fit was evaluated as a secondary diagnostic since PLS-SEM focuses more on measurement quality, explanatory power, predictive relevance and path significance than on global fit. SRMR and collinearity-based diagnostics are reported in Table 12. The SRMR value was lower than 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999) and the maximum VIF values did not show any instability of the model or high common method bias.

The results of the structural analyses are presented graphically in Figure 2. The figure illustrates the mediation relationship supported by the study from resource bricolage to sustainability, the positive moderation of perceived ecosystem support in the bricolage–legitimacy path, and the relationship between resource bricolage and sustainability.

As shown in Figure 2, resource bricolage is a direct and indirect pathway to sustainability (via the legitimacy mechanism), and ecosystem support helps to strengthen the pathway between bricolage and legitimacy.

4.4. Indirect Effects/Mediation Results

Results for mediation and conditional indirect-effect are presented in Tables 13 and 14. The indirect link between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability via organizational legitimacy was positive and significant. The moderated mediation index also was positive and significant, suggesting that the indirect path was stronger at higher levels of perceived ecosystem support.

The conditional indirect pattern is in support of the proposed mechanism. The indirect path between resource bricolage and sustainability via perceived ecosystem support was 0.122 when perceived ecosystem support was low. When the perceived ecosystem support was at the mean level, it raised to 0.157. If the perceived ecosystem support was high, it was further increased to 0.192. This is a pattern that bolsters the legitimacy pathway between resourceful action and organizational continuity.

4.5. Hypothesis Summary

A summary of the hypothesis decisions is given in Table 15. Each of the six hypotheses was confirmed. The findings do not suggest that there is a strong causal relationship between resource bricolage and sustainability, however. Instead, they offer evidence which is theory driven and shows that resource bricolage is positively related to sustainability directly and indirectly via organizational legitimacy and that perceived ecosystem support enhances the indirect relationship.

Table 13: Indirect effects and moderated mediation

Effect	β	Boot SE	t-value	P-value	95% bootstrap CI	Decision
Indirect RB→OL→SES	0.157	0.022	7.156	<0.001	[0.116, 0.201]	Supported
Index of moderated mediation	0.035	0.017	2.080	0.026	[0.004, 0.070]	Supported

Bootstrapping used 5,000 resamples. Indirect effects are significant when the bootstrap confidence interval does not include zero

5. DISCUSSION

The study examined how resource bricolage is associated with social enterprise sustainability among China-based nascent social enterprises and social-purpose organizations. The results support the proposed conditional mediation model: Resource bricolage was positively associated with sustainability, organizational legitimacy mediated this association, and perceived ecosystem support strengthened the path from resource bricolage to organizational legitimacy. This pattern is theoretically meaningful because it suggests that resourcefulness matters, but its sustainability value is partly dependent on stakeholder recognition and ecosystem-enabled interpretation (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Suchman, 1995).

Table 14: Conditional indirect effects at levels of perceived ecosystem support

Level of PES	Indirect effect	95% bootstrap CI	Decision
low PES (−1 SD)	0.122	[0.075, 0.175]	Significant
mean PES	0.157	[0.116, 0.201]	Significant
high PES (+1 SD)	0.192	[0.138, 0.254]	Significant

Low and high levels represent one standard deviation below and above the mean of perceived ecosystem support

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

The positive relationship between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability reinforces the notion that the capacity to "make do" and recombine resources and act under constraint is a benefit to nascent social enterprises. This is in line with the bricolage theory, which focuses on resource construction and recombination instead of passive relying on ideal resources (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Davidsson et al., 2017). It also resonates with the field of social bricolage, which demonstrates how social enterprises with limited resources can generate social value through mobilizing ignored resources, relationships and persuasive mission stories (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Hota et al., 2019).

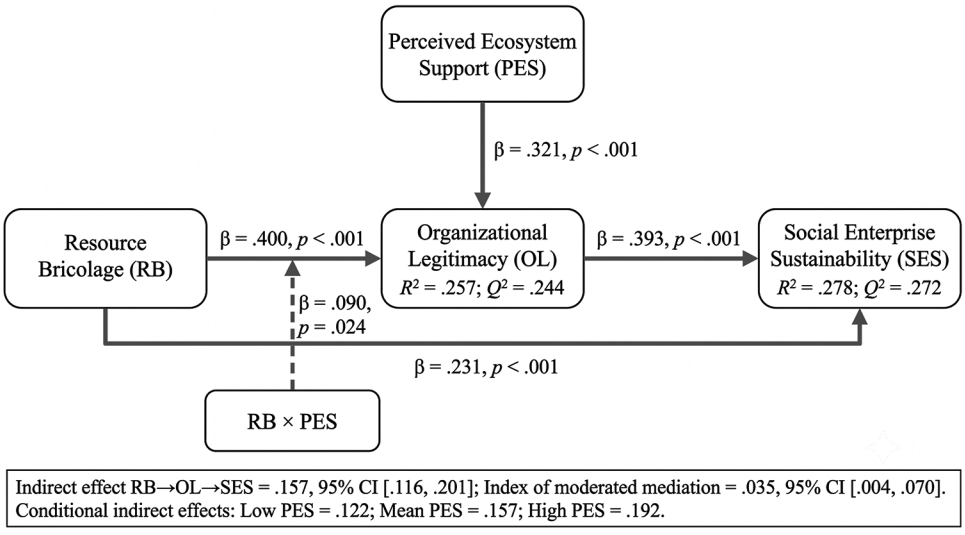
But, at the same time, the outcome should not be interpreted as proof of the always positive effects of bricolage. The study has a more conditional interpretation based on the theoretical model and empirical pattern. Resource bricolage can be a means of sustaining financial, mission and operational activities, but it needs to be

Table 15: Hypothesis summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Tested relationship	Result	Decision
H_1	Resource bricolage is positively associated with social enterprise sustainability.	RB→SES	β=0.231, P<0.001	Supported
H_2	Resource bricolage is positively associated with organizational legitimacy.	RB→OL	β=0.400, P<0.001	Supported
H_3	Organizational legitimacy is positively associated with social enterprise sustainability.	OL→SES	β=0.393, P<0.001	Supported
H_4	Organizational legitimacy mediates the relationship between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability.	RB→OL→SES	β=0.157, 95% CI [0.116, 0.201]	Supported
H_5	Perceived ecosystem support positively moderates the relationship between resource bricolage and organizational legitimacy.	RB×PES→OL	β=0.090, P=0.024	Supported
H_6	The indirect association between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability through organizational legitimacy is stronger when perceived ecosystem support is high.	Conditional indirect effect	Index=0.035, 95% CI [0.004, 0.070]	Supported

All hypothesis judgments are based on standardized coefficients and bootstrap confidence intervals

Figure 2: Structural model results



disciplined, responsible and comprehensible to stakeholders. This interpretation aligns with recent research on boundary conditions that suggests bricolage can be particularly beneficial in early-stage ventures but can turn into a problem when it leads to a set of compromises or suboptimal routines (Steffens et al., 2023).

The mediation outcome best backs up the main thesis of the article. Partly explained the relationship between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability was organizational legitimacy. Thus, bricolage is not only important for the internal resource issues but also because it may serve as a sign of competence, usefulness, mission commitment, and credible organizational identity if bricolage is interpreted in a positive way by the stakeholders (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). This stakeholder-recognition mechanism is vital in social-purpose fields, where the organizations need to have the support of their beneficiaries and communities, as well as funders and partners, and public-service actors. Finally, the moderation result indicates that the resource bricolage – legitimacy relationship was strengthened by perceived ecosystem support. The finding indicates that ecosystems are important not only for material resources, but to make sense of resourceful organizational action by stakeholders. Bricolage is more likely to be seen as responsible adaptation when policy channels, certification systems, advisory platforms, foundations, CSR partnerships, community collaboration and public-service opportunities are more available (Roundy, 2017; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024).

The conditional indirect effect is particularly relevant to the understanding of the China context. The indirect link between resource bricolage and sustainability via legitimacy was stronger when there was higher perceived ecosystem support. This indicates that sustainability is created in an interplay between the internal capability, the stakeholder interpretation and the external support conditions. Ecosystem support can help to make the social-purpose model more understandable and credible in China, where there is no one single national legal form for social enterprises and where they can be based on existing organisational forms, including certification or recognition systems (Li et al., 2022; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

All of the results together, clarify the definition of sustainability in the context of social enterprises in their early stages. Sustainability is not just about being better resourced, it's not just about having a strong mission. Rather, it's a question of whether organizations can be creative under constraint, whether the stakeholders accept the creativity as legitimate, and whether the ecosystem offers the interpretive infrastructure for the stakeholders to recognize. This interpretation builds on hybrid organizing research by demonstrating the interplay between internal practices, external legitimacy and contextual support in early-stage social-purpose organizations (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Pache and Santos, 2013).

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The first theoretical implication is related to the bricolage theory. Previous studies on bricolage have revealed that it is possible to create viable solutions in a resource-constrained organization by recombining available resources (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Davidsson et al., 2017). This paper takes this argument one step further and argues that bricolage needs to be theorized as interpretatively ambiguous in the context of social enterprise. While internal effectiveness is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for resourceful action to be sustainability relevant, it also hinges on whether external stakeholders see it as credible, mission consistent and accountable. This implication is noteworthy as it is common in social entrepreneurship research to see resourcefulness as a positive reaction to scarcity. The results of the present study suggest a more conservative interpretation.

While bricolage can enhance sustainability if it allows organizations to keep functioning and delivering mission-related activities, it can also present a risk of legitimacy if stakeholders perceive bricolage as a lack of professionalism, or inadequate accountability (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Steffens et al., 2023). Future bricolage studies should thus not presume that bricolage will directly lead to positive outcomes, but rather consider the difference between internal problem solving, stakeholder interpretation and long-term capability development. The second implication relates to the legitimacy of the organization. The results place the issue of legitimacy in a new perspective, as a mechanism and not just a background condition. Legitimacy can be understood as a way of making resource bricolage relevant to sustainability through a process of internal resourcefulness to external recognition. This builds on legitimacy research by showing the process role of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy in nascent social-purpose organizations (Suchman, 1995; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024).

It also helps to cement the fact that hybrid organisations need to constantly explain and make their social-commercial mix comprehensible and acceptable to stakeholders (Besharov and Smith, 2014; Pache and Santos, 2013). The study also makes a contribution to the social enterprises as hybrid organisations literature. Hybrid organizing research highlights that social enterprises are a blend of social mission and operating activity, and that this can lead to tensions with regards to mission drift, accountability and stakeholder expectations (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014). The present model introduces a resource-based mechanism in this literature: The resource bricolage is a way of acting under constraint by nascent organizations while legitimacy is a way of making such actions accepted in a hybrid field. This helps to link resourcefulness, hybridity and the recognition of stakeholders in one framework. The third implication has to do with research on ecosystems. The entrepreneurial ecosystem scholarship has received criticism for occasionally treating the elements of the ecosystem as if they were a description and not as a mechanism that influences the results of organisations (Stam, 2015; Wurth et al., 2022).

This study is a reply to this criticism and proposes to treat perceived ecosystem support as interpretive infrastructure. Ecosystem support is not just about providing resources, it's about offering categories, signals, networks and channels for stakeholders to understand and assess organizations. This is particularly significant for social enterprise research in the context of this ecosystem contribution. Social enterprise ecosystems contain actors and mechanisms that

might not be present in traditional high-growth entrepreneurship ecosystems, such as foundations, public-service procurement (PSP), CSR partners, social organizations, universities, incubators, certification systems and community networks (Roundy, 2017; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024). The study reveals that perceived ecosystem support reinforces the bricolage–legitimacy path and, therefore, can create a pathway to enacting constrained action as socially recognized social-purpose organizing.

The fourth theoretical implication is related to the research on social enterprise in the Chinese context. The social-enterprise field in China is institutionally plural, meaning that it is not unified by any one national social-enterprise legal form (Li et al., 2022). In this kind of field, social-purpose organizations might have to use a mix of legal form, social mission, local seal of approval, trust in the community, support from foundations, CSR partnership, and government-service collaboration to get known. The present study finds that this institutional heterogeneity is not simply the context in which bricolage becomes legitimate, but also an integral part of bricolage's mechanism for becoming sustainability-relevant.

5.3. Practical Implications

The results indicate that resource bricolage can be considered an operational practice and a legitimacy practice that should be managed by founders and managers of nascent social enterprises when they are dealing with stakeholders. Making do, improvisation or recombination should not be equated with innovation by the organisations. Managers should instead record how resourceful practices safeguard service quality, value to beneficiaries, continuity of the service and responsible use of resources (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Ebrahim et al., 2014). One implication is that social enterprises need to make bricolage credible evidence. For instance, if an organisation is reusing community resources, existing skills or small grants with partners' contributions, they should describe how this is in line with their social mission and how it helps to reduce waste as an informal cost saving. However, bricolage can be interpreted as responsible adaptation with clear reporting, feedback from beneficiaries, partner endorsements and transparent decision rules (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002).

The results indicate that for incubators, universities, foundations, advisory organizations and CSR partners, support should extend beyond just financial support. These actors can assist start-up social enterprises to create narratives, reporting templates, communication strategies with stakeholders and partnership documents that will help them to translate resourceful action into legitimate organizational practice. Advisory support is therefore not just technical support, but also interpretive support, which helps to make the organisation understandable to funders, communities, public-service partners and beneficiaries (Roundy, 2017; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024).

The results are a reminder for local governments and public-service partners of the need for recognition infrastructure. Social-purpose organizations can defuse confusion by being certified, awarded public interest, given registration guidance, purchased by government, and provided partnership platforms. These types of supports are especially helpful when the organizations are not legally and organizationally in a single social-enterprise legal category (Li et al., 2022; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2026).

The findings indicate that, for funders and philanthropic actors, the criteria for judging should make the difference between responsible bricolage and risky improvisation. There is no need for an automatic penalty for a resource-constrained social enterprise that uses a flexible resource combination, but there is a need for accountability to be demonstrated, mission fit and stakeholder value. Funders can help build the ecosystem by valuing and incentivizing the transparent re-combination of resources, the continuity of missions based on evidence, and responsible adaptation, and not just the professionalization of organizations with stronger formal infrastructure (Desa and Basu, 2013; Ebrahim et al., 2014).

The moderation outcome brings a strategic implication for social enterprises themselves: Social enterprises should make the effort to link bricolage practices with signals of the ecosystems. Stakeholders can find resourceful action more easily understood if there is participation in incubators, certification programmers', foundation networks, CSR partnerships, university platforms, or community collaboration. That is, ecosystem engagement is not just a means to access resources, but also to make internal capability institutionally visible (Spigel, 2017; Wurth et al., 2022).

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, the study is of cross-sectional, perception based. The evidence suggests that the theoretical model is based on bricolage theory, legitimacy theory, and ecosystem logic, but only provides theory-guided associations and conditional indirect effects, not robust causal evidence. Future research might explore the relationship between bricolage and legitimacy acquisition through longitudinal designs, and the relationship between legitimacy and objective sustainability outcomes (Hair et al., 2022; Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Second, the study is based on knowledgeable respondents in the organizations. This way of working is suitable as it is the founders, executives, senior managers and project level decision makers who are in a position to report on organisational resources, stakeholder relationships, ecosystem support and sustainability conditions. But, perception data from a single source can still be interpreted from a managerial perspective. Future research should find out managerial responses and validate them with beneficiary surveys, partner evaluations, certification records, public-service contracts, foundation reports, financial and operational records (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Kock, 2015). Thirdly, the legitimacy of the organisation was assessed by respondent perception of stakeholder recognition. The instrument includes stakeholder-signal anchors to counteract biases of founder self-confidence, nevertheless, not all groups of stakeholders are measured directly.

Further studies might gather multi-stakeholder data from beneficiaries, funders, public-service partners, CSR partners, incubators, and community actors to determine if there are

differences in legitimacy perceptions across stakeholders, as suggested by Suchman (1995) and Spanuth and Urbano (2024). Fourth, sustainability of social enterprises was defined as perceived financial sustainability, mission continuity, and operational sustainability. This multidimensional approach is in line with the theoretical definition of sustainability in hybrid organizations, albeit a convergent-validity result was on the edge. Future research would be able to test sustainability as a higher order construct, or to study the three dimensions separately, or to use subjective measures along with objective measures of sustainability, such as revenue diversification, program continuity, reach of beneficiaries, staff retention and renewal of partnerships (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014).

Fifth, the China context is not a homogeneous one. The level of social-enterprise certification, public-service procurement, philanthropic resources, CSR partnerships and social-organization governance differs from region to region and sector to sector. Future research may be conducted to compare the coastal and inland areas, urban and rural areas, certified and uncertified organizations, and various organizational forms. But it is important to note that such comparisons can only be made after measurement invariance is achieved, as otherwise group differences may not be substantive but rather due to measurement instability (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015).

Lastly, the study explores the perception of ecosystem support as an organisation-level perception. Future research might be complemented with other objective ecosystem indicators like density of incubators, local certification programs, government-purchase service opportunities, foundations, CSR networks, or social-organization policy infrastructure. This work would help to further tie together the perceived ecosystem support and the actual conditions of the ecosystem, while maintaining the insight that organizations act on the support they perceive and can access (Spigel, 2017; Wurth et al., 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper builds and validates a conditional mediation model to understand the relationship between resource bricolage and social enterprise sustainability for nascent social enterprises and social-purpose organizations in China. Results indicate that resource bricolage has a direct as well as indirect (via organizational legitimacy) positive relationship with sustainability. They also reveal that the perceived ecosystem support enhances the bricolage – legitimacy association and boosts the indirect connection between bricolage and sustainability. The main thesis is that resourcefulness isn't enough. In the case of nascent social enterprises, resource bricolage becomes relevant for sustainability when stakeholders consider it to be useful, morally appropriate, credible and understandable. Ecosystem support is important as it can contribute to the categories, channels and signals that enable this recognition to happen. The study thus conceptualizes sustainability of social enterprises as a process of interplay between resourceful capability, legitimacy and interpretive support at the level of the ecosystem.

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