

MASTER'S THESIS

SOCIAL BUSINESS IN AUSTRIA: ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE "VERIFIED SOCIAL ENTERPRISE" LABEL

Submitted at
FH JOANNEUM Gesellschaft mbH
Master's Degree Programme
"Global Strategic Management"

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Abstract

The Austrian social business sector comprises more than 2,385 organisations and continues to grow in both size and economic relevance. In order to enhance transparency and legitimacy within the sector, the nationwide “Verified Social Enterprise” (VSE) label was introduced in December 2022. As of May 2026, 85 organisations had obtained the label.

This master's thesis constitutes the first comprehensive evaluation of the VSE label's implementation during its initial three-year period. It addresses a significant research gap by examining the label's development and its contribution to strengthening social entrepreneurship in Austria, while providing evidence-based recommendations for its future development.

To respond to the research questions on the motivations for initial application, barriers to re-labelling after three years, and measures for the label's long-term success, a mixed-methods approach was employed. The qualitative component of the study comprised eight expert interviews, which were analysed using Mayring's qualitative content analysis approach. These findings were complemented by an online survey of 24 VSE-labelled social businesses.

The findings indicate that pull factors are the predominant drivers for application, particularly increased organisational credibility, differentiation from conventional enterprises, and greater sector visibility. The main barriers to re-labelling are an unclear renewal process and limited tangible benefits. Tax benefits, stronger integration into public funding and procurement, and a nationwide awareness campaign are identified as key measures for the label's long-term success, requiring collaboration among multiple stakeholders, particularly political ones.

The present study provides practical recommendations for policymakers and the organisations responsible for the “Verified Social Enterprise” label, thus contributing to its sustainable development and the continued strengthening of the Austrian social business sector.

Keywords: Austria, labelling schemes, social business economy, social entrepreneurship

JEL-Classification Codes: L15, L31, M14, O35

Acknowledgements

Having completed this master's thesis, I would like to thank everyone who supported me on this journey.

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all eight of my interview partners, as well as to all the registered “Verified Social Enterprise” companies that participated in my online survey. Their cooperation and honesty made it possible to achieve the detailed outcome presented in this thesis.

Another important partner was the *Social Business Hub Styria*, especially Rüdiger Wetzl, who shared his passion for social entrepreneurship and his extensive network with me. His support in helping me to focus on the right topic, and especially in connecting me to experts in this field, was essential for the whole progress of my study.

Special thanks go to my supervisor, Thomas Winkler, who knows the social business economy well and therefore always understood and supported my vision. His expertise was always valuable, and his feedback was helping me to improve.

Finally, thank you to my supportive network of friends, family and peers who believe in me and my work!

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
aws	Austria Wirtschaftsservice GmbH
B2B/ B2C	Business-to-Business/ Business-to-Consumer
BMAW	Bundesministerium für Arbeit & Wirtschaft (Federal Ministry Labour & Economy)
CSRD	Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive
ESER	European Social Economy Regions
ESG	Environmental, Social & Governance
EU	European Union
GEM	Global Entrepreneurship Monitor
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOOI	Input, Output, Outcome & Impact (Framework)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development
RQ	Research Question
RSV	Registreret Socialøkonomisk Virksomhed (Social Enterprise Label, Denmark)
SBHS	Social Business Hub Styria
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEE	Social & Solidarity Economy
SENA	Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria
SMEs	Small & Medium-sized Enterprises
USP	Unique Selling Point
VSE	Verified Social Enterprise
WKO	Wirtschaftskammer Österreich (Austrian Federal Economic Chamber)

1 Introduction

The "Verified Social Enterprise" (VSE) label, initiated in December 2022, marked a milestone for the development of Austrian social entrepreneurship (SBHS, n.d.-a). The aim of this master's thesis is to analyse the impact of the label in its first three years by identifying the motivation of the registered companies, which enterprises have been labelled and whether the first social enterprises will extend their registration in 2026. The empirical research will build on the findings of a 2023 analysis, focusing on the potential impact of the VSE label (Kleewein, 2023).

Austria has a growing landscape of social enterprises. However, before the implementation of the "Verified Social Enterprise" label, there was no state recognised label to ensure transparency and accountability. The label was introduced to prevent greenwashing and support social businesses in Austria. To date, it remains the only Austrian label focusing on social entrepreneurship only. The implementation in December 2022 was a collaboration between the following three institutions: the Austrian Wirtschaftsservice Gesellschaft mbH (aws), the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (WKO) and the Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria (SENA) (Detering, 2024).

Social entrepreneurship in Austria is constantly growing, as reports like the Austrian Startup Monitor 2024 show that 56% of Austrian startups have a focus on green and social impact (Leitner et al., 2025, p. 8). This positive development is also reflected in the findings of the Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor 2023/24, which states that over 2,385 companies identify as a social business, and this number does not even include additional organisations that do not explicitly label themselves as a "social enterprise", but still meet all the relevant criteria (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 11). Looking at the registered social enterprises, only 85 companies are officially published as a VSE as of May 2026 (Unternehmensserviceportal, 2026).

1.1 Problem Statement and Research Question

Given these numbers, the implementation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label has so far been quite moderate, and Austria still holds significant potential for fostering social entrepreneurship. This master’s thesis will focus on how the label is currently being implemented, as well as the push and pull factors that influence, and may continue to influence, enterprises in becoming VSEs. Given the fact that all companies must go through a re-labelling process after three years to further call themselves a “Verified Social Enterprise”, this information will be essential to prevent failure and promote successful implementation.

As this master’s thesis aims to provide a holistic understanding of the implementation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label, three research questions (RQ) will guide the study. These research questions enable the analysis of different aspects of the label and support a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

RQ1: What push and pull factors motivate Austrian businesses to become a “Verified Social Enterprise” company?

The first research question focuses on the motivations of social businesses in choosing to become a “Verified Social Enterprise”. The goal is to identify different push and pull factors of motivation. The push and pull theory is a widely used method from the 1980s to describe the dynamics behind motivational factors (Kirkwood, 2009, p. 346). Push factors typically refer to personal and external influences, and pull factors represent attractions or opportunities that draw individuals or organisations toward a specific action. For example, a pull factor might be the recognition of a new opportunity. Often, behaviour caused by pull factors is more likely to succeed than action forced by push factors.

Identifying the benefits of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label from the perspective of social enterprises, as well as from the broader social business ecosystem perspective, helps in understanding the current image of the label. Exploring this research question makes it possible to provide recommendations on how to further enhance the label’s attractiveness to businesses.

Furthermore, it will be interesting to examine whether the motivational factors of businesses that already have the VSE label have met expectations.

RQ2: What barriers might prevent a social business that has been registered as a “Verified Social Enterprise” company from undergoing the re-labelling process after three years?

The second research question addresses the requirement that the label must be extended after three years. Currently, there is no detailed information about the actual re-labelling process, but as the first companies have been registered in the year 2023, there are several VSEs that already considered their re-labelling in the beginning of 2026. Therefore, it is highly relevant to analyse the potential barriers that might prevent a social business that has been registered as a “Verified Social Enterprise” from undergoing this re-labelling process.

Identifying these barriers helps the organisation in charge of the label prevent failure and promote long-term success. Without this information, the label risks declining relevance and may face discontinuation.

RQ3: What measures are needed to further promote the successful implementation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label within the Austrian social enterprise ecosystem?

Building on the findings of the first two research questions this research question, focuses on the future development of the label. It is relevant to identify measures to further promote the label, and therefore, the goal is to provide recommendations for the next steps of the implementation. These recommendations will especially be relevant for the organisations that implemented the label, and for social business incubators that promote further registrations. The main stakeholders will be aws, WKO, SENA, Impact Hub Vienna, Social Business Hub Styria and Impact Hub Tirol.

These three research questions guide the writing process of this master’s thesis and are particularly important for the empirical study.

1.2 Research Gap

Social entrepreneurship has been promoted and institutionally supported within the European Union for several years. Initiatives such as the EU Social Business Initiative launched in 2011 aimed to create an ecosystem that enables social enterprises to grow and develop (European Commission, 2011, p. 5). Furthermore, the EU Social Economy Action Plan, guided by the vision of “Building an economy that works for people,” highlights the importance of the social economy sector as a driver of employment and as a provider of solutions to major societal challenges (European Union, 2021, p. 3).

Institutional Theory provides an appropriate framework for analysing these developments, as it explains how organisational behaviour is influenced by institutional environments, including legal norms, cultural expectations, and legitimacy pressures (Kauppi, 2022, p. 2). Organisations often adopt structures and practices not only for efficiency reasons but also to align with accepted standards and gain legitimacy within their field. This perspective is particularly relevant for the “Verified Social Enterprise” label in Austria, as the label represents social and environmental accountability within the Austrian social entrepreneurship sector. Institutional processes explain how such practices spread and eventually become embedded across organisations.

Although the European Union strongly supports social businesses, existing reports indicate that important challenges remain. According to the European Social Enterprise Monitor 2023/24, only 31.1% of social enterprises received support from national organisations during the previous year (Gazeley et al., 2025, p. 15). In Austria, the Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor was introduced to assess the status quo of the social economy and provide decision-makers with reliable data and context for future developments (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 4–10). The report also emphasises the importance of a national strategy and highlights initiatives such as the implementation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label as relevant instruments for the future development of the Austrian social business sector.

Despite the growing relevance of labels within the social economy, academic research on the implementation of the VSE label remains extremely limited. Labels are recognised as important tools for strengthening legitimacy and visibility within the social business economy (OECD/European Union, 2025). However, there is still only limited research on how newly introduced labels are implemented in practice and how organisations respond to them over time. Institutional theory suggests that organisations may adopt certification schemes in response to legitimacy pressures, yet it remains unclear whether these labels lead to substantial organisational change or mainly fulfil reputational purposes (Kauppi, 2022, p. 12).

In the Austrian context, no comprehensive academic literature currently exists that specifically examines the implementation process, early adoption, and long-term continuation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. Existing literature on social entrepreneurship and certification systems remains too broad and lacks a dedicated focus on the VSE label and its institutional development. One existing academic work directly related to the topic is the master’s thesis *Measures to Raise the Acceptance of the “Verified Social Enterprise” Label in Austria* by Sandra Kleewein, published shortly after the introduction of the label in 2023 (Kleewein, 2023). While this thesis provides valuable initial insights and serves as an important foundation for this study, empirical evidence regarding the implementation dynamics and sustainability of the VSE label is still lacking.

Consequently, a significant research gap exists concerning the early implementation and long-term institutionalisation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label in Austria. Further research is therefore necessary to analyse how organisations adopt the label, how legitimacy pressures influence this process, and whether the label contributes to meaningful organisational and institutional change over time. Addressing this gap is highly relevant for the future development of the Austrian social business sector, as it can support the organisations behind the VSE label and provide meaningful recommendations for future actions and policy development.

1.3 Research Methodology

This master's thesis takes a qualitative research approach, supported by quantitative elements, to address the defined research questions and examine the research gap concerning the implementation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label in Austria.



Figure 1: Research Approach. Source: Own illustration.

This thesis is theoretically founded on Institutional Theory, which serves as both the conceptual framework of the study and a structural guideline for the thesis as a whole (Kauppi, 2022). Throughout the master's thesis, and particularly in the analysis of the empirical findings, the theoretical framework is connected to the collected data to show how institutional pressures and considerations of legitimacy influence organisational behaviour and the adoption of the VSE label.

The first part of the thesis provides a theoretical background and reviews the existing literature. It provides an overview of the social business ecosystem in Europe and Austria, covering relevant definitions, institutional developments and policy frameworks.

Based on this theoretical framework and existing literature, the empirical part of the thesis consists mainly of qualitative interviews. As the VSE label is still relatively new and there is limited academic literature on its implementation, interviews are an appropriate and commonly used qualitative research method for gathering in-depth insights. Collaborating with the Social Business Hub Styria helps identify suitable interview partners and provides access to the Austrian social enterprise network.

In addition to the qualitative interviews, a quantitative online survey, targeting all registered “Verified Social Enterprise” companies, was conducted after the interview phase. This complements the qualitative findings, providing additional perspectives and broader data on the implementation of the VSE label, especially focusing on RQ1. The survey results also support the analysis of the interview findings and literature review, helping to identify trends, challenges and relevant factors that contribute to the development of meaningful recommendations at the end of the master’s thesis.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the qualitative research findings should be interpreted with caution as they are based on a limited number of expert perspectives and experiences. Despite these limitations, the chosen methodological approach enables an in-depth exploration of an under-researched topic and provides valuable insights into the implementation and future development of the VSE label in Austria.

The use of artificial intelligence in this thesis is clearly declared in the detailed tables in appendix C.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The first part of the master's thesis is a literature review. Starting with the theoretical background, it provides an overview of the social business ecosystem in Europe and Austria, before offering a detailed explanation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. The next chapter focuses on the empirical study, describing it in two phases: data collection and data analysis. The next chapter presents the thesis's results, structured in qualitative and quantitative findings. This

leads to a discussion which provides detailed practical recommendations for the successful further implementation of the VSE label. The conclusion summarises the most important findings in response to the three research questions, thereby closing the research gap. Finally, the study's limitations and recommendations for further research are presented.

2 Literature Review

As the Austrian “Verified Social Enterprise” label was only introduced in December 2022, there is still very limited academic research on its development, implementation and impact. At the time of writing, no peer-reviewed publications focusing specifically on the VSE label were available. Consequently, this literature review is based on a combination of academic literature and high-quality grey literature.

The literature search was conducted primarily using Google Scholar and the FH JOANNEUM online library. Combinations of keywords such as *social business*, *social entrepreneurship*, *social enterprise*, *social business economy*, *label*, *certification*, *Europe* and *Austria* were used in the searches. These searches identified a substantial body of research on social entrepreneurship in general. However, existing academic publications typically only address broader concepts, international case studies or theoretical perspectives regarding the social business economy.

For this reason, the primary sources for this chapter are governmental publications, policy papers, official reports and publications from national and international organisations. Reports published by the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, the European Commission and other recognised organisations proved particularly relevant, providing detailed information on the policy framework, development and implementation of the VSE label, and the broader social business economy in Austria and Europe. Compared to the available academic literature, these sources offer a considerably higher level of detail regarding the research topic.

Although the proportion of peer-reviewed literature in this master’s thesis is relatively low, this approach is appropriate given the novelty of the research subject and the policy-driven context in which the VSE label was developed. Throughout the literature review, emphasis was placed on using reliable, authoritative and up-to-date sources to provide a strong academic basis for the empirical study.

2.1 Theoretical Background

This chapter provides an important understanding of the theoretical framework, so as to understand which business is considered as a social business, and how the stakeholder theory applies to the topic of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. Important definitions create the understanding and the explanation on the concept of institutional similarity, via three main forms of institutional pressure. Additionally, this chapter explains how entrepreneurship today works, by providing a global perspective on the topic.

2.1.1 Definition of Social Business

In order to comprehend the terms “social enterprise” and “social business”, it is necessary to address several other terms to gain an in-depth understanding of the field of this master's thesis. This chapter provides an overview of the relevant definitions.

2.1.1.1 Definition of Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is commonly understood to be the process of initiating or managing a new business venture (Hill, 2025, p. 20). It refers to the activity of starting or operating a newly established enterprise. In this context, the term “entrepreneurial activity” describes the proportion of the adult population that is actively involved in setting up or running a young business. These new ventures are often associated with the introduction of new ideas, products or technologies. They often respond to economic, social or environmental challenges, and they can contribute to broader societal transformation, as well as to individual well-being. By generating new goods and services, creating employment opportunities, and often reshaping markets, entrepreneurship drives economic development. They often challenge and transform existing market structures through innovation and competition.

2.1.1.2 Definition of Social Innovation

In discussions about contemporary entrepreneurship, the concept of social innovation plays a central role (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). A closely related term is ESG (environmental, social and governance), which refers to a framework of principles that guide business conduct.

ESG considerations evaluate how companies manage environmental impacts, social responsibilities and governance practices.

At the European level, the European Commission defines social innovation as the development and implementation of new ideas that address social issues and encourage new forms of social cooperation (European Commission, n.d.). These innovations can take the form of products, services or organisational models that respond more effectively to societal needs.

In the Austrian context, however, the concept of innovation has traditionally been mainly influenced by science and technology (SENA, 2020, p. 4). Compared to the way innovation is understood internationally, a broader, more contemporary concept has only gradually gained recognition. Furthermore, the English term “social innovation” is not synonymous with the more narrowly defined German term “soziale Innovation”. While the term in Austria often refers primarily to innovations within the social sector, the English concept encompasses societal transformation more broadly, including ecological, economic and systemic dimensions. Therefore, a holistic understanding of innovation is required that integrates the concept of impact in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and reflects current societal movements.

Social innovation can be described as pursuing four overarching objectives (Schön & Lebert, 2024, pp. 9–10):

- Solving concrete societal problems

Social innovations aim to address urgent issues such as climate change, health problems, educational inequalities and poverty. Guided by a strong orientation towards measurable impact, they act as drivers of systemic change. By providing effective solutions to complex problems, social innovations can deliver tangible benefits to the public sector and wider society, while potentially reducing long-term social costs.

- Deepening democracy and enabling participation

Another key objective is to reinforce democratic processes by encouraging inclusive participation and solution-focused dialogue. Social innovation emphasises the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, particularly young people. The aim is not only

to ensure that diverse voices are heard, but also to enable them to actively contribute to the definition of measures.

- Promoting sustainable economic practices

Social innovations play a key role in reorienting economic systems towards resolving urgent societal challenges. They encourage entrepreneurial approaches that integrate social, environmental and economic objectives in pursuit of the common good. Social enterprises are particularly important in achieving these aims.

- Building transformative capacities

To respond effectively to contemporary crises, societies must develop the capacity for transformation. This means having the ability to learn collectively, act cooperatively and develop creative solutions. Social innovation provides the necessary tools and frameworks to strengthen these competencies.

2.1.1.3 Definition of Social Economy

The social economy encompasses a wide range of organisations operating in various economic sectors, such as agriculture, construction, trade, energy, education, health and culture (European Union, 2021, p. 5). According to the European Commission's European Social Economy Action Plan, entities within the social economy share several characteristics. These include prioritising people and social or environmental objectives over profit maximisation, reinvesting a substantial portion of their surpluses in their business and applying democratic or participatory governance.

Traditionally, the social economy includes four main organisational forms: cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations (including charitable organisations) and foundations (European Union, 2021, p. 5). These entities are privately established, operate independently from public authorities, and are constituted under specific legal frameworks.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) uses the term “social and solidarity economy” (SSE) to describe organisations and enterprises that engage in economic, social and

environmental activities that serve collective interests (ILO, 2022). According to this definition, such entities are based on voluntary cooperation, mutual support, democratic or participatory governance, independence from state control and prioritising people and social objectives over capital when allocating profits and assets.

Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines the social economy as comprising associations, cooperatives, mutual organisations, foundations and, more recently, social enterprises (OECD, 2022).

2.1.1.4 Definition of Social Business or Social Enterprise

Within the framework of the European Social Economy Action Plan, social businesses are defined as market-oriented entities operating within the social economy (European Union, 2021, p. 5). According to the European Commission, social enterprises provide goods and services in an entrepreneurial and often innovative manner while explicitly pursuing social and/or environmental objectives as the primary motivation for their economic activity. They reinvest most of their profits to advance these objectives and their governance or ownership structures are designed to reflect democratic, participatory or socially oriented principles. As there is no unified legal form for social enterprises, they adopt diverse structures depending on national legal contexts.

The OECD defines a social business as an organisation that trades goods and services with the aim of fulfilling a societal mission. Its primary objective is not to maximise financial returns for owners, but to reinvest earnings to ensure the continued pursuit of its social goals (OECD, 2022).

Social enterprises can take various legal forms, including social cooperatives, private companies limited by guarantee, mutual organisations, associations, voluntary organisations, charities and foundations (European Commission, n.d.-a). Despite this diversity, their activities commonly fall into one of four main categories:

- Work integration of people with disabilities or unemployed individuals.

- The provision of personal social services, such as healthcare, education, childcare and services for disadvantaged groups.
- Local development initiatives in disadvantaged urban or rural regions.
- Other fields include environmental protection, recycling, culture, sports, research and consumer protection.

From a business model perspective, these businesses are characterised by the creation of societal value in at least one of their core activities (WKO Gründerservice, 2025, pp. 13–14).

Three main types of business models can be identified:

1. Societal value in production

In this model, the social or environmental benefit stems from the way goods or services are produced. This could include resource-efficient production processes, circular economy strategies, fair trade practices or the integration of marginalised or affected groups into the value chain.

2. Societal value for customers

In this case, added societal value is generated by the target group being served. The enterprise provides products or services that were previously unavailable to this group, improving their situation. Often, these target groups have limited purchasing power, so highly affordable solutions and effective outreach strategies are required. One common challenge is the so-called “double customer” structure, whereby revenues are generated partly through a second customer segment, such as public authorities or private companies, to ensure the model's financial sustainability.

3. Societal value in the offering

In this model, the societal benefit is embedded directly within the product or service itself, often in the form of a novel solution. Like typical start-ups, they often face challenges in product development and financing in the early stages.

Together, these definitions of entrepreneurship, social innovation, the social economy and social enterprises form the basis for this master's thesis research topic.

2.1.2 *Institutional Theory*

Institutional theory seeks to explain why organisations in the same field tend to become more similar over time (Kauppi, 2022, p. 2,4). Rather than focusing on variation in organisational practices, it emphasises the mechanisms that cause organisations in an industry to adopt comparable structures and strategies. As organisations operate within broader institutional environments, they often adjust their behaviour to comply with norms and expectations. By doing so, businesses aim to gain public acceptance, secure access to necessary resources and increase their chances of long-term survival. Legitimacy is a closely connected concept. Within institutional theory, legitimacy refers to the acceptance of an organisation's actions and structures within its institutional environment. It reflects the perception that organisation's practices are appropriate, desirable and consistent with societal expectations. Therefore, achieving legitimacy becomes a central objective for organisations.

A central concept within institutional theory is institutional similarity, or institutional isomorphism, which refers to the process by which organisations become more alike when operating under similar environmental conditions (Kauppi, 2022, pp. 3–4). Institutional similarity is driven by three main forms of institutional pressure:

- **Coercive pressure** arises from influential stakeholders, such as powerful customers, on whom organisations depend. These actors may require organisations to adhere to specific standards or practices.
- **Mimetic pressure** occurs when organisations face uncertainty and respond by imitating other organisations that are perceived as successful or legitimate. Through imitation, organisations attempt to reduce uncertainty and strengthen their position within their business ecosystem.
- **Normative pressure** comes from professional norms and standards that develop within industries. These norms spread through professional networks and shared expectations regarding appropriate organisational behaviour.

Unlike many other organisational theories, institutional theory assumes that organisations do not always adopt structures and practices only because they are efficient or effective (Kauppi, 2022, p. 2). Instead, organisations may implement certain practices primarily to enhance their legitimacy and public acceptance.

Another important term within institutional theory is “decoupling” (Kauppi, 2022, p. 4). This describes situations in which organisations formally adopt practices in response to institutional expectations, but do not implement them fully in their everyday operations. In such cases, they appear to comply with external expectations, but their operational practices remain largely unchanged.

Institutional theory has been widely applied in various areas of organisational research (Kauppi, 2022, p. 8). Previous studies have primarily used the theory to explain the adoption of practices such as quality management systems, information technologies and supplier integration mechanisms. More recently, however, research applying institutional theory has increasingly focused on sustainability-related issues. More general sustainability topics have received attention, particularly in studies published after 2012.

In research on social businesses, the institutional approach has been used to examine how social enterprises pursue societal impact while addressing ethical considerations through practices such as sourcing from socially certified suppliers, engaging in ethical trading, and producing ethical products (Li & Bosma, 2024, pp. 531, 540, 543). Additionally, researchers have examined the influence of both formal and informal institutions on organisational behaviour within the social economy sector. This includes aspects such as social value creation, financial performance, and the use of certification schemes, such as B Corporation certification (B Corp).

Particularly labels are relevant for the social economy, as they can increase transparency and credibility with regard to organisations' social and environmental commitments and therefore lead to legitimisation (OECD/European Union, 2025, p. 16). The importance of such mechanisms is increasingly highlighted by international and European policy initiatives. For example, both the

OECD and the European Union emphasise the importance of exploring and developing labelling systems for organisations operating in this sector.

Overall, there are still several opportunities for further studies (Kauppi, 2022, p. 12). One relevant area for future research is to examine whether sustainability practices, such as certification schemes, lead to substantive changes in the day-to-day operations of organisations, or if they primarily function as tools for improving organisational reputation. More broadly, future research is encouraged to investigate the outcomes and consequences of institutions, including whether their establishment, maintenance or dissolution has beneficial or negative effects on organisations and the society.

Considering this theory, it is shown that the institutional theory is a relevant framework for addressing the implementations of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label in Austria as it emphasises that organisations frequently adopt structures and practices not only because of their operational effectiveness but also in order to gain legitimacy and acceptance within their institutional environment. In this context, labels for social entrepreneurship can serve as mechanisms that signal credibility, transparency, and adherence to recognised standards. The VSE label is therefore an institutional instrument through which social enterprises can demonstrate their commitment to making an impact and strengthen their legitimacy within the Austrian economy.

Understanding the three types of institutional pressure can also help to explain why organisations may decide to drop or maintain the VSE label. Coercive pressures may arise from stakeholders, such as funders or partners, who expect organisations to demonstrate social impact and accountability. Mimetic pressures may encourage organisations to imitate recognised social enterprises that have already obtained the label, particularly when there is uncertainty about how to demonstrate credibility within the industry. Lastly, normative pressures may influence adoption through shared professional standards and expectations within the social business economy.

Overall, institutional theory provides a valuable framework through which to examine the early development of the VSE label. It facilitates the analysis of the motivations that encourage organisations to get the label, the potential barriers that may influence their decision to renew it and the broader institutional dynamics that determine its long-term establishment in Austria.

2.1.3 *Global Entrepreneurship Today*

From a global perspective, one study stands out as the main source of information on entrepreneurship (Hill, 2025, p. 20). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) is the world's longest-running and largest research project in this field. It collects data directly from entrepreneurs, providing comprehensive insights into entrepreneurial activity worldwide. The most recent edition, published in 2025, included participation from 56 countries. These newly established businesses combine innovative ideas with modern technologies, and are increasingly pursuing not only economic objectives, but also social and environmental goals. This contributes to the well-being of the society as a whole. A new generation of purpose-driven entrepreneurs is emerging and taking a leading role in this development.

The study identifies several key insights and practical policy recommendations (Hill, 2025, p. 12). While starting a business is increasingly viewed as accessible, fear of failure continues to discourage many potential entrepreneurs. This concern is often based on the assumption that exiting a business is difficult and costly. However, the findings show the opposite: individuals who have previously closed a business are more likely to start another than those without such experience. To reduce these barriers, the report recommends stronger support measures, including better access to finance, training and mentorship programs, and simplified regulations, in order to encourage greater entrepreneurial engagement.

The report highlights persistent gender inequalities in entrepreneurship beyond the issue of fear of failure (Hill, 2025, p. 13). While challenging the traditional stereotype of the entrepreneur as predominantly young and male, it confirms that, in most economies, women are still less likely

than men to start businesses. This disparity is largely driven by unequal access to funding, training and mentorship. Therefore, more equitable support policies are recommended to ensure that women entrepreneurs have the same opportunities as men, thereby fostering more inclusive economic development.

Another issue that has been identified is the uneven awareness of artificial intelligence (AI) among entrepreneurs (Hill, 2025, pp. 15–16). Many new entrepreneurs are uncertain about its future relevance, with fewer than 30% considering it a crucial factor for business development in most countries. This limited understanding could hinder innovation and competitiveness. Targeted awareness campaigns and training programmes could help entrepreneurs to better understand the potential of AI and encourage its effective adoption, particularly in economies where recognition of its importance is currently low.

Taken together, these findings show that entrepreneurial activity is influenced by both individual motivation and broader structural factors, such as access to resources, digital literacy and supportive policy frameworks.

2.1.3.1 Sustainability-focused Entrepreneurship

From a global perspective, sustainability has become an increasingly important aspect of entrepreneurial activity (Hill, 2025, pp. 15, 67). The majority of early-stage entrepreneurs no longer focus solely on financial returns. In fact, in almost four out of five economies, new business founders prioritise social and environmental goals over profit maximisation. This shift is particularly evident among female entrepreneurs in high- and middle-income countries. Despite this overall trend, the growth of social businesses varies between regions. The highest levels of engagement in sustainable business activities are found in countries such as Brazil, Guatemala, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and Puerto Rico. In contrast, lower levels are reported in the Republic of Korea, Poland, Oman, Latvia and Israel. These differences highlight the impact of culture and institutional support on entrepreneurial priorities.

Public policy plays a crucial role in strengthening the social business economy (Hill et al., 2025, p. 93). Governments can actively encourage responsible business models by shaping entrepreneurial ecosystems. Key policy measures include:

- Establishing sustainability as a core strategic objective within national entrepreneurship policies.
- Promoting consumer and supplier awareness of sustainable products and services in order to stimulate green markets.
- Integrating environmental criteria into public procurement and supply-chain regulations.
- Fostering skills development and knowledge exchange related to sustainable innovation, especially between start-ups and established firms.
- Developing clear and practical sustainability impact indicators.

Overall, global studies indicate that many entrepreneurs are embracing sustainability, even in the absence of strong institutional support (Hill et al., 2025, p. 98). Nevertheless, progress remains gradual and uneven across economies. Aligning entrepreneurship policy with sustainability goals can strengthen the mutually reinforcing relationship between economic development and environmental responsibility.

2.2 Social Business Economy in Europe

The social business economy in Europe has grown to become a significant sector, comprising around 2.8 million organisations and providing over 13 million paid jobs (European Union, 2021, p. 3). This represents approximately 6.3% of the European workforce. The increasing relevance of the social business economy is reflected in the integration of social enterprise concepts into public policies across the European Union (SENA, 2020, p. 5). Sixteen EU member states have developed strategic frameworks and policy measures to support the sector, while fourteen have introduced specific legal arrangements, either by creating dedicated legal structures or by providing social enterprises with a distinct legal status.

At the regional level, initiatives such as the European Social Economy Regions (ESER) aim to raise awareness of the social economy and encourage collaboration between stakeholders (European Commission, n.d.-b). With over 100 participants, the ESER network highlights the growing interest and engagement in promoting social enterprise activities across Europe.

This chapter begins by examining the current state of social enterprises in Europe, as revealed by a 2024 study. It then explores the governmental and public framework conditions, outlining the strategies and measures that the European Union and its member states are implementing to strengthen and support the social economy ecosystem.

2.2.1 *Status Quo of European Social Enterprises*

To gain an accurate understanding of the social economy in Europe, the primary study in this field is the European Social Enterprise Monitor, with the most recent edition published in 2025 (Gazeley et al., 2025, p. 16). This biennial, survey-based study shows the state of European social businesses between 2023 and 2024. The purpose of this publication is to provide relevant data and information to industry stakeholders to inform better decision-making. It establishes a framework that supports the social business economy in Europe, raising awareness of the needs of social enterprises and strengthening the development and support systems that these businesses require. This is the third publication of the European Social Enterprise Monitor, which now includes data from 31 European countries and nearly all European Union countries (25 out of 27).

The report provides a description of a typical social enterprise, offering an easily understandable overview of the industry (Gazeley et al., 2025, p. 14). On average, social businesses reinvest around 80.7% of their yearly profits back into their business to support their mission. Most businesses participating in the European Social Enterprise Monitor study operate in the following sectors: Human health and social work (29.4%), education (25.2%) and service activities (15.2%). Most of these businesses operate within their local or national community and adopt an innovation-driven mindset. Social enterprises are often private limited liability

companies or associations, and the majority of the sector is currently in its business implementation and growth phase.

Examining the impact of European social enterprises on social and environmental issues, it is evident that most businesses (71.6%) target specific groups, with a particular focus on supporting children (25.3%) (Gazeley et al., 2025, pp. 14–15). Over half of the enterprises (54.5%) focus on SDG number 3, which relates to good health and wellbeing. Additionally, 84.2% of participants reported commitments to the circular economy, which has a strong environmental impact. Measuring these impacts and quantifying them is a crucial part of social entrepreneurship, with 62.2% currently doing so. However, many businesses face significant knowledge gaps regarding impact measurement, with only 18.8% confirming they have a high level of knowledge in this area. This knowledge gap is also the main reason why some social entrepreneurs still do not measure their social and environmental impacts, with 70.1% facing multiple challenges in this process.

In terms of diversity and minority representation, social enterprises are often more advanced than traditional businesses (Gazeley et al., 2025, p. 15). 46.5% of social enterprises report that some of their employees have a migrant background, and 43.5% indicate that they employ people with disabilities. Women are also represented at all levels of most businesses. It is also interesting to note that volunteer work is common in the social economy sector, with over 50% of businesses indicating that they use volunteers.

In terms of finances, the 2023 to 2024 study found that 30.2% of participating social businesses were profitable, while 22.5% incurred losses (Gazeley et al., 2025, p. 15). Additionally, 13.7% were not permitted to make a profit. Public financing, foundation funding and private donations are a secure source of external financing and hold immense power for social entrepreneurs. Both private (71.6%) and public (55.7%) social procurement are highly relevant for European social enterprises, but B2B (business to business) and B2C (business to customer) trading remain the most important source of income.

Collecting all this data on the European social business economy also reveals the barriers and challenges these firms face (Gazeley et al., 2025, p. 15). A significant issue across Europe is the absence of public support schemes, with 40.8% viewing this as a major hindrance. 41.9% cite the complexity of public financing, while 40.2% mention the weak level of lobbying for this sector. The same occurs at a national level, with 69.8% citing insufficient support from political institutions. Social entrepreneurs would value a specific legal status for their type of business. However, support systems such as national networks and membership organisations do exist, with 31.1% having been in contact with such institutions and receiving support over the last year.

European social enterprises are a crucial part of the European economy, so it is important to continue collecting data on the needs and development of this sector (Gazeley et al., 2025, p. 135). This allows us to critically reflect on how to support the European social economy ecosystem and achieve long-term societal impact.

2.2.2 Government and Public Framework Conditions

2.2.2.1 European Commission Social Business Initiative

A milestone for the European social economy was reached in 2011 with the publication of the Social Business Initiative (European Commission, 2011, pp. 2–6). The aim was to foster a competitive social market economy. Social innovation and social entrepreneurship were therefore defined as focus areas of the European Commission. This action plan focuses on concrete short-term support measures and establishes the basis for the future medium- and long-term development of European social businesses. It fosters cooperation between European Union member states and partnerships with various stakeholders in the sector.

The Social Business Initiative proposed eleven key actions summed up in three main categories (European Commission, 2011, pp. 6–10):

- The first category focuses on improved funding methods focusing on private funding as well as EU funds.

- Secondly the focus remains on the increased visibility of businesses in the social economy sector. Therefore, tools should be implemented to increase the general understanding of this industry, and a stronger focus lies on the implementation of networks for more professionalism.
- The last category sets actions for improving the legal environment by implementing relevant legal forms that work for European social enterprises and foster state aid and public procurement regulations.

In 2020, the final report on the impact of the European Commission's Social Business Initiative, launched in 2011, was published, focusing also on follow-up actions (Haarich et al., 2020, pp. 144–145). The analysis revealed that social businesses had gained significantly more visibility and growth. This increased awareness also helped them gain recognition within the economy and political institutions in general. A challenge for future EU policy frameworks is the increasing complexity at multiple levels and the need to define specific solutions for various settings. One drawback of the system was that a large proportion of the social enterprise community remained unaware of this initiative, due to a lack of clear communication regarding Europe's social business objectives, actions and organisations. Nevertheless, the Social Business Initiative as a whole was successful.

2.2.2.2 European Commission Social Economy Action Plan

In 2021, the European Commission published a new European framework based on the Social Business Initiative and the Start-up and Scale-up Initiative (European Union, 2021, p. 4). The so-called Social Economy Action Plan, which serves as a strategy until 2030, presents concrete measures for supporting the social economy sector. The two-year process of defining these goals paved the way for the strengthening of social innovation, social entrepreneurship, and societal transformation within the European Union.

The framework emphasises that successful implementation will require cooperation within the EU and with social economy stakeholders at all levels (European Union, 2021, p. 21).

Member states must support each other, share knowledge across countries and update their individual strategies regarding social innovation and social entrepreneurship. The European Commission will support countries in developing these strategies and achieving their goals.

Main actions taken by the European Commission are (European Union, 2021, p. 22):

- The preparation of a Council Recommendation aimed at enhancing framework conditions for the social economy.
- The organisation of targeted webinars and workshops for public officials across policy areas relevant to social economy development.
- The introduction of a new initiative under the Single Market Programme to encourage local and regional partnerships between social economy organisations and conventional businesses.
- The establishment of a single EU Social Economy Gateway serving as a central access point for information on EU funding, policies and initiatives.
- The creation of a Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy to promote youth entrepreneurship, in cooperation with national policymakers and relevant networks.
- The deployment of new financial instruments under the InvestEU programme to attract private investment suited to social enterprises at different development stages.
- The advancement of social impact measurement and management practices across the EU.

In March 2026, the European Commission published a mid-term report on the Social Economy Action Plan, highlighting the key achievements and future steps for the following years (European Union, 2026, p. 1).

There has been tangible progress, with more member states supporting the journey by implementing their own strategies, financing streams and legal frameworks (European Union, 2026, p. 17). Key stakeholders, including public authorities, financial institutions and wider society, are paying more attention to the field, which supports the ecosystem. However,

challenges remain, such as the fact that the social economy is not yet recognised in all member states, which creates strong uncertainties. These gaps need to be closed to ensure that support is not regionally specific.

In order to unlock the full potential of this sector, the clear goal remains to implement a competitive, robust and recognised social economy in Europe (European Union, 2026, p. 9,17). To this end, the European Commission and key stakeholders are pursuing specific sub-goals to achieve these three main targets which are highlighted in the mid-term review in detail.

2.2.2.3 European Laws for Social Businesses

Several European laws pursue social, environmental and ethical objectives, making them particularly relevant for social enterprises as they closely align with their mission-driven approach (WKO Gründerservice, 2025, p. 7). Within the European Union's regulatory framework, enterprises are required to integrate sustainability and responsibility into their economic activities. Central to this are ESG criteria, which require companies to consider ecological, social, and governance-related issues in their strategies and reporting. The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) has strengthened these requirements, to broaden the scope and depth of sustainability reporting and increasing transparency regarding environmental and social impacts, particularly for companies seeking public funding or investment.

Additionally, the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive requires companies to take responsibility for human rights and environmental standards across their entire supply chain, thereby emphasising the importance of fair and sustainable partnerships (WKO Gründerservice, 2025, p. 7). The EU Taxonomy Regulation complements this framework further by defining which economic activities qualify as environmentally sustainable. This facilitates access to green finance for enterprises that contribute to ecological objectives. At a strategic level, the European Green Deal sets out the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, stimulating investment and funding in sustainable innovation. Furthermore, the Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions strengthens fair and transparent employment

conditions across the EU, which is particularly significant for social enterprises working with vulnerable groups.

Together, these legal instruments create a coherent framework that promotes responsible business conduct while creating opportunities for social enterprises to increase their impact within a European economy (WKO Gründerservice, 2025, p. 7).

2.2.3 *Support Ecosystem for Social Entrepreneurship*

Several organisations support and lead the European social economy. One such organisation is Social Economy Europe, which acts as the voice of EU social enterprises and is the reference point at a European level (Social Economy Europe, n.d.). As a strategic partner to political institutions, its main purpose is to connect the social economy with European institutions to foster continuous dialogue. It also acts as the secretariat of the European Social Economy Intergroup. Together with its member organisations, Social Economy Europe represents the interests of the social economy, promotes cooperation and increases its visibility.

Another support initiative is the Global Impact Hub, which operates worldwide (Impact Hub, n.d.). It fosters a social innovation ecosystem and provides local support through its global community. By 2023, it had already established over 306 programmes in approximately 59 countries. Through community events, co-working spaces, start-up programmes and coaching, it supports social entrepreneurs in over 120 cities. Support ecosystems of this kind are key to enabling European social enterprises to comply with regulatory requirements, while strengthening their position and visibility within the broader market economy.

2.2.4 *Labels for Social Entrepreneurship*

Before examining the Austrian “Verified Social Enterprise” label in greater depth, it is useful to understand the importance of labelling schemes for the social economy and consider the development of comparable labels from other (European) countries.

In general, labels can take different forms depending on the national context (OECD/European Union, 2025, p. 16). These may include legal statuses, private labels,

certifications or marks that distinguish businesses and their offerings. Many countries use the terms “label” and “certification” interchangeably, although certification usually refers to a specific type of label that needs an assessment by an independent third party. Therefore, a label is defined broader and indicates that an organisation complies with a defined set of standards or principles, such as ethical or social criteria. International policy frameworks, such as those of the OECD and the EU Council, emphasise the importance of exploring labelling mechanisms for social enterprises.

For social entrepreneurs, labels can offer a number of advantages (OECD/European Union, 2025, pp. 17–18). They increase identification and visibility among governments, consumers and investors, therefore making it easier to build credibility and communicate effectively. They can also facilitate access to funding opportunities and support entry into public and private markets by signalling compliance with recognised standards. However, introducing too many labels or implementing systems poorly can also create challenges. It is important to avoid confusing stakeholders, as this could reduce trust in labels and the social economy as a whole. Effective verification and monitoring mechanisms are also essential to maintain credibility and prevent greenwashing.

Moving on with the development of comparable labels from other (European) countries. Especially, experiences from European countries provide valuable insights into the development and implementation of labels for social enterprises. The Danish label Registreret Socialøkonomisk Virksomhed (RSV) served as an important point of reference and inspiration for the Austrian “Verified Social Enterprise” label (aws, n.d.-d, p. 1). However, the Danish case also illustrates the importance of sustained political commitment and long-term institutional backing (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 72). Although the RSV initially received positive feedback within the sector, political support and the associated support infrastructure were significantly reduced following a change in government in 2015. The abrupt termination of the policy led to uncertainty and discouragement among social enterprise actors, demonstrating how fragile

progress can be when policy priorities shift. This example underlines the necessity of ensuring long-term commitment and continuous support for such initiatives.

Compared to similar labels in other countries, the Austrian “Verified Social Enterprise” label requires an investment of time for accreditation but does not impose additional financial burdens (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 83). This is in contrast to labelling models such as Benefit Corp or the SEE Mark in Hong Kong. Furthermore, unlike in the Netherlands, the Austrian label does not require notarial procedures. At the same time, the mandatory re-labelling process in Austria after three years establishes a structured quality assurance mechanism that is lacking in the Danish and Dutch labelling systems.

This chapter provided an in-depth understanding of the social business economy within Europe, which forms an essential basis for understanding the Austrian approach to supporting social entrepreneurship.

2.3 Social Business Economy in Austria

The advent of social entrepreneurship in Austria is traced back to 1976 (SENA, 2020, pp. 6–7). A substantial increase in this sector was observed around the year 2000 and a similar growth was also evident a decade later in 2010. A significant number of newly registered social businesses have been established within the Austrian economy in recent years. Since 2016, the *aws* (Austria Wirtschaftsservice) has been the first and only organisation in Austria to offer funding programmes for sustainable entrepreneurs. The Social Entrepreneurship Monitor Austria published in 2020 from SENA (Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria) has been the first data basis that shows the potential of social businesses in Austria and provides recommendation for actions to support the growth of the sector. The most recently published study in this field is the Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor 2023/24, which discusses the current situation and potential of the sector (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 1, 4, 8). This is the second edition, offering the opportunity to draw a comparison with recent years for the first time. As the report is also part of the European Social Enterprise Monitor, it provides data that allows for transparent

comparison across Europe. To provide a basis for this chapter, it is important to first understand how sustainability is implemented in Austria as a whole, before taking a closer look at the Austrian social economy.

2.3.1 Sustainability in Austria

The second Austrian Voluntary National Review (VNR) from 2024 documents Austria's progress towards the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Republic of Austria, 2024, pp. 10–13). This review was prepared during a period marked by global crises and recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the 2023 International Sustainable Development Report, Austria ranks fifth out of the 166 countries evaluated, indicating a comparatively high level of overall SDG implementation. Nevertheless, the assessment also highlights the need for further efforts. Significant challenges remain with regard to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Gender equality, youth perspectives and international responsibility are given high priority as they influence the implementation of all 17 goals. Austria continues to follow a mainstreaming strategy, embedding SDG implementation across all policy areas. The review identifies three central areas of transformation: strengthening social cohesion to ensure that no one is left behind, promoting education and skills for sustainable development, and protecting the biosphere within planetary boundaries.

Looking ahead to 2030, the report emphasises the need for accelerated action in terms of climate protection, the transition to renewable energy and sustainable mobility, the conservation of biodiversity, and the development of a circular economy (Republic of Austria, 2024, pp. 10–13). Austria again points out its commitment to multilateral cooperation and to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) as a key driver for future progress. Continued collaboration between the government, society and international partners is considered essential to successfully achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

2.3.2 *Status Quo of Austrian Social Enterprises*

The current number of active social enterprises in Austria is approximately 2,385 (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 8, 11). The study for the newest Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor is grounded in a mixed-methods approach, comprising a quantitative survey of 194 social enterprises as well as a qualitative expert study involving 30 participants from Austria and international contexts.

A review of the current structure of the sector reveals that social enterprises in Austria are characterised by a strong societal orientation, combined with a pronounced capacity for innovation and inclusion (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 8). The majority of these initiatives are concentrated in the sector of health and well-being, the reduction of inequalities, gender equality and education. In addition to social objectives, ecological goals play an important role, as evidenced by the fact that 47.9% of social enterprises report pursuing environmental aims, particularly in the areas of sustainability and climate protection. Innovation is a fundamental characteristic of the sector, with 83.5% of organisations indicating that they introduced significant innovations either at the time of their founding or within the past two years. Furthermore, 46.4% of respondents reported reliance on new technologies such as mobile applications or artificial intelligence in their operational activities.

From a structural perspective, the sector is relatively young (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 8–9). The Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor 2023/24 has revealed that 47.9% of social enterprises were established within the last decade, with a further 38.6% currently in the early stages of company formation. Social enterprises in Austria are characterised by a profound dedication to their social mission. This commitment is further underscored by the fact that 94.3% of these individuals reinvest most of their profits back into the organisation. In accordance with this mission-driven approach, impact measurement plays a pivotal role within the sector, as evidenced by the fact that 84.5% of organisations already assess their social or environmental impact. Sustainability is not merely an external objective; rather, it is also embedded in internal organisational practices. A significant proportion of social enterprises (51.6%) incorporate

principles of the circular economy into their operational practices, and 46.4% explicitly prioritise environmental sustainability within their supply chains.

In terms of employment, social enterprises represent a significant and growing contributor to the Austrian labour market (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 9). When projected across the entire sector, social enterprises account for between 34,000 and 93,000 jobs, measured in full-time equivalents. These employment effects go beyond simply creating jobs, as many organizations deliberately hire people who face disadvantages in the labour market. The social business sector in Austria is characterised by a notable degree of inclusiveness and gender balance, with women holding 50.8% of management positions and 47.6% of founder roles. Furthermore, 43.8% of social enterprises employ people with disabilities, while 38.1% employ individuals from ethnic minorities.

Overall it can be said, that recent years have been characterized by both positive and negative developments in the Austrian social enterprise sector (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 4, 9, 12). Social enterprises have demonstrated a high degree of resilience in times of crisis, thereby making a meaningful contribution to social stability. At the same time, the sector's continued impact cannot be taken for granted and remains dependent on governmental support. A large majority of organizations (79.1%) identify the current economic and political environment as a major challenge to their operations. The discontinuation of COVID-19 related financial support has altered the funding landscape, although this has been partially offset by public funding programs for social enterprises. Ongoing geopolitical tensions, particularly the war in Ukraine and high inflation rates, have generated uncertainty. Inflation affects social enterprises in several ways. Many of these organizations target vulnerable groups who are especially impacted by rising living costs, which leads to a higher demand for their services. At the same time, their own operating costs increase. Despite these adverse conditions, the sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience, as 94.6% of the enterprises surveyed in 2021/2022 remained active and notable institutional improvements have been introduced in recent years. This includes the expansion of tax incentives for donations and the implementation of the "Verified Social

Enterprise” label, which represent important steps toward strengthening the sector’s structural support.

2.3.3 Government and Public Framework Conditions

Austria does not pursue a formal national strategy for social entrepreneurship. However, the topic is increasingly being integrated into broader economic and policy frameworks.

The Austrian Government Programme 2025 to 2029 sets out a clear commitment to strengthening social innovation and social entrepreneurship as key elements of national policy (Österreichische Volkspartei, 2025, p. 99). It pledges to further develop the existing framework conditions for social and societal innovations, including ongoing support for instruments such as the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. Furthermore, the programme foresees the evaluation of new funding structures based on public-private partnership models, including the potential establishment of a National Fund for Societal Innovations and the introduction of Social Impact Bonds. These measures aim to expand support for social entrepreneurs and integrate social innovation more firmly into Austria's broader economic and innovation strategy.

Besides the nationwide strategic priorities, the individual Austrian federal states have also incorporated objectives and measures to promote social entrepreneurship into their government programmes (Millner et al., 2024, pp. 22–24). Current regional policy documents show that many regions address similar topics in their strategies relating to areas such as inclusion, employment, regional development, and social services. Overall, the regional programmes demonstrate that they play an active role in advancing frameworks relevant to the social economy alongside the federal strategy through a variety of targeted measures.

In 2016, Austria adopted a national Open Innovation Strategy with a planned implementation period until 2025 (Rohrhofer et al., 2021, p. 6). This made it the first, and so far only, European country to establish such a comprehensive framework. The strategy was developed in response to increasing globalisation and digitalisation, as well as the growing need for collaborative innovation approaches. Its aim is to promote the systematic opening up of

innovation processes across different organisations and sectors. Five years after its launch, in 2021, the strategy underwent an evaluation to assess progress and formulate recommendations for the remaining period. The evaluation revealed that awareness of Open Innovation approaches had already grown within the research, technology, and innovation community. However, as the strategy was not due to end until 2025, a final, comprehensive evaluation of its overall impact and outcomes is not yet available.

In addition, Austria published its Industrial Strategy for 2035 in 2026, which sets out long-term priorities for strengthening the national economy while supporting sustainable transformation (Republik Österreich, 2026, pp. 64–68). Of the seven central fields of action identified in the strategy, the area of the “Circular Economy, Bioeconomy and Transformation” is a particular focus. The strategy emphasises the importance of increasing resource sovereignty, encouraging the use of sustainable raw materials and improving economic resilience. A central objective of the strategy is to transition towards a circular economic model. This shift is seen as a way of addressing rising raw material costs, resource scarcity, and global trade uncertainties. Austria is recognised as a leading location for environmental technologies within the European Union, with strong performance in innovation rankings and above-average achievements in areas such as recycling, renewable energy and resource efficiency. The strategy emphasises that sustainable competitiveness and environmental responsibility must go hand in hand. Several concrete measures are outlined to achieve the defined goals. These include establishing national and European raw material reserves, expanding recycling and processing systems, and creating regional recycling and recovery clusters. Additionally, sustainable sourcing practices should be actively promoted within public procurement. These initiatives aim to enhance Austria’s resilience, reduce dependency on primary resources and promote innovation-driven transformation across key industrial sectors.

2.3.4 Support Ecosystem for Social Entrepreneurship

In Austria, social entrepreneurs can draw on a wide range of support instruments, including networks, public advisory services, awards and certification schemes.

2.3.4.1 Networks

A key player in Austria's social entrepreneurship ecosystem is the Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria, which was founded in 2018 and is based in Vienna (SENA, n.d.-a). SENA serves as the national umbrella organisation and voice for social entrepreneurship, connecting stakeholders across the social and green entrepreneurship sectors. It raises awareness of social entrepreneurship and fosters understanding of it among society, businesses and policymakers, while increasing the visibility of ventures that create a positive societal impact.

In addition to this nationwide network, several regional networks support social entrepreneurs at the local level. Impact Hub Vienna, established in 2009, provides spaces, programmes and community support for founders and institutions developing entrepreneurial solutions to societal challenges (Impact Hub Vienna, n.d.-a). It aims to build strong impact ecosystems through collaboration across sectors. The Social Business Hub Styria acts as an incubator and network for social businesses that address issues such as climate change, demographic shifts, migration and education (SBHS, n.d.-b). It provides guidance, expertise and networking opportunities to promote social innovation. Impact Hub Tirol, founded in 2019, fosters social entrepreneurship by creating a community that is both locally rooted and globally connected, supporting ventures that pursue a regenerative economy for people and the planet (Impact Hub Tirol, n.d.). Together, these networks demonstrate how national coordination and regional support strengthen Austria's social entrepreneurship ecosystem.

2.3.4.2 Public Advisory Services

The start-up service of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKO) plays a central role in supporting entrepreneurial activity in Austria, including the development of social enterprises (WKO Gründerservice, 2025, pp. 1, 53). Every year, the WKO assists thousands of

founders by providing personalised consultations and structured guidance throughout the business creation process. To address the specific needs of social entrepreneurs, the WKO start-up service offers detailed guidelines providing a systematic overview of social entrepreneurship in Austria. These guidelines cover core aspects of social entrepreneurship and key steps in the founding process, with a focus on business model design and financing. They also explain impact measurement and the legal frameworks relevant to social enterprises, showcasing best practices through Austrian case studies. This service plays a significant role in fostering a supportive ecosystem for social entrepreneurship in Austria.

2.3.4.3 Awards

Awards for social entrepreneurs have a significant impact on the Austrian social innovation ecosystem. They not only raise public awareness but also encourage financial support (Millner et al., 2024, p. 35). One of the most prominent awards is the so-called “Social Impact Award”. It was implemented in Austria in 2009 with the aim of supporting young social entrepreneurs (Social Impact Award, 2022). Through workshops and incubation programmes, they build a network that provides information on managing innovative business models focused on solving societal problems. Today, the network has an international reach, spanning over 139 cities in more than 25 countries across Europe, Africa and Central Asia. It supports 10,000 young participants each year through its events and workshops. Social businesses in the early stages of development can participate in webinars and educational events free of charge, learn about potential career paths, and receive support from the community in the form of mentoring and funding. Although it started in Austria, it has now become a larger community that not only Austrian social entrepreneurs can use to drive growth and knowledge.

Other examples of awards that promote social business development in Austria include the “Get Active Social Business Award” and the “EY Entrepreneur of the Year” award, which has a special category for social entrepreneurship (Millner et al., 2024, pp. 35–36).

2.3.4.4 *Labelling Schemes*

Since the introduction of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label in December 2022, Austrian social and green enterprises have, for the first time, been able to officially label their social business status (SBHS, n.d.-a). It is currently the only national Austrian label serving as a quality mark to support social entrepreneurs, investors, and funding programmes (SENA, n.d.-b). Further information about the label, its labelling criteria, and labelled social entrepreneurs can be found in chapter 2.4.

2.3.5 *Recommendations for Policy and Practice*

The first comprehensive study on social entrepreneurship in Austria, published in 2020, revealed substantial structural challenges for social entrepreneurs (SENA, 2020, pp. 12–16). In particular, the overall framework conditions were widely perceived as unfavourable, with strong criticism directed towards the limited policy support for the sector. Social entrepreneurs also expressed dissatisfaction with the current funding landscape, including the availability of impact investment and emphasised the need for greater political understanding of the different needs of social enterprises. Key expectations of public authorities included reduced labour-related costs, lower administrative burdens, more appropriate regulatory frameworks and tax relief measures. Beyond financial aspects, the sector also highlighted deficits in societal awareness, limited interaction with policymakers and the need for support in impact measurement.

Since then, the policy and ecosystem landscape has continued to evolve. More recent analyses, including the Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor 2023/2024 and a publication by the #mitsinn initiative demonstrate that these challenges are now being addressed in greater detail (Schön & Lebert, 2024, p. 6; Vador et al., 2024). The aim is to present a publicly available roadmap for the implementation of the social economy in Austria, which includes concrete proposals for systemic framework changes. Consequently, both sources provide specific recommendations for policymakers and economic stakeholders, supported by practical

examples from other European countries. This chapter highlights the key recommendations aimed at strengthening the long-term development and impact of social enterprises in Austria.

2.3.5.1 Governance and Public Framework Conditions

To provide strategic direction and improve coordination across administrative levels, Austria requires a comprehensive national strategy for social entrepreneurship (Schön & Lebert, 2024, p. 75). This strategy should set out clear objectives and guiding principles while ensuring policies are connected at national and regional levels. In doing so, Austria would be aligning itself with the practices of many other EU member states and following the recommendations of the European Commission. Participation in the EU Social Economy Action Plan requires clearly defined institutional responsibilities at a national level.

Additionally, a supportive fiscal and tax framework is essential in enabling social enterprises to increase their impact (Schön & Lebert, 2024, p. 68). Alongside clear legal recognition of social enterprises, targeted tax incentives should be developed that reflect their economic as well as social mission. Key measures could include reducing corporate income tax and offering broader investment tax credits. Other options could be income tax reductions linked to employment in social enterprises and tax relief for new social businesses.

At the same time, it is recommended that bureaucratic procedures should be simplified to reduce the administrative burden on social enterprises (Schön & Lebert, 2024, p. 71). This includes mandatory notarial acts, certification procedures, and the insufficient digitalisation of administrative processes. Selection criteria for public funding should focus more on societal impact, and reporting and accounting requirements should be simplified.

Finally, it is recommended that the “Verified Social Enterprise” label should be strengthened further and recognised as a key governance instrument (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 83–84). While the label is generally perceived positively, there is room for improvement. As a network good, its value increases with the number of labelled enterprises. Experts emphasise

that sustained political commitment and patience are critical to enabling the label to fulfil its potential.

2.3.5.2 Financing

Strengthening the financing of the social economy in Austria requires coordinated action across multiple levels, combining private, public, and European resources (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 86–88). At the private level, philanthropic foundations are recommended to play a more prominent role as providers of risk capital, given that their independence enables them to address neglected social challenges and accept higher risks. But compared to other European countries the level of philanthropic engagement in Austria is rather low, this is why major foundations should significantly increase the available funding. In parallel, private investment financing through impact investing should be supported and implemented more widely. At the public level, funding schemes should systematically recognise social innovation equally and consistently. Finally, European Union funds offer significant leverage. Programmes such as ESF+ and EFRE can co-finance national and regional initiatives and attract additional public and private funding. Taken together, these measures could increase the financial resources available for the Austrian social economy.

2.3.5.3 Markets and Demand Creation

Creating functioning markets and lasting demand is essential for enabling social enterprises in Austria to grow and achieve long-term impact (Schön & Lebert, 2024, pp. 50, 55). Public procurement plays a key role in creating demand. Taking a consistent approach that considers value creation as well as price helps public contracting authorities to integrate social and environmental criteria alongside financial considerations. Increasing the visibility of social enterprises in public procurement processes and developing relevant skills within public administrations can help align public spending with broader sustainability goals.

Access to private markets is equally important as public markets, as sales revenues represent a central source of income for businesses (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 88–91). However,

low societal recognition of their value often puts businesses at a competitive disadvantage. Reducing information gaps and increasing awareness among private customers through demand-side measures is key to addressing this imbalance. Taking this approach would lead to more inclusive markets that reward societal efforts.

2.3.5.4 Education and Skill Development

Education, skill development and research are essential for strengthening social entrepreneurship in Austria (Schön & Lebert, 2024, pp. 59, 63). Therefore, societal innovation should be more embedded within existing education and training structures. At the school level, initiatives such as the Initiative for Teaching Entrepreneurship demonstrate how entrepreneurial and innovative competencies can be introduced at an early stage. At the tertiary level, Austria already benefits from a view research and teaching institutions, including the Social Entrepreneurship Center at the Vienna University of Economics. Based on that, further expansion of academic capacity is recommended, for example by university programs focused on social entrepreneurship.

Beyond schools and universities, a system of continuing education for all is needed to enable lifelong learning (Schön & Lebert, 2024, p. 64). In this regard, the establishment of training or advisory programs for employees would strengthen the skills of workers to actively shape societal innovation. This could be offered by the Chamber of Labour. More than 40% of Austrian social enterprises themselves express a strong demand for practical training opportunities, especially in areas such as impact measurement and scaling (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 91). Expanding and strengthening such training programs is therefore a key recommendation.

2.3.5.5 Visibility and Societal Recognition

Social enterprises continue to face limited public recognition (Schön & Lebert, 2024, pp. 17–19; Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 94–95). A significant majority (78.1%) of Austria's social enterprises state that low public awareness is a major barrier to their work. Therefore, increasing the visibility and societal recognition of social enterprises in Austria is essential for their long-

term development and political relevance. The Austrian federal government should therefore proactively communicate about this sector and its contribution to social, economic, and ecological transformation. A nationwide awareness campaign, perhaps focusing on the “Verified Social Enterprise” label, is recommended to strengthen public understanding. Additionally, systematically mapping the social enterprise ecosystem would provide a stronger evidence base for policy development.

The main recommendation in this field is to establish a national summit or conference on societal innovation, to be held every two years (Schön & Lebert, 2024, p. 19). If implemented as a multi-stakeholder initiative, such a platform would not only increase visibility, but also encourage exchange and mutual learning across sectors. Austria already has SENA, an interest group for social entrepreneurs. While this is a good first step, SENA requires long-term funding to ensure ongoing success. This will enable it to continue representing the sector's interests and acting as a strong collective voice in political decision-making processes.

All of these recommendations combined aim to support the Austrian social economy by encouraging politicians, businesses and organisations to act in a way that ensures long-term stability and growth.

2.4 “Verified Social Enterprise” Label

With the implementation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label (VSE label) in December 2022, it is now possible for social and green enterprises to obtain an official social business status (SBHS, n.d.-a). The VSE label is a national Austrian label and marks a milestone in the development of social businesses in Austria. As a quality mark, the label supports not only social entrepreneurs themselves but also investors and funding programs (SENA, n.d.-b). Regarding the benefits of the label, the Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria claims the following four main benefits:

- **Credibility:** The VSE label fosters trust and recognition among stakeholders, as it is based on transparent criteria. Therefore, it increases the credibility of businesses, especially among investors, funding programs, and customers.
- **Identity and affiliation:** As registered VSEs, companies can easily communicate what they do and what their core values are, as they are part of a larger community.
- **Statement to investors:** Using the VSE label when addressing potential investors may serve as a competitive advantage and support social entrepreneurs.
- **Exclusive funding programs:** Together with business partners, SENA works towards the goal of implementing funding and support programs exclusively for labelled companies.

The main partners in this regard are the WKO and aws.

Furthermore, the “Verified Social Enterprise” label contributes to systemic change that may have the power to influence policies in the long run (Impact Hub Vienna, n.d.-b). It strengthens the impact ecosystem by creating unified standards for green and social businesses in Austria. The mentioned benefits, as well as the media exposure following the labelling ceremony, create a supportive basis for competing in the Austrian impact landscape.

Various partners, such as SENA, Social Business Hub Styria, Impact Hub Vienna, and atempo, support the vision of the VSE label (aws, n.d.-b). They provide information about the labelling process, advise companies on how to improve their impact strategies, and guide social businesses towards becoming VSEs through workshops and start-up programs.

2.4.1 Implementation

The official publication of the VSE label took place in December 2022 (SBHS, n.d.-a). The leading organisation that made this label possible is SENA, operating under the supervision of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy. All Austrian companies, cooperatives, and associations whose purpose is to make a positive environmental or societal contribution are eligible to start the labelling process (aws, n.d.-a). Thus, companies of all industries, from small

start-ups to large businesses, are part of the target group for the label, which is valid for three years and subsequently requires a re-certification procedure.

The purpose of the VSE label is to create transparency by publicly identifying social businesses in Austria that meet certain criteria (aws, n.d.-a). Therefore, the label can be used for communication purposes in combination with the company name. After a positive review of the application materials, the label is officially awarded by the BMAW and managed by the aws in cooperation with SENA and the WKO.

In addition to the initial definition of the target group, the aws provides a clear statement on who can receive the VSE label and who cannot (aws, n.d.-a):

- Who is permitted to receive the VSE label?

To obtain the label, it is required to publish a publicly accessible impact report that includes a meaningful impact logic. Furthermore, the company must state its self-commitment and create a pitch deck for the application. All Austrian-based and commercially active organisations with societal impact that state their commitment in their statutes or comparable publications have the possibility to start the labelling process.

- Who is not permitted to receive the VSE label?

There are two main criteria that exclude companies from applying for the VSE label: first, if their registered office is not located in Austria and second, if they do not provide impact documentation that proves the company's positive impact on society.

Shortly after the implementation of the VSE label, the first study regarding the label was published (Kleewein, 2023, pp. 77–78). The study focused on the measures needed to raise acceptance of the label, and eight social business experts were interviewed. The main expected benefits of the label are funding incentives and visibility, as well as usage as a USP (Unique Selling Point). The most popular reasons why social entrepreneurs are interested in the label are to raise awareness of the social business economy, and because they see the bigger picture, despite there being no immediate benefits connected to the label. Potential hurdles for companies to

obtain the label may include writing the impact report and navigating the application process. The study highlights the need for any necessary adjustments to be made quickly to prevent the label from failing.

2.4.2 Labelling Process

The labelling process can be found online on the aws webpage and consists of the following four main steps:

1. The application for the labelling process is done online via the aws funding manager (aws, n.d.-d, p. 2). In the beginning, the applicants fill out a questionnaire that serves to state the most important facts to check compliance with the mandatory label criteria. Additionally, the companies have to select three of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to define their green or social impact.
2. Three documents must be submitted for a formally compliant application (aws, n.d.-d, p. 1):
 - Impact Report: Companies must submit a so-called impact report with an impact logic that follows the guidelines stated in the Terms and Conditions of Participation, which can also be found online. It is a report that presents the impact of a company in a structured way.
 - Pitch Deck: Guidelines for the pitch deck can also be found online, and the purpose is to present the company itself, with its core operations, mission and vision.
 - Legal documentation: To confirm the legal basis of the business, they also must provide their articles of association, statutes and bylaws.
3. After the first check of completion of the application documents and basic criteria, a so-called impact board evaluates the potential VSEs (aws, n.d.-a). The impact board is an independent group of experts that is in control of the reviews. Applications can be submitted on an ongoing basis and will be reviewed in about four to eight weeks.

4. After a positive review of the impact board, the jury makes the final decision, and the VSE label is issued by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour and Economic Affairs.

The labelled social entrepreneurs are obligated to inform aws as soon as there are any changes of the business model that affect compliance with the label (aws, n.d.-d, p. 2). The duration of the label holds up to three years but can be undone via email by both parties. After three years, the re-labelling will be approved if the VSE still upholds all criteria of the conditions of participation (Impact Hub Vienna, n.d.-b). The re-assessment is done using a questionnaire. Failing the re-assessment leads to an immediate withdrawal of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. The whole labelling process, the support from aws throughout the process, and the label itself are all free of charge (aws, n.d.-d, p. 3).

2.4.3 Impact Report

The most complex part in the preparation for the VSE labelling is the writing process of the impact report. Therefore, the aws offers a guideline document which step by step explains what to mention and how to formally explain the company’s impact (aws, n.d.-c, pp. 3–8). The basis for the structure of the report is the internationally implemented IOOI framework (Input, Output, Outcome and Impact). First comes the input, which is what the business uses for its business model. It includes financial as well as human resources, physical materials, knowledge of the team, and cooperation with relevant stakeholders. Second step in this framework is the output, which is the result that follows the companies input and describes what the customers get, the product or service. Concluding the IOOI framework, outcomes and impacts are changes that affect the whole society, only certain stakeholders or the environment. These impacts and outcomes come from products and services provided by companies and are not always positive, in fact, they can be positive or negative, intended or not intended and expected as well as unexpected.

The impact report starts by explaining in detail the societal problem that the social business is addressing (aws, n.d.-c, pp. 3–5). It is important that the stakeholders understand this

part to see the purpose of the business. The extent of the problem should be the focus as well as the causes for this issue. Pointing out long-term and short-term consequences to see what will happen in the future if nobody acts today leads to the part where the social businesses explain their own idea. Explaining how other services deal with the societal problem and then stating the differences to the own solution creates good understanding. This step-by-step approach, combined in one model is called the impact logic of a social business model.

The next part of the impact report focuses on the resources used during the reporting period, which is mostly one business year (aws, n.d.-c, pp. 8–9). The companies must document their different inputs, the created output, as well as their achieved outcomes and impacts. The chapter offers insights in data and comparison to previous years.

Next up, the impact report continues with planning the next steps and preparing an outlook regarding the goals of the social enterprise (aws, n.d.-c, p. 10). The goals should be precise and should match the company's mission and vision. As a preparation for future uncertainties related to business trends, policies or other external influences, the business must identify relevant risks and opportunities.

The impact report concludes with an overview of the company and team structure (aws, n.d.-c, p. 11). Visualising the organisational structure explains who is involved in creating impact and how the different units are connected. Finally, the report must mention the most important cooperation partners and introduce the social entrepreneurs itself.

2.4.4 Registered Enterprises

As of May 2026, there are 85 companies, organisations and associations that hold the “Verified Social Enterprise” label (Unternehmensserviceportal, 2026). All of these companies can be found online in the Austrian company service portal and are also listed in the A-Z company register of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (aws, n.d.-a). The company service portal lists all registered VSEs, links their webpage, and states how long the label is valid

(Unternehmensserviceportal, 2026). As the label duration is three years, the first 28 registered businesses will need re-labelling in 2026.

Looking closer at the published VSEs, it is noticeable that approximately 84% are SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) and 16% are larger organisations. Around 73% are economically active organisations, whereas around 27% are purely non-profit. The 85 VSEs can be clustered in six industry types shown in figure 2.

INDUSTRY DISTRIBUTION VSE COMPANIES

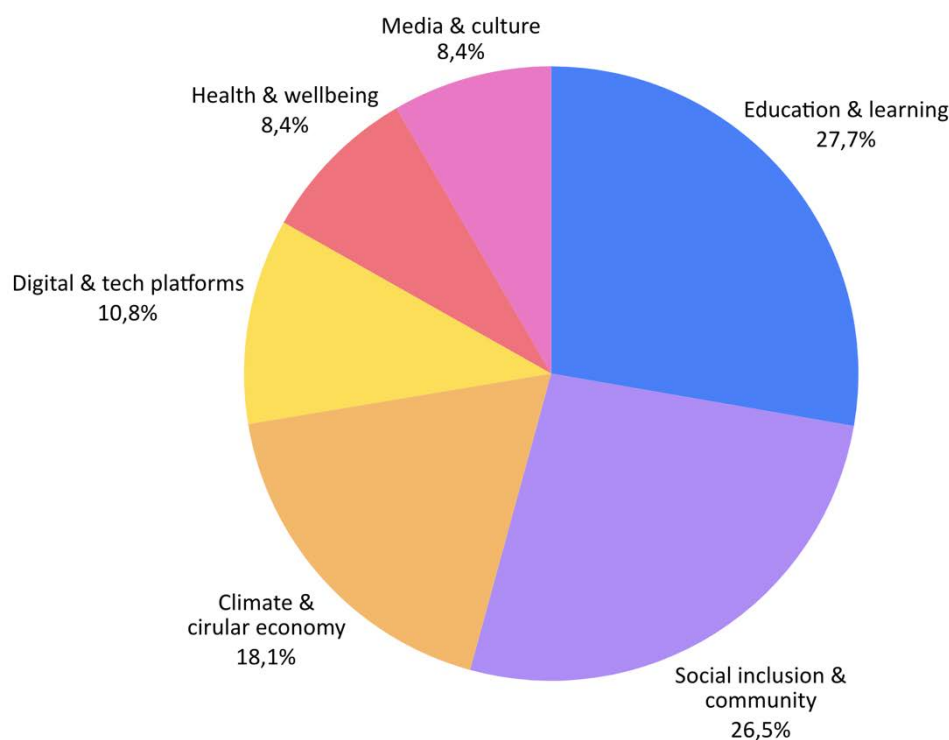


Figure 2: Industry Distribution VSE Companies. Source: Own illustration.

2.4.5 Potential for Improvement

Recently, in September 2025, the European Social Economy Gateway published an article about Austria making social impact visible via the VSE label (aws, n.d.-b). It states that the label does not only foster social entrepreneurship in Austria, but it contributes to the ambitions of the European Social Economy Action Plan that stands for visibility and growing importance in the economy. Although there is already a number of social enterprises registered with the label, there is still potential for improvement as shown in the Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor 2023/24 (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 72).

As part of the study, companies were asked about the “Verified Social Enterprise” label, and about 50% of them already knew about this label (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 71). However, it is important to mention that the survey was shared via organisations like SENA and aws, so there is high potential for oversampling of VSEs. 12.1% of those surveyed already hold the VSE label, and 17.9% state they might want the label in the future. Mentioned reasons why businesses did not apply for the label are the lack of knowledge about the label itself, the disbelief in its advantages, and that the companies do not meet the basic criteria that are mandatory.

Additionally, social businesses as well as experts of the social business economy were asked about the potential for improvement of the label (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 72). Both stakeholder groups see financial benefits as a main driver for growth and seek for advantages against conventional businesses when it comes to public tenders. Especially experts point out the need for lasting implementation and support to prevent failure of the whole project. Some experts fear that the relatively low number of labelled businesses so far creates a distorted picture of the sector and its potential power in the economy. The need for more attractive incentives will be a challenge and should become the focus in further developing strategies for the implementation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label in Austria.

3 Empirical Study

In order to answer the research questions concerning the VSE label, an empirical study is necessary to gather the additional data required after the literature review phase. This chapter explains in detail the methodology used to collect this data. It starts by outlining the overall empirical approach, then focuses on the two streams of data collection, and finally provides insights into the data analysis phase.

3.1 Empirical Approach

For this master's thesis, a mixed methods research design is used, as it is well suited to the topic and helps address the identified research gap. Mixed methods research refers to the strategic combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods (Malhotra, 2020, p. 153). A qualitative research approach is exploratory in nature and generally less structured, typically involving a small sample size. It provides an initial understanding of the topic and generates valuable insights. In contrast, a quantitative research approach is used to quantify the collected data, ideally based on a large and representative sample. The two approaches complement each other and, when combined, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic and support conclusions based on reliable data.

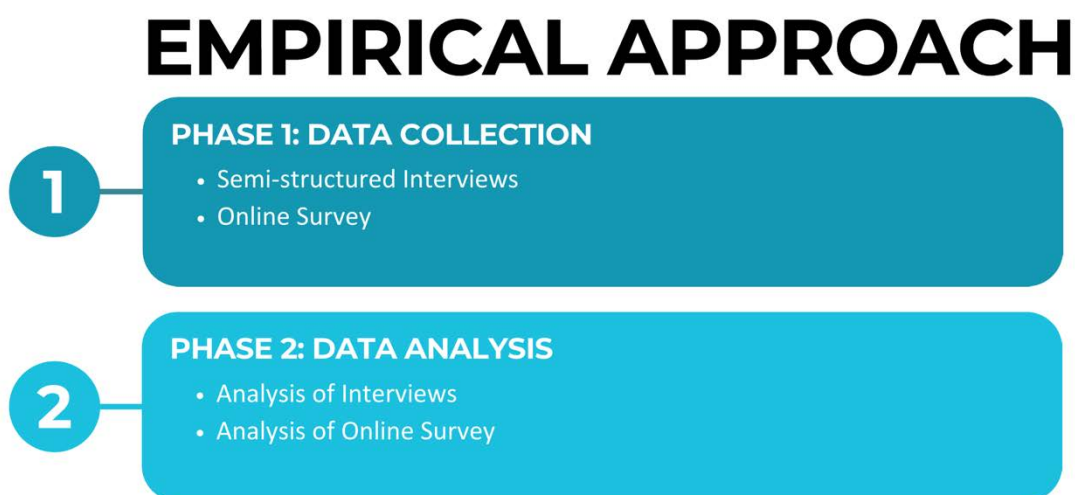


Figure 3: Empirical Approach. Source: Own illustration.

Due to the limited amount of data available on the implementation of the VSE label, a mixed methods approach is appropriate. It allows qualitative findings to be supported by quantitative research, thereby strengthening the quality of the results presented and the recommendations derived from them. The primary focus is on exploratory research, which is particularly suitable in cases where only limited or no secondary data is available.

3.2 Data Collection

The first step of the empirical study is the data collection phase. In terms of qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are used to identify initial insights into the research topic. Afterwards, a quantitative online survey is conducted to further strengthen the data by making it more representative. However, the qualitative interviews represent the primary method and therefore provide the main body of data. The online survey serves as a complementary quantitative element and mainly focuses on RQ1.

3.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are a qualitative research method that uses a direct approach, meaning the purpose of the study is clearly communicated to the respondent (Malhotra, 2020, p. 155). Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in exploratory research (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 378).

3.2.1.1 Research Sample

For the qualitative part, eight interviews were conducted. The interview partners were identified with the support of the Social Business Hub Styria as well as through the networks of the interview partners themselves. The selection criteria were that participants either work for a registered VSE company, conduct research in this field or work for an institution that engages with the label. For the registered companies, the focus was on organisations that hold the label for more than two years by now.

It is important to note that four interviews were conducted with organisations that currently hold the “Verified Social Enterprise” label, two with experts who conduct research in

the field of the VSE label, and two with individuals from organisations that manage or support the label. Some interviewees fulfil more than one of these roles. One interview was conducted with two interview partners, meaning that in total there were five male and four female interview partners.

Table 1: Overview interview partners. Source: Own illustration.

Number	Gender	Type of Organisation	Duration	Date
01	male	Registered VSE company	24 min	05.03.26
02	male	Registered VSE company	38 min	09.03.26
03	male	Organisation that supports the label	43 min	11.03.26
04	2x female	Registered VSE company	31 min	18.03.26
05	male	Expert that researches this topic	30 min	25.03.26
06	female	Registered VSE company	27 min	27.03.26
07	male	Expert that researches this topic	29 min	31.03.26
08	female	Organisation that supports the label	48 min	22.05.26

3.2.1.2 Interview Guideline

Using semi-structured interviews means that, for this master's thesis, each interview followed a consistent structure (Saunders et al., 2012, pp. 374–375). However, there were both must-have questions and nice-to-have questions, and depending on the context of the interview partner, the most appropriate questions were selected. Most questions were asked in all interviews, but the researcher was free to ask additional questions or skip certain sub-questions if the topic had already been covered.

The basis for developing the interview guideline were the three research questions. For each research question, a thematic block with three to five sub-questions was created in order to explore the topic in sufficient depth to later answer the research questions. The interview guideline begins with an introduction of the researcher and the purpose of the study, followed by a personal question and an ice-breaker question at the start. Afterwards, the main part of the interview is structured around the three focus sections. The interview ends with a short

conclusion in which the main points discussed are summarised. After the interview, the interview partners were provided with further details on the next steps of the study.

All questions were developed based on theory from the literature review. To avoid bias from the questions or the interviewer, all questions were formulated in a neutral way and asked in a neutral tone, so that they do not lead the respondent in a specific direction. In addition, the use of open-ended questions helps to further reduce bias. In order to make the interview more varied, different questioning styles were used.

The full interview guideline can be found in appendix A.

3.2.1.3 Time Period and Execution

All interview partners were contacted via email, and the interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, with only one interview taking place in person. The interviews lasted between 24 and 48 minutes and were conducted in April 2026, with one interview taking place later at the end of May 2026. The interviews were conducted in German, as all participants, including the interviewer, are German speaking. This was done to avoid any loss of information due to language barriers and to ensure clarity throughout the interviews.

After signing the data protection declaration, all interviews were recorded using a mobile phone. The recordings were subsequently transcribed using the MacWhisper tool, which enables local transcription and therefore meets high data security standards. The transcripts were then manually anonymised and afterwards revised and translated from German into English using the AI tool ChatGPT.

Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the entire research process, both during the design of the study and its execution. All personal data is securely stored, and the data used is anonymised by excluding names of interviewees, company names and other identifiable details such as specific years and locations.

3.2.2 Online Survey

The online survey is used in the descriptive research part in order to strengthen the findings from the interviews, with a main focus on RQ1. Based on the literature, it is designed with standardised questions that are easy to understand so that all participants understand them in the same way and there is limited room for interpretation (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 419).

3.2.2.1 Research Sample

The target group of the online survey consists of all registered VSE companies, which numbered 85 as of May 2026 (Unternehmensserviceportal, 2026). Given the limited population size of registered VSEs in Austria, all registered companies were contacted in order to ensure maximum coverage and representativeness. However, it was difficult to obtain responses from many companies, which is why ultimately 24 representatives from the 85 VSE companies participated in the survey.

To reach all social businesses within the target group, various communication channels were used. All companies were contacted via email, the survey was shared via LinkedIn, and several partners, such as the SHBS, SENA and the aws, also distributed the link through their communication channels.

3.2.2.2 Questionnaire Design

The survey questions were developed through the operationalisation of the research questions and the theoretical constructs identified in the literature review. Each question is linked to one specific research question.

Several questioning styles were used, although the survey mainly consists of closed questions (Malhotra, 2020, pp. 330–334). The questions were formulated in a neutral way, avoiding leading wording and using simple, easy-to-understand language.

A funnel structure was applied, meaning the order of the questions moves from general to more specific topics. Rating questions in the form of a five-point Likert scale were used instead

of yes/no questions in order to collect more suitable data for the analysis (Saunders et al., 2012, pp. 436–437).

The survey items were derived from the interview findings and structured according to the institutional pressures identified in institutional theory. The importance of motivational factors was measured using Likert scale items. Mean scores can then be calculated to identify the relative importance of push and pull factors, allowing for the development of a ranked list of motivations. Re-labelling intention was measured using a Likert-type likelihood scale, which enables the capture of behavioural intentions in a more nuanced way and supports descriptive statistical analysis.

Due to the small population size of registered “Verified Social Enterprise” companies in Austria, only a limited number of demographic variables were collected in order to ensure respondent anonymity and reduce the risk of indirect identification.

Three pre-tests were conducted to identify and eliminate potential issues (Malhotra, 2020, p. 338). Two experts in research design reviewed the survey, and one person from the target group itself tested it as well.

3.2.2.3 Time Period and Execution

The survey was created using the tool QuestionPro, and the pre-tests were also conducted with the final survey design in the tool. Completing the survey takes approximately five minutes, and it is accessible on both mobile phones and laptop devices.

The survey was initially launched at the beginning of May 2026 and actively promoted throughout May and June 2026. The survey was closed after 9 weeks.

3.3 Data Analysis

The main focus of the analysis phase is on the interviews, which were analysed using Mayring’s content analysis approach. The data from the additional online survey was analysed using a descriptive statistical approach.

3.3.1 Analysis of Interviews

3.3.1.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

The purpose of content analysis is to understand the connections and overlapping statements in communication materials (Mayring, 2015, pp. 11–13). In this master's thesis, the focus is on the content of eight interviews. The approach involves creating a systematic, rule-based and theory-based structure that can be used to analyse each interview.

As mentioned in the previous chapter about data collection, all eight interview transcripts were prepared for analysis in the same way during the data collection phase. All content analyses by Mayring are typically structured in the same way, starting with the preparation of the material and clarifying the goal and the research questions that will lead the analysis (Mayring, 2015, p. 62,65). However, there are special qualitative techniques that aim to provide structure and rules for understanding and interpreting interview content.

For this study, a deductive qualitative content analysis approach was chosen (Mayring, 2015, pp. 97–98). This means that the categories used to analyse the interview content are based on the research questions and can be supported by theory. Following four categories have been formed, covering all three research questions:

- Category 1: Motivation to become a VSE (RQ1)
- Category 2: Benefits of the VSE label (RQ1)
- Category 3: Re-labelling and long-term commitment (RQ2)
- Category 4: Future development of the VSE label (RQ3)

Each category is divided into several subcategories, each of which is defined by specific coding guidelines. These guidelines are used in the next step, when the entire content is systematically reviewed using the QCAmap tool. Each category has its own codebook containing definition, anchor examples and coding rules. The coding guidelines were tested on two of the eight interviews and then refined to ensure the highest quality when analysing the content of all eight interviews. This is an important step when considering Mayring's theory.

After coding the entire content, the QCMap tool provides an Excel document including all marked phrases and the expert who stated them (E1–E8). These lists are essential for the actual analysis of the content. Each sub-category is described neutrally and provides an overview of the content mentioned, including similarities and differences. Quotes are also provided to improve understanding of how interview partners discussed certain topics. In this process, the AI tool ChatGPT was used with a detailed prompt, ensuring that no content was added and only facts based on the coded material were used. The tool does not replace manual analysis but rather supports it in a digital and structured way, making the findings more understandable.

The coding guidelines and the coded content of each subcategory can be found in appendix A.

3.3.1.2 *Connection to Institutional Theory*

The deductive qualitative content analysis aims to describe the interview findings based on the developed category system. The chapter *discussion* interprets the findings by combining the interview results with the descriptive survey findings and relating them to the research questions.

Institutional theory serves as the analytical lens through which the findings are then interpreted. The discussion particularly examines whether the statements reflect institutional pressures (coercive, normative or mimetic) and how considerations of legitimacy influence motivation to obtain the VSE label and willingness to re-label.

3.3.2 *Analysis of Online Survey*

3.3.2.1 *Descriptive Statistical Analysis*

The descriptive statistical approach uses numerical data to describe the findings, allowing numerical variables to be interpreted and compared (Saunders et al., 2012, pp. 502–508). Additionally, graphical representations are used to make the data more accessible and easier to understand.

Due to the use of Likert scale items, mean values were calculated, and the push and pull factors motivating applications for the VSE label were ranked from highest to lowest priority. This allows the data to be interpreted in a straightforward way. For the re-labelling question and most other items, frequencies and percentages, supported by graphs, are used to illustrate the tendencies of the participants. The data is described in a neutral manner and is not interpreted at this stage; interpretation is reserved for the *discussion* chapter.

3.3.2.2 *Integration with Interview Findings*

The survey items were derived from theoretical constructs and insights gained from the interviews. Therefore, the purpose of the quantitative findings is to support and strengthen the qualitative results, or to identify aspects that may not apply to a larger group. Additionally, the survey data provides further insights into the qualitative interview findings.

3.4 **Methodological Limitations**

However, despite the literature-based methodological design, this study has several limitations.

The main limitation is the relatively small sample size in both the interviews and the online survey. Especially in the early stage of implementation of the VSE label, the views of different social businesses may vary significantly.

In addition, potential subjectivity in the qualitative interpretation is an important factor to consider. Overall, the research results should be seen as a general indication rather than a fix conclusion, as the qualitative research represents an initial step and further data would be needed to strengthen the findings due to the exploratory nature of this study.

4 Results

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative and quantitative studies. The aim is to present the findings in a neutral but structured way, while keeping the interview and survey data separate for now.

4.1 Qualitative Study

The interview findings are described qualitatively, outlining the main statements and structuring the content to highlight essential similarities and differences regarding the “Verified Social Enterprise” label.

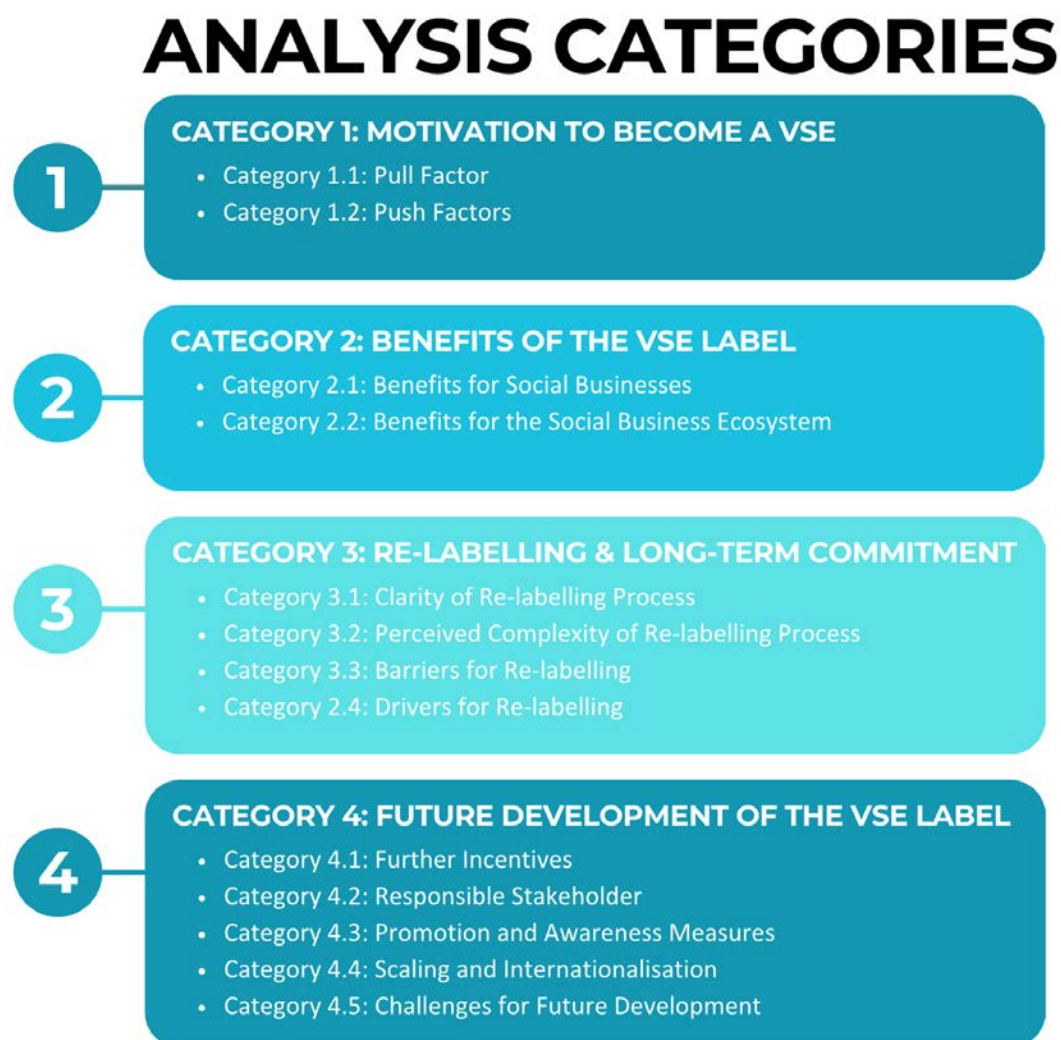


Figure 4: Qualitative Analysis Categories. Source: Own illustration.

4.1.1 Category 1: Motivation to Become a VSE

Category 1 relates to RQ1 and focuses on the reasons and influencing factors that motivate organisations to apply for the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. The results are organised into two deductive categories.

Category 1.1: Pull Factor

The findings on pull factors for becoming a VSE show that motivation is primarily driven by perceived external recognition, differentiation, credibility, and a sense of belonging, alongside some expectations of emerging (but not yet fully realised) benefits.

A dominant theme is the search for credibility, recognition, and external validation (E1; E3; E5; E8). The label is described as a form of official confirmation that organisations are acting in line with their mission and standards. One expert refers to it as “a kind of check, similar to an organic certification, showing that you are trustworthy” (E1), while another highlights “self-confirmation and external validation vis-à-vis third parties and stakeholders” (E3).

Closely related is the desire for differentiation and external visibility (E1; E3; E4; E6). Several interviewees emphasise that the label helps organisations distinguish themselves in the market and communicate their mission-oriented identity more clearly. This includes both external communication and internal positioning. One expert states it is “about standing out” (E6), while another notes the intention “to differentiate yourself somewhat from others” (E1). At the same time, it is seen as a tool to make already existing internal practices visible to the outside (E4).

A further important aspect is the sense of community and belonging within the ecosystem (E2; E5; E8). The label is perceived as a way to become part of a broader movement and connect with like-minded organisations. One interviewee describes it as “nice to be part of a community” (E2), while others emphasise that this sense of community is itself a key motivating factor (E8).

In addition, some statements point to instrumental and strategic advantages, particularly in relation to funding, public recognition, and emerging policy frameworks (E1; E5; E7). The label is seen as potentially beneficial in funding applications or as a signal in institutional contexts. At the same time, expectations of concrete benefits remain partly future-oriented.

Finally, a smaller but notable theme is value-based motivation and symbolic support for the ecosystem itself (E4; E7). Some organisations emphasise that their motivation is not only self-oriented but also linked to supporting the broader development of the social enterprise field.

Overall, the findings suggest that pull factors are driven by a combination of external legitimacy, differentiation, community belonging, and partially anticipated strategic advantages. While credibility and recognition emerge as the strongest motivators, differences between interviews relate to whether the focus is primarily on external signalling, internal identity confirmation, or ecosystem-oriented support.

Category 1.2: Push Factors

The findings on push factors for becoming a VSE indicate that motivation is primarily triggered through external ecosystem actors, although this theme is mentioned less frequently and in less detail compared to pull factors, suggesting a relatively weaker role of push dynamics in the overall motivation process.

A key element is the role of intermediary organisations and ecosystem builders like SENA and the Social Business Hub Styria in creating initial awareness of the label (E1; E6; E8). These actors make the topic visible within the Austrian social enterprise ecosystem. One expert emphasises that without such institutions, “this topic would hardly be on the radar in Austria at all” (E6).

In addition, exposure through organised events serves as an initial trigger for engagement (E1). In such contexts, the label is introduced and explained, leading to immediate recognition, as reflected in the statement: “yes, that fits, we will give it a try” (E1).

Finally, political and institutional context factors are mentioned as an enabling background condition (E2), contributing to legitimacy and awareness but not described as a primary driver.

Overall, push factors appear limited and mainly related to initial exposure and awareness creation, while motivation to become a VSE is more strongly shaped by pull factors identified in the previous analysis.

4.1.2 Category 2: Benefits of the VSE Label

Category 2 relates to RQ1 and focuses on the perceived positive effects and added value that the “Verified Social Enterprise” label creates for individual organisations and the wider social enterprise ecosystem. The results are organised into two deductive categories.

Category 2.1: Benefits for Social Businesses

The findings show that perceived benefits of the VSE label for social businesses are mainly concentrated around visibility and signalling effects, while more tangible economic advantages are mentioned less consistently across interviews.

A dominant theme is increased visibility and external recognition of social enterprises (E1; E3; E4; E6; E7; E8). The label is described as helping organisations position themselves more clearly in the market and become identifiable as social enterprises. It is also seen as creating curiosity and awareness among external stakeholders, as some actors reportedly “had never seen it before and had to google what it was” (E6). Similarly, it is emphasised that companies can “present themselves more effectively to consumers, funders, and investors” and signal certification status (E7). In this sense, visibility is closely linked to differentiation and market positioning.

Closely related is the signalling of credibility, legitimacy, and orientation for external stakeholders (E1; E4; E7; E8). Several experts highlight that the label helps communicate seriousness and trustworthiness, particularly in contexts where stakeholders have limited time for evaluation. It is described as providing “credibility and visibility, as well as a clear positioning

as a social enterprise” (E4) and as a way to create “clarity and legitimacy” towards third parties (E7). The label is also seen as supporting classification and making organisations easier to identify through publicly accessible lists (E8).

A third recurring aspect concerns internal development and learning effects within organisations (E1; E6; E8). The label is associated with more structured working approaches, increased reflection on impact, and engagement with impact measurement. One expert notes that it makes the topic of impact “much more present and conscious” and encourages reflection on what is being contributed and how it can be measured (E6). Similarly, it is described as helping organisations “truly understand what they are doing” and identify achieved outcomes (E8). This indicates an internal capacity-building effect beyond external signalling.

In contrast, several statements point to a limited or still underdeveloped level of concrete economic advantage (E3; E5; E7; E8). While some expectations include improved market positioning or competitive advantage, multiple interviewees stress that these effects are not yet strongly realised in practice. One expert reports that “most of them said that it has not brought them particularly much so far” (E5), while another explicitly states that there are “no immediate or obvious benefits” at present (E8).

Overall, the findings indicate a clear pattern: the VSE label is currently perceived as most effective in generating visibility, signalling credibility, and fostering internal reflection processes, while direct economic or competitive advantages are described as emerging but not yet fully realised.

Category 2.2: Benefits for the Social Business Ecosystem

The findings indicate that the VSE label is primarily perceived as beneficial for the broader social business ecosystem through increased visibility, strengthened cohesion, and improved external orientation.

The most prominent theme across interviews is enhanced visibility of the social enterprise sector (E1; E2; E3; E4; E6; E7; E8). The label is consistently described as a mechanism that raises awareness of social entrepreneurship among political actors, funding bodies, and the

wider public, while also strengthening its recognition as a distinct field. One expert highlights that it serves as “a useful point of orientation for partners, customers, and funding bodies” (E8), while another emphasises its role in increasing “the visibility of the sector overall” (E3).

A second key aspect is the strengthening of ecosystem coordination and political embedding (E2; E3; E7). The label is seen as contributing to a more structured dialogue between stakeholders and as a signal of institutional recognition. In this context, it is described as a “vehicle” that enables engagement with public actors and ensures that the topic is addressed at political level (E7). Similarly, the label is interpreted as sending “a signal of transformation to the wider economy” (E3).

Closely related is the strengthening of community and shared identity within the sector (E1; E4; E5; E8). Several experts emphasise that the label fosters cohesion among social enterprises and reduces competitive thinking in favour of collaboration. It is also seen as supporting a collective identity in a field that is still emerging and not fully structured. This is reflected in the description of “a sense of cohesion, a shared identity” (E4).

Finally, the label is perceived as providing orientation and legitimacy for external stakeholders (E5; E8), making the sector more understandable and distinguishable from profit-oriented business models. In this way, it contributes to a clearer positioning of social enterprises within the broader economic system.

Overall, the findings suggest a high level of agreement that the VSE label functions not only as an instrument for individual recognition, but as a systemic tool that strengthens visibility, coordination, and cohesion within the social business ecosystem.

4.1.3 Category 3: Re-labelling and Long-term Commitment

Category 3 relates to RQ2 and focuses on organisational perceptions, evaluations and behavioural factors that influence the decision of a registered “Verified Social Enterprise” companies to renew its status after the initial labelling period of three years. The results are organised into four categories based on deductive reasoning.

Category 3.1: Clarity of Re-labelling Process

The findings indicate that knowledge and understanding of the procedure are still limited among several interview-partners, with only a few having concrete information available. Overall, the subcategory is characterised by uncertainty, fragmented knowledge, and varying levels of perceived transparency.

A dominant theme is the lack of clear and consistent information about the re-labelling process (E1; E3; E4; E7). Several interview-partners explicitly state that the process is not yet well understood or sufficiently communicated. One person notes, “It is not yet clear to me.” (E1), while another states, “At the moment, there is no information available yet” (E4). This indicates that for some registered companies, re-labelling remains a largely undefined or insufficiently communicated procedure.

In contrast, a smaller group of statements reflects initial procedural understanding and emerging transparency (E6; E8). These experts describe a basic awareness of the three-year cycle and the requirement to submit an impact report as part of the renewal process. One registered VSE company explains that “after three years there is an impact measurement” to demonstrate continued eligibility for the label (E6). Similarly, it is noted that “the process has to take place every three years” and largely mirrors the initial application, with the main requirement being an updated impact report (E8).

Finally, a few interviewees explicitly indicate limited personal engagement or knowledge due to early-stage implementation of the process (E2; E7), with one noting uncertainty and lack of clarity regarding expectations, reflecting the still evolving nature of the re-labelling framework.

Overall, the findings show a mixed picture: while some basic structural elements of the re-labelling process are known, particularly the three-year cycle and reporting requirement, overall clarity remains limited. The process is perceived as only partially communicated, with significant variation in how well it is understood across stakeholders.

Category 3.2: Perceived Complexity of Re-labelling Process

The findings on the perceived complexity of the re-labelling process indicate that it is generally viewed as manageable, with only limited concerns about excessive effort.

A dominant theme is that the process is considered relatively simple or feasible to handle within organisational routines (E2; E5; E6). Several experts explicitly describe the effort as “still manageable” (E5) and expect that re-labelling will be “just as simple as the registration” (E6). This suggests an overall perception of low procedural complexity.

At the same time, one interview-partner points out that the effort depends on internal priorities and how strategically the required data collection is integrated into organisational processes (E1). Another expert similarly acknowledges that, while not excessive, the process still requires some effort (E2).

The findings suggest that the re-labelling process is not perceived as highly complex, but rather as a manageable administrative requirement, with minor variation depending on organisational context and preparation.

Category 3.3: Barriers for Re-labelling

The findings on barriers for re-labelling indicate that the main obstacles are perceived lack of added value, resource constraints, and uncertainty regarding expectations, all of which may reduce willingness to continue with the label over time.

A dominant theme is the lack of perceived tangible benefits in relation to required effort (E1; E2; E3; E5; E6; E7). Several experts emphasise that organisations are only willing to engage in re-labelling if clear value is visible. One person summarises this by stating, “there has to be a benefit” (E2), while another notes that “a lack of added value would be the main reason” for discontinuing (E6). Similarly, it is highlighted that companies may opt out if “they simply do not currently have the time” and the effort outweighs perceived gains (E8). This indicates a consistent logic of cost–benefit evaluation across responses.

Closely related is the issue of resource constraints, particularly time, capacity, and organisational pressure (E1; E4; E5; E8). Several respondents point to limited internal resources as a key barrier, especially for smaller organisations. One interview-partner warns that “the

reporting process requires significant capacity” and questions whether organisations will be able to allocate sufficient resources in the future (E4). Others explicitly mention that “if resources are lacking - whether time or manpower - then it becomes difficult” (E5), highlighting operational limitations as a practical barrier to re-labelling.

A further aspect concerns uncertainty, communication gaps, and unclear expectations regarding the process and requirements (E3; E7). Some interviewees indicate that insufficient clarity around expectations or impact measurement requirements may discourage participation. One person refers to “significant communication gaps” in how requirements are conveyed (E3), while another highlights general “uncertainty regarding expectations” (E7). This suggests that ambiguity in implementation may act as an additional barrier.

Finally, some statements point to contextual and strategic risks affecting long-term commitment, such as changing organisational priorities, funding pressures, or external economic conditions (E4; E8). These factors may reduce the priority of re-labelling or shift focus away from the label.

The findings indicate that overall barriers to re-labelling are primarily driven by a perceived imbalance between effort and benefit, reinforced by limited resources and some uncertainty regarding requirements. These factors together suggest that long-term commitment depends strongly on whether the label continues to deliver practical value for organisations.

Category 3.4: Drivers for Re-labelling

The findings on drivers for re-labelling show that the intention to continue with the VSE label is primarily shaped by perceived benefits, organisational fit, and the community, alongside practical considerations such as effort and capacity.

A dominant theme is the continuation of perceived benefits and functional advantages of the label (E1; E3; E5; E7). Several experts emphasise that re-labelling is likely when the label continues to provide value, such as improved processes, funding advantages, or signalling effects. One interviewee highlights “better funding conditions and certain simplifications” as a reason to continue (E1). Similarly, it is suggested that companies will remain engaged when the

label contributes to business advantages such as customer acquisition or investor recognition (E5).

Closely related is the role of community belonging, networking, and ecosystem contribution (E1; E2; E5; E8). Many respondents describe continued participation as being driven by a sense of connection and collective development within the social enterprise ecosystem. One interview-partner explains the community leading to reduced competition and mutual support (E1), while another emphasises “being part of a community and jointly developing the ecosystem” (E2). This indicates that social and relational factors play an important role in sustaining long-term engagement.

A further aspect concerns organisational embeddedness and strategic alignment with impact-oriented practices (E1; E3; E6). Re-labelling is more likely when impact measurement and structured processes are already integrated into the organisation’s core operations. One expert notes that those who already collect data and define indicators will “naturally continue” (E3).

In addition, some statements point to structural conditions, such as available capacity, low procedural burden, and external support structures (E4; E5; E7). The ease of the process and sufficient organisational resources are mentioned as relevant facilitators. At the same time, visibility, signalling effects, and external recognition are highlighted as additional motivational drivers, particularly where the label helps communicate legitimacy to third parties.

The findings suggest that drivers for re-labelling are shaped by a combination of perceived ongoing benefits, community and ecosystem affiliation, and organisational fit with impact-oriented practices. While functional advantages and signalling effects appear particularly important, relational and structural factors also contribute to the willingness to maintain long-term engagement with the VSE label.

4.1.4 Category 4: Future Development of the VSE Label

Category 4 relates to RQ3 and focuses on the perceived actions, strategies and structural changes required to strengthen, expand and institutionalise the “Verified Social Enterprise” label

within the Austrian ecosystem. The results are organised into five categories based on deductive reasoning.

Category 4.1: Further Incentives

The findings on further incentives for the future development of the VSE label show a strong emphasis on economic and structural advantages that could increase the attractiveness and practical relevance of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. Across the interviews, financial and policy-related incentives are mentioned far more frequently than symbolic or community-oriented measures.

A dominant theme is the introduction of tax-related advantages for VSE companies (E1; E2; E3; E4; E5; E6). Several interview-partners propose measures such as reduced VAT, lower wage-related taxes, tax-deductible donation status, or broader tax relief mechanisms. These incentives are seen as a way to acknowledge the societal contribution of social enterprises and create tangible economic value linked to the label. One registered VSE company argues that “from an economic perspective, this is the strongest motivation” (E1), while another suggests that organisations contributing positively to society should not simply be treated “in the same category as all the large companies that are only focused on profit maximisation” (E6).

Closely related is the theme of stronger integration of the label into public funding and procurement systems (E1; E2; E3; E4; E7; E8). Several respondents highlight preferential treatment in public tenders, simplified funding applications, higher funding rates, or dedicated funding schemes as important future incentives. Interviewees emphasise that organisations creating social value should receive stronger consideration in procurement decisions. One expert describes this as “an extremely important element” (E2).

A further aspect concerns additional support structures and ecosystem services linked to the label (E7). These include workshops, training programmes, networking support, and facilitation of contacts with public administration or private actors. Such measures are described as helpful in strengthening the ecosystem and increasing the usefulness of the label.

Overall, the findings indicate a strong consensus that future development of the VSE label requires more tangible and systemic incentives. While visibility and recognition remain relevant, the interviews clearly prioritise economic, financial, and institutional advantages as the most important drivers for increasing the long-term attractiveness and impact of the label.

Category 4.2: Responsible Stakeholder

The findings show strong agreement that the future development of the VSE label depends on a multi-stakeholder approach, rather than a single responsible institution. Responsibility is broadly distributed across political actors, intermediary organisations, ecosystem actors, and companies themselves (E2; E3; E4; E5; E6; E7; E8).

A dominant theme is the central role of political institutions, especially the Federal Ministry, State Secretary, and Austria Wirtschaftsservice (aws). Several interview-partners emphasise the need for stronger political leadership and commitment, with one stating that “the entire sector requires far more political support” (E2).

Closely linked is the key role of the Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria as an intermediary actor responsible for lobbying, coordination, and awareness-building. SENA is described as “absolutely essential” and acting in the role of “lobbyists” pushing the topic forward (E8) and is also highlighted together with aws for actively supporting implementation (E6).

Ecosystem actors such as the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKO), universities, foundations, and social business incubators are also mentioned, mainly due to their communication reach and institutional influence, although some are seen as slow-moving (E3; E7).

Finally, several interview partners stress that responsibility also lies within organisations themselves, highlighting the importance of bottom-up engagement and intrinsic motivation. The label is described as a multi-stakeholder initiative combining top-down and bottom-up approaches (E5), while another registered VSE company highlights that “the greatest influence comes from the organisation’s own idealism” (E4).

Overall, the findings confirm that the VSE label is perceived as requiring coordinated collaboration between government ministries, aws, SENA, ecosystem actors, and social enterprises, with political institutions ensuring structure and legitimacy, and intermediary organisations driving implementation and advocacy.

Category 4.3: Promotion and Awareness Measures

Promotion and awareness measures are described by the interviewees as essential factors for strengthening the future relevance and visibility of the VSE label. Across the interviews, respondents repeatedly emphasise that broader public recognition, stronger communication strategies, and more visible representation of social enterprises are necessary to increase acceptance and attractiveness of the label (E1; E2; E3; E5; E6; E7; E8).

Particular importance is assigned to marketing, media presence and public communication efforts (E1; E2; E3; E5; E7). Several experts argue that the label requires much stronger strategic promotion in order to gain visibility both within society and beyond the existing social entrepreneurship community. One interviewee directly states that “ultimately, this is a question of marketing” (E2), while another emphasises that “marketing is a huge factor” (E5). Suggested measures include campaigns, press cooperation, television advertising, events, and broader communication activities designed to establish the label more firmly in public discourse (E3; E5; E7). Improved communication is also linked to motivating more organisations to apply for or maintain the label (E1; E3).

Another frequently mentioned aspect concerns the role of storytelling and visible examples of successful “Verified Social Enterprise” companies (E2; E3; E7). Respondents stress that the label gains legitimacy when connected to concrete examples of impactful organisations. One social enterprise explains that “a label by itself has no value, but by presenting strong examples, you can demonstrate why it matters” (E2). One interview-partner further highlights the idea of strengthening the VSE label as an umbrella brand that creates emotional value and collective public recognition for social enterprises (E7).

In addition to media-oriented strategies, some respondents emphasise ecosystem-based awareness measures such as workshops, advisory services, educational integration, and public relations activities (E5; E8). Educational institutions in particular are described as important multipliers that could familiarise future entrepreneurs with the VSE label (E5).

Several respondents additionally underline that effective promotion requires financial resources and institutional support (E5; E6; E7). Public visibility campaigns and large-scale communication efforts are seen as difficult to implement without sufficient funding and coordinated involvement from actors such as aws, SENA, and related ecosystem organisations.

Overall, the interviews suggest broad consensus that stronger promotion and awareness-building are necessary for the future development of the VSE label. While some experts primarily emphasise traditional marketing and media campaigns, others focus more strongly on storytelling, ecosystem engagement, or educational outreach. Despite these differences, the interviews consistently identify visibility, recognition, and communication as key conditions for increasing the long-term relevance and societal acceptance of the VSE label.

Category 4.4: Scaling and Internationalisation

The topic of scaling and internationalisation is discussed by the interviewees as a possible long-term direction for the VSE label, although most respondents view it as a future rather than immediate priority (E1; E2; E3; E4; E5; E6; E7; E8). Across the interviews, the respondents acknowledge the potential benefits of stronger European alignment and international visibility, while simultaneously emphasising structural, legal, and contextual limitations that currently restrict broader implementation.

One central theme concerns the potential value of developing a stronger European framework for social enterprises and the VSE label (E1; E2). Several interviewees argue that greater European harmonisation could strengthen legitimacy, comparability, and cross-border recognition of social enterprises. One states that “we would need something European” (E1), while another highlights that “it would naturally be helpful to establish at least a common framework at the European level” (E2). In this context, the Austrian VSE label is also described

as a potential good-practice example that could contribute to international discussions and alignment processes (E2).

At the same time, many respondents express caution regarding internationalisation and question whether it is currently realistic or necessary (E3; E5; E7; E8). Several interview partners argue that the label first needs stronger institutionalisation and long-term stability within Austria before broader expansion can be considered. One interviewee explains that “before pursuing internationalisation, the most important requirement would be long-term institutionalisation” (E7), while another states that “I do not see internationalisation as a priority at this stage” (E3). Similarly, some respondents describe a European or global umbrella label as theoretically possible, but still “very far away” (E5).

Another recurring aspect relates to structural and contextual barriers that complicate international scaling (E1; E5; E6; E7). Experts refer to differences in legal systems, labour regulations, corporate structures, and national contexts as major challenges for transferring the label across countries. One interviewee argues that “a 1:1 transfer of the label will probably not work” because “the contexts in different European countries are simply too different” (E5). Likewise, another respondent highlights the absence of unified European corporate, labour, and insolvency law as “the biggest obstacle” (E1). Financial and organisational capacity is also mentioned as a limiting factor for broader international expansion (E6).

In addition, some interview partners emphasise more moderate forms of internationalisation, such as knowledge sharing, mutual learning, and increased international visibility, rather than full replication of the label system (E3; E8).

Overall, the findings suggest cautious openness towards scaling and internationalisation of the VSE label. While they generally recognise the potential advantages of stronger European alignment and international visibility, the interviews consistently emphasise that institutional consolidation within Austria, legal differences between countries, and limited capacities currently represent significant barriers. As a result, internationalisation is mainly viewed as a long-term possibility rather than an immediate development priority.

Category 4.5: Challenges for Future Development

The interviews identify several interconnected challenges regarding the future development of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label, with a particularly strong focus on the lack of tangible benefits, limited visibility, political dependency, and difficulties in creating broader societal understanding and acceptance of the label (E1; E2; E3; E4; E5; E6; E7; E8). Across the interviews, respondents repeatedly emphasise that the label currently lacks sufficient incentives and recognition to generate stronger adoption and long-term momentum.

One of the most frequently discussed challenges concerns the absence of concrete added value and incentives linked to the label (E2; E3; E4; E6; E7; E8). Several experts argue that symbolic recognition or community belonging alone will not be enough to sustain long-term interest among organisations. One interviewee states that “there are no immediate or obvious benefits” (E8), while another social business argues that “some kind of concrete advantage will be necessary, otherwise the label is unlikely to gain real momentum” (E2). Respondents repeatedly stress that tangible pull factors such as procurement advantages, financial incentives, or measurable benefits are crucial for increasing participation and long-term relevance (E2; E3; E4; E6; E7).

Another central challenge relates to visibility, public awareness, and societal understanding of the VSE label and the broader concept of social entrepreneurship (E1; E2; E3; E5; E6; E7). Several interviewees describe the label as still largely remaining within a limited “bubble” or insider community (E2; E6). One respondent explains that “if you are not part of the bubble, you often do not know” (E6), while another highlights that “the greatest challenge will be positioning the topic in such a way that it is clearly understood and accepted at all levels of society” (E3). Limited adoption rates and low public visibility are therefore perceived as significant barriers to future growth (E7).

Closely connected to this is the challenge of communicating and defining the concept itself (E3; E5). Some respondents argue that the term “social enterprise” is often misunderstood or perceived too narrowly, especially in relation to environmental or sustainability-oriented

organisations as the term “sozial” in German is understood differently than the “social” in English. One interview partner notes that organisations may reject the label because they think: “I am not a social entrepreneur, I am doing something for the environment” (E5). Another expert therefore prefers the term “impact enterprise” because the concept should include both societal and ecological impact (E3).

Political and structural dependency is also described as a major challenge for the long-term stability of the label (E1; E2; E6; E7). Several respondents stress that future political priorities, funding availability, and government support will strongly influence whether the label continues to exist and expand. One person warns that “if the State Secretary and the government do not start moving on these issues, then I do not think this initiative has a particularly strong long-term future” (E2). Others additionally point to funding constraints within public institutions and the need for permanent institutional embedding beyond changing legislative periods (E6; E7).

Overall, the findings suggest broad consensus that the future development of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label depends on overcoming several structural and strategic challenges. While opinions differ in whether they primarily emphasise incentives, communication, terminology, or political support, the interviews consistently highlight the need for stronger visibility, clearer added value, broader societal understanding, and long-term institutional stability in order to ensure the future relevance and expansion of the VSE label.

4.2 Quantitative Study

The findings of the online survey are presented using a descriptive statistical approach, outlining responses from 24 registered “Verified Social Enterprise” companies regarding five categories. The first category focuses on the participants' demographics, while the other categories each align with a specific research question:

- Demographic Questions
- Pull Factors (RQ1)

- Push Factors (RQ1)
- Re-labelling (RQ2)
- Outlook (RQ3)

4.2.1 Demographic Questions

Figure 5 presents the distribution of respondents according to their role within their organisation.

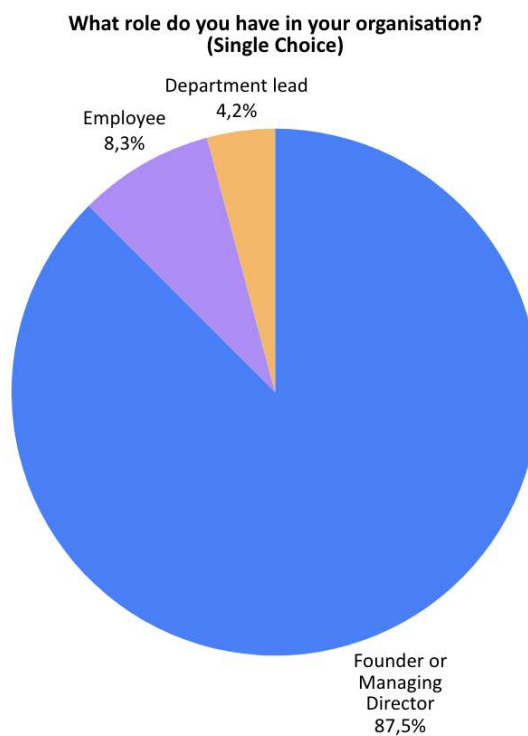


Figure 5: Role of respondents within their organisation (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

A total of 87.5% (n = 21) identified themselves as founders or managing directors. Employees accounted for 8.3% (n = 2) of the respondents, while 4.2% (n = 1) indicated that they held the position of department lead.

The following figure illustrates the year in which respondents' organisations first received the VSE label.

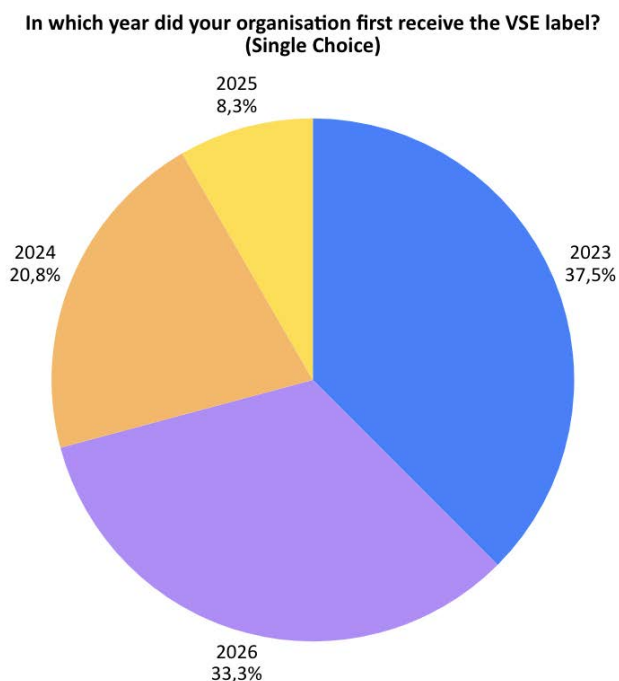


Figure 6: Year in which respondents' organisations first received the VSE label (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

A total of 37.5% (n = 9) reported first receiving the label in 2023, followed by 33.3% (n = 8) in 2026. A further 20.8% (n = 5) indicated that their organisation first received the label in 2024, while 8.3% (n = 2) reported 2025.

The next figure illustrates the number of employees currently employed in the respondents' organisations.

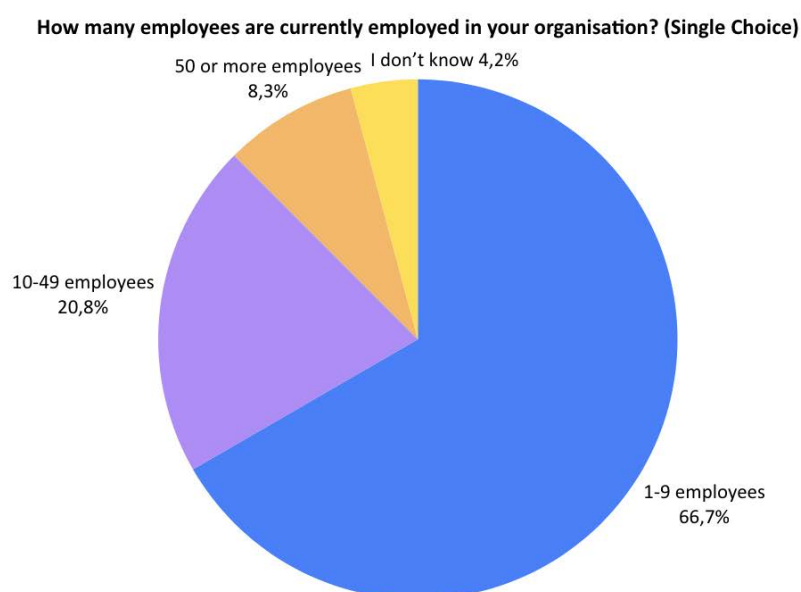


Figure 7: Number of employees currently employed in respondents' organisations (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

A total of 66.7% (n = 16) of respondents indicated that their organisation employs between one and nine employees. Organisations with 10-49 employees accounted for 20.8% (n = 5) of the sample, while 8.3% (n = 2) reported employing 50 or more employees. One respondent (4.2%) selected the response option "I don't know".

4.2.2 Pull Factors

The following figure illustrates respondents' assessment of the importance of various pull factors for their organisation's decision to apply for the "Verified Social Enterprise" label.

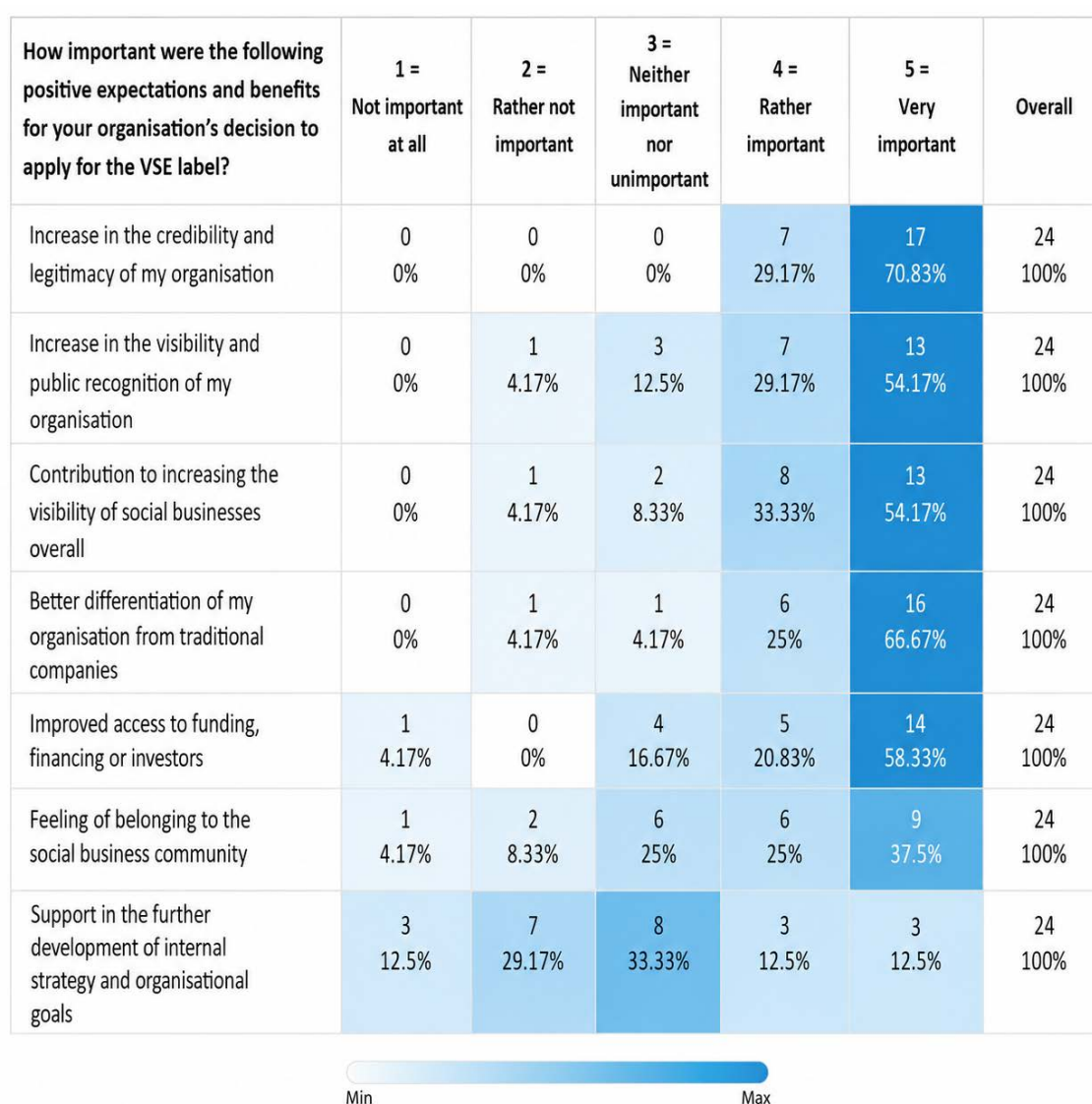


Figure 8: Heatmap pull factors (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

The survey data indicate that the assessed pull factors were generally perceived as important decision to apply for the VSE label. Across most factors, responses were concentrated

in the categories *Rather important* (4) and *Very important* (5). The strongest levels of agreement were observed for the factors related to increasing the credibility and legitimacy of the organisation, better differentiation from traditional companies, and increasing the visibility of social businesses overall. In contrast, support in the further development of internal strategy and organisational goals received comparatively lower importance ratings.

Table 2 summarises the pull factors according to their mean values, providing an overall ranking of their perceived importance.

Table 2: Ranking of pull factors by mean value (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

Ranking	Pull Factor Statement	Mean Value
1	Increase in the credibility and legitimacy of my organisation	4.71
2	Better differentiation of my organisation from traditional companies	4.54
3	Contribution to increasing the visibility of social businesses overall	4.38
4	Increase in the visibility and public recognition of my organisation	4.33
5	Improved access to funding, financing or investors	4.29
6	Feeling of belonging to the social business community	3.83
7	Support in the further development of internal strategy and organisational goals	2.83

The ranking points out that *Increase in the credibility and legitimacy of my organisation* received the highest mean value (M = 4.71), followed by *Better differentiation of my organisation from traditional companies* (M = 4.54) and *Contribution to increasing the visibility of social businesses overall* (M = 4.38). *Support in the further development of internal strategy and organisational goals* recorded the lowest mean value (M = 2.83).

4.2.3 Push Factors

The following figure illustrates respondents' assessment of the importance of various push factors for their organisation's decision to apply for the "Verified Social Enterprise" label.

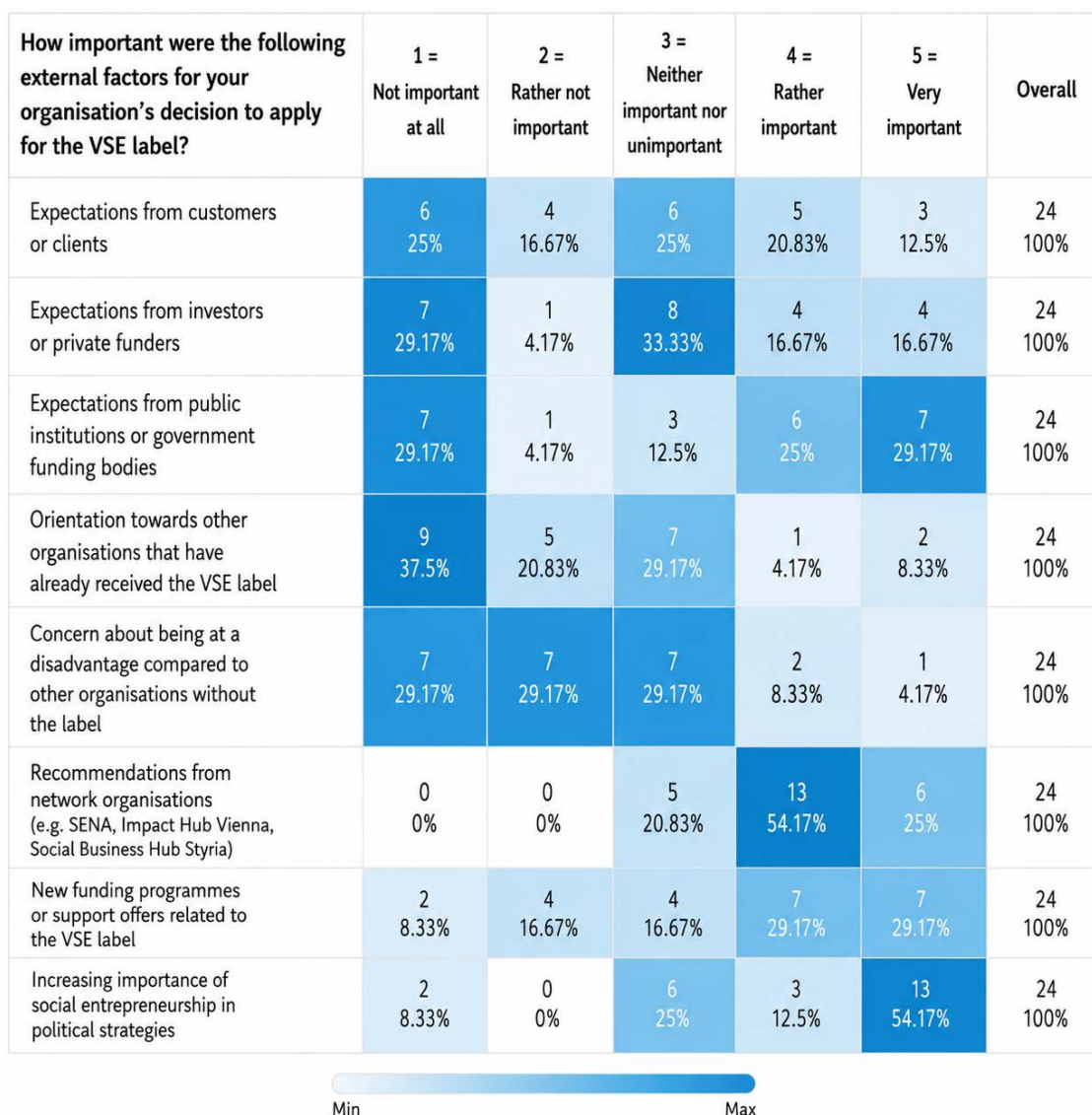


Figure 9: Heatmap push factors (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

The responses indicate a more varied assessment of the importance of the examined push factors compared to the pull factors. While recommendations from network organisations, the increasing importance of social entrepreneurship in political strategies, and new funding programmes or support offers related to the VSE label were predominantly rated as *Rather important* (4) or *Very important* (5), other factors received more mixed responses. Expectations from customers or clients, expectations from investors or private funders, concern about being at a disadvantage compared to organisations without the label, and orientation towards organisations that had already received the VSE label were more frequently assessed as *Not important at all* (1), *Rather not important* (2), or *Neither important nor unimportant* (3).

Table 3 summarises the push factors according to their mean values, providing an overall ranking of their perceived importance.

Table 3: Ranking of push factors by mean value (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

Ranking	Push Factor Statement	Mean Value
1	Recommendations from network organisations (e.g. SENA, Impact Hub Vienna, Social Business Hub Styria)	4.04
2	Increasing importance of social entrepreneurship in political strategies	4.04
3	New funding programmes or support offers related to the VSE label	3.54
4	Expectations from public institutions or government funding bodies	3.21
5	Expectations from investors or private funders	2.88
6	Expectations from customers or clients	2.79
7	Concern about being at a disadvantage compared to other organisations without the label	2.29
8	Orientation towards other organisations that have already received the VSE label	2.25

The ranking shows that *Recommendations from network organisations (e.g. SENA, Impact Hub Vienna, Social Business Hub Styria)* and *Increasing importance of social entrepreneurship in political strategies* received the highest mean values (M = 4.04 each). These were followed by *New funding programmes or support offers related to the VSE label* (M = 3.54). *Orientation towards other organisations that had already received the VSE label* (M = 2.25) and *Concern about being at a disadvantage compared to other organisations without the label* (M = 2.29) recorded the lowest mean values.

Table 4 combines the rankings of all **pull factors** (marked in violet) and **push factors** (marked in orange) according to their mean values, providing an overall comparison of their perceived importance in respondents' organisations' decision to apply for the VSE label.

Table 4: Overall ranking of pull and push factors by mean value (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

Ranking	Push Factor & Pull Factor Statement	Mean Value
1.	Increase in the credibility and legitimacy of my organisation	4.71
2.	Better differentiation of my organisation from traditional companies	4.54
3.	Contribution to increasing the visibility of social businesses overall	4.38
4.	Increase in the visibility and public recognition of my organisation	4.33
5.	Improved access to funding, financing or investors	4.29
6.	Recommendations from network organisations (e.g. SENA, Impact Hub Vienna, Social Business Hub Styria)	4.04
7.	Increasing importance of social entrepreneurship in political strategies	4.04
8.	Feeling of belonging to the social business community	3.83
9.	New funding programmes or support offers related to the VSE label	3.54
10.	Expectations from public institutions or government funding bodies	3.21
11.	Expectations from investors or private funders	2.88
12.	Support in the further development of internal strategy and organisational goals	2.83
13.	Expectations from customers or clients	2.79
14.	Concern about being at a disadvantage compared to other organisations without the label	2.29
15.	Orientation towards other organisations that have already received the VSE label	2.25

The combined ranking indicates that the highest mean values were predominantly associated with pull factors. The five highest-ranked factors were all classified as pull factors, led by *Increase in the credibility and legitimacy of my organisation* (M = 4.71). The highest-ranked push factors were *Recommendations from network organisations* and *Increasing importance of social entrepreneurship in political strategies*, both with a mean value of 4.04. Overall, push factors tended to receive lower mean values than pull factors.

4.2.4 Re-labelling

The following figure illustrates respondents' assessment of the likelihood that their organisation will re-label after the current registration period of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label expires. The mean likelihood for a renewal is 4.33 on a five-point scale.

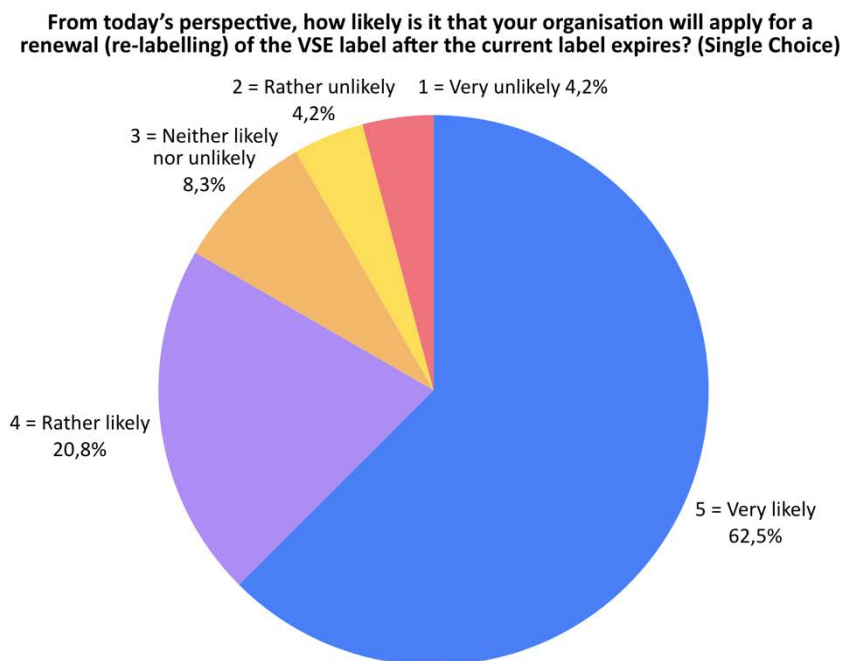


Figure 10: Likelihood of re-labelling of the VSE label (N = 24). Source: Own survey data.

A total of 62.5% (n = 15) indicated that their organisation is *Very likely* to apply for a renewal of the VSE label, while 20.8% (n = 5) selected *Rather likely*. A further 8.3% (n = 2) reported being *Neither likely nor unlikely*. *Rather unlikely* and *Very unlikely* were each selected by 4.2% (n = 1) of respondents.

To complement the quantitative findings, respondents were invited to briefly explain the reasons for their assessment of the likelihood of applying for a renewal of the VSE label. The responses are summarised according to the selected response category.

- Very likely = 5 (n = 15)

Respondents in this category most frequently refer to the VSE label as reflecting their organisational values, mission, and commitment to social entrepreneurship. Several responses emphasise the importance of the label for communicating credibility, demonstrating social

impact, and strengthening the organisation's position within the social entrepreneurship ecosystem. Other recurring reasons include having already completed the re-labelling process, considering renewal part of an ongoing organisational process, and expecting the renewal process to require less effort than the initial registration. A small number of respondents also acknowledge that, although the practical benefits of the label are currently limited, they nevertheless intend to renew it because of its symbolic value and long-term potential.

- Rather likely = 4 (n = 5)

Responses in this category highlight the alignment of the VSE label with organisational values and impact orientation, as well as its contribution to communicating credibility externally. Several respondents express hope that the recognition and significance of the label will increase over time. At the same time, some note that they have not yet experienced clear economic or practical benefits, while others state that the decision to renew depends on future external conditions.

- Neither likely nor unlikely = 3 (n = 2)

Respondents in this category refer to the limited practical benefits they have experienced from the VSE label. In addition, one respondent states that the decision to renew depends on a future assessment of the label's value, as well as the organisation's capacity and continued existence at the time of re-labelling.

- Rather unlikely = 2 (n = 1)

The respondent indicates that no tangible improvements or benefits have resulted from the VSE label so far. Nevertheless, the person expresses hope that the label could contribute to positive developments in the future and emphasises a willingness to continue supporting the initiative despite the limited benefits experienced to date.

- Very unlikely = 1 (n = 1)

The single respondent in this category does not provide a substantive explanation.

4.2.5 Outlook

Respondents identify several measures that could improve the attractiveness and long-term use of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. The most frequently mentioned theme is the introduction of tangible benefits associated with the label, particularly in the form of tax incentives, dedicated funding programmes, simplified access to public funding, favourable financing opportunities, and preferential consideration in public procurement processes.

Another recurring theme concerns increasing the visibility and recognition of the VSE label. Respondents refer to the need for stronger communication and promotion of the label among the general public, public institutions, businesses, and political stakeholders. Several responses also highlight the importance of increasing awareness of the label beyond the social entrepreneurship ecosystem and strengthening its position as a recognised quality mark.

Additional suggestions include expanding networking opportunities within the VSE community, providing practical support such as workshops and guidance materials, promoting examples of successful Austrian social businesses, and introducing an official bilingual certificate explaining the purpose and significance of the label for use in international applications and funding procedures.

5 Discussion

This discussion chapter is structured according to the three research questions and the corresponding thematic categories developed throughout the analysis. For each category, the interview findings serve as the primary basis for interpretation and are complemented by the survey results to strengthen and contextualise the identified patterns. The findings are then discussed in relation to existing literature to assess whether they confirm, extend, or contradict previous research. Furthermore, the results are interpreted through the lens of institutional theory to provide a theoretical explanation of the observed patterns. Based on these integrated insights, practical recommendations are derived in the end for relevant stakeholders of the VSE label, ensuring that the discussion not only contributes to the academic understanding of the topic but also provides actionable implications for practice.

5.1 Motivation to Become a VSE & Benefits of the Label

This category addresses RQ1 by examining why organisations apply for the VSE label and what benefits they associate with it. It combines insights on the key motivations for registration with the perceived added value of the label for both individual organisations and the wider social enterprise ecosystem.

5.1.1 *Main Interview Findings*

The main pull factors for becoming a VSE are gaining credibility, external recognition, and validation from stakeholders, while also differentiating the organisation from others. Many organisations are additionally motivated by the opportunity to join a like-minded community, strengthen their identity, and increase visibility. Further motivations include expected future strategic benefits, such as improved funding opportunities and public recognition, as well as contributing to the development and support of the wider social enterprise ecosystem.

The main push factors for becoming a VSE are external awareness and encouragement provided by ecosystem actors, particularly organisations such as SENA and the Social Business Hub Styria. Events and institutional networks introduce organisations to the label and increase

its visibility, while the broader political and institutional context supports its legitimacy. Overall, however, push factors play a relatively minor role compared to the stronger pull factors driving application.

The VSE label is primarily perceived as increasing visibility, credibility, and recognition, helping social businesses differentiate themselves and communicate their mission more effectively. It also supports internal learning and reflection, particularly regarding impact measurement and organisational development. While some strategic and economic benefits are expected, interviewees generally agree that these remain limited or are still emerging.

The VSE label is seen as strengthening the wider social business ecosystem by increasing the sector's visibility, legitimacy, and recognition among policymakers, funders, and the public. It also fosters collaboration, shared identity, and ecosystem coordination, while providing clearer orientation for external stakeholders and supporting the broader institutional development of the social enterprise sector.

5.1.2 *Integration of Survey Results*

Taking a deeper look at the findings of the online survey, it is encouraging to see a strong alignment with the interview findings, which makes the data more robust. In particular, the finding that pull factors are much more relevant than push factors in motivating organisations to apply for the VSE label is strongly reflected in both data sets.

Furthermore, the survey identified the same top pull factors as the interviews, thereby strengthening the interview findings. The most important pull factors relate to increasing the legitimacy of social businesses and enabling better differentiation from traditional companies.

Only one push factor was rated as highly relevant by both interview and survey participants: recommendations from network organisations such as SENA, Impact Hub Vienna, and Social Business Hub Styria. In addition, if participants perceive an increasing relevance of social businesses in political strategies, this can also act as a driving push factor. Other push factors were not perceived as particularly relevant.

5.1.3 Literature-Based Discussion

The findings demonstrate that pull factors are considerably more influential than push factors in motivating organisations to apply for the VSE label. This aligns with the push & pull theory of entrepreneurial motivation, which argues that behaviour driven by attractive opportunities and intrinsic motivations is generally more sustainable and successful than behaviour triggered by external pressures (Kirkwood, 2009, p. 346). Since organisations primarily seek credibility, differentiation, and community, the current motivational structure suggests favourable conditions for the long-term relevance and continued adoption of the VSE label.

Although push factors were found to be less influential overall, the findings highlight the central role of ecosystem organisations in promoting the label. This is consistent with the global approach of the Impact Hub network, which fosters social entrepreneurship by connecting and supporting them globally (Impact Hub, n.d.). The strong influence of organisations such as Impact Hub Vienna, Impact Hub Tirol, and Social Business Hub Styria confirms the importance of these intermediary actors in increasing awareness of the VSE label and encouraging organisations to apply (Impact Hub Tirol, n.d.; Impact Hub Vienna, n.d.-a; SBHS, n.d.-b). These organisations, especially SENA as the national umbrella organisation (SENA, n.d.-a), represent a particularly powerful push factor, despite the overall lower relevance of push motivations. The interviews and survey confirm that SENA already fulfils this role by serving as one of the main channels through which organisations become aware of the VSE label.

The second relevant push factor identified in this study concerns the growing political recognition of social entrepreneurship. This finding is supported by the Austrian Government Programme 2025 to 2029, which explicitly commits to strengthening social innovation and further developing instruments such as the VSE label (Österreichische Volkspartei, 2025, p. 99). Such political commitment is likely to enhance the institutional legitimacy of both the label and the wider social enterprise sector, thereby creating a more favourable environment for future applications. This interpretation is further supported by the Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor

2023/24, which recommends strengthening the VSE label as a key governance instrument while acknowledging that there is still room for further development (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 83–84).

The perceived benefits of the VSE label strongly align with the literature on certification schemes for social enterprises. According to the OECD and European Union, labels primarily contribute by increasing visibility, strengthening credibility, facilitating communication with stakeholders, and improving access to funding opportunities and markets (OECD/European Union, 2025, pp. 17–18). The present findings confirm these benefits, particularly regarding credibility, visibility, and differentiation. At the same time, they indicate that many of these advantages currently remain concentrated within the existing social entrepreneurship ecosystem. To realise their full potential, broader public awareness and recognition beyond this relatively small community will be necessary.

Some of the officially communicated benefits of the VSE label are only partially confirmed by the empirical findings. SENA highlights credibility, identity and affiliation, signalling value for investors, and access to exclusive funding programmes as key advantages (SENA, n.d.-b). While credibility and community identity are clearly supported by the findings, the benefits related to investors and funding appear to be considerably more limited in practice. Many organisations reported that they first need to explain the purpose of the label because it is still largely unknown outside the social entrepreneurship community. Similarly, exclusive funding opportunities were perceived as relatively limited and not equally relevant for all business models. This suggests that these benefits are likely to increase only if the label achieves greater market recognition and a larger number of registered organisations.

Finally, the new findings largely confirm the results of the first study on the VSE label three years ago (Kleewein, 2023, pp. 77–78). Similar to the earlier study, organisations continue to associate the label primarily with visibility, differentiation, and contributing to the broader development of the social business ecosystem rather than with immediate economic benefits. However, the present findings indicate that the expected funding incentives remain relatively limited and that tangible benefits have developed more slowly than initially anticipated. This

suggests that, three years after its introduction, the VSE label has established itself as an important instrument for legitimacy and visibility, while its practical economic value still depends on further institutional development and broader societal recognition.

5.1.4 *Institutional Theory Perspective*

From the perspective of institutional theory, the findings indicate that the VSE label currently functions primarily as a mechanism for gaining legitimacy rather than as a source of immediate economic benefits. This strongly reflects the assumption that organisations often adopt structures and practices not solely because they are operationally efficient, but because they enhance legitimacy and public acceptance within their institutional environment (Kauppi, 2022, p. 2). The interviews show that many organisations want the VSE label to increase credibility, strengthen their identity as social enterprises, and contribute to the broader development of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem, even though the tangible benefits are currently perceived as limited.

Examining the findings through the three forms of institutional pressure reveals that coercive pressure is currently the most visible mechanism influencing adoption. Although organisations are not formally required to obtain the VSE label, influential ecosystem actors such as SENA and Social Business Hub Styria actively promote the label and encourage organisations to apply. Through their networks, events, and advisory activities, these organisations shape the institutional environment and increase the perceived legitimacy of the label, thereby creating a soft form of coercive pressure (Kauppi, 2022, pp. 3–4).

Normative pressure is currently less present but can already be observed to some extent. The findings show that organisations value the shared identity, community, and common understanding associated with the VSE label. Professional networks increasingly communicate that recognised social enterprises should demonstrate their societal impact through transparent standards (Kauppi, 2022, pp. 3–4). However, these norms are not yet sufficiently established to create strong expectations across the wider economy.

In contrast, mimetic pressure appears to be largely absent at the current stage of the label's development. Institutional theory suggests that organisations imitate successful and legitimate peers under conditions of uncertainty (Kauppi, 2022, pp. 3–4). However, the findings provide little evidence that organisations apply for the VSE label because other social enterprises have already done so. The label has not yet reached a level of public recognition where registered organisations serve as strong role models that encourage imitation. As awareness and the number of registered businesses increase, mimetic pressure may become more relevant in the future.

5.2 Re-labelling and Long-term Commitment

The next category addresses RQ2 and examines how organisations perceive the VSE label over time. It focuses on factors that influence whether registered social businesses remain committed to the label and consider the re-labelling process.

5.2.1 *Main Interview Findings*

The re-labelling process is generally perceived as unclear and only partially understood, with limited and inconsistent information available to organisations. While some basic elements such as the three-year cycle and the requirement for an impact report are known, overall transparency remains low and understanding varies widely between stakeholders.

The process is mostly seen as manageable and not overly complex, with re-labelling expected to require a similar level of effort as the initial application. However, the actual workload is seen as dependent on internal organisation, prioritisation, and how well reporting requirements are integrated into existing processes.

Key barriers include a perceived lack of added value relative to effort, limited organisational resources (time, staff, money) and uncertainty about expectations and requirements. Additional risks such as shifting priorities or external pressures may also reduce long-term commitment to maintaining the label.

Re-labelling is mainly driven by continued perceived benefits such as funding advantages, signalling effects, and general business value. Community belonging and ecosystem participation also play an important role, along with good organisational fit and embedded impact practices. Low effort and sufficient resources further support the decision to continue with the VSE label.

5.2.2 *Integration of Survey Results*

Additionally, looking at the findings of the online survey, the overall tendency for re-labelling looks quite good with a mean value of 4.33. Most respondents (15 out of 24) are highly likely to re-label their company. However, it is highly relevant to consider the reasons behind this decision. As mentioned in the interviews as well, the VSE companies that will definitely re-label mainly refer to factors such as alignment with their own company values and impact orientation. The interview findings as well as the survey findings state that the re-labelling process is expected to require less effort than the initial application and can therefore be easily managed with limited resources.

However, many mention the lack of tangible benefits at the moment and are hoping for significant improvements before they have to make a decision about whether to re-label their social business or not. Interestingly, some respondents say that supporting the field is still more important to them, even without tangible benefits. Others say that they might stop if no benefits emerge soon, and these respondents mainly ranked their likelihood of re-labelling as rather low to medium. Nevertheless, most hope for a positive development and want to support the label as long as economically viable, which very much aligns with the interview findings.

5.2.3 *Literature-Based Discussion*

The positive attitude towards re-labelling aligns with previous literature, which describes the renewal process as an important quality assurance mechanism that helps maintain the credibility and reliability of labelling schemes over time (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 83). The interviewees likewise viewed re-labelling as an important element of ensuring the label's quality

and legitimacy. Compared to similar European certification schemes, the VSE label may have an additional advantage, as the renewal process is free of charge, reducing one potential barrier to long-term participation.

However, the findings also show that external conditions can significantly influence organisations' willingness to renew the label. The Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor highlights that social enterprises continue to operate in a challenging political and economic environment characterised by funding uncertainty, inflation, and increasing operational costs, while remaining dependent on governmental support (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 4,9,12). These findings correspond with the interviews, where limited organisational resources and changing priorities were identified as important barriers to re-labelling.

The findings further align with previous research showing that limited public awareness remains one of the major challenges facing Austrian social enterprises (Schön & Lebert, 2024, pp. 17–19; Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 94–95). Participants repeatedly stated that the label is still largely unknown outside the social entrepreneurship ecosystem. This reduces its perceived added value and may weaken organisations' motivation to invest resources in maintaining the label if external stakeholders do not recognise or reward the label.

Compared with the first study on the VSE label, the findings reveal an important shift in perceived barriers. Kleewein identified the application process and the preparation of the impact report as potential obstacles to obtaining the label (Kleewein, 2023, pp. 77–78). In contrast, the present findings suggest that organisations generally perceive both the initial application and the re-labelling process as manageable. Once organisations have established internal impact measurement systems and completed their first report, the administrative effort appears less problematic than initially expected. This development may also reflect the availability of detailed guidelines and structured support for preparing the required impact. Instead, the lack of tangible benefits has emerged as the more significant challenge which again aligns with the study of the Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor, which identifies financial incentives as one of the most important drivers of growth for social enterprises (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 72).

A related finding concerns the limited understanding of the re-labelling process itself. Although the necessary information is publicly available (Impact Hub Vienna, n.d.-b), many interview participants reported uncertainty regarding the process and where to find relevant information. This suggests that providing information alone is not sufficient. Improving communication and making the re-labelling process more visible and transparent could therefore represent a relatively simple but effective measure to increase long-term commitment.

5.2.4 Institutional Theory Perspective

From an institutional theory perspective, the concept of decoupling is particularly relevant for understanding the importance of the re-labelling process. Decoupling describes situations in which organisations formally adopt structures or practices to satisfy institutional expectations but fail to implement them consistently in their day-to-day operations (Kauppi, 2022, p. 4). The mandatory re-labelling process every three years helps to reduce this risk by requiring organisations to continuously demonstrate that they still fulfil the VSE criteria and actively create social impact. In this way, re-labelling strengthens transparency, maintains the credibility of the VSE label, and helps prevent greenwashing.

The findings indicate that organisations generally recognise this quality assurance function and view re-labelling as an appropriate mechanism for maintaining the integrity of the VSE label. At the same time, the process is perceived as sufficiently manageable, suggesting that it balances accountability with practical feasibility.

5.3 Future Development of the VSE Label

This category addresses RQ3 and explores how the VSE label can be further developed and strengthened within the Austrian social business ecosystem. It focuses on actions, strategies, and structural adjustments needed to enhance the label's visibility, credibility and long-term institutionalisation.

5.3.1 Main Interview Findings

Interviewees emphasise that the VSE label would become more attractive through tangible economic and institutional incentives, particularly tax benefits and stronger integration into public funding and procurement. Additional support services, such as training, networking, and advisory programmes, are also seen as valuable for increasing the label's practical relevance and long-term impact.

The future development of the VSE label is seen as a shared responsibility involving political institutions, aws, SENA, ecosystem organisations, and social enterprises themselves. While political actors are expected to provide legitimacy and structural support, intermediary organisations play a key role in coordination, advocacy, and implementation, complemented by bottom-up engagement from registered social businesses.

Stronger promotion and awareness-building are considered essential for increasing the visibility and acceptance of the VSE label. Interviewees highlight the importance of marketing campaigns, media presence, storytelling, and showcasing successful VSE companies, alongside educational initiatives and ecosystem activities. Effective promotion is also seen as dependent on sufficient funding and coordinated support from key stakeholders.

Interviewees generally view scaling and internationalisation as a long-term opportunity rather than an immediate priority. While greater European alignment could improve recognition and legitimacy, significant legal, structural, and contextual differences between countries make broader implementation challenging. Most respondents believe the VSE label should first become more established within Austria before expanding internationally.

The main challenges for the VSE label are the lack of tangible incentives, limited public awareness, and insufficient understanding of social entrepreneurship. Interviewees also highlight political dependency, funding uncertainty, and the need for stronger institutional support, while emphasising that clearer communication and greater practical value are essential for the label's long-term success.

5.3.2 *Integration of Survey Results*

One open question was asked in the online survey about what the label would need for long-term success, and the findings were very similar to those from the interviews. The most important factor for long-term success is creating tangible benefits, otherwise companies will not register or re-label in the long term. The most frequently mentioned benefit is financial, such as tax benefits, funding programmes, and public procurement regulations that support VSE companies. This was also mentioned several times in the interviews.

The interviews also mentioned the importance of increasing public recognition and visibility through marketing campaigns to raise awareness of the topic in general society, a point that can be reinforced by the additional survey findings.

Lastly, it was mentioned that providing network events and workshops to further support the community would be relevant. However, this would only be possible if several stakeholders work together, as evidenced by the additional data.

5.3.3 *Literature-Based Discussion*

The findings indicate that the VSE label has considerable potential to strengthen the Austrian social entrepreneurship ecosystem, but that its long-term success depends on further institutional development. This aligns with current figures showing that Austria has approximately 2,385 social enterprises, while only around 85 organisations currently hold the VSE label (Unternehmensserviceportal, 2026; Vandor et al., 2024, p. 11). The relatively low number of registered organisations suggests that there is significant potential for future growth if the label becomes more attractive and widely recognised.

The findings further support the view that the VSE label can become an important governance instrument for strengthening social entrepreneurship in Austria (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 4–10). However, interviewees repeatedly emphasised that this potential can only be realised through stronger political commitment and concrete support measures. This corresponds with broader European evidence showing that the lack of public support schemes remains one of the

main barriers for social enterprises (Gazeley et al., 2025, p. 15). Similarly, the Austrian multi-stakeholder initiative #mitsinn argues that Austria requires a comprehensive national strategy for social entrepreneurship (Schön & Lebert, 2024, p. 75). While European initiatives such as the Social Business Initiative and the Social Economy Action Plan provide an important strategic framework, the findings suggest that national implementation remains the decisive factor for the future success of the VSE label (European Commission, 2011; European Union, 2021).

The importance of long-term political commitment is further illustrated by the Danish case. The Austrian Social Enterprise Monitor 2023/24 describe how the Danish label initially developed successfully but lost momentum after political priorities shifted and institutional support was reduced (Vandor et al., 2024, p. 72). The concerns expressed by interview participants closely reflect this experience, as political dependency and uncertain long-term commitment were identified as major risks for the future development of the VSE label. This suggests that continuous governmental support is essential to ensure institutional stability and maintain confidence among registered social businesses.

The requested support measures identified in this study strongly correspond with previous research on the needs of Austrian social enterprises. The Austria Social Entrepreneurship Monitor from 2020 reports that organisations particularly expect reduced administrative burdens, more suitable regulatory frameworks, lower labour-related costs, and tax incentives (SENA, 2020, pp. 12–16). These priorities closely match the interview and survey findings, where financial incentives and simplified framework conditions were consistently identified as the most important requirements for strengthening the VSE label.

The findings are further supported by recent policy recommendations for the Austrian social economy. Mentioned initiatives recommend creating supportive fiscal conditions, simplifying bureaucratic procedures, and implementing broader systemic reforms to strengthen the sector (Schön & Lebert, 2024, p. 68,71; Vandor et al., 2024). particular, the recommendation to further establish the VSE label as a central governance instrument aligns closely with the interview findings (Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 83–84). The present study reinforces this

recommendation by showing that long-term political commitment and patience will be necessary before the label can fully realise its intended impact.

Finally, the findings strongly confirm previous research highlighting limited public awareness as one of the greatest challenges facing social enterprises in Austria (Schön & Lebert, 2024, pp. 17–19; Vandor et al., 2024, pp. 94–95). Similar to the literature, interviewees mentioned nationwide marketing campaigns, stronger media presence, and increased public communication as essential measures for improving recognition of both social entrepreneurship and the VSE label. While the literature recommends that the Austrian federal government should actively lead such awareness campaigns, the present findings suggest that the responsibility will likely need to be shared among policymakers, SENA, ecosystem organisations, and registered social enterprises themselves. This shared responsibility appears crucial for achieving the broad societal recognition required for the VSE label's long-term success.

5.3.4 *Institutional Theory Perspective*

From an institutional theory perspective, the future development of the VSE label depends primarily on its ability to become a widely recognised and legitimate institution within the Austrian economy. Institutional theory argues that organisations seek legitimacy because it increases public acceptance, facilitates access to important resources, and improves their long-term chances of survival (Kauppi, 2022, p. 2,4). The findings indicate that the VSE label has not yet reached this level of institutional legitimacy, as its public recognition and practical benefits remain limited.

The proposed development measures identified in this study, such as stronger political support, financial incentives, increased public awareness, and broader stakeholder engagement, can therefore be understood as mechanisms for strengthening the institutional legitimacy of the label. As legitimacy increases, organisations are more likely to perceive the VSE label as valuable, while external stakeholders such as policymakers, funders, customers, and business partners are more likely to recognise and reward the label.

This interpretation is consistent with the OECD and European Union, which emphasise that labels play an important role in increasing transparency, credibility, and legitimacy within the social economy (OECD/European Union, 2025, p. 16). The findings therefore suggest that the long-term success of the VSE label will depend less on changes to the labelling process itself and more on establishing the label as a recognised institutional standard for social enterprises in Austria. Achieving this broader legitimacy would strengthen all forms of institutional pressure and create a self-reinforcing system that encourages both initial application and long-term commitment.

5.4 Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made to support the further development and long-term success of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label in Austria. These recommendations aim to ensure that the discussion contributes to both the academic understanding of the topic and provides practical implications. The recommendations are particularly relevant for organisations involved in implementing and promoting the label, including aws, SENA, WKO, Impact Hub Vienna, Social Business Hub Styria and Impact Hub Tirol, as well as political institutions.

First, the findings indicate that future communication and promotion of the VSE label should primarily build on the identified pull factors that motivate organisations to apply. Therefore, future awareness campaigns should place particular emphasis on the aspects that organisations perceive as most valuable: increasing organisational legitimacy, differentiating social enterprises from traditional businesses, and contributing to the visibility and recognition of the social business sector as a whole. A clear communication strategy, including stronger media presence and success stories of existing label holders, could increase awareness of the label and encourage further applications. SENA, in cooperation with aws, should take a leading role in coordinating such marketing campaigns.

In addition, awareness of the VSE label and the concept of social entrepreneurship should be strengthened by collaboration with universities and universities of applied sciences. Integrating the topic into educational settings would familiarise students with social entrepreneurship as a recognised entrepreneurial pathway. This collaboration should not only target business-related programmes but also students from other disciplines where social innovation plays an important role. SENA, together with ecosystem organisations such as Impact Hub Vienna, Social Business Hub Styria, and Impact Hub Tirol, could contribute to reaching universities across different regions of Austria.

The findings further focus on the importance of networking events and information sessions. Many organisations are not yet aware of the VSE label or may perceive the application process, particularly the preparation of the impact report, as complex. Workshops, networking events, and practical guidance offered by ecosystem organisations can therefore function as important facilitating factors by reducing uncertainty and increasing accessibility. These activities should continue to be organised collaboratively by SENA, Social Business Hub Styria, Impact Hub Vienna, and Impact Hub Tirol.

Another important recommendation concerns maintaining the community aspect of the VSE label. Participants frequently described the opportunity to become part of a network of values-driven organisations as important. Continuing to foster exchange between labelled businesses through networking opportunities and joint events could therefore increase the perceived value of the VSE label beyond the labelling itself.

Furthermore, the findings also highlight the importance of improving communication regarding the re-labelling process. As the VSE label requires renewal after three years, organisations should receive timely and transparent information about the requirements well before their label expires. Relying solely on information available on the aws website appears insufficient. Instead, proactive communication through reminder emails, LinkedIn updates, the aws portal, and other communication channels are important to reduce uncertainty. The key stakeholder for taking the lead in implementing these communication measures is aws.

Perhaps the most significant recommendation emerging from this study concerns the need to strengthen the VSE label through tangible benefits. Financial incentives were mentioned most frequently, including tax benefits, access to funding programmes, and stronger consideration within public procurement. Although SENA can play an important advocacy role in promoting these developments, the implementation ultimately depends on political decision-makers. Without stronger political support, there is a risk of declining re-labelling rates over time.

At the same time, the quality and credibility of the VSE label should remain a priority. One of the central findings of this study is that organisations strongly identify with the values represented by the label. Consequently, lowering labelling standards solely to increase the number of labelled organisations should be avoided, as this could undermine the credibility of the label and weaken trust in both the label and the broader social business ecosystem. Keeping strict quality standards, particularly during the re-labelling process, is therefore an essential recommendation for maintaining the long-term legitimacy of the VSE label.

Finally, the implementation of many of these recommendations depends on the availability of sufficient financial and institutional resources. Participants repeatedly mentioned that the further development of the VSE label requires stronger long-term support from political institutions to ensure stable funding for promotion, community-building activities and communication measures. More broadly, the findings underline that the future success of the VSE label is a shared responsibility. Political institutions, aws, SENA, ecosystem organisations, and social enterprises themselves all play complementary roles in strengthening the label and increasing its long-term impact. Continued cooperation between these stakeholder groups will therefore be essential to ensure that the VSE label becomes an established and sustainable instrument for recognising and supporting social enterprises in Austria.

6 Conclusion

The introduction of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label was a significant milestone for the Austrian social enterprise sector, and it still offers considerable potential for future development. However, until now, no academic literature has specifically examined the label's institutional development in its first three years. This study therefore starts to fill this significant research gap by providing valuable insights for the responsible stakeholders who are leading the way. The main stakeholders are SENA, aws and the WKO. Other organisations, such as Social Business Hub Styria, Impact Hub Vienna and Impact Hub Tirol, will also benefit from these findings, as will political institutions, which are the main decision-makers and can use the findings of this study as a reliable source when making decisions about the future development of the VSE label.

RQ1: What push and pull factors motivate Austrian businesses to become a “Verified Social Enterprise” company?

The first research question focuses on the motivational factors behind applying for the VSE label. Currently, pull factors are much more powerful than push factors. The main pull factors driving initial applications are increasing the credibility and legitimacy of one's own organisation, better differentiation from traditional companies, and contributing to raising the overall visibility of the social business sector. The push factors with the most potential are recommendations from network organisations such as SENA and the Social Business Hub Styria, and the growing importance of social entrepreneurship in political discussions and strategies.

The VSE label is seen as increasing the credibility and visibility of individual organisations, as well as the social business ecosystem as a whole. However, although economic benefits were expected, they remain quite limited for now. Nevertheless, the expected community focus is still seen as adding significant value to the VSE label. It fosters collaboration and limits competitive thinking, thereby creating a resilient ecosystem with potential for growth.

RQ2: What barriers might prevent a social business that has been registered as a “Verified Social Enterprise” company from undergoing the re-labelling process after three years?

Considering the findings of the second research question, which focused on identifying barriers to re-labelling, it is clear why the actual growth rate is rather low and why immediate action is needed to prevent a decline in numbers. One major barrier to re-labelling is the lack of a common understanding of how the re-evaluation works and what exactly needs to be delivered by the registered companies. It is important to communicate this more proactively so that companies are not lost due to uncertainty about requirements, especially since the findings indicate that the re-labelling process is expected to not be overly complex.

Overall, the trend towards re-labelling looks promising for now, with most companies committed to supporting the VSE label even after the initial three-year registration period. The drivers for re-labelling are the project's impact orientation, which matches their own values, and the already perceived benefits, such as the signalling effect and community power.

However, the most impactful barrier for re-labelling might be the lack of tangible benefits of the VSE label. In the long run, it will not be enough for companies to support the growth of social entrepreneurship in Austria and be part of a great community, they will need actual benefits to offset the resources they have to invest in the labelling and re-labelling processes. Tangible benefits, especially financial ones, will be the main driver of re-labelling and long-term commitment to the label. This leads to the final research question.

RQ3: What measures are needed to further promote the successful implementation of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label within the Austrian social enterprise ecosystem?

The final research question focuses on the future development of the label and the factors that will contribute to the long-term success of this project. The main focus after the study is the lack of tangible benefits of the VSE label. Registered companies need concrete advantages that support their business model. Specifically, they are looking for tax benefits and stronger integration into public funding programmes and public procurement. Further support

for the community in the form of networking events, workshops, and knowledge-sharing is also seen as important in maintaining the label's positive image.

The VSE label and its further development are seen as a shared responsibility, which no single stakeholder can achieve alone. Political actors in particular must prioritise implementing monetary benefits and funding for marketing. To raise overall awareness, it is recommended that a multimedia awareness campaign is created, highlighting successful VSE companies and fostering a broader understanding of the topic.

All of these findings contribute to strengthening the “Verified Social Enterprise” label and its long-term relevance. Such initiatives have the power to provide a business sector with the visibility it deserves, thereby strengthening its relevance in political and economic discussions. This is why this master's thesis not only presents academic findings but also translates them into practical recommendations targeting the main stakeholders in the Austrian social business ecosystem.

7 Limitations

The primary objective of this chapter is to acknowledge the limitations of the study while identifying opportunities for future research that can build upon its findings.

The main limitation of this master's thesis is the scarcity of scientific literature on the Austrian social business economy, particularly with regard to the “Verified Social Enterprise” label. At the time of writing, there were no peer-reviewed publications that specifically addressed the VSE label, meaning that this study was largely exploratory. While one interview partner (E5) suggested that a relevant publication is expected soon, the absence of existing research restricts the ability to compare the findings with those of previous studies.

Another limitation of the study is its small sample size. Qualitative research included interviews with eight experts from the Austrian social business ecosystem, while 24 registered VSE companies completed the quantitative online survey. While the online survey served to complement and strengthen the qualitative findings, the number of participants remains relatively small compared to the social business sector as a whole. Consequently, the results are not statistically representative but rather provide an initial empirical insight into the implementation of the VSE label during its first three years.

The findings highlight the need for further research into the Austrian social business economy and the VSE label. Future studies could repeat the online survey with the aim of achieving a full census of all registered VSE companies.

Another important area for research is investigating why eligible social businesses choose not to apply for the VSE label, even though they meet the labelling criteria. As interview partner 5 highlighted, understanding these barriers could contribute to improving the label. Furthermore, future research should examine why organisations decide to renew or discontinue their label after the initial three-year period. This is particularly relevant given that more than 25 organisations are expected to make this decision in 2026.

Another limitation of this study is that it focuses on the perspectives of registered VSE organisations and selected experts within the Austrian social business ecosystem. Due to the scope of a master's thesis, it was not possible to incorporate the views of all relevant stakeholders. Future research could therefore include representatives from government institutions and policymakers responsible for shaping the regulatory framework for social businesses in Austria. Additionally, valuable insights into the regional development of the social business ecosystem could be gained from the focus of the umbrella organisation SENA and incubation hubs such as the Social Business Hub Styria, Impact Hub Vienna and Impact Hub Tirol. Such research could help to identify differences between Austrian federal states, as well as exploring potential urban-rural disparities in the availability of support structures and promotion of the VSE label.

In conclusion, the significant lack of scientific literature on the Austrian social business economy and the “Verified Social Enterprise” label is the main limitation of this study. However, this gap also highlights the considerable potential for future academic research in this area. The limitations identified throughout this thesis suggest several opportunities for research that could contribute to a deeper understanding of social businesses and support the further development of the Austrian social business ecosystem. Given the increasing societal and economic significance of social businesses, further research in this area would be extremely valuable for academia and policymakers.

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9 Appendix A: Interview Content

Appendix A contains the interview guidelines, coding guidelines and the coded interview content, offering detailed documentation of the study's qualitative data collection and analysis.

Interview Guidelines

Master's Thesis of Anna Stoffaneller (FH JOANNEUM) → Topic:

Social Business in Austria: Assessment of the Implementation of the "Verified Social Enterprise"

Label

Method: Semi-structured expert interviews (approx. 45 minutes, MS Teams)

Part 1: Introduction (10 minutes)

Introduction by Interviewer

- Welcome and thank you for participation
- Brief introduction of researcher and master's thesis topic
- Purpose of the interview
- Duration (about 45 minutes)
- Confidentiality and anonymisation → signed before interview
- Permission to record

Introduction Expert

- Could you briefly introduce yourself and your organisation?
- What is your role in relation to the "Verified Social Enterprise" label?

Opening Question

- From your perspective, what characterises a social enterprise in Austria?

Part 2: Main Section (30 minutes)

Motivation to Become a VSE

- What are the main reasons for becoming a "Verified Social Enterprise"?
 - (If applicable) What were your organisation's specific motivations?
- What expectations did you associate with the label (before labelling/implementation)?

- To what extent have these expectations been fulfilled?
- Were there any unexpected outcomes (positive or negative)?
- What concrete benefits does the VSE label create:
 - for individual enterprises?
 - for the Austrian social enterprise ecosystem?

Re-Labeling and Long-Term Commitment

- What is your current understanding of the re-labelling process after three years?
 - How transparent and clear do you perceive this process to be?
- In your opinion, what challenges might discourage a registered enterprise from undergoing re-labelling?
- Imagine a registered VSE deciding whether to renew the label in 2026. What factors would influence this decision most strongly?
- How would you assess the influence of institutions such as Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria, Austria Wirtschaftsservice and Wirtschaftskammer Österreich on companies' willingness to become or remain registered?
 - On a scale from 0 (no influence) to 10 (very strong positive influence), how would you rate their impact? Please explain your reasoning.

Future Development of the VSE Label

- What measures would make the VSE label more attractive to social enterprises?
- Which stakeholders should take the lead in strengthening and promoting the label?
- How could the implementation of the VSE label be improved in the coming years?
- Do you see potential for international recognition or replication of the VSE label? Why or why not?

Sum-up

- Is there anything we have not discussed that you consider important?

Part 3: Reflection and Summary (5 minutes)

Please complete the following sentences:

- The greatest benefit of the VSE label for my organisation is ...
- For the Austrian social business economy, the label primarily contributes ...
- The biggest challenge for the long-term success of the label will be ...

Part 4: Closing

- Information about next steps (anonymisation, data analysis and timeline)
- Thank you for your time and contribution!

Coding Guidelines

Category 1: Motivation to become a VSE - Coding Guideline			
Category 1	Definition	Anchor examples	Coding rules
Category 1.1: Pull factors	Voluntary and attractiveness-based motivations that encourage organisations to obtain the VSE label because of expected positive outcomes or advantages.	"We believed the label would strengthen our credibility and visibility."	Code statements referring to expected benefits, opportunities, or positive outcomes associated with obtaining the VSE label. Do not include external pressure, expectations, or obligations from stakeholders (Push factors).
Category 1.2: Push factors	External pressures, expectations, or institutional influences that encourage organisations to obtain the VSE label.	"Our funders increasingly expected recognised proof of our social impact."	Code statements referring to pressure, expectations, requirements, recommendations, or institutional influences from external actors. Do not include voluntarily expected benefits or attractiveness of the label (Pull factors).

Category 2: Benefits of the VSE label - Coding Guideline			
Category 2	Definition	Anchor examples	Coding rules
Category 2.1: Benefits for social businesses	Perceived positive effects of the VSE label for individual social enterprises, including organisational, strategic, reputational, or financial advantages.	"For us, the label increased our credibility and helped us build trust with partners."	Code statements referring to benefits experienced or expected by a specific organisation. Do not include effects on the wider ecosystem or sector.
Category 2.2: Benefits for the social business ecosystem	Perceived positive effects of the VSE label for the broader social enterprise sector, including visibility, legitimacy, networking, and ecosystem development.	"The label helps create a clearer identity for the social enterprise sector in Austria."	Code statements referring to collective or system-level benefits for the social enterprise ecosystem. Do not include organisation-specific advantages.

Category 3: Re-labelling and long-term commitment - Coding Guideline			
Category 3	Definition	Anchor examples	Coding rules
Category 3.1: Clarity of re-labelling process	Perceived clarity and transparency of the requirements, steps, and procedures for renewing the VSE label after the initial certification period.	"I'm not entirely sure what exactly is required for re-labelling."	Code only statements referring to understanding, clarity, or transparency of the re-labelling procedure. Do not include effort or difficulty (that belongs to perceived complexity).
Category 3.2: Perceived complexity of re-labelling process	Perception of administrative, procedural, or organisational effort required to complete the re-labelling process.	"The renewal process seems quite bureaucratic and time-consuming."	Include statements about effort, bureaucracy, workload, or procedural complexity. Do not include lack of understanding or strategic decision-making.
Category 3.3: Barriers for re-labelling	Factors that discourage organisations from renewing the VSE label due to low perceived value, resource constraints, or strategic deprioritisation.	"At the moment, we don't see enough benefit to go through the process again."	Code only negative arguments against re-labelling. Do not include institutional pressure or positive motivations (these belong to drivers).
Category 3.4: Drivers for re-labelling	Factors that motivate organisations to renew the VSE label due to expected benefits such as legitimacy maintenance, funding access, or stakeholder expectations.	"Keeping the label is important for our credibility with funders."	Code only positive motivations for renewal. Do not include barriers or concerns.

Category 4: Future development of the VSE label - Coding Guideline			
Category 4	Definition	Anchor examples	Coding rules
Category 4.1: Further incentives	Proposed financial or non-financial benefits intended to increase the attractiveness of the VSE label.	"There should be tax advantages or funding benefits linked to the label."	Include only suggested incentives or reward mechanisms. Do not include communication or governance structures.
Category 4.2: Responsible stakeholders	Actors or institutions perceived as responsible for implementing, promoting, or supporting the VSE label.	"The ministry and organisations like SENA should take a leading role."	Code only references to actors, institutions, or organisations with responsibility. Do not include actions or measures themselves.
Category 4.3: Promotion and awareness measures	Communication and dissemination activities aimed at increasing awareness, understanding, and visibility of the VSE label.	"There needs to be a stronger campaign so more companies know about the label."	Include communication, marketing, education, and awareness activities. Do not include financial incentives or structural governance.
Category 4.4: Scaling and internationalisation	Strategies or ideas related to expanding the VSE label beyond its current national scope or aligning it internationally.	"It would be great if the label were recognised at EU level."	Code only statements about international recognition, expansion, or standardisation beyond Austria. Do not include national promotion or internal implementation measures.
Category 4.5: Challenges for future development	Perceived obstacles, risks, or challenges that may hinder the long-term success, adoption, or institutionalisation of the VSE label within the Austrian social enterprise ecosystem.	"The biggest challenge will be convincing enough organisations that the label creates real added value."	Code statements that describe future barriers, risks, limitations, or concerns regarding the development and long-term success of the VSE label.

Coded Interview Content

Category 1.2: Push factors	
Expert	Statement
E1	Then we got to know [social business incubator 1], and we found their approach very likeable. Through them, we also learned that the Verified Social Enterprise Label exists. At an event organised by SENA, they introduced it to us and explained that it would soon be introduced, and we thought, yes, that fits, we will give it a try.
E2	The current State Secretary, although generally very supportive and positive when speaking about social enterprises
E6	if committed institutions such as [social business incubator 1] or SENA did not exist, this topic would hardly be on the radar in Austria at all
E8	For example, you know the Social Business Hub Styria. They are really focused on creating a community and building an ecosystem where organisations are connected with one another.

Category 1.1: Pull factors	
Expert	Statement
E1	The general reasons are that it is like a kind of check, similar to an organic certification, showing that you are trustworthy.
E1	The motivation in general is to differentiate yourself somewhat from others
E1	to have external confirmation that you mean well and are doing things properly, because you are also re-certified later
E1	It also helps us internally - it is like a walking aid or a guard rail that ensures you take the right steps, because with an impact pathway there are many processes that help you achieve your goals, which is to generate impact, ask people questions, and check whether something is actually effective.
E1	We thought it would help us appear more credible
E1	One positive aspect was - actually several - that in funding applications, for example with aws (Austria Wirtschaftsservice) or FFG (Forschungs-förderungsgesellschaft), this is sometimes already a focus.
E1	For example, there is a funding programme from the FFG called Impact Innovation. There, you receive a higher funding rate if you are certified. That is the first real benefit.
E1	In other funding schemes, it is simply already a checkmark for certain criteria that you must fulfil for funding.
E2	The Verified Social Enterprise Label offered an opportunity to position ourselves and to find a kind of home.
E2	it is nice to be part of a community
E2	One important aspect was strengthening the community. That is absolutely crucial.
E3	For those who already have a very clear self-understanding of the topic - and I should add, not all do - it is primarily a form of confirmation: an official, publicly visible confirmation that they are indeed such an enterprise.
E3	It represents added value in communication with stakeholders, something that can be conveyed outwardly.
E3	It represents added value in communication with stakeholders, something that can be conveyed outwardly.
E3	It represents added value in communication with stakeholders, something that can be conveyed outwardly. It creates differentiation - I would not necessarily call it uniqueness, but it does create distinction - especially if there are similar actors in the market.
E3	a form of self-affirmation that the organisation's mission-oriented approach is genuinely anchored at its core. The label is meant to reflect exactly that.
E3	a form of self-affirmation that the organisation's mission-oriented approach is genuinely anchored at its core. The label is meant to reflect exactly that.
E3	the most important aspects are self-confirmation and external validation vis-à-vis third parties and stakeholders.
E3	there are gradually increasing opportunities associated with the label - still relatively limited, but growing - for example in innovation programmes.
E4	wanting to be different
E4	wanted to become more visible
E4	We wanted to communicate more externally about the things we had developed internally that were working well.
E4	for us, there was never really a turning point - we have been a social enterprise from the very beginning. And then something emerged where we could say: look, now this is becoming visible
E4	I also hope that the Austrian government will, sooner or later, engage with this. That is perhaps one of the key reasons for supporting the Verified Social Enterprise label: to say, yes, this is who we are, and yes, we want to support this movement.
E4	I think it is more likely that people come across it by chance - through networks like SENA or a social business incubator, for example. That was the case for us as well.
E4	I saw some people involved and wondered what they were doing there and why we were not part of it
E6	I am not aiming for profit maximisation or the next big exit as a start-up or anything like that. Rather, I simply want to contribute something through the vision or mission that we have. And perhaps this is simply a good way of labelling that
E6	it is about standing out
E6	So it is really about contributing something, and this is essentially a good stamp that represents that.
E8	credibility is a major factor
E8	this sense of community is definitely an important aspect as well
E5	simply the confirmation of being officially recognised as a social enterprise
E5	It is a label that carries a certain weight, also because it is issued by the public sector, namely through the Federal Ministry. And that gives it a certain visibility.
E5	For some it also has a marketing effect
E5	public recognition
E7	It signals to third parties, who have less time, what the situation is. That is one of the promises of the label. I believe this motivates some organisations.
E7	providing access to concessions, incentives, and resources. This is not really in place yet
E7	the main motivation, particularly among the small number of organisations that hold the label, is that they want to support the field
E7	Let us support this initiative, obtain the label, and contribute to it.
E7	to obtain the photograph with the minister or the state secretary. That looks good on social media and may also please some individuals

Category 2.1: Benefits for social businesses	
Expert	Statement
E1	Partly better funding conditions and certain simplifications, because some tasks have already been completed.
E1	The internal effect, which I already mentioned, is that you may work in a more structured way if you follow these guidelines or standards and have already engaged thoroughly with the topic.
E1	And in the broader market, if you want to acquire customers, it might show that you are not an exploitative or harmful institution, but are perceived somewhat more positively
E1	It is always nice when you meet others who also have the label. It is a bit like saying, look here, cool buddy - like a community. People support each other, and there is less competitive thinking.
E1	A support for focusing on impact, so that one truly carries out targeted work to help people.
E2	it provides what I previously described as a sense of home, and that is already quite valuable. However, I still believe that its external impact has considerable room for improvement.
E2	the sense of belonging to a sector that we consider important for the future.
E3	the label ideally provides strong visibility and a degree of differentiation in the market
E3	It should also lead to competitive advantages - good enterprises should benefit from it, even if that is not always easy to achieve.
E3	However, there are initial developments: for example, innovation funding schemes that support this area, both in research and in economic development at federal and regional level. But overall, we are still far from where we need to be.
E4	To be honest, I do not think it currently provides any real advantage - apart from a strong sense of idealism, of saying: let us move forward together and see what happens.
E4	But in general, it is about credibility and visibility as a genuine social enterprise towards customers, suppliers, employees, and network partners.
E4	increased credibility and visibility, as well as a clear positioning as a social enterprise
E4	being an early part of this movement
E6	several people have approached me, because within the bubble you naturally get to know each other
E6	people become curious and take a closer look, wondering what it is, because they have never seen it before. I have actually received that feedback several times - other entrepreneurs saying they had never seen it before and had to google what it was. So it definitely creates curiosity.
E6	it makes the topic of impact measurement much more present and conscious for me - not only because I have to submit it after three years, but also because it is so important to consider what I am contributing and how I can perhaps translate that into measurable figures
E8	through the label, they gain visibility and can be properly classified
E8	at the moment, there are no immediate or obvious benefits
E8	Last year, there was an advantage when applying for one or two programmes through the FFG. If you already had the label, you no longer needed to submit certain additional documentation.
E8	I think that, for some of the companies applying for the label, engaging with impact logic becomes a major step forward internally. It helps them further develop themselves and truly understand what they are doing. It also gives them a way of identifying what has already been achieved.
E8	I think it is beneficial that the companies are formally recorded and that there are publicly accessible lists where they can be found online. It creates a shared point of reference.
E8	could eventually lead to advantages in public procurement processes or similar areas
E5	it now still needs to be filled with value so that it becomes more attractive for more companies
E5	I have spoken with around 30 companies that have it. And unfortunately, most of them said that it has not brought them particularly much so far.
E5	Many had expected more from it than it ultimately delivered.
E5	the idea was that companies would become more attractive to stakeholders, possibly also gain new customers, and so on
E5	it is already important for companies, but there is definitely still a lot of potential that has not yet been realised
E7	The label promotes itself as creating clarity and legitimacy, and I believe that this promise is reasonably credible.
E7	It signals to third parties, who have less time, what the situation is.
E7	one clear advantage is the possibility of signalling
E7	they can present themselves more effectively to consumers, funders, and investors, and say: look, this has been certified
E7	It may also provide advantages when working with the aws or the ministry, in the sense of signalling that they are responsive and willing to participate in their initiatives. However, I do not believe that there are any concrete advantages in practice.
E7	it may provide knowledge and visibility benefits, but not much more

Category 2.2: Benefits for the social business ecosystem	
Expert	Statement
E1	People support each other, and there is less competitive thinking.
E1	Visibility towards the outside, in order to support companies that want to improve society and help society.
E2	it is fundamentally about visibility and about bringing the topic into the political sphere. That has worked reasonably well because it has been possible to involve the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Chamber of Commerce, and actors from the social sector, and to build something tangible together
E2	the advantage of making this type of business model more visible.
E3	the label was explicitly designed to send a signal of transformation to the wider economy
E3	the intention behind establishing the label was to strengthen the sector and even send political signals
E3	the label has created a valuable opportunity to increase the visibility of the sector overall
E3	For the ecosystem, the label is important because the sector still lacks a fully developed shared identity and is not yet completely organised.
E3	important visibility regarding the necessity of this sector, ideally.
E4	an important contribution to the standardisation and visibility of the social sector
E4	a sense of cohesion, a shared identity
E6	Visibility and awareness that there is an impact when I do things differently and rethink approaches instead of immediately doing things the way everyone else does, for example.
E8	I think it serves as a useful point of orientation for partners, customers, and funding bodies because they immediately understand the background of the organisation.
E8	I think it is beneficial that the companies are formally recorded and that there are publicly accessible lists where they can be found online. It creates a shared point of reference.
E8	Orientation, visibility, stronger networking
E5	an important expectation has been met in that sense: that it is not just some temporary initiative, but a certification that will have long-term value
E5	it is of course also important to strengthen networking through the label and to achieve more together
E5	It is also about strengthening the community itself and being able to better distinguish itself from primarily profit-oriented companies, and to use the label as a tool of legitimacy - so that one can say social enterprise is not just some abstract idea, but has substance.
E5	A clear added value in strengthening the community.
E7	For the field, the label is helpful insofar as there is no overarching strategy for this topic in Austria.
E7	Now, however, there is a vehicle. The Republic thereby commits itself, at least to a small extent, to the topic. This provides everyone in the ecosystem, as well as social enterprises themselves, with the opportunity to engage in dialogue. At the very least, there is now a contact person with whom one can speak, and a state secretary who bears some responsibility for the topic. This makes the topic more visible.
E7	a contribution to strengthening the discourse and enhancing the visibility of social enterprises

Category 3.1: Clarity of re-labelling process	
Expert	Statement
E1	I am observing a bit how it happens with the very first companies that have already gone through it
E1	To be honest, I do not yet know exactly how it works.
E1	It is not yet clear to me. So rather not very well at this stage. I keep hearing about applications, but not much about re-labelling. There has not yet been an event about it or anything similar.
E2	Since we already fulfilled the requirements the first time around, the process is relatively straightforward for us.
E3	I cannot say much about that
E4	At the moment, there is no information available yet.
E6	What I know about it is that after three years there is an impact measurement. That means you have to demonstrate what you have done and why you deserve to keep the label.
E6	I also find the process very transparent and clearly communicated, and I have to say they handle it very openly.
E6	The information mainly comes from AWS. I mostly receive it through LinkedIn.
E8	The process has to take place every three years. It is also outlined on the aws website.
E8	In principle, it is the same process as the initial application. The only thing that is no longer required is a pitch deck. Companies must again submit an impact report, which cannot be older than 18 months. Writing an impact report is time-consuming. Either you do it yourself, which requires a lot of time, or you pay someone to do it, which requires money. That is why it may be up to 18 months old. It is also important that companies are not required to demonstrate that they have improved or become better. Otherwise, it would actually be unfair if they already had the label and then suddenly had to prove enormous progress. As long as they are at least maintaining the same standard and still fulfil the criteria for the Verified Social Enterprise Label, they receive it again.
E7	I am not entirely certain how this process will look in detail.
E7	As far as I have observed, this has not been communicated very strongly in terms of what is expected.

Category 3.2: Perceived complexity of re-labelling process	
Expert	Statement
E1	It always depends on how busy you are in the company and what you are focusing on. However, I wanted to prepare impact reports strategically, so that at least the relevant data is collected.
E1	I do not think it will be that strict.
E2	it has to be acknowledged that while the process may not be a huge effort, it is still an effort.
E6	I believe the re-certification will probably be just as simple as the certification.
E5	the effort is still manageable
E7	I also think that three years is a fair timeframe.

Category 3.3: Barriers for re-labelling	
Expert	Statement
E1	If the effort required is too high, that could discourage them.
E1	For some, it might simply be the relationship between effort and benefit. To put it simply: there are still not many clearly measurable benefits associated with the label.
E1	The required effort is something that could discourage companies - for example, if you had to produce a 150-page report, it might be difficult to find the time.
E1	Strict deadlines could also be an issue - if you miss them, there might be no further opportunity.
E1	Or simply too much information, so companies forget about it.
E2	not much has really been developed further since the creation or establishment of this label
E2	A company will only be willing to make that effort if there is a tangible benefit on the other side. If those benefits do not increase, then I do not believe support or interest will significantly grow either.
E2	At the moment, public awareness is still rather limited, and being part of a community that hardly anyone knows about risks becoming more of an insider matter. In that case, I could imagine organisations eventually concluding that the effort is no longer worthwhile.
E2	There has to be a benefit.
E2	Being part of a community and jointly developing the ecosystem is all well and good, but there also needs to be a tangible benefit.
E3	precisely the requirement to carry out impact measurement. Some organisations may not have engaged sufficiently with this.
E3	on the one hand, it is a question of incentives, and on the other, a question of how clearly this requirement has been communicated - in this case, by the aws as the responsible body. I suspect there are still significant communication gaps here
E3	If they feel that they have not gained significant benefits from the label
E3	facing the additional requirement of implementing impact measurement
E4	Current cost-cutting measures by various governments, which are making organisations think very carefully about where they invest. The reporting process requires significant capacity, and my concern is whether organisations will be able to free up those resources in the coming years to invest in it - especially since, at the moment, there are no clear tangible returns.
E4	I also fear that idealism may decline in the coming years, even if organisations would like to maintain it.
E4	Another challenge could be internal changes within the organisation - for example, changes in funding structures, growth, or organisational restructuring. These developments might mean that the label is no longer a good fit.
E4	However, if you look at the Ministry of Economic Affairs or certain regional governments, the outlook becomes somewhat less optimistic.
E6	perhaps if you no longer see the added value
E6	if the company is already struggling from a business perspective
E6	I actually think that a lack of added value would be the main reason.
E8	others who say that they simply do not currently have the time
E8	The current economic situation is also not particularly favourable. Many start-ups are struggling at the moment. In that context, the certificate is not always the highest priority among the things they need to deal with.
E8	There was also one situation where someone was currently negotiating with investors and was concerned that if the impact first aspect appeared too strong, potential investors might decide not to invest.
E5	Some companies have said that if there are no concrete benefits from the label in the near future, they would not be willing to go through recertification again.
E5	it is mainly the time required. And many of them are very small enterprises, it has to be said
E5	if resources are lacking - whether time or manpower, so to speak, meaning staff shortages - then it becomes difficult for some
E7	uncertainty regarding expectations
E7	If you feel that it has provided no benefit at all, then it would make less sense.

Category 3.4: Drivers for re-labelling	
Expert	Statement
E1	Partly better funding conditions and certain simplifications, because some tasks have already been completed.
E1	The internal effect, which I already mentioned, is that you may work in a more structured way if you follow these guidelines or standards and have already engaged thoroughly with the topic.
E1	It is always nice when you meet others who also have the label. It is a bit like saying, look here, cool buddy - like a community. People support each other, and there is less competitive thinking.
E1	A support for focusing on impact, so that one truly carries out targeted work to help people.
E2	one should not give up too quickly, which means we will definitely remain involved and undergo the certification process again
E2	Being part of a community and jointly developing the ecosystem
E3	It depends on whether they already integrate and value this as part of their business model. Those who do - who already produce impact reports, have defined indicators, and collect data - will naturally continue.
E4	we still have the capacity
E4	SENA is currently positioning itself quite well and is making efforts to achieve political progress
E4	Also, with the support of State Secretary Zehetner, who is part of the government, I get the impression that some movement is happening.
E6	In other words, it should be as simple as possible to provide the required documentation.
E8	visibility and networking
E5	they would like to be re-labelled, mainly because it is also free of charge
E5	The time required is relatively manageable because the biggest hurdle is the initial application.
E5	they still want to contribute to the community and at least continue to be recognised as a labelled company
E5	the hope is that more new ones will join
E5	But if I, as a company, say that it simplifies processes with impact investors, for example, because they recognise the label and therefore do not need to carry out their own checks, then that is of course an advantage - a win-win for everyone.
E5	if that brings me more customers and more money as a company, then that would be the main advantage for me
E5	the signalling effect - being able to say I have been officially recognised by the government as a social enterprise
E5	the strengthening of the community
E5	it may also have an effect in encouraging more founders to choose to establish a social enterprise, rather than just any company
E7	If you feel that the label has provided some benefit, then renewal would make sense.
E7	With AI, this can be done quickly. If I had any indication that it had been beneficial and if I had the capacity available, then I would proceed with re-accreditation.
E7	If I were to receive another photograph with the state secretary, I believe that might push me over the line and lead me to say, yes, that is worthwhile - it represents something tangible.

Category 4.1: Further incentives	
Expert	Statement
E1	There are ideas to introduce tax advantages for the label, which would create financial and economic benefits.
E1	One could also offset the economic value created for society through the activities of the company. If this were taken into account, it could indeed become a real strategic economic advantage.
E1	I also mentioned funding schemes where you receive more funding compared to others. I believe that, from an economic perspective, this is the strongest motivation.
E1	The second aspect concerns public visibility and marketing value.
E1	this could involve tax-deductible donation status for Verified Social Enterprise companies or reduced tax contributions, such as employer contributions when hiring staff
E2	in the form of procurement benefits or tax incentives
E2	There are already tax advantages regarding VAT for non-profit organisations. Similar arrangements could also be linked to the VSE Label.
E2	In public tenders, organisations that do not externalise environmental or social costs onto society, but instead actively take responsibility for them, should be taken into account when determining who offers the best bid. I believe that is an extremely important element.
E3	There is also the prospect, albeit still modest, of gaining an advantage in procurement or tendering processes. These are very much market-related considerations.
E3	If visibility through the label increases, it becomes more likely that in public procurement or also in private-sector contracting, organisations will say: We want to commission a Verified Social Enterprise.
E3	is incentives at a systemic level - potentially even at state or legislative level - through a clear economic policy commitment
E3	could be tax-related, related to non-wage labour costs, and so on - there are many possible approaches
E4	a reduction in VAT for Verified Social Enterprises, or lower wage taxes, or something similar
E4	As I mentioned, some form of tax relief - whether on income tax, VAT, or even social security contributions - would be helpful.
E4	For example, if VAT could be reduced, services could be offered at lower prices.
E4	stronger links to funding schemes and financial instruments - so that there are clear advantages, for example in the allocation of grants or similar programmes
E6	I genuinely expect that there will be advantages for those who contribute something, and that we will not simply be placed in the same category as all the large companies that are only focused on profit maximisation.
E6	eligibility for tax-deductible donations would be very valuable
E6	I am not saying we should not pay anything, but perhaps a reduced tax rate would make sense, so that it actually matters that you contribute something to society.
E6	Or perhaps advantages related to labour costs.
E8	create certain advantages for social enterprises in public procurement processes, so that they would have at least some form of preferential treatment there
E5	generate tax advantages for companies, so that you might not have to pay corporate tax anymore or something like that
E7	Specifically, there was the idea that within the Impact Innovation funding programme, if one applied as a Verified Social Enterprise, one would receive a higher approval rate. However, I am currently not even certain how the Impact Innovation funding programme will continue.
E7	simplifying the process for certain public funding schemes
E7	offering higher funding rates or financing quotas
E7	creating dedicated funding calls specifically for VSEs
E7	With some negotiation skills, it might also be possible to involve private actors, encouraging them to provide benefits such as discounts or services that could be accessed.
E7	workshops and training programmes could also be offered
E7	lobbying-type activities. This could involve helping to establish contacts within public administration or providing information about where other funding opportunities exist. Acting as the public face and facilitator towards government administration would be extremely helpful.

Category 4.2: Responsible stakeholders	
Expert	Statement
E1	The tax authority would be good.
E2	The current State Secretary, although generally very supportive and positive when speaking about social enterprises
E2	If the State Secretary and the government do not start moving on these issues, then I do not think this initiative has a particularly strong long-term future.
E2	In the case of SENA, it is obvious because that is their role: to strengthen and expand social business.
E2	I think it is important that the Chamber of Commerce is part of this development because it demonstrates that they have at least understood part of the concept.
E2	Austria Wirtschaftsservice. They are naturally important because these issues are also about access to mainstream funding channels, for example. So in terms of importance, they are definitely a ten and highly relevant.
E2	We have already mentioned the relevant stakeholders, but what is really missing is political leadership with the courage to act. Although we are discussing the VSE Label specifically here, the issue is actually much broader. The entire sector requires far more political support.
E2	I think this initiative really has to come from the Ministry of Economic Affairs. They are the central institution, and they already have the capacity to conduct public communication campaigns for all sorts of topics, so why not for the VSE Label?
E3	Even independent of formal political structures, there is support - for example from the current State Secretary, Elisabeth Zehetner, who has long been engaged with the topic and continues to support it within her capacity.
E3	For Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria, I would say they have significant potential influence, as they can serve as a primary point of contact and actively inform companies, given that they represent the sector.
E3	The Austrian Federal Economic Chamber would also have considerable potential, given its size and reach. However, it is a very large organisation and does not always enjoy full credibility - partly because membership is mandatory and it covers a vast range of topics.
E3	Yes, we have already mentioned them. I think these are very important actors, also at ministerial level.
E3	It should be obvious that the Ministry of Economic Affairs is involved, but also the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Infrastructure, the Ministry of the Interior - wherever procurement takes place, there is already a reason for engagement. There is hardly a ministry where this is not relevant.
E3	The Economic Chamber and similar associations also play a role. In Austria, as a chamber-based system, it is quite reactive and often slow to innovate.
E3	Universities are already beginning to respond, which is positive.
E4	the greatest influence comes from the organisation's own idealism
E4	Ideally, a range of actors
E4	chambers, social insurance institutions, and tax authorities
E6	it is important that the Federal Ministry supports it and that AWS and SENA, the network, are actively pushing it forward, taking action and creating awareness
E6	I would definitely rate SENA and AWS as a 10, because they make a great effort to ensure that this works. They also strongly support representation of interests and engagement behind the scenes.
E6	There are large foundations in Austria that are longstanding institutions and help shape Austria in that way. I believe some of them should be involved, not only politicians or political decision-makers, because it is problematic if major changes happen every five years.
E6	Erste Foundation - from Erste Bank
E6	MEGA Education Foundation
E8	SENA is absolutely essential. I see them very clearly in the role of lobbyists. They are the ones who should be developing ideas, approaching the ministry, advocating for whatever support or changes they would like to see, and persistently pushing these issues forward. They should also be making constructive proposals regarding what could be developed further.
E8	ministry level
E5	I would describe it as a multi-stakeholder initiative, where you do not just have a government organisation launching a label onto the market, or a private organisation doing it, but rather genuine collaboration across different sectors, which creates real added value. And that is more context-sensitive, I would say, because it is closer to the field. And through the Social Entrepreneurship Network Austria, concerns from the company side can also be brought in again. So you have a mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches. And I think that is a huge advantage.
E5	I think something needs to be done from all sides to support this.
E5	I also think educational institutions can act as multipliers and integrate it into their lectures.
E5	it definitely has to come from the supporting institutions - aws, the WK+, the Social Enterprise Network Austria, and the Federal Ministry
E5	also from the companies themselves
E5	But I do not see it as a one-way street
E7	believe SENA has considerable potential
E7	The Austrian Federal Economic Chamber has enormous potential if it were to expand communication more broadly
E7	the mandate primarily lies with the aws
E7	The Austrian Federal Economic Chamber has significant capacity. It is currently occupied with its own internal matters, but in principle many social enterprises are members of the Chamber - probably the majority. Therefore, there is considerable potential there as well. Of course, it is challenging because this is a cross-cutting issue, and questions arise regarding responsibility.
E7	SENA is already engaged with the topic. I am not sure what additional actions SENA could undertake without further funding, as much of its work is currently voluntary.
E7	ecosystem actors are also relevant. There are already discussions with organisations such as Impact Hub and Social Business Hub Styria and others

Category 4.3: Promotion and awareness measures	
Expert	Statement
E1	improved communication - although they are already making strong efforts - in order to motivate more companies to become and remain certified. It would also be beneficial if companies actively acted as ambassadors for the label.
E2	If promoted well, a label can help bring the topic more strongly into society, and that is a very important point.
E2	Ultimately, this is a question of marketing.
E2	If you genuinely want to push something like this forward, then it requires classic marketing efforts.
E2	There are also plenty of successful and visible social businesses that could be showcased in order to strengthen the label. After all, what matters is what stands behind the label. A label by itself has no value, but by presenting strong examples, you can demonstrate why it matters. At the moment, however, I do not think anyone is handling the marketing aspect particularly well.
E3	One aspect is the storytelling level, I would say, where the strategic, economic policy, and societal importance of social entrepreneurship is communicated much more clearly and publicly. In some cases this already happens, but it could certainly be expressed differently or more strongly.
E3	There should be a much more deliberate approach at the media and communication level, through campaigns and messaging, clearly stating: these are real role model enterprises - and this is why. Full stop. That can also be clearly evidenced, and even measured. This would likely motivate many more companies to carry out impact measurement or even become VSEs in the first place.
E3	Media coverage is still too limited, which also reduces visibility and the ability to talk about the topic properly.
E3	If one were to run a large campaign to establish this topic properly, it would require three things: clear signals from above, effective media communication and visibility, and strong ecosystem work from below. These three elements need to come together.
E6	I believe that if the VSE label is positioned well within that context - and of course it needs promotion and public visibility, which requires funding - then once it has a place in people's minds, or at least in more people's minds because they have heard of it and understand what it represents, it will certainly improve.
E8	important for the label to gain recognition beyond its own scene and community
E8	For example, aws collaborates with the Social Business Hub Styria, which organises workshops and advisory services on behalf of aws. The same applies to SENA. They also proactively approach people and explore whether the label could be suitable for them.
E5	marketing is a huge factor
E5	It will not work without investment
E5	I also think educational institutions can act as multipliers and integrate it into their lectures. Especially in courses on sustainable entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, or entrepreneurship in general, the VSE Label could be presented so that students who may at some point intend to found a company or start a startup at least have heard of the VSE Label.
E5	perhaps cooperation with the press as well
E5	maybe even television advertising
E5	you can also run it through various events or similar channels to further increase awareness
E7	Another interesting approach would be for the aws to launch a campaign for Verified Social Enterprises, showcasing how strong they are and thereby attaching tangible value to the label. Thinking more broadly, why not implement something similar to umbrella brand campaigns? You know what I mean - where many major brands come together and attempt to build value around the concept of a brand. For example, advertisements such as those for Barilla pasta, where the message is something like: If it needs to be good, pay attention to the brand - something along those lines.
E7	In a similar way, one could highlight: these are individual VSEs, but they are all VSEs. This would build emotional value and public perception around the umbrella category. I find that extremely clever. Individual Verified Social Enterprises may not be able to afford such campaigns themselves, but it would be one way to strengthen the umbrella brand and the individual actors without directly distributing funding - which is understandably difficult for a funding agency due to regulatory constraints.

Category 4.4: Scaling and Internationalisation	
Expert	Statement
E1	of course that would be beneficial, because we would need something European
E1	We would need European corporate law. There is something called Regime 28, with the aim of creating an EU Inc. structure that would allow startups to operate more easily across Europe. Unified insolvency law, unified corporate law, unified labour law - that is the biggest obstacle.
E2	In some countries, for example, it is clearly established that social enterprises may be given preference in public procurement processes. EU legislation allows positive discrimination in certain cases, for instance for women, and also for social enterprises. Austria, however, does not really dare to pursue this path.
E2	I think it would be very sensible to pursue this direction. That view is connected to the fact that I consider the Austrian decision to use a label rather than creating a separate legal form to be a very smart one.
E2	Since social enterprise is still not a clearly understood or easily categorised concept, it would naturally be helpful to establish at least a common framework at the European level.
E2	Austria could therefore contribute by presenting the VSE Label at EU level as a good practice example in order to create greater international alignment.
E3	It would certainly be desirable. But realistically speaking, we should be cautious.
E3	From a signalling perspective, international relevance could be positive. There are already initiatives in different EU countries, and the Verified Social Enterprise label is in some ways a pioneer in Europe. That should be acknowledged.
E3	I do not see internationalisation as a priority at this stage.
E3	At best, there could be mutual support and knowledge sharing - for example: look, this is how they did it there.
E3	I do not see strong international replication potential at this stage.
E4	Yes, I do. I believe there are countries that are more innovative than Austria. The fact that Austria has developed such an innovative idea is already quite remarkable. But it may be that other countries advance it further more quickly.
E6	I do see potential
E6	the question is whether there is sufficient endurance and financial capacity to sustain that effort
E8	Aws is currently working on an English version of the recognition certificate.
E8	But a single system that would operate across Europe as a whole is not really something I currently see on the horizon.
E5	I can imagine it, yes, but I think the path towards that is still quite long.
E5	A 1:1 transfer of the label will probably not work. The contexts in different European countries are simply too different.
E5	it can of course be used as a model and then adapted in a context-specific way
E5	And of course, maybe at some point there will be overarching labels that cover this at a European or global level. But we are still, I think, very far away from that. It is really not an issue at the moment, I would say.
E7	At the current stage, I do not believe internationalisation is necessary.
E7	It would need to be an EU-level initiative, or alternatively one of the existing global labels would need to expand its scope.
E7	However, before pursuing internationalisation, the most important requirement would be long-term institutionalisation. Solutions would need to be established so that the label does not depend on whether it continues into the next legislative period.

Category 4.5: Challenges for future development	
Expert	Statement
E1	We are always strongly influenced by the times. For example, how much funding will there be in the future for green transition? That is a major topic. Now many crises have emerged. Climate change, for instance, is sometimes pushed further back, while security has become a major issue. That is somewhat geopolitical and global in nature. Politics strongly influences how funding is perceived. Some political parties want to abolish all funding for NGOs completely. If that were to happen, the label would probably also disappear.
E1	Is the label recognised, accepted, and valued by the public? It is simply difficult to build such a brand.
E1	The biggest challenge, given my background as [Background], is how to measure or determine value.
E1	To demonstrate the long-term advantages of this label and to continue the high-quality work.
E2	At the moment, it is more a matter of saying, well, it is nice to be part of a community. In the long term, however, I do not think that will be enough. We will probably come back to that later, but I believe much more will have to happen in this regard. I just lost my train of thought there, but it will come back.
E2	Whether these advantages come in the form of procurement benefits or tax incentives can certainly be debated. But I think some kind of concrete advantage will be necessary, otherwise the label is unlikely to gain real momentum.
E2	If the State Secretary and the government do not start moving on these issues, then I do not think this initiative has a particularly strong long-term future.
E2	Assuming that the sector itself will somehow spread the word naturally only leads to the current situation, where it remains largely an insider topic that does not extend beyond its own circle.
E2	whether it can genuinely be linked to a recognisable and measurable benefit.
E3	I don't just say social enterprise, but prefer the term impact enterprise, and there is a reason for that. In the field of social entrepreneurship, the term sozial is often translated somewhat misleadingly. What we are really talking about is achieving societal and ecological impact.
E3	One of the biggest challenges with such topics is that they sound appealing but fail to generate sustained interest.
E3	only if a large number of eligible organisations apply for and receive the label will it gain the intended impact
E3	Incentives - real pull factors - are crucial.
E3	What is missing is a strong signal from the middle and upper levels, including the media.
E3	The greatest challenge will be positioning the topic in such a way that it is clearly understood and accepted at all levels of society.
E4	to generate tangible added value for organisations
E4	also on a financial level
E6	if you are not part of the bubble, you often do not know
E6	I believe it will only work through such incentives, encouraging more organisations to position themselves on this side, because otherwise it will simply be dismissed if it brings no real advantages.
E6	political institutions and large publicly funded organisations often face funding challenges
E6	Finding enough committed people who also gain added value and benefit from orienting themselves towards the common good and contributing something
E8	at the moment, there are no immediate or obvious benefits
E8	At the same time, people ask why they should apply if they do not receive any immediate benefit from it. So it is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation.
E8	Further expanding the concrete added value in the long term
E8	reflecting the diversity of the scene
E5	Yes, but there is a lack of understanding in Austria in particular, and that is actually a problem, because then people say, Yes, but I am not a social entrepreneur, I am doing something for the environment. Yes, and then they think the label is not relevant for them and therefore do not apply, because they believe they do not fit the definition. And there is still work to be done by the institutions, or yes, there was even the consideration of whether we should perhaps rename it, yes, whether we should perhaps call it Sustainable Verified Enterprise or something like that, or Impact Verified, or something along those lines. Yes, but I think if the understanding is clarified, then that also brings added value to the label.
E5	there is definitely still a lot of potential that has not yet been realised
E5	So it is not a financial barrier in the sense that companies say it is too expensive. However, it can become a barrier if companies are required to include a clause in their articles of association stating that they operate in a socially oriented way. And if this has to be notarised, then administrative costs arise - legal fees and so on.
E5	To anchor it within the broader business landscape and to promote it in a targeted way.
E7	What has not developed positively is the adoption rate. The label currently includes around 60 certified organisations. I consider this relatively low given the level of effort that has been invested.
E7	Since the VSE has not yet gained significant visibility, I also do not think it poses a major risk if a company is not re-accredited.
E7	the label is fine, it is generally acceptable, but there is currently no tangible incentive to participate
E7	Therefore, the most important step may be to embed the label permanently and ensure that it remains in place and is organised in a way that does not require renewed political decisions from each successive government.
E7	ensuring that the benefits of the label are visible to those interested in obtaining it

10 Appendix B: Online Survey Content

Appendix B contains the online survey questionnaire and the responses to the open-ended questions, providing detailed documentation of the study's quantitative data collection.

Questionnaire Online Survey

This survey is addressed to all organisations currently registered as “Verified Social Enterprise” (VSE) companies in Austria.

Participation in the survey takes approximately 5 minutes. Your responses will of course be treated anonymously and used exclusively for scientific purposes.

My name is Anna Stoffaneller, and I am conducting this survey as part of my Master’s thesis at FH JOANNEUM. The title of my thesis is: Social Business in Austria: Assessment of the Implementation of the "Verified Social Enterprise" Label.

The aim of this survey is to capture your motivation for registering and your assessments of the VSE label, thereby contributing to the further development of the label and to strengthening the social business sector in Austria.

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this survey.

Screening Question

*Is your organisation currently registered as a “Verified Social Enterprise” (VSE)? (Single Choice)**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No → End of survey

Demographic Questions

*What role do you have in your organisation? (Single Choice)**

- ☐ Founder or Managing Director
- ☐ Member of the management team
- ☐ Head of department
- ☐ Employee
- ☐ Other: _____

*In which year did your organisation first receive the VSE label? (Single Choice)**

- ☐ 2023
- ☐ 2024
- ☐ 2025
- ☐ 2026
- ☐ I don't know

How many employees are currently employed in your organisation? (Single Choice) → not mandatory

- ☐ 1–9 employees
- ☐ 10–49 employees
- ☐ 50 or more employees
- ☐ I don't know

Pull Factors = positive incentives or benefits

*How important were the following positive expectations and benefits for your organisation's decision to apply for the VSE label?**

Please rate each of the following factors using the scale.

1 = Not important at all

2 = Rather not important

3 = Neither important nor unimportant

4 = Rather important

5 = Very important

Factors to be assessed:

- ☐ Increase in the credibility and legitimacy of my organisation
- ☐ Increase in the visibility and public recognition of my organisation
- ☐ Contribution to increasing the visibility of social businesses overall
- ☐ Better differentiation of my organisation from traditional companies
- ☐ Improved access to funding, financing or investors

- Feeling of belonging to the social business community
- Support in the further development of internal strategy and organisational goals

Push Factors = pressure or external expectations

*How important were the following external factors for your organisation's decision to apply for the VSE label?**

Please rate each of the following factors using the scale.

1 = Not important at all

2 = Rather not important

3 = Neither important nor unimportant

4 = Rather important

5 = Very important

Factors to be assessed:

- Expectations from customers or clients
- Expectations from investors or private funders
- Expectations from public institutions or government funding bodies
- Orientation towards other organisations that have already received the VSE label
- Concern about being at a disadvantage compared to other organisations without the label
- Recommendations from network organisations (e.g. SENA, Impact Hub Vienna, Social Business Hub Styria)
- New funding programmes or support offers related to the VSE label
- Increasing importance of social entrepreneurship in political strategies

Re-labelling

*From today's perspective, how likely is it that your organisation will apply for a renewal (re-labelling) of the VSE label after the current label expires?**

1 = Very unlikely

2 = Rather unlikely

3 = Neither likely nor unlikely

4 = Rather likely

5 = Very likely

Please briefly explain the reasons for your assessment. → not mandatory

Open text field

Outlook

*In your opinion, which measures or support offers would help to improve the attractiveness and long-term use of the “Verified Social Enterprise” label?**

Open text field

→ End of survey

Thank you for your participation.

If you have any further questions regarding the survey or the study, please feel free to contact me by email: anna.stoffaneller@edu.fh-joanneum.at

Responses to Open-Ended Questions

How important were the following external factors for your organisation’s decision to apply for the VSE label? Please briefly explain the reasons for your assessment.
Answer: 1 = Very unlikely
n/a

How important were the following external factors for your organisation’s decision to apply for the VSE label? Please briefly explain the reasons for your assessment.
Answer: 2 = Rather unlikely
wir hoffen nach wie vor, dass durch das Label irgendwelche Verbesserungen, Erleichterungen passieren - bisher haben wir noch nichts davon mitbekommen. Damit das aber passieren kann, sind wir gerne dabei, auch wenn wir nur 1 Unternehmen sind, dass das Label trägt.

How important were the following external factors for your organisation’s decision to apply for the VSE label? Please briefly explain the reasons for your assessment.
Answer: 3 = Neither likely nor unlikely
wir haben bisher kaum / keine Vorteile aufgrund des VSE-Labels gehabt
Braucht dann ad-hoc eine Einschätzung, wie sinnvoll das VSE Label wirklich war/ist plus andererseits ob unsere Organisation überhaupt in der Lage ist, den Prozess zu durchlaufen bzw. überhaupt noch existiert.

How important were the following external factors for your organisation's decision to apply for the VSE label? Please briefly explain the reasons for your assessment.
Answer: 4 = Rather likely
wir hoffen, dass die Bedeutung des vse Labels steigt.
Impact ist unser zentrales Anliegen, das Label fördert die glaubwürdige Darstellung nach außen.
Ich habe bis jetzt noch wirtschaftlichen Vorteile des VSE gespürt und denke nicht, dass es für meine Kooperationspartner oder bei Anträgen eine wesentliche Rolle spielt. Dennoch bin ich sehr gerne Teil der Community und möchte nach aussen zeigen, dass mit Social Entrepreneurship am Herzen liegt und ich auch dementsprechend agiere. Daher werde ich wahrscheinlich um Rezertifizierung ansuchen.
Es kommt drauf an, wie das Sozialministeriumservice gegenüber der Firma mit VSE Label steht. Der Gründer sieht es kritisch.
Ich habe bis jetzt noch keine klaren Vorteile erlebt, aber VSE entspricht unser Philosophie und ich finde es gut, dass es dieses Label gibt. Damit werden wir wieder einreichen.

How important were the following external factors for your organisation's decision to apply for the VSE label? Please briefly explain the reasons for your assessment.
Answer: 5 = Very likely
Re-labelling ist kein großer Aufwand, motivation für zertifizierung war ohnehin eher mittel-, als kurzfristig bessere Rahmenbedingungen zu schaffen
positive Wirkung nach innen und nach außen. Mahnung und Erinnerung daran, wer wir sind und was wir wollen. Solange VSE Label positiv promotet und aufgenommen wird, werden wir verlängern.
Ich bin bereits rezertifiziert
Wir sind stolzer Träger des Labels und haben uns daher für eine Rezertifizierung entschieden.
VSE is a top down approach and not a bottom up meaning coming from the companies, but that is actually a good signal and we should use the label to gain more visibility and prove the value of the label.
Wir sehen uns strategisch als Impact Unternehmen und lassen Impact Metriken in unsere Produkt Entscheidungen miteinfließen. Für uns ist es intern aber auch in unserem Außenaufreten vor allem Kunden und Förderstellen gegenüber wichtig, einen greifbaren positiven Impact beizutragen.
das ist unser Plan!
.
Kontinuierlicher Prozess
Label ist wichtig, wenn aktuell auch noch zahllos
Weil label wichtig ist
Ich bin bereits rezertifiziert. Spiegelt meine unternehmerischen Werte wieder
Weil wir es schon machen mussten, da wir 2023 das VSE beantragt haben.
Der Glaube daran, kapitalistische Systemen die Stirn bieten zu können. Wir sehen die Notwendigkeit den Mensch vor den Profit zu stellen und gemeinsam zu wirtschaften. Gleichmäßigere Verteilung von Gewinnen für die Menschen, die dazu beitragen anstatt die, die "nur" investieren. Machtverteilung durch Geld muss ein Ende haben. Die Macht von Großkonzernen gegenüber impactgetriebenen Unternehmen ist in unglaublicher Schieflage. Unternehmen, die notwendige Dienstleistungen für Menschen erbringen, müssen sich noch immer rechtfertigen bzw. werden gekürzt. Allerdings ist leider auch der Umgang mit Menschen in vielen Gemeinnützigen Einrichtungen nicht auf Augenhöhe... Wir haben viel zu tun!
Mit der ersten Einreichung und dem damit verbundenen Aufwand (Erstellung Wirkungsbericht!) sind die größten Hürden bereits absolviert. Eine Erneuerung des Labels sollte mit weniger Aufwand verbunden sein, zudem stärkt die dauerhafte Auszeichnung als VSE unseren Status im Ökosystem.

In your opinion, which measures or support offers would help to improve the attractiveness and long-term use of the "Verified Social Enterprise" label?
Statements
Privilegierter Zugang zu Förderungen und insb. Finanzierungsinstrumenten (social banking), gemeinsame positionierung der VSE Label organisationen bei politischen debatten
Weitere Schärfung des Profils eines VSE, Promotion in der Bevölkerung Österreichs aber auch im Ausland; darstellen, dass marktwirtschaftliches Handeln nicht gegen sondern mit sozio-ökologischen Anforderungen geschehen und wertvoll sein kann.
Steuererleichterungen (Umsatzsteuer, Lohnnebenkosten) Mehr Sichtbarkeit für VSE Label trägerInnen Vorteile bei förderungen
1. spezielle Förderprogramme für VSE Label Träger 2. privilegierter Zugang zu öffentlichen Aufträgen
Förderangebote Anerkennung bei Goodstack
Besserer Zugang zu Finanzierungsoptionen (öffentliche Förderungen, Impact Investoren, etc.)
echte Vorteile schaffen z.B. steuerliche Erleichterungen, eigene Förderschienen, Bevorzugung in der öffentlichen Beschaffung, etc...
The value in the eye of stakeholders must be clear What does this label add apart from immaterial gains, eg a tax reduction, how does this give me a competitive advantage, why do we have labeled social enterprises and what does that mean to have non-verified social enterprises? Does this provide a short cut for social procurement? What are the added benefits?
steuerrechtliche Konsequenzen, auf das VSELabel ausgerichtete Förderungen, Information im öffentlichen Bereich um das Label, damit es gesehen und aktiv in Entscheidungen miteinbezogen wird
Maßnahmen die sich auf eine bessere Vermarktbarkeit unseres Angebots auswirken, bzw. auf unsere Finanz- und Kostenstruktur, zB über gewissen Lohn- und oder Steuervorteile oder spezielle Förderungen.
handfeste Vorteile, die mit dem Status des VSE verbunden sind, z.B. stärkere Förderungen, günstigere Kredite, steuerliche Absetzbarkeit von Zuwendungen an VSE
Mehrwert für VSE Unternehmen von Seiten Fördergeber / Politik darstellen, aktive Unterstützung und Positionierung des Labels nach außen (wie bekannt ist das Label außerhalb der "Bubble"?)
Auf allen Ebenen, Bund, Länder, Kommunen, eine klare Bewerbung des VSE und welche Unternehmen in welchen Bereichen hier Träger*innen sind. Nur wenn es in diesem Bereich relevant ist und tatsächlich zur Bevorzugung/Aufträgen/Förderungen kommt, hat es wirklich einen Wert.
Pressearbeit über das VSE-Label durch SENA, usw.
Steuerliche Anreize
Ich denke, die Richtung stimmt und es wird im letzten Jahr immer mehr gemacht. Ich warte leider nach wie vor auf ein zweisprachiges, offizielles Nachweisdokument, welches nicht nur das Label bescheinigt, sondern auch beschreibt, was dahinter steht. Das würde sehr helfen, wenn man ein derartiges Dokument bei Anträgen, Ausschreibungen etc. mitsenden kann.
Gezielte Förderungen Anerkennung / Gleichstellung mit gemeinnützigen Unternehmen
Stärkere öffentliche Sichtbarkeit und Kommunikation des Labels gegenüber Unternehmen, Bildungseinrichtungen und der breiten Öffentlichkeit Konkrete Vorteile für zertifizierte Organisationen, z. B. bevorzugte Berücksichtigung bei Förderungen, öffentlichen Ausschreibungen oder Kooperationsprogrammen Aufbau einer aktiven VSE-Community mit regelmäßigem Austausch, Vernetzungsformaten und Best-Practice-Sharing zwischen Social Enterprises Gemeinsame Kommunikations- und Marketingmaßnahmen, damit das Label stärker als Qualitätsmerkmal wahrgenommen wird Praxisnahe Unterstützungsangebote, etwa Workshops, Weiterbildungen oder Toolkits zu Wirkungsmessung, Finanzierung und nachhaltigem Wachstum Mehr Sichtbarkeit von Impact und Erfolgsbeispielen, um den konkreten gesellschaftlichen Mehrwert von Verified Social Enterprises greifbarer zu machen
Dass Unternehmen mit VSE genauso unter Gemeinnützigkeit fallen. Viele Förderungen akzeptieren nur gemeinnützige Unternehmen, oder Vereine, aber kein Einzelunternehmen mit VSE.
Steuererleichterungen (Umsatz, Lohnsteuer u. Lohnnebenkosten) vereinfachter Zugang zu Fördermitteln mehr Sichtbarkeit und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, damit die Bedeutung der Social Entrepreneurs für unsere Gesellschaft deutlich wird
-
größere Anerkennung und Sichtbarmachen durch die Politik, Steuerunterschiede zu gewinnorientierten Unternehmen, Vorteile bei Förderungen, etc. Aktuell ist es ein Nice To Have und hat noch keine wirklichen Vorteile für die Labelträger. Es kennen wenige das Label. Das sollten wir gemeinsam ändern! :-)
Wichtiger erster Schritt: Klare Dokumentation - aktuell ist mir noch kein Dokument bekannt (zumindest habe ich noch keines erhalten), dass mir das VSE Label bescheinigt und gleichzeitig offiziell und zweisprachig erläutert, was das bedeutet. Ich musste das Label bei internationalen Anträgen bereits wieder aus meinen Unterlagen entfernen, da ich nicht ausreichend und offiziell bestätigt darlegen konnte, was es ist und wer es ausstellt.
Stärkere Anreizfaktoren (Berücksichtigung bei Ausschreibungen, Förderungsvergaben, öffentliche Sichtbarkeit, Vorteile bei Steuern oder Lohnnebenkosten oder ähnliche Effekte als Belohnung für gesellschaftlich/ökologisch wertvolles Unternehmertum)

11 Appendix C: Disclosure of (AI-)Tools

Appendix C includes an overview of the (AI-)tools used, the Declaration of Honour and the Declaration of Independent Research and Academic Integrity, providing transparency regarding the use of AI-tools and compliance with academic integrity requirements.

Overview of (AI-)Tools Used

Overview Tools Chapter "Introduction"

AI Tool	Purpose of Use	Prompts used
DeepL Write	Refining style & grammar check	/
Google Translate	Translation English/German	/
Zotero	APA citation	/
ChatGPT	Structuring notes for academic use	<i>please take my notes regarding "xy" and structure them in an academic way, do not add content</i>

Source: Own illustration.

Overview Tools Chapter "Literature Review"

AI Tool	Purpose of Use	Prompts used
DeepL Write	Refining style & grammar check	/
Google Translate	Translation English/German	/
Zotero	APA citation	/
ChatGPT	Providing simple explanations of complex contents like institutional theory to understand how it can be used - Structuring notes for academic use - Providing an overview of e.g. report findings to understand relevance for the thesis	<i>explain this in short and simple words</i>

Source: Own illustration.

Overview Tools Chapter "Empirical Study"

AI Tool	Purpose of Use	Prompts used
DeepL Write	Refining style & grammar check	/
Google Translate	Translation English/German	/
Zotero	APA citation	/
ChatGPT	Translation of anonym interview transcripts, survey questions and interview guideline - Structuring methodological approach - Rephrasing coding guidelines	<i>please translate my German transcript from my master's thesis interviews using British English, translate what is given, refine the text so that the sentences make sense but do not add or remove content from the interview</i> - <i>please translate this German survey/interview guide using British English, do not change the content</i>
QCAMap	Coding support for Mayring analysis	/
MacWhisper	Local transcription of audios	/

Source: Own illustration.

Overview Tools Chapter "Results"

AI Tool	Purpose of Use	Prompts used
DeepL Write	Refining style & grammar check	/
ChatGPT	Summarising findings of coded interview content in a neutral way without interpretation - Summarising findings of online survey in a neutral way without interpretation	<i>please analyse this subcategory "xy" of the main category "xy" in a way that you give an overview of the mentioned content, outline similarities and differences and provide strong quotes as an example - please do not add any content and put in () which of the experts (E1-E8) have mentioned this</i> - <i>please describe the findings presented in attached survey figure, write in formal British English using a neutral, descriptive style, report the percentages and absolute frequencies without interpreting or explaining the results, do not add information that is not shown in the figure</i>
QCAMap	Coding support for Mayring analysis	/

Source: Own illustration.

Overview Tools Chapter "Discussion"

AI Tool	Purpose of Use	Prompts used
DeepL Write	Refining style & grammar check	/
Google Translate	Translation English/German	/
Zotero	APA citation	/
ChatGPT	Summarising main findings from analysis - Structuring notes for academic use	<i>shorten these findings to provide an overview, do not add content and no interpretation</i>

Source: Own illustration.

Overview Tools Chapter "Conclusion"

AI Tool	Purpose of Use	Prompts used
DeepL Write	Refining style & grammar check	/

Source: Own illustration.

Overview Tools Chapter "Limitations"

AI Tool	Purpose of Use	Prompts used
DeepL Write	Refining style & grammar check	/
ChatGPT	Structuring notes for academic use	<i>please take my notes regarding "xy" and structure them in an academic way, do not add content</i>

Source: Own illustration.

Declaration of Honour

I hereby declare under oath

- that I have independently prepared this master's thesis and have performed all associated tasks myself, using no other sources or aids than those indicated
- that in preparing the thesis I have adhered to the guidelines of FH JOANNEUM for ensuring good scientific practice and for avoiding misconduct during the preparation of this work
- that I have properly cited all formulations and concepts taken over from printed or unprinted works as well as from the internet in wording or in the essential content in accordance with the rules of Good Scientific Practice (guideline GSP) and have marked them by precise references
- that I have declared in the method presentation, the appendix and in the Declaration of Independent Research and Academic Integrity (see below) all aids used (artificial intelligence assistance systems such as chatbots [e.g., ChatGPT], translation applications [e.g., DeepL], paraphrasing applications [e.g., Quill bot], image generator applications [e.g., Dall-E], or programming applications [e.g., Github Copilot], and indicated their usage at the corresponding text passages.
- that this original thesis, in its current form, has not been submitted to any other academic institution for the purpose of obtaining an academic degree.

I have been informed that my work may be checked for plagiarism and for third-party authorship of human (ghostwriting) or technical origin (artificial intelligence assistance systems).

I am aware that a false statement may result in legal consequences such as a negative assessment of my work, the subsequent revocation of any obtained degree, and legal prosecution.

Declaration of Independent Research and Academic Integrity

Research and Data Analysis	Yes	No	Not relevant
All data analysed or generated using AI tools such as <i>[ChatGPT]</i> have been presented and transparently described in the methodology section of this thesis.	x		
All results have been personally verified by me to ensure their validity and reliability.	x		
Interviews and Surveys	Yes	No	Not relevant
I confirm that the use of AI in conducting surveys and interviews was methodologically sound and did not cause any distortions or manipulations of the results. The AI tools used are listed in detail in the appendix.	x		
All participants were informed in advance about the use of AI technology and provided their explicit consent.	x		
Use of Chatbots for Surveys	Yes	No	Not relevant
All participants of AI-supported surveys and interviews were informed in advance about the use of AI technology and provided their explicit consent.	x		
I confirm that when using chatbots <i>[ChatGPT]</i> for data collection, all ethical guidelines were followed, and participants were fully informed.	x		
Hypothesis Generation	Yes	No	Not relevant
I confirm that the hypotheses of this thesis were generated with the support of an AI technology. However, I take full responsibility for selecting, adapting, and further scientifically examining these hypotheses.			x
AI algorithms were used in this thesis to generate research hypotheses. I have critically reviewed all generated hypotheses, modified them where necessary, and independently evaluated their scientific relevance.			x
Literature Research	Yes	No	Not relevant
The identification of relevant literature was partially supported by AI. I confirm that I independently analysed all selected sources and assessed their relevance for this thesis.			x
An AI tool or many AI tools was/were used for automated literature research. I declare that I understand the tool's methodology and that I independently reviewed the resulting literature suggestions and appropriately integrated them into the scientific context of this work.			x

Automatic Code Generation	Yes	No	Not relevant
I used AI tools to generate code examples. These examples were reviewed, adapted, and integrated into the scientific context of the thesis by me.			x
I confirm that all code generated with the help of AI tools has been clearly identified as such and served solely as a foundation for my own programming contributions.			x
Text and Language Processing	Yes	No	Not relevant
<u>Automated Text Improvement</u>			
I declare that the use of AI-assisted correction tools [<i>DeepL Write</i> , <i>ChatGPT</i>] was limited to grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The substantive core of the thesis remains unaffected.	x		
AI-assisted correction tools [<i>DeepL Write</i> , <i>ChatGPT</i>] were used only in the early stages of writing to improve stylistic flow, not to alter the content. All changes made by AI tools were personally reviewed and validated by me to ensure the independence of the scientific content. I confirm that the use of AI-supported correction tools did not result in any plagiarism or improper academic practices.	x		
<u>Auto-Generated Summaries</u>			
Any automatically generated summaries or sections created by AI tools [<i>ChatGPT</i>] are explicitly marked as such in this thesis.	x		
Automated summaries of texts were created in this thesis using AI tools [<i>ChatGPT</i>]. I independently assessed the relevance and accuracy of all automatically generated summaries.	x		
Automated Translations	Yes	No	Not relevant
I hereby declare that all texts integrated into this thesis with the help of AI translation tools [<i>ChatGPT</i> , <i>Google Translate</i>] were carefully reviewed and manually corrected where necessary. These translations are appropriately marked in the text to ensure transparency. I confirm that the AI translation tools used served only as auxiliary tools and that I retain full responsibility for the correctness and appropriateness of the translations. I further ensured that these translations comply with the academic and ethical standards of this thesis.	x		
I declare that all translations performed using AI tools [<i>ChatGPT</i> , <i>Google Translate</i>] have been appropriately marked and reviewed.	x		
Text Analysis	Yes	No	Not relevant
I declare that all text analyses conducted with the support of AI tool [<i>ChatGPT</i>] are fully described and identified in the methodology section. I independently selected the AI tools, defined their parameters, and interpreted the results. I confirm that these analyses and their results meet scientific standards and are ethically sound. Furthermore, I documented all steps of the analysis to ensure traceability and verifiability.	x		
All text analysis performed by AI tools [<i>ChatGPT</i>] are appropriately identified and described in the methodology.	x		

Media Generation and Evaluation	Yes	No	Not relevant
<u><i>Image Processing</i></u>			
Some of the graphics used in this thesis were created, optimised, or edited using AI tools. The selection and application of these tools as well as the final editing were performed by me.			x
I declare that all images, graphics, and diagrams altered or generated by AI are appropriately marked in this thesis			
<u><i>Audio/Video Transcription</i></u>			
Audio/video interviews were transcribed using AI-supported software [MacWhisper]. I manually corrected and validated the transcriptions.	x		
<u><i>Image and Video Analysis</i></u>			
This thesis contains image or video material analysed using AI. I independently interpreted the AI results and integrated them into my research context.			x
List of AI Tools Used & Comments ChatGPT DeepL Write Google Translate MacWhisper → further details listed in detailed tables above			