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Digital platform for social innovation: Insights from volunteering

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Academics, policymakers and society at large are calling for solutions to societal problems. Digital platforms are a promising means to this end, as they can drive social innovation at a scale and pace previously unimaginable. To date, little attention has been paid to how technologies facilitate social change and lead actors to solve social problems over time. This study explores how digital platforms foster the development of successful social innovation practices to improve the process of social change and well-being. It adopts a qualitative, in-depth case study approach and focuses on RomAltruista, a so-called social mission platform that promotes flexible volunteering. The study contributes to the literature by providing a framework for understanding the opportunities and role of platforms as cornerstones of successful social innovation practices.

KEYWORDS
digital platform, social inclusion, Social innovation, volunteering

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent years have been marked by new global social and cultural trends that call for a new humanism in the development paradigm, advocating for the social inclusion of every person at all levels of society (d'Orville, 2016) and the responsible use of resources.

Such a shift inevitably entails a strategic revision of the design of services and product offerings, for institutions and organizations as well as for companies.

Social and environmental issues are playing an increasingly important role in both institutional policy and management practice, in part because of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals enshrined in the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015).

At the same time, models of the sharing economy are emerging (Sundararajan, 2016), aiming at collaborative consumption (Lessig, 2008) and redistribution of tangible and intangible goods (Kathan et al., 2016). They are supported by information technology (Heinrichs, 2013) and consist of peer-to-peer activities in which

access to goods and services is coordinated through community-based online services (Hamari et al., 2016).

Moreover, the pandemic that has widened the social and economic gap to the detriment of the most vulnerable has highlighted the importance of socio-cultural issues and the need for change processes to improve collective well-being in the last 2 years.

In such a climate of greater sensitivity and awareness of issues of a cultural and social nature, social innovation has gained momentum on the agenda of both policymakers (Aksoy et al., 2019) and scholars (Ostrom et al., 2015; van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). By social innovation, we mean the development of novel, scalable and sustainable solutions to meet social needs and solve systemic societal problems (Aksoy et al., 2019; Battistella et al., 2021; de Wit et al., 2019; Mulgan et al., 2007; van Wijk et al., 2019). This increasing relevance is partly due to the growing influence of digital platforms on many human activities (Kolk & Ciulli, 2020), from entertainment to commercial and crowdsourcing activities. Indeed, the development and use of technology in all activities based on social interaction has strongly influenced social innovation (Certomà & Corsini, 2021).

In particular, in the broader context of digital platforms, social innovation has emerged as a new practice to solve social needs at a scale and speed unimaginable before the advent of network technologies (Kohler & Chesbrough, 2019; Kolk & Ciulli, 2020; Logue & Grimes, 2019; Mulgan et al., 2007; Presenza et al., 2020). Indeed, digital platforms influence the attitudes and behaviours of community members by changing the way they view and manage social problems (Kolk & Ciulli, 2020). This phenomenon has become more evident as the widespread evolution from single- and two-sided to multisided platforms (Edvardsson & Trovoll, 2020; Gawer, 2014; Lusch & Nambisan, 2015; Trabucchi & Buganza, 2020) connects and mobilizes diverse social actors to drive scalable and sustainable transformative change (Jha et al., 2016).

Although the platform-centric approach to solving social problems is gaining momentum (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012; Logue & Grimes, 2019; Misuraca & Pasi, 2019), little attention has been paid to how technologies facilitate social change (Singh & Majumdar, 2015) and engage actors (citizens, third sector organizations, government agencies and institutions, etc.) in solving social problems over time. As far as the author is aware, there are few studies looking at social practice enhanced by platforms and functioning mechanisms to enable social innovation.

Empirical evidence and further research are needed to examine how digital platforms open up new ways to meet social needs (Lee et al., 2019). Therefore, we explore how digital platforms trigger social innovation and foster the development of successful practices (Lettice & Parekh, 2010; Mulgan, 2006), which we characterize as effective and scalable solutions that improve the social change process and social well-being (Aksoy et al., 2019; McGowan & Westley, 2015; Mulgan et al., 2007; van Wijk et al., 2019).

This study focuses on RomAltruista (RA), a digital platform that promotes volunteerism and connects citizens, third sector organizations, nonprofits and businesses to solve everyday social problems of people in need in Rome. It is an appropriate example to illustrate and explain how digital platforms enable social innovation practices continuously and at scale, making them relevant to social groups.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on social innovation. It advances knowledge about the potential of digital platforms to foster new, effective, scalable and impactful social innovation practices. It considers digital platforms for social purpose and their offline extensions as a new form of social interaction designed to enable actors to engage together in purposeful ways to achieve positive, systemic social change. We propose a framework that integrates the discourse on social innovation and platforms by highlighting how the fundamental functions of platforms enable the core elements of social innovation and how the architecture of the platform reinforces and empowers these elements by allowing dimensions of social innovation to emerge in terms of new forms of innovation and social change.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: The second section reviews the literature on social innovation and digital platforms. The third section describes the research setting, methodological approach, data collection and analysis. The fourth section illustrates the main findings of the study, and the fifth section discusses the results. Finally, the sixth section presents the main theoretical and societal implications, and the seventh section presents the limitations of the study and further research.

2 | LITERATURE BACKGROUND

2.1 | Social innovation

The concept of social innovation emerged in 2005 (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014), but the application of social innovation to solve social needs and create social value cut across many sectors before it was conceptualized (Aksoy et al., 2019; Mulgan et al., 2007). The literature on social innovation spans various research directions and perspectives. Choi and Majumdar (2015) identified seven perspectives on social innovation, including sociological, creativity research, entrepreneurship, welfare economics, practice-led, community psychology and territorial development perspectives. Similarly, van der Have and Rubalcaba (2016) grouped the literature on social innovation around four research areas: community psychology, creativity research, social and societal challenges around sustainability transitions and local development.

These perspectives emphasize both specific and overlapping aspects of social innovation. For example, the sociological perspective describes social innovation as social change itself, which very often happens organically and leads to new social structures and changes in the social system. The sociological perspective focuses more on social practices and how they are combined (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016); it refers more to social innovation as an outcome and pays less attention to the process driving such social change. Departing from this perspective, Cajaiba-Santana (2014) conceptualized social innovation as an engine of social change that cannot rely on established practices. The author proposed a broad and integrated framework that goes beyond the outcome–process dichotomy to better understand the social innovation process in terms of changes in attitudes, behaviours or perceptions (Neumeier, 2012) that are ultimately institutionalized in new social practices (e.g., structure of social innovation) (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Because social innovation occurs at the level of interaction and practices, it is intangible (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Choi & Majumdar, 2015). This aspect contrasts with technological innovation and is particularly relevant to studies of innovation and creativity that focus specifically on strategies and tactics intentionally designed to pursue social innovation.

According to van der Have and Rubalcaba (2016), such studies aim to better understand the emergence and implementation of social innovations. Howaldt and Schwarz (2011) posited that social innovation occurs only when a social idea or invention is implemented (through planned and coordinated action), accepted and incorporated into a social system—that is, when it contributes to human and social life. Similarly, Mumford (2002) noted a few years earlier that social innovation ranges from new ideas to the creation of new processes and procedures affecting interactions between people within a social system. It leads to the development of collaborative work, new

business practices and new social practices. Collaboration is both the source and the outcome of social innovation. In this context, Cajaiba-Santana (2014) defined collaboration 'as a matter of mobilizing resources and other agents' (p. 49) and explained that social innovation results from collective, intentional and purposeful actions that reconstruct how social goals are achieved.

Similar to the latter research streams, studies from the perspectives of social entrepreneurship, territorial development, community psychology and practice focus on the processes and mechanisms that are developed and implemented to create positive social change and social value. For example, the entrepreneurship perspective reflects on the role and mission of social entrepreneurs who act as agents of social change by performing new combinations of people's skills, enhancing human capabilities to create and increase collective well-being (Ziegler, 2010). Community psychology studies have mainly discussed models used to promote innovative social and behavioural change in social systems. Territorial development views social innovation as empowering change in the relationships between local communities and their governing bodies aimed at meeting human needs (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). The practice-led perspective focuses more on the practical applications of social innovations that can be replicated through models, methods and programmes (Mulgan, 2006). To be successful, social innovations must scale, be durable and have broad impact (McGowan & Westley, 2015).

From this perspective, social innovation refers to the creation and implementation of novel, scalable and sustainable ideas and solutions to solve systemic societal problems (Aksoy et al., 2019; Mulgan et al., 2007; van Wijk et al., 2019).

Despite the multitude of perspectives that scholars and practitioners have provided regarding overviews of social innovation, they seem to converge on the following five core elements: novelty, implementation, effectiveness, meeting of social needs and enhancing society's capacity to act. These core elements were summarized by Caulier-Grice et al. (2012, p. 18), who stated the following:

> Social innovations are new solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes, etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources. In other words, social innovations are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act.

Novelty means that social innovation is new to the field, sector, user, region or market or is applied in a new way (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012). Thus, the practice of social innovation is new not only in terms of the product or service offered but also in terms of how it is implemented (Austin et al., 2006). Very often, it involves unconventional approaches that require a 'doing-more-with-less' approach to engage the entire community in problem-solving activities and overcome resource constraints (Gebauer & Reynoso, 2013; Reynoso et al., 2015). The second core element states that social innovation is not just about having a new idea, but putting it into practice, social innovation must be effectively implemented to generate and leverage social benefits. This requires both stakeholder acceptance and cooperation (Rao-Nicholson et al., 2017; Steinfield & Holt, 2019; Ziegler, 2010) for the further institutionalization of the new beliefs and ways of acting that address solidarity and social change (Mair & Marti, 2006). The third core element states that social innovation is more effective and appropriate than other alternative solutions. To this end, it should coordinate a large-scale citizen response to reach a large number of people and satisfy many social needs (i.e., the effectiveness of the delivery process). In this context, we recall the fourth core element, which states that social innovations must be explicitly designed to satisfy a social need. Finally, the fifth core element refers to the educational role of social innovations. Caulier-Grice et al. (2012) assumed that social innovations improve society's capacity to act, which means that they 'empower beneficiaries by creating new roles, relationships, assets, and capabilities, or by making better use of assets and resources' (p. 21). This is when active citizens, service providers, social entrepreneurs and third sector organizations integrate and use resources to intentionally meet a social need (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2013) or solve a social problem (Rubalcaba, 2016; van Wijk et al., 2019).

Despite awareness of the conditions that favour the replicability and proliferation of social innovation, the mechanisms that enable its promotion, adaptation and scale-up are not well-investigated and understood; thus, many projects fail (Cui et al., 2017; Mulgan, 2006). To this end, studies that understand how social innovation emerges and becomes recurrent or even continuous are needed (Aksoy et al., 2019). The above definition of social innovation and its associated core elements (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012) correspond to different foci and bring together both research and practice-oriented perspectives on social innovation. They therefore provide a useful starting point to better understand what successful social innovation practices are and how they emerge.

In line with the purpose of this study, we will consider the contribution of networked technologies and platforms to the development and implementation of new, effective and valuable social innovation practices.

2.2 | Digital platform as a pattern for social purposes

Platform research has expanded from the information and communication technology literature, which viewed digital platforms mainly as software-based platforms (Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Evans & Schmalensee, 2007; Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2013), to the management (Gawer, 2014; Hein et al., 2020; McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2017) and marketing literature (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015). Recently, specific definitions of service platforms emerged in the service research field (de Reuver et al., 2013; Edvardsson & Trovoll, 2020; Lusch & Nambisan, 2015). In these studies, platforms are closely related to the ecosystem perspective and have proven to be a fruitful way to connect multiple actors that are too diverse and

poorly organized to collaborate directly (Edvardsson & Trovoll, 2020; Jacobides et al., 2018; Lusch & Nambisan, 2015). Specifically, Lusch and Nambisan (2015) applied the Service Dominat Logic perspective to the platform context, defining 'a service platform as a modular structure that consists of tangible and intangible components (resources) and facilitates the interaction of actors and resources (or resource bundles)' (p. 166). According to the authors, platforms play both an enabling role, by helping actors mix and match resources, and a triggering role, by acting themselves and/or with other actors to initiate new opportunities for resource integration and service exchange. To this end, the platform operator provides the basic infrastructure and establishes the rules, general conditions and coordination mechanisms that enable the exchange and integration of resources (products, services, information, etc.) in large-scale collaborations (Edvardsson & Trovoll, 2020; Smedlund et al., 2018).

In order to be effective and create value for diverse interdependent groups of participants (Drewel et al., 2021), digital platforms need to combine core services and interfaces that enable a high volume of valuable interactions between two or more sides, thus being able to scale quickly and foster positive network effects (Parker et al., 2016). Following previous studies (Choudary, 2015; Cusumano et al., 2019;Drewel et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2016), we will briefly explain how platforms can achieve this. Much of the ability to succeed lies in the architecture of the platform as it plays a key role in engagement (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020) and influences how participating actors interact, integrate resources (Kowalkowski et al., 2012) and create value (Spagnoletti et al., 2015). In a few words, it enables social interactions—information sharing, collaboration and/or collective action—within an online community (Spagnoletti et al., 2015). To achieve this, a platform's architecture must perform three basic functions: match, facilitate and pull (Choudary, 2015; Cusumano et al., 2019; Drewel et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2016).

Match concerns the ability to connect users between sides based on their characteristics and needs. Accurate algorithms and well-designed filters are appropriate matching mechanisms that ensure the effective exchange of relevant and valuable information between platform users (Drewel et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2016). Facilitate refers to the ability to enable value-added interactions between sides (Drewel et al., 2021; Spagnoletti et al., 2015). A user-friendly interface, easy-to-use tools for collaboration and sharing and clear rules for engagement are all appropriate mechanisms to improve the user experience and better leverage mutually rewarding collaboration on the platform. Pull refers to the ability to quickly and easily expand, scale and strengthen the value that network effects provide (Parker et al., 2016).

As the authors explained, the opportunity for users to quickly and easily join a platform and participate in its activities (i.e., frictionless entry) is a key factor in supporting collective action and thus attracting and retaining users on the platform. Encouraging self-reinforcing activities (e.g., through a feedback loop), promoting different activities and user word-of-mouth are also effective strategies to retain existing users and attract new ones. In order to scale a network, it is also important that both sides of the market grow proportionally. In the literature on platforms, the above functions and mechanisms were mainly discussed in relation to business platforms and thus to the interaction and exchange between producers and customers.

In this study, we aim to explain how the functions of match, facilitate and pull can be successfully exploited to make the practices of social innovation relevant to social groups and become effective, institutionalized and recurrent (e.g., continuous and on a larger scale). This issue is by no means new. Recent studies and examples have highlighted the potential of digital platforms to enhance cross-sector collaboration for social innovation purposes, directly address social and/or environmental problems and ensure economic value creation and capture (Kohler & Chesbrough, 2019; Kolk & Ciulli, 2020; Logue & Grimes, 2019; Presenza et al., 2020). For example, Logue and Grimes (2019) referred to digital platforms as social mission platforms (e.g., civic crowdfunding platforms) because they are promising means that enable the voluntary engagement of the entire community to solve social problems. Digital platforms offer the opportunity to directly involve citizens in the design and management of social services by making them more proactive and closer to the point of need (Caridà et al., 2019; Reynoso et al., 2015). Other scholars referred to digital platforms as temporary solutions (e.g., digital volunteer networks) to address disasters, crises (Park & Johnston, 2018, 2019) and humanitarian problems (McLennan et al., 2016; Starbird, 2011). Despite the general assumption that digital platforms are a useful tool to increase the efficiency and accessibility of social innovation (Logue & Grimes, 2019; Misuraca & Pasi, 2019), there is a surprising lack of research exploring exactly what a platform does and how it works in order to engage active citizens, service providers, social entrepreneurs and third-sector organizations to integrate and use resources (Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2013), intentionally meet a social need and solve a social problem (Rubalcaba, 2016; van Wijk et al., 2019). The truly new and interesting idea is how platforms, through their basic functions, become a cornerstone of a successful social innovation practice.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Research approach and process

This study explores how digital platforms foster the development of effective and scalable social innovation practices that improve social change processes and social well-being. It is an inductive research using a qualitative, in-depth case study approach (Stake, 2011). The choice of the case study method is consistent with both the novelty of the topic (Yin, 2009)—there is a dearth of empirical studies on the role of digital platforms in fostering social innovation practices and actor engagement, particularly in the field of volunteering—and the research question, which is exploratory in nature and aims to understand the dynamics of a process in its own setting (Eisenhardt, 1989). Because the phenomenon under study occurs in a complex and multi-actors social context, the case study method seems particularly appropriate. Indeed, as some scholars confirm, it is useful to collect in-depth

data 'using multiple sources of evidence and from multiple actors' (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020) according to a holistic approach (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). The paper focused on what is known as a social mission platform (Logue & Grimes, 2019) developed by RA. Social mission platforms 'are unique in that they provide technological architectures and governance standards that guide the loosely coupled interactions of network users towards the remediation of social problems and the creation of shared value' (Logue & Grimes, 2019, p. 2). RA is our case study and was intentionally chosen for three main reasons. First, it is an emblematic and well-established social mission platform that has been operating successfully since 2011. Second, it was chosen for its revelatory potential, as the process under study—how digital platforms enable the development of social innovation and how they make social innovation practices continuous, large-scale and thus relevant to social groups—is 'transparently observable' (Eisenhardt, 1989). Third, RA staff strongly supported our data collection by providing access to confidential documents and archives and keeping us in touch with various types of key informants. Thus, this is an extreme example with unusual explanatory power to which we had the opportunity for unusual research access (Yin, 1994).

3.2 | The case

RA is an Italian non-profit organization that, since 2011, has connected volunteers with non-profit organizations and small volunteer groups to support people in need in Rome. Figure 1 shows the process of engaging volunteers and developing activity on the RA platform.

The architecture of the platform works through four main activities:

1. Register on the RA website.
2. Search for a project among those present on the site. All the necessary information related to each activity (time, place, number of available volunteer slots, description) is provided.
3. Sign up and wait for the confirmation email.
4. Start your project.

3.3 | Data collection and analysis

The in-depth case study relies on the combination of multiple data sources (Yin, 2009), as the typology of the data allows for the identification and definition of the phenomenon (Gehman et al., 2018).

Data collection was developed in two research steps.

First, we collected secondary data (from August 2018 to March 2021) using reports, newspaper articles, newsletters and Facebook Live events that occurred between January and March 2021. The live events were organized by RA to explain what RA is and how it works, thus generating interest in flexible volunteering among potential volunteers and volunteer associations. These data offered comprehensive and complementary information and insights into the methods used by RA to adapt the logic and working mechanisms of digital platforms—normally used for for-profit purposes—to non-profit issues (e.g., related to social innovation and volunteering), as well as the mechanisms of engagement and coordination applied to ensure the effective and continuous development of social activities listed on the platform. They allowed us to clearly frame the context of the analysis and identify the actors and dynamics of the platform.

Second, from September to mid-October 2021, we collected primary data through interviews with different types of key informants to whom RA staff gave us access—RA board members, volunteer associations and volunteers (Table 1). In total, we conducted 18 interviews: seven with board members of RA, three with partners of volunteer associations of RA and eight with volunteers who participated as individuals in the activities of the platform. All interviews were conducted in Italian via video calls to Google Meet, tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then translated into English with the help of an independent native speaker. Each of these in-depth interviews lasted approximately 30 min to 1 h (Table 1).

Choosing multiple methods to gather information allowed for data triangulation to determine the reliability and validity of the research construct (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009).

We chose to interview the entire board of RA to understand the philosophy behind the RA project, as well as volunteers and partner associations to gain insights into the key motivations and mechanisms that drive engagement on social mission platforms, as well as the nature of the value and benefits they perceive.

Both volunteers and partner associations were self-selected—RA encouraged participation in the project by posting a call for interviews on the platform (see Figure 2).

All interviews were conducted in the style of a 'problem-centered interview' (Kuehn & Witzel, 2000) (i.e., a mix of open-ended questions that allowed respondents to develop their own subjective views on forms of social innovation and social value creation, as well as more specific questions about the mechanisms of engagement). To this end, we used a semi-structured guide with open-ended questions. The
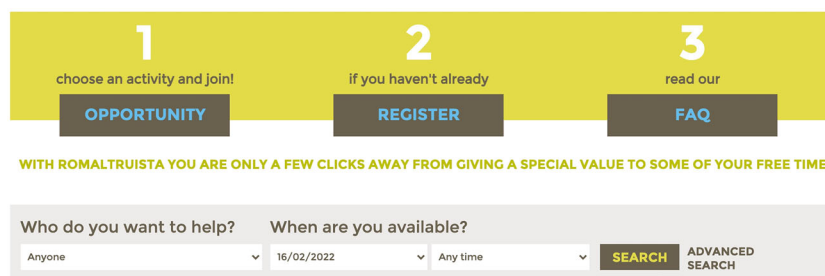

FIGURE 1 RomAltruista platform. *Source*: https://www.romaltruista.it/ [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 1 Primary data collection

Respondents	Date (2021)	Duration (min)
Volunteers		
E.M.	09/17	40
G.C.	09/16	40
G.L.	09/18	46
M.C.C.	09/20	45
M.L.P.	09/17	50
O.C.	09/16	53
P.F.R.	09/17	60
Non-profit organization leaders		
A.G.V.O. (R.P.)	09/17	30
P.S.M. (R.P.)	09/17	40
A.L.D. (P.F.)	09/14	60
Board members		
B.H.	09/14	50
C.D.P.	09/15	60
D.R.	09/14	65
D.R.	10/09	30
D.R.	10/07	30
L.P.	09/15	55
M.C.	10/04	45
M.M.	09/15	60

Note: The names of the interviewees and organizations are anonymized in this article for privacy.
Source: Our elaboration.

questionnaire was based on the theoretical framework presented in Section 2.1 (Core Elements of Social Innovation).

As mentioned above, the interviews focused on different topics depending on the role of the interviewee: board member, association leader, volunteer. Therefore, they offered a holistic perspective (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020) on the mechanisms and development paths that drive a platform with a social mission such as RA.

3.4 | Data analysis

The data were analysed using the conceptual categories identified in the theoretical framework by categorizing the key themes of the semi-structured questionnaire into the core elements of the framework (order categories) (Table 2).

We then conducted an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of the platform (mechanisms of engagement) and the motivation and activities of the actors. In this phase, the data were analysed through a coding process according to the categories of the theoretical framework (see Table 2), as these categories define the occurrence of social innovation.

Novelty can refer to the originality of the proposed solution and to its implementation in a new context or its application by a new group of users.

We believe that in order to define novelty, we need to identify the main differences between traditional volunteering activities and those of RA, both in the perception of the respondents and in the facts, and also compare them with the activities of other volunteering providers.

Social innovation is not just about having a new idea—it also needs to be implemented. Therefore, the perception and evaluation of the governance mechanism along with the awareness of the respondents are useful to distinguish between invention (development of ideas) and innovation (implementation and application of ideas) (actual implementation).

Social innovation needs to be more effective, efficient and sustainable than existing practice. This could include the application of the proposed solution to many social needs, the ability to reach large numbers of people and the coordination of a large-scale citizen response. We focused on outcomes related to motivation, volunteer satisfaction and platform performance compared to traditional forms of volunteering.

In terms of meeting social needs, we focused on the architecture and functionality of the platform to understand the extent to which it meets social needs (access, shareability, easiness) as well as the performance of the platform (number of projects, volunteers, participating nonprofits and hours donated).

To explore potential social change in terms of improving community agency (capacity to act) in the process of social innovation, we focused on actors' experiences with volunteering and, more importantly, the outcome in terms of resource sharing and integration. Specifically, we wanted to analyse whether participation in RA activities improved participating actors' knowledge, relationships, skills and satisfaction (enabling actors to act collectively and purposefully to achieve positive, systemic social change).

4 | FINDINGS

Our results deepen what successful social innovation practice looks like. To this end, they are organized by the core elements of social innovation mentioned in the literature background: novelty, actual implementation, effectiveness, meeting of social needs and enhancing society's capacity to act. In analysing these aspects, the working scheme of flexible volunteering and the architecture of the RA platform are considered.

4.1 | Novelty

Flexible volunteering is a new and alternative solution to traditional and stable volunteering. It redesigned the logic and way of volunteering in Rome, allowing the opportunity for people who want to volunteer but do not have a great deal of time or specialized training or who want to try out an experience at least a few times before deciding to make a permanent commitment. RA and flexible volunteering represent a new solution for the territory both in terms

FIGURE 2 Selection of interviewees. *Source*: https://www.romaltruista.it/ [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of the content of the social innovation and the process (e.g., what and how the activities are carried out).

> RA was founded 10 years ago (October 17, 2011) for people like me who want to support people in need but are too busy to do so in a stable way. Ten years ago, and to some extent still today, volunteering was challenging and time-consuming; you had to go through long training courses and ensure a stable commitment to volunteer associations. This model did not fit my interests and availability, so in 2010, after meeting the founder of MilanoAltruista, I decided to adopt the flexible volunteering model in Rome. The idea was to offer activities that are easy for everyone to do, with a certain degree of flexibility; when you want and when you can (M.C. RA Founder).

As we have briefly introduced in the research context, the entire project is based on the functional mechanisms of networked technologies and platforms in order to facilitate the provision of volunteer activities through virtual and physical interaction. RA emerges as a transaction platform (Gawer, 2020).

> Flexible volunteering is the Copernican revolution of volunteering in Rome. I would like to define RA as a dating platform for volunteers; it is the trade union

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TABLE 2 Coding structure

Key issues of the interview	Core elements of social innovation
• Definition of flexible volunteering and main differences with traditional volunteering • Knowledge and awareness of flexible volunteering • Difference/similarities between RomAltruista and other volunteer organizations • Definition and perception of RomAltruista	Novelty
• Role of project leader • Judgement about flexibility and ease-of-use of the platform • Perception and evaluation of the governance mechanism	Actual implementation
• Motivations of participation in RomAltruista • Satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the basic function of the platform • Comparison of traditional/digital volunteering • Evaluation of the platform function for the matching of demand/offering in volunteer activities	Effectiveness
• Platform performance (number of projects, volunteers, non-profit-organizations involved and donated hours) • Typologies of activities run by RomAltruista	Meeting of social needs
• Experience volunteering • Typology of volunteering (flexible or permanent) • Judgement about value in comparison with other experience • Advantages/disadvantages of reading website stories of other volunteers • Resource sharing • Network effect on personal skills and capabilities	Enhancing capacity to act

Source: Our elaboration.

between volunteers and non-profit organizations, especially small organizations, who together support people who need help with activities of daily living (R.P. non-profit organizations leader).

The RA founder remarked that 10 years ago, few volunteer associations had a website, and it was difficult to make contacts, and volunteers confirmed this.

If RA did not exist and I had to search for volunteer associations on my own, the process would certainly be less interactive and more cumbersome, I would have to send an email, wait for a reply and arrange a

meeting. Instead, you are the RA volunteer, the associations know who you are and you already know what to do and what to expect (E.M. volunteer).

Interestingly, this context shows the supportive role of RA in creating a trusting relationship between volunteers and non-profit organizations. 'It seems that the events and the associations that run through the screening of Rome have a greater legitimacy' (E.M. volunteer).

4.2 | Actual implementation

The RA example shows that flexible volunteering is effectively implemented and brings social benefits to many different actors (non-profit organizations, volunteers, etc.).

Our research shows that volunteers are looking for activities that are easily accessible and can be done immediately. They are ordinary people who lack time and expertise in dealing with social problems. Most of them are initially attracted by the opportunity to volunteer on a one-off basis and according to their availability, rather than by the idea of permanent and continuous volunteering. Both the simplicity and flexibility of the tasks and the large number of different activities available on the platform are the main reasons for the acceptance and collaboration of such a large number of people, as well as the main mechanisms that RA uses to mobilize and coordinate them.

These aspects contribute to the institutionalization of the new beliefs and ways of approaching solidarity and social change.

I was looking for volunteer associations that did not require a fixed commitment, since I am a mother and a full-time worker. I found RA on the internet. I liked the idea of occasionally joining in when I had time. After my first experience, I participated in many other projects, and now I am a permanent member of RA (C.D.P. RA board member).

For potential volunteers, flexibility means having control over their participation in volunteer initiatives (e.g., how, when, where and for how long they participate). This feature of volunteering relates to the concept of convenience, as it allows people to engage in activities that fit into their lives and that overcome their time and space constraints.

The offering of many activities (e.g., cleaning a park, packing parcels for the homeless, baking cakes for the under-resourced) expresses a new concept of volunteering as a whole and as a useful way to engage long-term volunteers. 'For me, RA is the supermarket of volunteering. It gives me the opportunity to try different activities and join many groups before deciding to become a permanent volunteer or not' (M.L.P. volunteer).

From the volunteer's point of view, it is more important to take on simple tasks that do not require a training period so that they can

overcome barriers to accessing non-profit organizations. This was clearly explained by one of the founders of RA and is also confirmed by many of our interviewees. Unlike traditional volunteering, simple and flexible volunteering can self-manage many difficult aspects and therefore requires minimal effort and coordination. Nevertheless, both volunteers and non-profit organizations emphasized the coordinating and engaging role of the project leader and group. Project leaders support and mentor new volunteers (e.g., welcoming new volunteers and providing instructions) and strengthen relationships with permanent volunteers in new, challenging and influential environments. To this end, the project leader and the group itself have direct control over the volunteers. They address the need of non-profit organizations to successfully coordinate and integrate new volunteers into stable social groups.

> Ten years ago, we were not so confident about flexible volunteering because we were afraid of taking in people from the internet and because it is easier to coordinate the work of experts or senior volunteers. Now every day new members join and start working. Both the supervision from the project leaders and the support from the group make this possible (P.F. non-profit organization leader).

Table 3 summarizes the key elements, which we refer to as the governance mechanisms, that drive people's acceptance of and collaboration with the flexible volunteering model promoted by RA.

4.3 | Effectiveness

To analyse effectiveness, we refer to the architecture and functionalities of the RA platform. As reported by RA's founder and board members, the basic idea was to harness the power of digital technologies to more easily engage people in volunteer activities. To this end, the platform combines a user-friendly interface with numerous features tailored to the specific needs of volunteers, non-profit organizations and for-profit companies. The website sections (Get Involved, Help Us, Contact Us and News) categorize information according to an intuitive and simple navigation scheme that allows users to easily find what they need. However, to ensure the engagement of all users, RA interacts with specific stakeholders in very different ways.

On the non-profit organization and for-profit company sides, interaction and engagement emerge beyond the online environment.

> Establishing face-to-face contact with voluntarism organizations to explain the new flexible volunteering model to them and train them was a challenge, especially in the early stages of the project. The platform provides specific instructions to make the first contact and develop further relationships (M.C. RA founder).

The platform allows very small non-profit organizations and groups of volunteers to promote their activities to a wider audience and benefit from a fast and efficient booking system. They specify their conditions (e.g., time, place, number of volunteer slots available and description of the activity) and present social projects in a mass-

TABLE 3 Flexible volunteering—Governance mechanisms

Easiness	Projects and activities are simple tasks. • They do not require any special training. • Instructions are provided to volunteers upon their arrival. • Anyone can do them.	Goals	• Make volunteering attractive for ordinary people. • Allow potential volunteers to try different activities. • Allow the easy coordination of volunteers through simple tasks, a project leader, and a group. • Ensure the repetitiveness of activities to enable volunteer learning-by-doing, self-regulation, and empowerment. • Create a safe environment to integrate new volunteers in a small group and to reinforce intrinsic motivation. • Reach and coordinate a large number of people to promote volunteering in Rome.
Flexibility	Project and activities are flexible tasks. • The availability of volunteers is matched: date, place, type. • Volunteers can participate one time without making a fixed commitment (i.e., occasional volunteer). • The same projects/activities take place every week. • Volunteers can choose from many activities covering different thematic areas.		
Project leader	Projects and activities are developed under the supervision of a project leader and/or a senior volunteer. • Project leader organizes activities, welcomes and directs volunteers in their task. • Project leader provides volunteers with the required instructions.		
Volunteers group	Projects and activities take place in a group. • Group welcomes new volunteers. • Group trains inexperienced volunteers in the field. • Group guarantees safety of new volunteers.		

Source: Our elaboration.

customized way. As the project leader of a small non-profit organization explained, RA allows third-sector organizations to benefit from the work of new volunteers for free.

> RA has opened up many opportunities. It makes my volunteer search easier and more effective. Before cooperating with RA, I spent a lot of time each week calling my friends to ask about their availability for social activities. RA supported our group by adapting our existing projects and designing new ones based on the concept of flexible volunteering. The flexibility has motivated many occasional volunteers to return and commit regularly, transforming our small group of volunteers (R.P. non-profit organizations leader).

The concept of effectiveness emerges as a valuable solution that creates a measurable improvement in reaching and engaging more volunteers than previous solutions.

On the volunteer side, the platform facilitates matching with non-profit organizations through four main mechanisms: aggregation and viral diffusion of digital content, filtering and search optimization, a calendar and booking system and ratings and comments.

In 2019 and in 2021, the platform was improved and equipped with many features to facilitate both registration and cancellation. For example, project leaders can now automatically send confirmation and reminder emails to volunteers.

Changes have also been made to make the design of platform more intuitive, attractive and fresh; to make it easier to use blogs, discussions and comments from peers; and to improve the use of Facebook and Instagram. The challenge, however, is to promote the scaling-up of volunteer involvement into engagement because, as many board members highlighted, a point of weakness of RA is its capacity to engage people who are simply attracted by the platform. 'We have not done anything to attract volunteers, they come to us. If you search for volunteering in Rome, RA is the first result on Google. It is more difficult to activate and engage them' (D.R. RA Board Member).

Two weeks after registration, RA provides volunteers who have not yet joined an initiative with a personal contact to whom they can turn in case of doubts or problems. Furthermore, RA is aware of the importance of improving the sharing of content created by peers in order to motivate potential volunteers and spread ethical values through the sharing of experiential knowledge (i.e., through peers' experiences of volunteering). Statements such as the following confirm the importance of sharing stories and experiences in blogs, newsletters and so on:

> In 2014, I started thinking about how I could improve the lives of less fortunate people. I started by reading other volunteers' stories and checking out the volunteer opportunities available, so I did not hesitate: I signed up for Chef for an Evening! (C.C. volunteer).

Nevertheless, respondents show that these feelings are mostly relevant for volunteers who feel part of the RomAtruista community and less so for those who use the platform only to book and carry out activities. The latter consider RA merely a useful app or algorithm that provides easy access to volunteering. To clarify this point, volunteers illustrated the key role that user-friendly interfaces and architecture play in users' access to volunteering. One said, 'It's very easy to choose and book the activities listed on the platform, I love it!' (G.C., volunteer). Another stated:

> With one click, you can become a volunteer, even if you do not have much time! I booked my first volunteer experience through the website. With a simple click, RA allowed me to choose when, for whom, and how I wanted to give my time (M.L.P., volunteer).

The data show that most volunteers consider the concept of easy clicking (e.g., 'I can choose when, for whom, and how I give my time.') as an important factor for their engagement, which is mainly related to the filtering mechanisms for accessing content relevant to them and to the activity booking system.

Table 4 provides a brief description of the main features and services that facilitate and effectively match volunteers and non-profit organizations.

As previously mentioned, the platform is an effective mechanism that facilitates access to and complements social activities. These activities are mostly performed through physical and social interactions and require coordination. To this end, the successful development of volunteer activities in practice requires some governance mechanisms, which we have referred to as easiness, flexibility and project leadership.

4.4 | Meeting of social needs

RA is a non-profit organization platform dedicated to solving social problems. The inspiring vision of RA is that everyone can do something good to help people in need, despite the scarcity of time and limits imposed by our hectic lifestyles. To this end, RA has developed a new idea of flexible and easy volunteerism, which we have described in detail above. It uses one platform to bring together many factions: small and/or marginal groups of volunteers; non-profit organizations looking for new volunteers to take on simple tasks in many thematic areas (e.g., environment, animals, children, elderly, disabled and immigrants); ordinary people who want to help those in need but are too busy and/or have no specific expertise or training in the field; for-profit companies that run employee volunteer programmes to strengthen employee cohesion and motivation, strengthen ties with the local community and increase brand image and visibility. RA offers the opportunity to do volunteering differently by adapting the design and working mechanisms of digital platforms from other unrelated domains (for-profit companies) to meet social needs.

TABLE 4 Platform features

Aggregation and diffusion of digital content	• Blog, weekly newsletter, FAQs and videos explain the scope, rules of engagement and the working mechanism of the platform (e.g., how to choose an activity, how to register, who you can help and the cancellation policy). • The same content (as well as live streaming events) is available on popular online social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram and YouTube).	Goals	• To allow access to vast knowledge and information resources • To assess value and mitigate risks: evaluate the potential outcome and the effort required by each activity before making decisions • To facilitate the growth of community members • To facilitate the spread of news and updates to a large number of recipients • To allow for fast and efficient screening • To effectively match the volunteers preferences with the non-profit organizations' needs (e.g., social activities) • To provide a simple and efficient booking process to easily connect volunteers with non-profit organizations • To build confidence towards strong psychological and impactful activities • To source information from peers to further motivate volunteers to participate • To increase trust and mitigate risks
Filtering and optimizing of searches	• Advanced search of activities by keywords, beneficiaries (e.g., a projects thematic areas) and volunteers specific needs (e.g., suitability for volunteers with disabilities, parents with children under 18 and people not fluent in Italian) • Direct search of activities by: - an interactive map and calendar - project profile pages providing standardized information (e.g., date/time slot, place, number of available slots, description and non-profit organizations involved)		
Calendar and booking system	• Automatic booking system through a calendar • Interactive calendar connecting social activities with the volunteers personal agenda (e.g., Outlook and mobile calendar) • Automatic confirmation email including project leader contacts and meeting details • Automatic cancellation options without need to log in		
Rating, comments and reward mechanisms	• Volunteer reviews and feedback inform other potential volunteers looking to book social activities. • Complaints and negative feedback (e.g., social activities do not match their description on the platform, and volunteer does not feel welcome) (RomAltruista Onlus, 2019) are handled directly by RA through the feedback review process (i.e., surveys, meetings and monitoring of the RA inbox and social networks). • Project leader status signals the expertise, credibility and engagement of volunteers (e.g., a team supervisor who has already participated in at least five projects or who coordinates new projects).		

Source: Our elaboration.

Since 2011, the RA digital platform has supported more than 70 non-profit organizations, many of which are very small, by recruiting 28,200 volunteers who have donated more than 1,580,000 h and covered more than 35,000 activities over many thematic areas (RomAltruista Onlus, 2021). In addition, since 2014, it has sponsored more than 80 corporate volunteering projects, involving 10 companies that finance RA, and 1964 employees who have donated more than 8500 h.

The data on RA performance (RomAltruista Onlus, 2021) provide information on the social results created: meeting social needs, solving social problems and promoting socially responsible companies.

4.5 | Enhancing society's capacity to act

Both the practice of flexible and easy volunteering and the architecture of the digital platform are specifically designed to pull and reach as many people as possible and, overall, to empower them to give their time. From a volunteer perspective, all the respondents told us that they appreciate and feel motivated by the simplicity of the tasks, which do not require any special skills or training period.

> At the beginning I had a lot of doubts, I felt inadequate and I was not sure if I could do the different activities.

> After my first experience I understood that no special skills or abilities are required, only motivation and enthusiasm (G.L. RA volunteer).

Both easiness and flexibility allow volunteers to try several activities, self-assess their aptitude (e.g., psychological and emotional) and skills, gain experience with different non-profit organizations and overcome their initial resistance. This is particularly important to motivate and further empower volunteers who have never been involved before and who make up 61% of the volunteers registered on the platform (RomAltruista, 2021). Moreover, most occasional volunteers become permanent members of the non-profit organizations listed on the platform.

> Volunteering is not easy! I like to have the opportunity to join many groups and look at different activities before deciding to become a volunteer or not. I and other volunteers coming from RA are now permanent members of some non-profit organizations (E.M. Volunteer).

As board members explained, this phenomenon seems contrary to RA's goals (e.g., promoting flexible volunteering), but that is not the case. It confirms the power of this practice to mobilize and empower people to act for those in need, thus driving social change.

For some volunteers, the recognition of their status on the platform and the possibility of upgrading it to the levels of 'irreducible' and 'superstar' after completing a certain number of activities motivate them to act. On this point, one volunteer said, 'When I realize I am moving up a level, I start booking activities for the whole month' (M.L.P. volunteer).

We also noted that the user-friendly logic inspiring the platform allowed people without any expertise to use digital communication tools, as the following words of a volunteer illustrate: 'I did not like technology and I was not so confident with it. Despite this, to follow the activities on the site, I have also learned how to use a PC and email' (G.C. volunteer). To that end, the platform could contribute to overcoming the digital divide that excludes people who are not so familiar with technology from this type of giving.

Interestingly, respondents (both volunteers and non-profit organizations leaders) emphasized the key role of networking in creating and sharing new knowledge, acquiring new skills and achieving new goals. This learning process contributes to the strengthening and empowerment of the entire network. The following statements from a volunteer and a non-profit organization leader illustrate this point.

> I have had the opportunity to acquire new skills that match my aptitudes and interests. It is difficult to deal with sick children and their parents. These are all skills that I did not have before and that I have now (E.M. Volunteer).

> Our association was founded in 2010 and has grown up with RA. The volunteers have different skills and have given us many ideas to carry out new activities (for example, the wheelchair Zumba for disabled children) and to better manage technologies. They are people who, through RA, know other associations and put us in contact with them to participate in their events and organize joint events. RA is a bigger and amazing human network, without it we would not exist, we live thanks to RA and the volunteers. Many of our ideas have also been adopted and developed by RA. We know that alone we cannot achieve anything, but together we can conquer the world (P.F. non-profit organizations leader).

They confirmed that supporting people in need through successful volunteering is the most important social outcome achieved through network effects—collaboration with volunteers and non-profit organizations—and that it acts as a driver of social change.

5 | DISCUSSION

These findings allowed us to build up a framework for understanding and interpreting the role of platforms—a cornerstone of successful social innovation practice (Figure 3). The framework highlights the link between platforms and social innovation. It consists of three main integrated, interconnected building blocks: basic platform functions, core elements of social innovation and dimensions of innovation.

The basic functions of platforms—match, facilitate and pull (Choudary, 2015; Cusumano et al., 2019; Drewel et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2016)—enable the development of core elements of social innovation and support the scaling of new forms of social innovation for social change and social value creation by fostering information sharing, collaboration and collective action (Spagnoletti et al., 2015) and providing an environment of interaction.

The architecture of the platform represents the key driving force of the engagement of multiple and different actors (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020; Kowalkowski et al., 2012) who may not have volunteered before but have common interests in volunteering. Our contextualization exercise demonstrates that the successful engagement of such actors relies on the user-friendly interface of a platform and, thus, on how quickly and easily it allows people to find, filter and book volunteer opportunities (effectiveness). Our findings also reflect the importance of access to information in order to effectively engage and retain volunteers.

In this complex and not well known context, the use of different digital tools (e.g., blogs, newsletters, videos and live-streaming events on Facebook and Instagram) is important to aggregate and share information and experiences from peers. This ability to share makes it easy to educate others about what it means to be a volunteer and how to access volunteer opportunities, thus enhancing the engagement and stable involvement of 'ordinary people' in volunteer networks

FIGURE 3 Framework. *Source*: Our elaboration [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
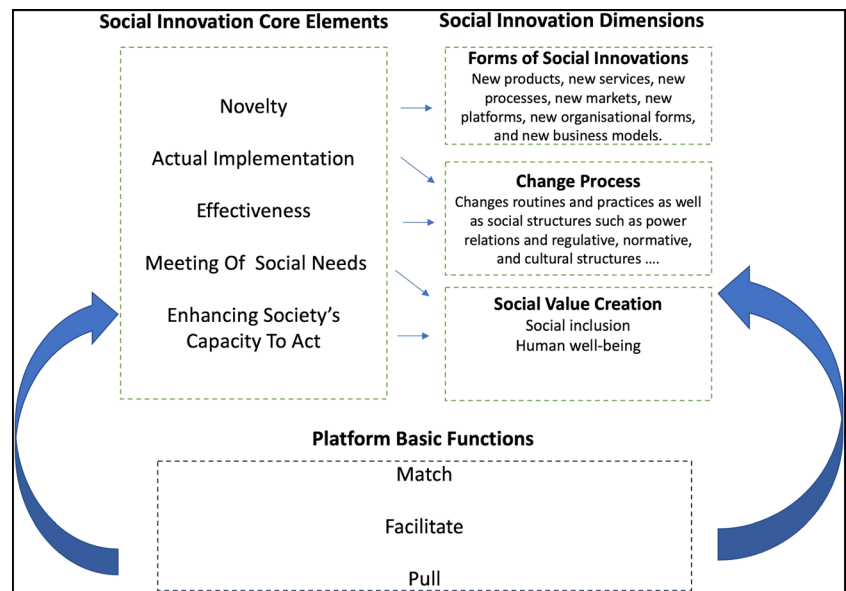
(actual implementation). It allows potential volunteers to overcome a range of practical (e.g., lack of time and availability), psychological (e.g., feelings of inadequacy, lack of specialist skills and knowledge and intensely emotional experiences) and institutional (e.g., volunteer training courses and formal and fixed involvement in non-profit organization) barriers. The platform addresses such barriers by allowing new volunteers to evaluate the potential outcome and the effort required by each activity. That is, volunteers can assess the value and mitigate the risks of engagement.

We found that simplicity and user-friendliness, as well as the possibility of engaging volunteers in online and offline volunteering activities, reduce the digital divide and enable the inclusion of potentially excluded groups of people (e.g., older people and people with disabilities). These features also increase the technological skills of many small non-profit organizations and enable their inclusion in a wider network, which means allowing potentially excluded non-profit organizations to more easily reach and effectively manage (e.g., a calendar and booking system, automatic confirmation emails and automatic cancellation options) a large number of people. The more that non-profit organizations participate in the platform and the greater number of activities that are available allow more volunteers to find a suitable activity and thereby contribute to social change. In this regard, the platform also plays the role of enabler for social inclusion (enhancing society's capacity to act) (Caridà et al., 2019; Gebauer & Reynoso, 2013; Mulgan, 2006) for people who want to offer help—volunteers—and those who need to receive it—non-profit organizations and vulnerable populations (meeting of a social need).

Therefore, these mechanisms provide a guideline for enhancing the opportunities to reach a wide number of people and to coordinate and address their response to many social needs (Steinfield & Holt, 2019), which, in turn, means fostering the scalability of social innovation practices (Varadarajan, 2014) (social value creation).

Clear and shared rules, standards and modes of exchange ensure the successful coordination and integration of volunteers over time as they support governance mechanisms and enable people's acceptance (change process) (Aksoy et al., 2019).

Governance mechanisms relate to the design and management of social activities. Both flexibility and easiness are inherent properties of social activities; they represent the key driving force for attracting new volunteers and quickly coordinating their efforts within a stable social group (forms of social innovation). Our results confirm that governance mechanisms are the pivotal connector between two parts: the expectations of people interested in activities not requiring any specific skill or training and who want to maintain, at least initially, control over their involvement without any formal agreement with the non-profit organization (i.e., volunteer side), and the coordination required by said organizations to balance the lack of experience and expertise of new volunteers with the need to ensure the quality of the work. To this latter point, we found that both the project leader and the social group itself enact the role of coordinator in order to maintain direct control over new volunteers and to facilitate their integration within challenging environments. They mitigate the risks perceived by volunteers (i.e., psychological side) and the non-profit organization's reputational risk related to occasional engagement and a reduction in direct control of volunteers.

6 | THEORETICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The rise of digital platforms is transforming the landscape of social innovation, leading to the development of successful social innovation practices and new service ecosystems that change people's attitudes and behaviours towards systemic social problems.

This study sheds light on how the design and operational mechanisms of digital platforms, mainly used in business settings, can be leveraged to effectively and successfully address social needs (Lee et al., 2019; Logue & Grimes, 2019; Misuraca & Pasi, 2019) by

connecting multiple actors and enabling their engagement in the pursuit of a new social innovation practice (flexible volunteering). We also argue for the need to ensure coherence between the platform architectural design and the design/management of social innovation practice. This cohesion will inspire people to take action in their communities, over time successfully coordinating and driving their effort and collaboration towards the same goal. Specifically, we refer to coherence as the concept of smartness (e.g., user-friendliness, ease and flexibility).

In summary, we contribute to defining the potential of digital platforms for promoting scalable and recursive solutions, as well as enabling societal transformation and the improvement of individual well-being and the overall system. To this end, we consider digital platforms for social purposes and their offline extensions as a new form of social interaction that is specifically designed to empower people to self-manage actions leading to transformative and systemic change in the whole society.

This study advances research on both digital platforms and social innovation by providing implications for scholars and policymakers. It integrates the social perspective into the digital platform literature, and vice versa, by opening up new research trajectories and application opportunities that exploit the inclusive role of digital platforms in the field of social innovation, specifically in the volunteering context.

The positive externalities and social impacts of the use of digital platforms for social purposes are relevant and numerous. First, this study extends the use of platforms for social purposes and the exploitation of interactive technologies beyond the disaster and emergency field (Chernobrov, 2018; Hemmi & Graham, 2014; Park & Johnston, 2019). During the pandemic, RA leveraged the platform to offer remote and online volunteer opportunities (e.g., playing online games with disabled people, meeting via Zoom to create gadgets for good causes and mapping rural areas). Such activities were offered to both individual volunteers and companies. In most cases, RA repackaged existing opportunities to ensure operation during lockdown. This adds to the current literature addressing the use of the platform mainly for the coordination of extempore activities for the management of catastrophes and disasters (Kreps & Bosworth, 2007). Platforms can act as a triggering mechanism that boosts systemic networking and the development of new social practices, which are perceived by the entire community as the most natural way to improve the collective well-being of society (Caridà et al., 2019).

Moreover, this study addresses the interest of institutions and governments looking for practical guidance on the development of effective policy and organizational practices in order to have more efficient collaborations to face social challenges (Misuraca & Pasi, 2019). To this end, it frames the practice of flexible volunteering as a possible answer to solving societal challenges. Its focus, in fact, is on how to render social actions as more sustainable and accessible to the wider social community.

Finally, the study takes into account the perspective of non-profit-organizations and third-sector organizations; hence, it advances the extant literature addressing the use of technology for social innovation purposes beyond the perspective of large, global multinational organizations. It provides non-profit organizations, which are in charge of solving societal problems, with useful guidelines on using digital platforms to spread the culture and practice of civic volunteering. Non-profit organizations can broaden and diversify the volunteer base and transform occasional participation into permanent, by easily reaching and effectively coordinating and integrating different people and resources within a large ecosystem.

7 | LIMITS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The study reports the findings and conceptualizations of a single case, so we do not offer generalizable results but provide some insights that can be used for further research. Although the focus on volunteering expands and enriches the concept and studies of volunteering (including digital and flexible), the specific subject matter of the platform activity might present a kind of positive bias for triggering social innovation practices, as the intention of the actors is to pursue a social purpose just by participating in the platform.

Future research could also extend the study to a sample of platforms in other domains to verify the framework and test its validity.

Moreover, the results we present suggest that the analytical framework should also be deepened with respect to the sharing economy (Kathan et al., 2016) and transformative services research (Ostrom et al., 2014). Indeed, the sharing economy is 'a scalable socio-economic system that employs technology-enabled platforms to provide users with temporary access to tangible and intangible resources that can be crowdsourced' (Eckhardt et al., 2019, p. 7), and thus, it would be useful to interpret social innovation practices of business platforms within such a framework.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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