

Innovative Pathways in Social Enterprise: Global Trends and Insights

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ABSTRACT

In the ever-evolving landscape of sustainable development and social innovation, social enterprises have emerged as pivotal players. These businesses are at the forefront of cutting-edge approaches with a focus on environmental preservation, youth employment, and community revitalization. Bibliometric analysis and TCCM analysis are extremely helpful in fully grasping the body of knowledge in this field. The multifaceted nature of social enterprise and innovation research is revealed, showcasing its dynamic and connected global environment through word clouds, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic maps. We explore this expansive landscape using the SCOPUS database as our main resource, highlighting the connections between and the universal applicability of important research themes. Our analysis highlights countries and regions as well as concepts like "innovation," "entrepreneurship," "sustainability," and "social impact." It underscores the collaborative efforts of scholars worldwide to explore these multifaceted dimensions. Finally, this study offers a broad perspective on the dynamic field of social enterprise and innovation, highlighting recurrent themes and offering insightful information about this academic field.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Innovation, Bibliometrics, Social Enterprises, Social Impact, Sustainable development.

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Received: 22-08-2025;

Revised: 17-10-2025;

Accepted: 03-12-2025.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of social entrepreneurship and social enterprise began to gain prominence in the late 1990s, but historical instances of these ideas date back over a century.^[1] Privately run organizations that utilize business tactics to fulfil socially-driven objectives are known as social enterprises.^[2] They are characterized by their fusion of social objectives with a business focus.^[3] The core mission of a social enterprise is to advance social impact by engaging in the exchange of goods and services, channelling profit toward achieving social objectives rather than providing financial rewards to its owners and shareholders.^[4] A social enterprise's commitment to achieving sustainability across environmental, social, and economic dimensions can be seen as its conceptual fundamental.^[5]

Social entrepreneurship, as a form of social innovation, entails adopting creative ideas that improve individuals' quality of life.^[6] Innovation manifests as radical, introducing groundbreaking concepts, or incremental, enhancing existing products or services.^[7] With rising priorities such as environmental conservation, youth employment, and community revitalization, social enterprises increasingly pursue innovative, sustainability-driven strategies and initiatives.^[8] Innovation involves introducing new or significantly improved products, services, marketing strategies, or organizational methods.^[9] In social enterprises, it signifies developing creative solutions to social and environmental challenges while ensuring sustainability and societal impact.^[10] Such innovation can distinguish enterprises and enhance long-term viability.^[11] It includes innovative business models blending profit and purpose, eco-friendly products, technology-driven outreach, and collaborative partnerships.^[12,13] Additionally, advancements in impact measurement, financing mechanisms, and community engagement foster empowerment and sustainable social transformation.^[14,15]



DOI: 10.5530/jscires.20251676

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Within the realm of business research, bibliometric analysis has recently seen a substantial increase in popularity.^[16] An overview of a study topic organized by research papers, authors, and journals is provided by bibliometric analysis, which involves the quantitative analysis of bibliographic information.^[17]

In this scenario, researchers are striving to pinpoint the most influential authors, affiliations, and countries in terms of their contributions to the respective fields of social enterprise and innovation. They also aim to identify various themes within the research landscape, including established, fundamental, specialized, and emerging or declining areas. Furthermore, to recognize trending keywords by analyzing existing literature using the bibliometric analysis method. Furthermore, an in-depth TCCM (Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methodology) analysis was conducted to extract comprehensive insights into the utilization of theories and methodologies, the exploration of variables, themes, and the scope of study within the research.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized the SCOPUS database to retrieve global publications on social enterprise and innovation, chosen for its advantages over WOS and Google Scholar.^[18] Using the search string “Social Enterprise” AND “Innovation,” only peer-reviewed journal articles were analyzed, excluding books, chapters, and conference proceedings. The researcher adhered to the following steps for conducting the bibliometric analysis (Figure 1). Using the defined search string, 905 documents were initially extracted. Applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, the scope was narrowed to relevant subject areas-Business, Management, Economics, and Social Sciences-excluding others like Engineering and Environmental Science. Focusing solely on peer-reviewed journal articles yielded 498 documents, with no publication year restrictions to capture the field’s temporal evolution.

For performance analysis, including identifying key sources, the Bibliometric R package was used. Comprehensive content analysis employed both Bibliometrix and VOSviewer to explore structural and intellectual patterns. Additionally, TCCM analysis identified prominent theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods, revealing underexplored areas within the social enterprise and innovation domain.

RESULTS

Bibliometric Analysis

An extensive and useful source of information is provided in the context of authorship characteristics and collaboration.^[19] Our dataset consists of 498 publications written by a group of 1,176 authors who are affiliated with 527 institutions located in 72 different countries or regions. These articles have been disseminated through 270 distinct publications. The trend of publication shown in Figure 2.

Most relevant Sources

The standout source is the “*Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*” with an impressive h-index of 13, commencing publications in 2010, amassing 481 total citations across 19 articles, emphasizing its profound impact and scholarly significance. Additionally, “*Sustainability (Switzerland)*” exhibits substantial influence, boasting a h-index (12), TC (411), and 35 publications since 2017. Because the journal is multi-disciplinary and provides the opportunity for all kinds of research. Several other journals, including “*Voluntas*”, “*Social Enterprise Journal*”, “*Technological Forecasting and Social Change*” and “*Journal of Business Ethics*” contribute significantly to the field, making them valuable resources for researchers and scholars interested in social entrepreneurship (Table 1).

Keyword Analysis

The word cloud analysis of author keywords on social enterprise and innovation highlights frequently occurring and significant terms (see Figure 3). A word cloud, or tag cloud, visually represents text data, emphasizing word importance through color variations, thereby identifying dominant research themes and prevalent focus areas.^[20]

The term “innovation” appears most frequently (84 times), underscoring its central role. Keywords like “entrepreneur,” “social enterprise,” and “sustainability” highlight links between entrepreneurship, social impact, and responsible practices. Geographical terms such as “India,” “United Kingdom,” and “United States” reflect global relevance, while “stakeholder” and “social impact” emphasize the field’s multidimensional nature and interconnected research themes.

To better understand the contextual framework of the reviewed literature, a factorial analysis using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) via Biblioshiny in the Bibliometrix R package was conducted. The analysis formed a single cluster with two dimensions (Dim. 1 and Dim. 2) (see Figure 4). Dim. 1 is strongly linked to “social entrepreneurship,” “social innovation,” and “social impact,” while Dim. 2 aligns with “technology adoption,” “social capital,” and “numeric model.” Keywords like “innovation” and “entrepreneur” relate moderately to both dimensions, reflecting their cross-cutting relevance in social enterprise research.

TCCM Analysis

This section reviews existing literature using the TCCM framework, focusing on highly cited studies, identifying knowledge gaps, proposing future research directions, and outlining theory development, contextual factors, and methodology. We focus on prior research that has received a minimum of 50 citations in order to ensure the inclusion of influential works.

Theory Development

Within the realm of social enterprise and innovation, the extant literature encompasses a diverse array of theories, including the "Theory of Entrepreneurship," "Search Theory," "Social Origins Theory," "Network Theory," "SE Motivation Theory," "Expectancy Theory," "Goal-Setting Theory," "Human Capital Theory," "Collins' Interaction Ritual Chain Theory," "Institutional Theory," "Neo-Institutional Theory," "Theory of Change," "Theory of Market Orientation," "Theory of Mission Drift," "Structuration Theory," "Ecological Modernisation Theory," "Sustainable Business Model Theory," "Stakeholder Theory," "Nonlinear Dynamical Systems Theory," "Catastrophe Theory," "Bifurcation Theory," "Emergence-Based Theory," "Connected Difference Theory," "Political Process Theory," and "Information and Communication Theory".^[21-27] However, the predominant theories that have found substantial application in this domain are the "Theory of Entrepreneurship," "Neo-Institutional Theory," and "Institutional Theory." While the review underscores the notable progress made in applying these theories, it also identifies certain theoretical gaps within the context of social enterprise and innovation. Consequently, it calls for future empirical investigations to utilize these theories as foundational frameworks. Moreover, it advocates for the exploration of novel theoretical perspectives to address uncharted areas, particularly pertaining to the implementation of social innovation involving diverse stakeholders, governance dynamics, and technological influences on key facets of innovation within social enterprises, ultimately contributing to sustainability. Furthermore, the introduction of new or expanded theoretical constructs, particularly in the realm of entrepreneurship theory intertwined with innovation,

is recommended to comprehensively elucidate the multifaceted factors shaping sustainability outcomes.

Context

Research within the domain of social enterprise and innovation has significantly contributed to the advancement of knowledge, particularly through the identification of pivotal features, antecedents, and outcomes. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that the extant literature in this field exhibits a notable degree of fragmentation and diversity. This diversity presents a challenge in formulating definitive propositions and conclusions, thus underscoring the complexity and multifaceted nature of the subject matter. Within the realm of industry-focused research, investigations have encompassed a diverse array of sectors, including "Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE)," health and social care sectors, rural social entrepreneurs, "Environmentally focused Social Economy Enterprise (ESEE)," Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), sustainable foods companies, and responses to challenging economic conditions, such as solidarity-based exchanges and networks, cooperative structures, barter clubs, credit unions, ethical banks, time banks, alternative social currencies, citizens' self-help groups, neighborhood assemblies, and social enterprises. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the scope limitations inherent in this study. Predominantly, the research has concentrated on contexts within the United Kingdom, Canada, North American origins, North-East Poland, Upper Austria, Australia, European labor markets, and the United States.^[28-32,8] Notably, there is a significant lack of research within the contexts of Asian countries, the Middle East, North Africa, Greater Arabia,

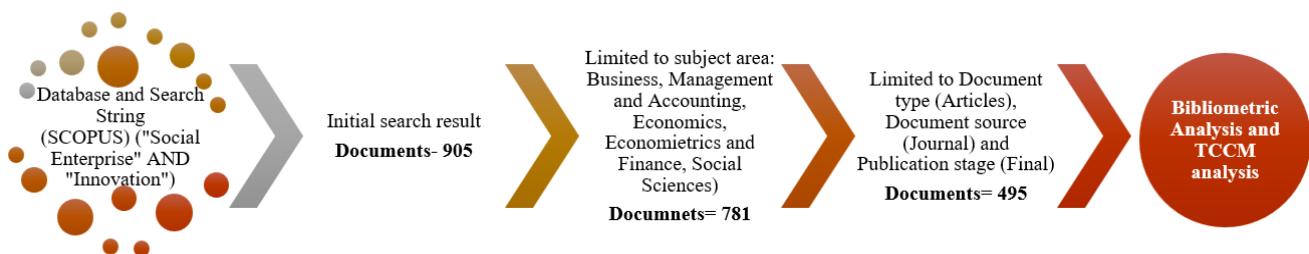


Figure 1: Processing of data.

Table 1: Top 20 Journals.

Element	H_Index	TC	NP	PY_Start
Journal of Social Entrepreneurship.	13	481	19	2010
Sustainability (Switzerland)	12	411	35	2017
Voluntas	8	437	8	2011
Social Enterprise Journal.	7	112	18	2018
Technological Forecasting and Social Change.	7	208	10	2017
Journal of Business Ethics.	6	449	7	2012
Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics.	5	243	7	2005
Ciriec-Espana Revista De Economia Publica, Social Y Cooperativa.	4	133	8	2016

and Sub-Saharan Africa. Hence, there exists an opportunity to conduct research in diverse fields and across various countries. Exploring social enterprise and innovation within different regions can facilitate the assessment of result generalizability.

Characteristics

This comprehensive research offers an in-depth exploration of the diverse themes and variables that characterize the field of social enterprise and innovation. It captures the richness of prior studies, spanning topics such as the entrepreneurial process, network embeddedness, financial risk, and the role of individual entrepreneurs in fostering creativity and innovation. The study also examines the intrinsic motivations of social entrepreneurs, emphasizing personal fulfillment, social impact, and non-monetary goals. Broader social and policy dimensions—including employment, poverty, and social exclusion—are analyzed to understand strategies that address these systemic challenges. Furthermore, the research highlights the multifaceted nature of social innovation, exploring its conceptual evolution, stakeholder collaboration, and governance challenges within the social economy, especially during periods of crisis and transformation. It identifies key enablers of innovation such as staff empowerment, financial management, and knowledge sharing while emphasizing the critical role of collaboration among NGOs, public institutions, and civil society. The study extends to sectoral applications, including education, energy, and waste management, alongside challenges in rural contexts. It also considers regulatory and cultural pressures, hybrid organizational forms, and sustainability drivers like managerial commitment and green information systems. Overall, the research presents a holistic understanding of social enterprise and innovation,

offering pathways for future empirical investigation and model validation.

Methods

Among the commonly employed research methods are semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, case study methodology, and field research.^[33-38] Semi-structured interviews are widely used, and they often involve in-depth exploratory analysis. Questionnaires are used to gather structured data, and statistical methods such as t-tests and SEM are applied for analysis. Case study methodology is prevalent, and it involves cross-case analysis and thematic analysis of data. Field research methods encompass participatory observations, interviews, and document analyses, often used in triangulation. Additionally, various software tools like NVivo, Atlas.ti, and NVivo are utilized for data management and analysis. Literature reviews, systemic approaches, and alternative action organizational analysis are also evident in the research methods employed. The preeminent articles within this domain have predominantly employed a conceptual approach to navigate the extant literature.^[39-42] In contrast, several other methodological approaches have eroded away unexplored in this area of research. Future research endeavors may benefit from incorporating mixed-method approaches, diversifying data collection techniques, and employing an array of analytical tools, particularly when investigating the causal effects or intricate relationships among antecedent variables and their subsequent outcomes.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study utilized bibliometric analysis to explore the intersection of social enterprise and innovation across business, economics, and social sciences. Interest in this field notably increased after

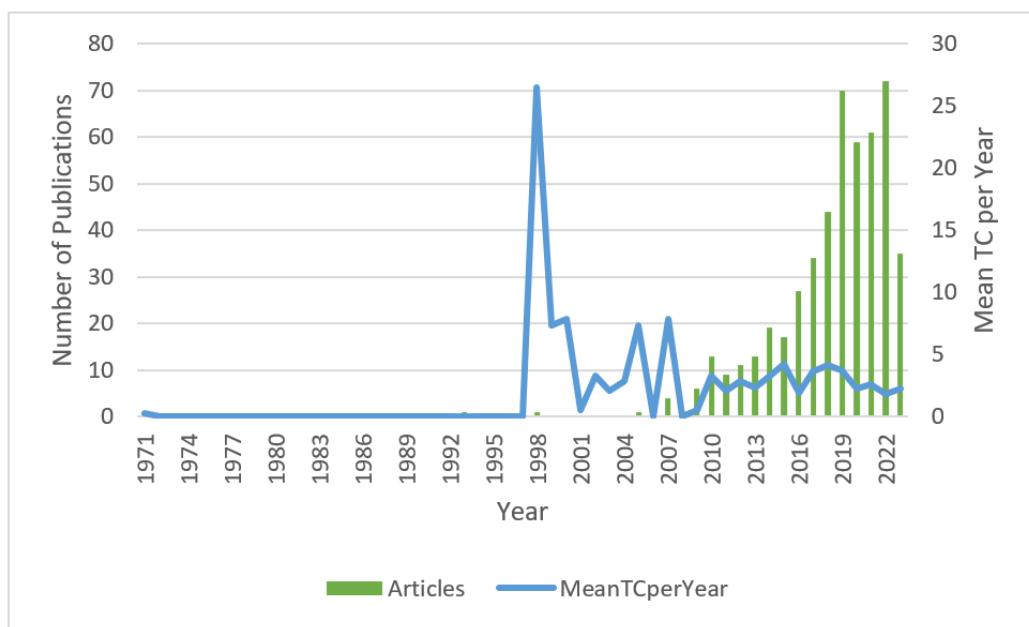


Figure 2: Annual production and average total citation per year.



Figure 3: Word Cloud Analysis of Author Keywords.

2019, though the earliest publication dates to 1971. A seminal 1998 work by Dees J.G. marked a key milestone, addressing challenges faced by nonprofit enterprises in commercial funding. Among sources, *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, *Sustainability* (Switzerland), and *Voluntas* emerged as leading journals with high h-index and citation counts, reflecting their strong influence and comprehensive coverage of this research domain.

The word cloud analysis of social enterprise and innovation highlights key themes and focal points in the field. "Innovation" emerges as central, emphasizing creative solutions in social entrepreneurship. Other prominent terms—"entrepreneurship," "sustainability," "social impact," and geographic references like "India," "UK," and "US"—reflect a dynamic, globally interconnected research landscape. This study conducts an in-depth review of highly cited literature on social enterprise and innovation using the TCCM framework (Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methodology), bridging knowledge gaps and offering directions for future research. Key theories include the Theory of Entrepreneurship, Neo-Institutional Theory, and Institutional Theory.^[26,38] Shaw and Carter (2007) highlighted creativity and innovation as drivers of sustainable growth, while Shyama *et al.*, (2017) examined innovation impacts and suggested future research on entrepreneurial capabilities, behavioral intentions, and innovation outcomes. Methodologically, interviews, case studies, and surveys dominate, though longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-method approaches are recommended to explore social innovation comprehensively.^[8,35,38] The analysis underscores the field's theoretical diversity, regional complexity, and methodological opportunities. Findings provide significant

theoretical and practical insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, facilitating enhanced understanding of antecedents, outcomes, and sustainable strategies in social enterprise and innovation.

The theoretical implications of this study are profound. Firstly, there has been a notable shift in research focus towards social enterprise and innovation, particularly after 2019, marking a significant temporal change that calls for more research into its underlying drivers. Seminal nature work and its influence on subsequent research suggest that foundational frameworks such as the "social enterprise spectrum" play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse and can serve as theoretical anchors for further exploration. Lastly, the multifaceted research landscape, illustrated by keyword and thematic analysis, encompassing innovation, entrepreneurship, sustainability, social impact, and social capital, presents opportunities for researchers to explore the intricate interplay of these themes and advance theoretical understanding in this dynamic domain.

The practical implications of this research are noteworthy. Policymakers and practitioners stand to benefit by aligning their strategies with the evolving research landscape in social enterprise and innovation. This alignment can be instrumental in developing innovative approaches to address pressing societal and environmental challenges while adhering to sustainability objectives. Furthermore, the identification of key themes like corporate social responsibility and social entrepreneurship underscores the prospects for cross-sector collaborations, bridging the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Lastly, the research accentuates the importance of impact assessment tools,

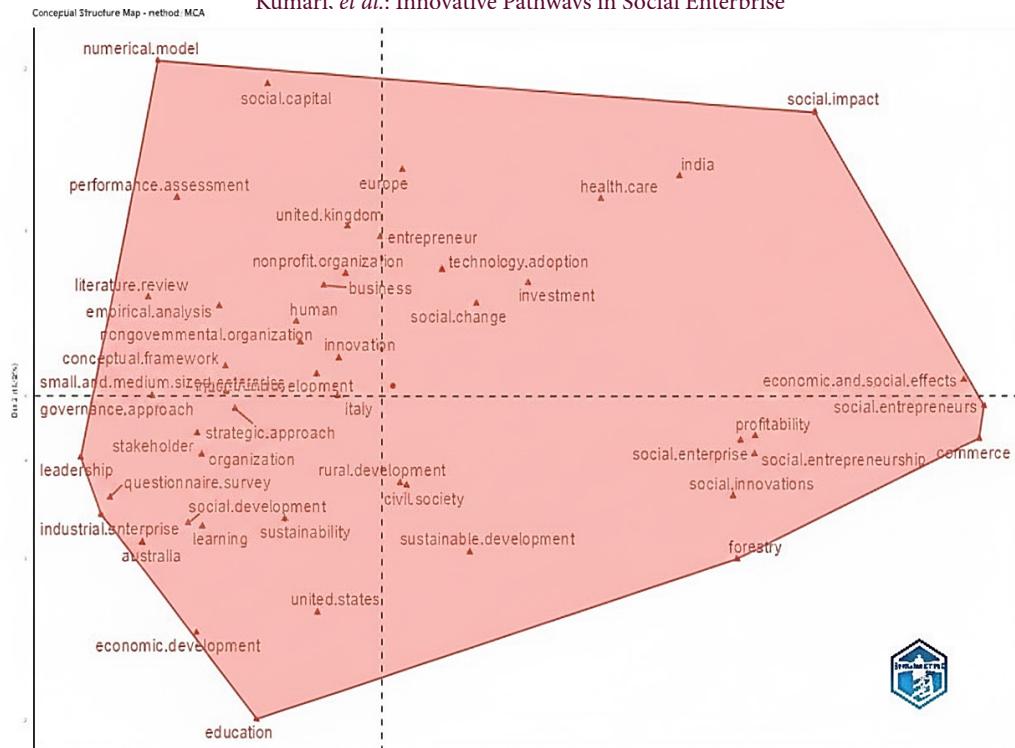


Figure 4: Factorial Analysis of Keywords.

with a focus on themes such as social capital and the creation of social value. Practitioners are encouraged to explore and adopt robust methodologies for effectively measuring and communicating the social and environmental value generated by their enterprises.

CONCLUSION

This research employs bibliometric analysis and the TCCM framework to examine the evolving intersection of social enterprise and innovation across multiple disciplines. It highlights key contributors, influential publications, and emerging trends, demonstrating the field's growth in recent years. Analyses of word clouds, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic mapping reveal the multifaceted, interconnected nature of social innovation research. Innovation in social enterprises involves developing creative, effective solutions to social and environmental challenges while ensuring sustainability, emphasizing continuous experimentation, improvement, and a commitment to generating positive societal impact.

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE STUDY

This study provides valuable insights into the evolving field of social enterprise and innovation. However, it is constrained by its dependence on data available within a specific timeframe and a focus mainly on academic publications. Future research should periodically update bibliometric analyses, incorporate grey literature, and include qualitative assessments of key works. Additionally, designing and validating impact assessment tools tailored to social enterprises would strengthen the measurement

and communication of their social and environmental contributions, enhancing understanding of this dynamic field.

In summary, this study provides a comprehensive panoramic view of the social enterprise and innovation research landscape. However, it is incumbent upon future research to build upon these findings while addressing the aforementioned limitations, thus fostering an enhanced and more nuanced understanding of this dynamic and pivotal domain.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article: Kumari N, Kumar S, Kondala M, Ganti P. Innovative Pathways in Social Enterprise: Global Trends and Insights. *J Scientometric Res*. 2025;14(3):743-9.