COLOMBO JOURNAL OF
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

COLOMBO JOURNAL OF MULTI-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Volume 10 - No. 01 & 02 - March & November 2025

Faculty of Graduate Studies - University of Colombo

Social Innovation in Theory and Practice: A Critical Review of Scholarly Perspectives

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Abstract

Over the period, social innovation (SI) has emerged as one of the most important areas of innovation and business. Though actors engage with social innovation by addressing a wide range of social issues, it's unknown which are only seldom satisfied by SIs. Thus, its lack to find out a comprehensive and clear elucidation of the field. To bridge this gap, the present work pursues the following objectives: to examine the existing knowledge about social innovation and to understand the gaps in the field. Research on this phenomenon has proliferated significantly near past that extended to the last decade. The study used the systematic literature review (SLR) methodology and Meta-Analyses on (PRISMA) guidelines. Based on inclusion criteria, 63 articles have been included in the database for final review. Findings emphasize that social innovation has been less focused. This led to the identification of a number of gaps covering different facets of social innovation. Accordingly, most of the studies were conducted in Western settings. In future studies can examine of different settings like, mental and physical health in future.

Keywords: Social innovation, Knowledge mapping, Research gaps, Systematic literature review.

Received:	Accepted revised version:	Published:
14 March 2025	22 August 2025	24 December 2025

Suggested citation: Dinesha P. K. C., Jayarathne P. G. S. A., & Galdolage B.S. (2025). Social innovation in theory and practice: A critical review of scholarly perspectives. *Colombo Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research, 10* (01 & 02), 1-20.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.4038/cjmr.v10i1-2.84
ISSN: 2362-0633
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Introduction

In the past several years, social innovation (SI) has become one of the most prominent fields in business and innovation. As it attempts to include governments, corporations, and civil society in finding new approaches to address enduring social problems, it has become a focal point of policy discussions worldwide. Social innovations have emerged as solutions for social issues such as marginality, inequality, and social exclusion, through developing digital technology-based products, services, processes, and business models (Shalini et al., 2021). These collaborative practices have been raised as social innovation (SI), which presents long-lasting answers to urgent societal issues as well as a pathway to suitability. Accordingly, it has been defined as "a type of social and collaborative innovation in which innovators, users, and communities collaborate using digital technologies to co-create knowledge and solutions for a wide range of social needs and at a scale and speed that was unimaginable before the rise of the Internet" (Bria et al., 2015, p. 9). Literature statistics in the fields of SI remain inadequate, as well as limited to developing countries (Huang et al., 2023). Further, a wider range of actors engage with social innovation. Additionally, even though SIs address a wide range of social needs, it is unknown which receive the most attention and which are only seldom satisfied by SIs.

Thus, there is a lack of clear and comprehensive elucidation in the field of social innovation. To bridge this gap, the present work pursues the following objectives, as to determine what is already known about social innovation and provide bibliographic information by conducting a systematic literature review (SLR); and to understand the gaps in the field of social innovation research

Thus, this paper explores and analyses the current state of theoretical, conceptual work on the assessment for SI and their consequences, related concepts, and relevant activities. The paper arranges with six sections where, the section one offers a brief overview of the topic matter, and the research is divided into six sections. The modified technique and approach are examined in Section 2. In Section 4, the conclusion is presented, whereas in Section 3, the findings and discussion are presented. While part six gathers and presents the sources used in this study, section five examines possible avenues for future research endeavors as well as any discovered restrictions.

Accordingly, the objectives of the study are to

- Explore existing knowledge on social innovation and provide bibliographic insights through a systematic literature review (SLR).
- Explore gaps in research within the field of social innovation.

Theoretical Background

The evolution of the environment in the global scale with the increase level of the climate change, air pollution and possible fuel depletion has past tracked development of the sustainable practices and technological solutions. Further, in order to meet the 2030 Agenda,

key players are turning to Digital Social Innovations (DSIs), which are collaborative innovations in which businesses, users, and communities work together using digital technologies to create solutions quickly and at scale. DSIs connect innovation, the social world, and digital ecosystems (Kazemi et al., 2024). The notion of social innovation surfaced around the turn of the century and has experienced a remarkable surge in recent years, in both theory and practice. The initial definitions of the term concentrated on novel approaches and inventions that were not only socially conscious but also sought to tackle societal issues through novel forms of cooperation. The policy initiation made by USA president Barack Obama in 2009, it has become as more effective initiation to deal with societal challenges.

Even though, it's limited the developments in emerging countries with context specific failures, the recent research demonstrates that social innovations, which provide a distinct environment for the development of these innovations, can assist emerging economies in filling institutional gaps, especially as they become more visible in the global market (Fauzi et al., 2025).

Methodology

The research mainly depends on the "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)" guidelines (Liberati et al., 2009) in selecting, analysing and reporting of the review findings of the selected papers. To prevent bias during the process, the PRISMA is a highly recommended mechanism for SLRs (Otto et al., 2021).

The literature review constitutes a crucial component of academic inquiries. According to Brantnell and Wagrell (2024), the approach aims to investigate gaps in knowledge and so enhance it fundamentally by drawing on existing information and understanding its breadth and depth. By duplicating studies, the author showed transparency by employing a systematic review methodology. Page et al. (2021) affirmed its adequacy in reviewing the nexuses of digital social innovation and sustainability literature due to its immaturity.

This study employed the rigorous and well-liked Bibliometric Analysis methodology, which helps researchers identify new topics in a certain field by examining enormous amounts of scientific data. The four-stage process for bibliometric analysis consists of defining the objectives and parameters of the study, selecting the appropriate techniques, gathering the necessary data, conducting the analysis, and summarising the results (Donthu et al., 2021). Three electronic databases that have published various kinds of academic publications with a high impact factor were searched for studies: Scopus, and Google Scholar. Additionally, Sauer and Seuring (2023), state that the snowballing method was also used to retrieve the additional articles. In these databases the keyword 'social innovation' was applied to identify the potential sources of papers which resulting in 533. Since this article focuses on social innovation, researchers did not consider other similar terms as search criteria. We applied the PRISMA flow diagram which has recommended for SLRs that consist with three stages as "identification, screening and included" (Figure 01).

Table 01

Phases for Bibliomaniacal Analysis

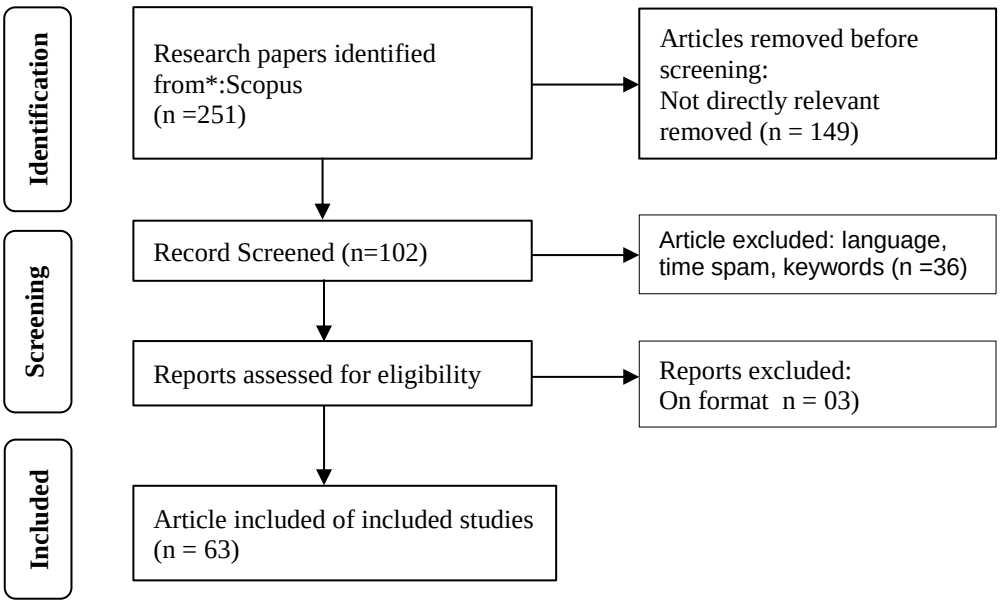
Phases	Steps	Description
Exploration	Step 1	Formulate research problem and objectives
	Step 2	Search sources for appropriate literature.
	Step 3	Critical review the selected studies
	Step 4	Data amalgamation in one database.
Analyse	Step 5	Analysis the data and report findings
Present	Step 6	Present the findings

Through the second phase the inclusion criteria were defined prior to the data collection which emphasis methodologically rigorous and theoretically soundness of the review, providing a reliable basis on which to formulate decisions and take actions, in this study. Applying with the inclusion criteria screening was done. The inclusion criteria were the "publications as articles" published in "English" in "Journals" publications with the keyword "Social innovation" from "2014 to 2024 under Scopus". The attention on social innovation has steadily increased after 2017, we focused on the selected time span.

Figure 1

PRISMA Article Selection Flow Diagram

Review protocol



Findings and Discussion

Article Characteristics

The summary of the primary information of the review article is presented in Table 02. Between 2014 and 2024, 38 publications written by 110 Authors from different nations were published in 31 top journals. The average growth rate per year is 9.6 and average citation has received paper is 13.32.

Figure 2 illustrates the annual production of scientific publications, which has fluctuated but has been gradually increasing since 2019, thus the significant attention of research on social innovation was furnished after 2019. It suggests that academics are becoming more and more interested in the topic of social innovation in recent years. The authors Ayob et al. (2016) have proved that, since recent years, the idea of social innovation has grown dramatically in popularity, both in theory and in actual applications.

Figure 2

Annual Scientific Production

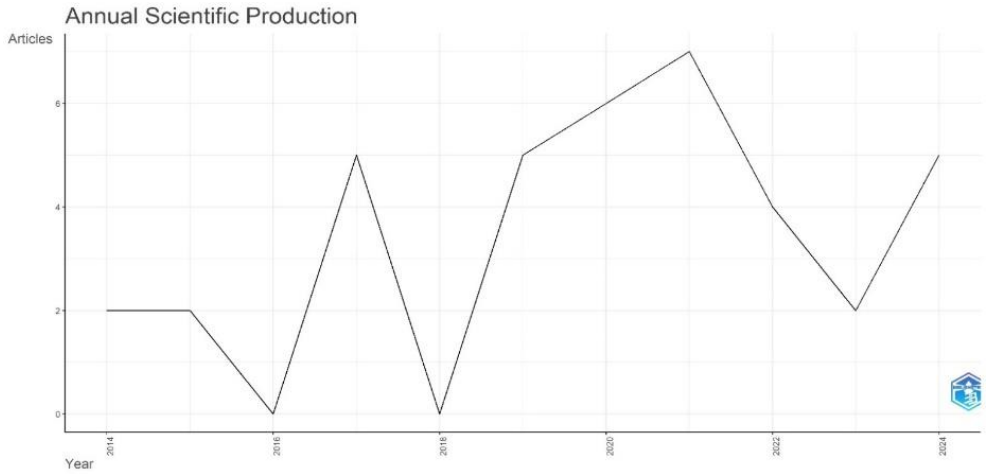
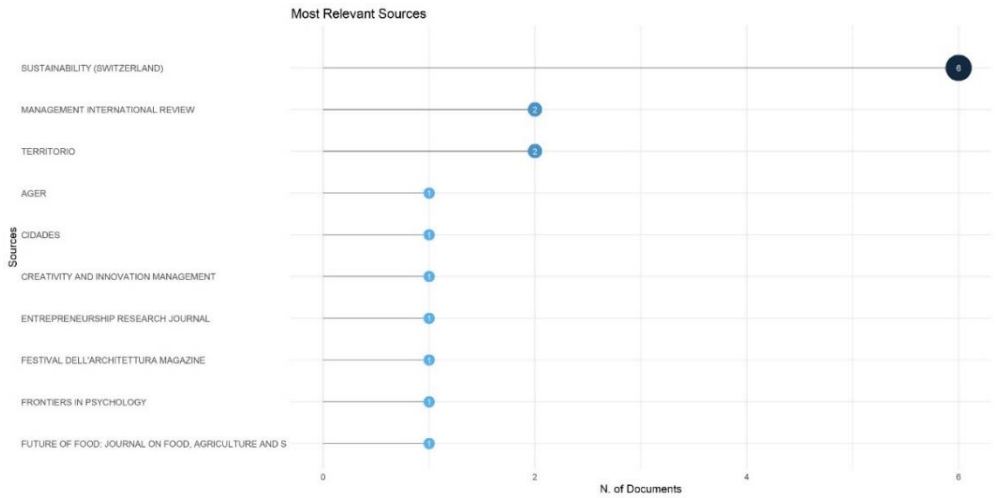


Figure 3

Most Cited Articles



The summary of the most relevant publication is presented in Figure 03. The highest number of papers have published Sustainability (Switzerland) (6articles), and respectively two papers have been published in Management International Review and Territorio. Accordingly, overall papers have published in 31 journals.

Figure 4

Country Collaboration Map

Figure 4 shows the research cooperation on the world map represents that the research has been mostly limited to developed countries such as the USA, collaboration with Australia, Portugal and Spain and is mostly nonexistent in other countries. Hence, the researchers in developing countries should be motivated to conduct their research studies on social innovation further.

Additionally, the majority of review studies have been qualitative in nature, especially case studies, and are based on theories such as the Triple Bottom Line Theory, Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and Schumpeter's Theory of Innovation (Messiha et al., 2023). Moreover, it's noted that, majority of the studies on sustainable behaviour, entrepreneurial motivation, and organisational performance are all significantly influenced by environmental concern, which spans individual awareness, emotional attachment to nature, and institutional commitment. It is more important in attaining sustainability than less obvious social or economic variables because of its impact, which extends from grassroots initiatives to strategic decision-making (Ngah et al., 2025; Tran et al., 2025).

Results

The results discussion based on the objective are presented in this section. The findings were developed using keyword co-occurrence analysis and co-citation analysis. To reveal the relationships between conceptual objects and subjects, the term co-occurrence analysis technique was used. The method operates under the premise that phrases that occur simultaneously are related to one another thematically. The keyword co-occurrence network visualisation and co-citation analysis network addressed the first objective that finding out the existing knowledge on social innovation practices and presenting bio-matrix analysis. The density analysis on keyword occurrence addresses the second objective of identifying the new venues to be addressed on social innovation practices.

Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis and Current Knowledge in Social Innovation Practices.

Additionally, we represented the progression of the conceptual items and keywords. As is clear from Figure 5a and 5b, the word “social innovation” exhibits the greatest co-occurrence frequency, as it is tightly linked to other words such as “innovation”, “social change”, “urban regeneration”, and “social sustainability”. The keywords with the highest occurrence in each keyword co-occurrence network were deployed to label the keyword co-occurrence networks.

Co-citation Analysis Based on the Documents

Citation analysis searches to assess the academic acceptability of research by including the frequency with which studies have been cited in various publications (Khanra et al., 2020). A co-citation link is a link between two items that are both cited by the same document (Guleria & Kaur, 2021). Using cited documents as the unit of analysis, a co-citation analysis was conducted. The minimum number of documents for a cited article was considered three. Out of the total 110 cited documents, 80 met the threshold. For each of the 110 cited documents, the total strength of the co-citation links was calculated. Accordingly, several clusters can be identified based on the different key areas that these authors have mainly focused on in their studies. Fewer co-citations reflect that the manuscripts have less data in common (Lamba et al., 2022).

Figure 5a

Co-citation Analysis Based on the Documents

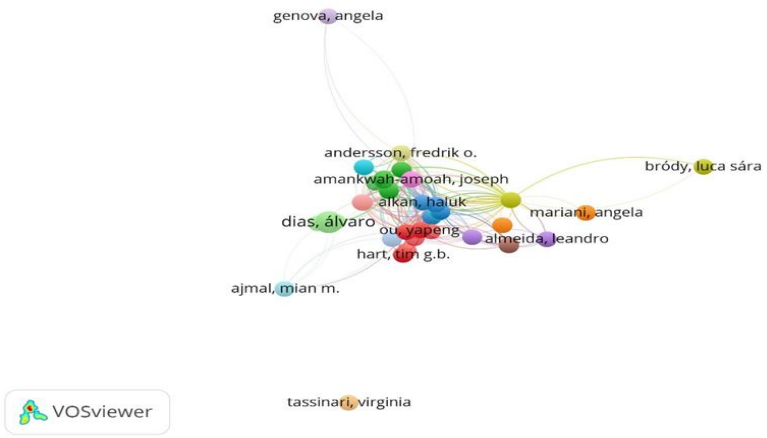
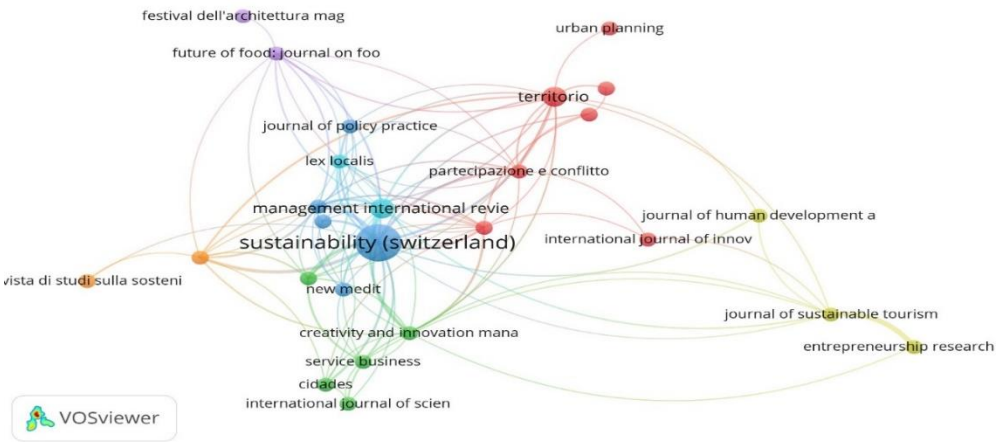


Figure 5b, shows that co-citation analysis was done based on sources and the minimum number of sources for a cited article was considered two. Among the total of 30 journals, cited documents, 30 met the threshold. For each of the 30 sources, the total strength of the citation links with other sources was calculated. The sources with the greatest total link strength were selected. As presented in the bibliometric coupling with journals displayed how the greatest number of publications were published in selected journals and how it has formed a research field with the focal areas in sustainable innovation.

Figure 5b

Co-citation Analysis Based on the Documents



As presented in Figure 5b, “Journal of Sustainability, has received high citations that” their co-linkages with other sources are shown by the blue coloured circles and lines. The blue cluster has formed a link with some other journals like “Management international review”, and journal of policy practice”. Further, both Red Green clusters have formed very strong linkages that green has clustered with “Creativity and innovation”, “Service Business”, and “International Journal of Science”.

Table 02

Highly Cited Research Articles Published in Journals

	Total Citations	TC per Year	Total Citations
MORAWSKA-JANCELEWICZ J, 2022, J KNOWL ECON	60	20.00	3.48
KUMARI R, 2020, SUSTAINABILITY	56	11.20	2.29
SANZO MJ, 2015, SERV BUS	46	4.60	1.51
SVENSSON PG, 2020, SPORT MANAGE REV	41	8.20	1.67
CRUZ H, 2017, PARTECIP CONFL	36	4.50	2.14
MATTHEWS JR, 2017, J HUM DEV CAPABILITIES	25	3.13	1.49
FISK R, 2019, HUMANIST MANAG J	24	4.00	1.88
MONTEIRO S, 2021, SUSTAINABILITY	22	5.50	3.85
GONZÁLEZ CG, 2014, AGER	20	1.82	1.11
KRUSE DJ, 2019, J PROD INNOVATION MANAGE	18	3.00	1.41
STRASSER T, 2020, SUSTAINABILITY	17	3.40	0.69
BERZIN SC, 2014, J POLICY PRACT	16	1.45	0.89
HART TGB, 2015, S AFR J SCI	15	1.50	0.49
BEVILACQUA C, 2020, SUSTAINABILITY	14	2.80	0.57
AMBATI NR, 2019, INT J SCI TECHNOL RES	14	2.33	1.09
JULIANI DP, 2017, INT J SOC ECOL SUSTAINABLE DEV	12	1.50	0.71
GENOVA A, 2020, SUSTAINABILITY	11	2.20	0.45
MILWOOD P, 2020, WORLDWIDE HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM THEMES	8	1.60	0.33
CARIDÀ A, 2022, CREAT INNOV MANAGE	8	2.67	0.46
VASCONCELLOS OLIVEIRA R, 2021, SUSTAINABILITY	8	2.00	1.40
NOGUEIRA C, 2019, CIDADES	7	1.17	0.55
PARRILLA-GONZÁLEZ JA, 2021, NEW MEDIT	5	1.25	0.88
SLETTEBØ Å, 2021, FRONT PSYCHOL	5	1.25	0.88
MARIANI A, 2017, RIV STUDI SULLA SOSTENIBILITA	3	0.38	0.18
TASSINARI V, 2023, URBAN PLANNING	2	1.00	1.33
DIAS Á, 2024, ENTREP RES J	2	2.00	5.00
DIAS Á, 2023, J SUSTAINABLE TOUR	1	0.50	0.67
ALKAN H, 2019, LEX LOCALIS	1	0.17	0.08
DA COSTA LF, 2022, INT J INNOV SUSTAINABLE DEVELOP	1	0.33	0.06

Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

Figure 6

Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

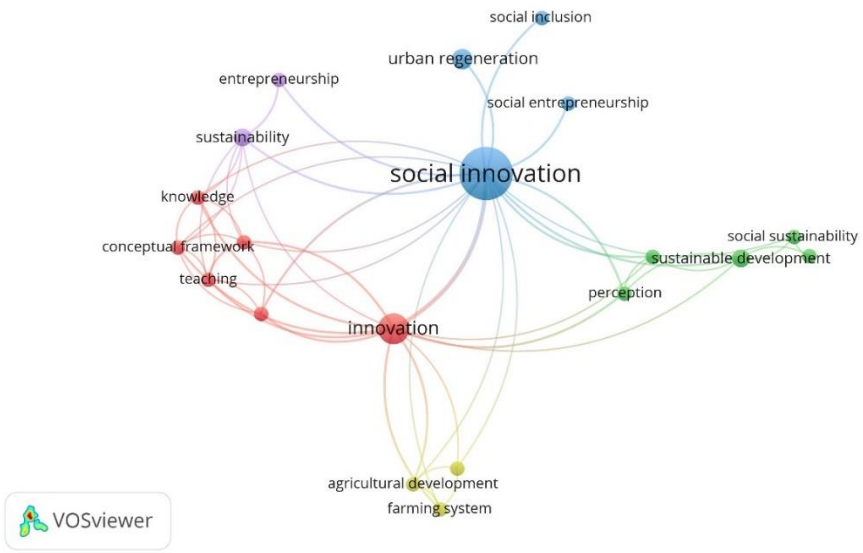


Table 03

Keywords Categorised into Clusters Based on the Co-occurrence

	Cluster	Cluster theme	Keywords
Cluster 1	Green	Sustainability	Social Sustainability, Sustainable development, perception, social innovation, social change.
Cluster 2	Red	Knowledge sharing	Innovation, knowledge, Higher education, teaching, research and development.
Cluster 3	Blue	Social Innovation	Social Innovation, Social entrepreneurship, Urban regeneration, social inclusion.
Cluster 4	Yellow	Agriculture	Agricultural development, Farming system, social economy
Cluster 5	Purple	Entrepreneurship,	Entrepreneurship, sustainability

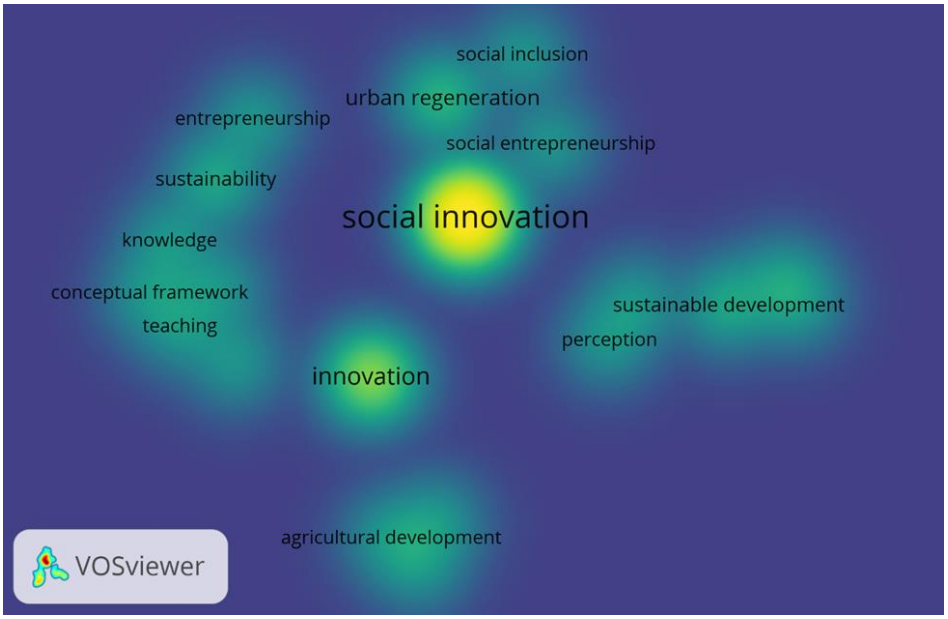
According to the findings of the co-occurrence, there are five clusters that have been identified in the study, which have been designated with different colours as green, red, blue, yellow and purple. These findings related to each theme are explained in Table 4 with keywords in clusters. The cluster one and three are trending areas during this period. Further, cluster 3 (blue) with a larger size of the node and the thickness of the line represents the strong

relationship of these keywords. Accordingly, the second most powerful linkage is displayed through cluster 2 with red colour.

The line thickness in the figure denotes the strength of the relationship between the keywords. The size of the node denotes the frequency of occurrences. Higher frequency denotes a higher size of the nodes. Thus, "Social innovation" can be said it frequently occur in studies. It means this area has been widely researched. Further, it has been proven with frequent occurrence of keywords respectively as social innovation (27), Innovation (9). Sustainability (3).

Figure 7

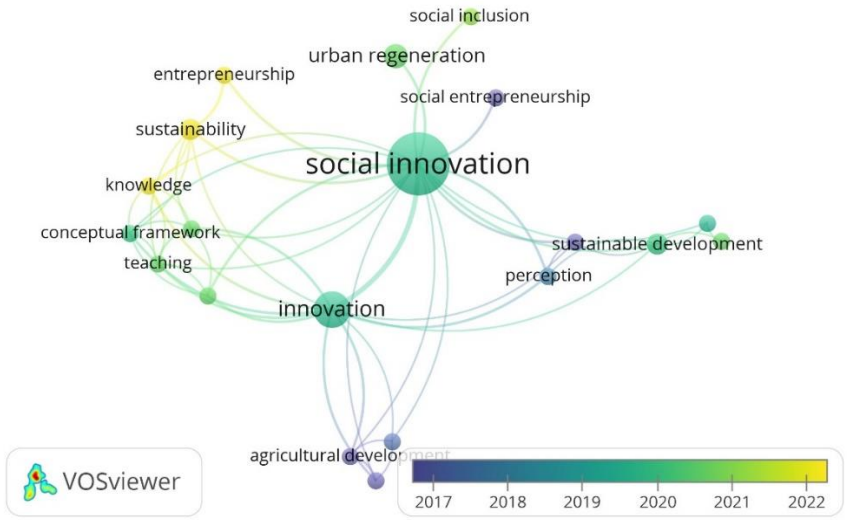
The Map of Keyword Co-occurrence Density Visualisation



We further analysis through the map of keyword co-occurrence density visualisation, as presented in Figure 7, there is no keyword considered here that has been positioned as red note that shed the light that there are numerous areas that need to cover with future research studies that are still in their infancy level as a phenomenon. "Social innovation" which has in yellow colour node indicates that some research has been done, whilst those that fall in the green area indicate that little research has been done. Thus, it suggests a paucity of research to back up this assertion with existing knowledge. Therefore, more research in such areas has to be done by future scholars.

Figure 8

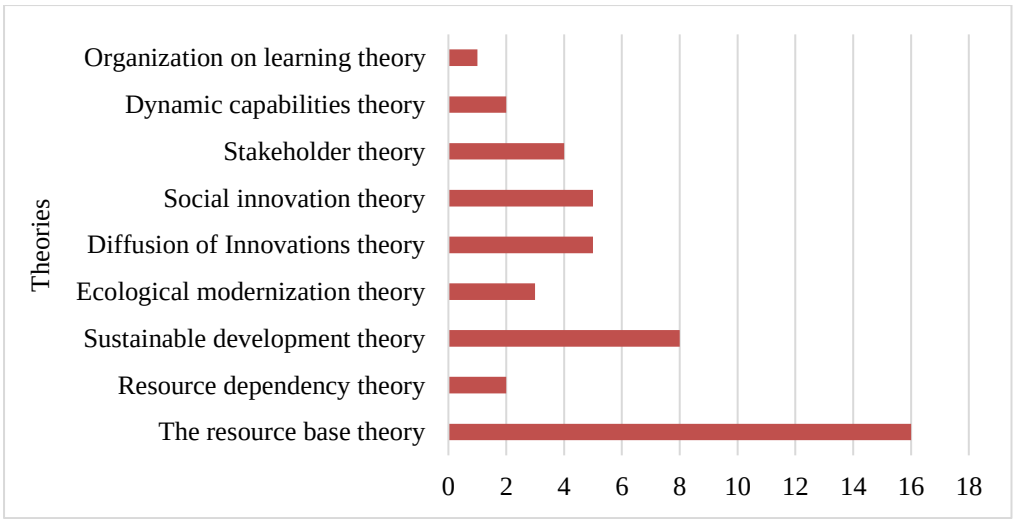
Dynamic Co-word Map for Central Keywords Detection



Through tracking, central keyword analysis was performed to track the recent keywords related to the social innovation phenomenon. In 2020, the concepts of social innovation have gained growing relevance in the focal literature. In recent years (2022) main attention has been focused on keywords such as entrepreneurship, sustainability, and knowledge. Thus, it illustrates that in recently papers revolving around above mentioned areas.

Figure 9

Theoretical Approaches in the Literature



The overview of the theoretical approaches has focused on referred literature presented in Figure 8. In theoretical overview of the prior studies can identify major theories such as the resource base theory (Mishra et al., 2019), the Sustainable development theory (Mensah & Ricart ,2019). As well as social innovation theory, Diffusion of Innovations theories have also gained attention in past literature.

Gaps Identified for Further Exploration

Limited research exists on the application of social innovation processes in turbulent environments, such as COVID-19. To address this gap, further research should explore factors that promote or inhibit social innovation, the mechanisms underlying these processes, and their outcomes. This could help understand how participation in social innovation during turbulence impacts people's commitment to projects and their physical and mental welfare.

The dearth of comparable research initiatives in the SI sector special reference to developed nations as well as to NGOs, particularly in the settings of the Middle East countries, African countries, is the reason for the significance of future work. Thus, studies need some effort to close some of the gaps in the relevant literature (Matloub et al., 2022).

The past studies have focused on the specific stakeholder while discussing social innovation, especially at the organisational and corporate levels. Thus, more comprehensive views of a wider range of stakeholders and analytical levels—including users, organisations, ecosystems, and society—will be required in future research (Phillips et al., 2024).

There are number of social innovations to improve the social and economic well-being of the poor in developing countries with limited state intervention and structural constraints. As well as these activities are as widespread and often as commercially oriented ones (Tang et al., 2023). However, it's unclear who should benefit from these practices, how they should be implemented, and the level of engagement of target stakeholders. The evaluation of the effect of sustainable consumption as an impact-oriented approach focused on its effect on the ecological and social surroundings. Further, the intent-oriented approaches considered the intention of the behaviour based on its pro-ecological or pro-social intention.

More research has been done in the sustainable development field to show that sustainable development is still crucial for safeguarding society and the environment. Thus. Although there is certainly space for improvement, many noteworthy accomplishments have been made. Retailers, for example, might maintain influence and control over the distribution process by acting as an "ecological gatekeeper" through their strong ability to connect with supply chain participants (Yang et al., 2017). Further proposed that its issues would not just affect retailers but also reach the post-consumption phases (Taghikhah et al., 2019). However, the customers' crucial involvement in converting the supply chain's process into sustainability is crucial and highlights them (Matharu et l., 2020).

Research on social innovation primarily focuses on organisational perspectives, focusing on how organisations develop creative responses to societal problems. In educational institutions, the collaboration of "social innovation" and "design education" is used to open

innovation in building institutional social relations. However, studies often overlook grassroots, community, and individual contributions to social change (Li, 2022; Tu et al., 2024; Wang, 2023).

Findings of the study line with the findings of Lu (2024) as the SDGs seemed to be a very appropriate way to categorise the social and environmental issues that were addressed. In addition to the fact that one of the more prominent methodologies is case studies to nexuses with one or more SDGs, the SDGs' global relevance makes them an appropriate SI classification scheme.

Conclusion

This study provides a systematic review of the social innovation literature to fulfill the two-fold objectives, as, to identify the gaps in the existing body of knowledge and to pinpoint areas in which research relating to the social innovation phenomenon is based on the articles published in Scopus database. Study included with the 63 articles which selected PRISMA guidelines was adhering with the inclusion criteria. Most of the studies focused on firms' perspective than the consumers' perspective. The objective was achieved through keyword co-occurrence network visualisation and Co-citation analysis. According to the descriptive findings, the study explores that the concept of social innovation has gained more attention in academia since 2017, and it has a more popular in recent years. The keyword "social innovation" exhibits a high occurrence compared to other keywords searched; however, the keyword co-occurrence density visualisation map proves that has not been extensively explored. Thus, it emphasises that the social innovation is a novel phenomenon.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Every study has limitations, and the authors acknowledge that by using strict inclusion criteria, they might have overlooked some significant research that has been published in other languages and included in-depth theoretical discussion. The evaluation left out book chapters and reports, but it is suggested that these be included in future research, along with studies conducted in scholarly databases and other languages.

The current SLR finds the gaps in the body of literature by carefully examining the studies selected for the defined locations, using the designated area as the output of the density visualisation map. There has been discussion of the information gaps and possible research areas.

It shows the chronological growth of research at social innovation; it's fruitful to conduct further studies by future scholars in order to explore new venues in the domain. In contexts such as the application of social innovation during turbulence impacts people's physical and mental welfare. A higher number of predominance studies have been conducted in the Western context, So it is essential to focus on the other contexts for future studies.

The past studies have focused on the specific stakeholder while discussing social innovation, especially at organisational and corporate levels. Thus, more comprehensive

views of a wider range of stakeholders and analytical levels-including users, organisations, ecosystems, and society-will be required in future research.

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