The Evolution of Social Entrepreneurship Research: A Systematic Literature Review

Nur Izzati Ab Ghani[1]*, Nur Syifaa Athirah Mohd Said[2], Farah Roslan[3] and Norhilmi Mohammad[4]

[1,4]Faculty of General Studies & Advanced Education, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

[2]Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

[3]Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship has increasingly emerged as a vital mechanism for driving sustainable development and addressing persistent societal, economic, and environmental challenges globally. However, despite the exponential growth of academic publications in recent years, the body of literature remains fragmented across diverse disciplines, requiring further synthesis of the relationships between organizational strategies, institutional contexts, and community outcomes. To address this critical research gap, this study presents a systematic literature review with an intended publication window of 2021–2026 and reporting guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement. A rigorous literature search strategy was conducted across two major international multidisciplinary databases, namely Web of Science and Scopus, to identify high-quality, peer-reviewed primary research. After applying strict inclusion and exclusion criteria through structured screening, a final sample of 30 primary studies (n=30) was selected for in-depth qualitative synthesis and thematic analysis. The synthesized findings are categorized into three distinct thematic clusters: (1) Organizational Strategies, Business Models, and Performance, which examines operational governance, dual-mission alignment, scaling strategies, and financial sustainability; (2) Ecosystems, Policy Frameworks, and Institutional Environments, which investigates macro-level institutional support, policy mechanisms, and regulatory contexts; and (3) Community Development, Social Innovation, and Impact Creation, which focuses on grassroots empowerment, social value co-creation, and transformative societal outcomes. Ultimately, this review offers a thematic synthesis of recent developments in social entrepreneurship research, highlighting core research trajectories while identifying key conceptual and empirical gaps. By delivering a unified synthesis, this study provides actionable insights for scholars, decision-makers, and practitioners, while establishing a strategic, future-orientated research agenda aimed at advancing theoretical and practical developments within the field.

Keyword: Social Entrepreneurship; Systematic Literature Review; Sustainable Development; Social Innovation; Social Impact.

INTRODUCTION

The modern global landscape is confronted with unprecedented socio-economic and environmental crises, ranging from systemic poverty and food insecurity to widening structural inequalities. These escalating realities expose the limitations of traditional state interventions and purely profit-driven market systems, rendering the pursuit of alternative socio-economic models an urgent necessity. Social entrepreneurship has consequently emerged as a critical real-world mechanism designed to bridge the gap between market efficiency and societal impact. By embedding social missions into financially viable business models, social enterprises directly tackle pressing challenges at the grassroots level, such as rural marginalization, food scarcity, and local unemployment.

However, as the operational complexities of these ventures intensify in highly volatile and resource-constrained environments, a critical evaluation of how this field has evolved to meet pressing societal demands is urgently needed to inform resilient policy-making and sustainable practice.

In response to these real-world imperatives, the state-of-the-art literature has witnessed a significant expansion, capturing the multifaceted evolution of social entrepreneurship across diverse geographic and institutional contexts. Scholars have extensively mapped the mechanisms through which social enterprises scale their impacts and navigate complex operational environments. For instance, research highlights the critical role of organizational scaling strategies, such as knowledge dissemination and structural growth, in amplifying social performance within nascent ecosystems (Bi & Yu, 2023). Simultaneously, the academic discourse has expanded to examine how entrepreneurial orientation and strategic flexibility drive social innovation in emerging markets shaped by profound institutional pressures (Althabahi et al., 2025). Advancements also underscore the intersection of social entrepreneurship with localized operational models, including the integration of Islamic microfinance mechanisms for poverty alleviation (Ayouche & Aligod, 2025), the cultivation of innovation capabilities within artisan communities to promote cultural sustainability (Gumulya et al., 2022), and the strategic role of targeted marketing in resource-constrained emerging markets (Tariq et al., 2026). Furthermore, there is a growing theoretical convergence examining the intertwined academic trajectories of sustainable and social entrepreneurship (Bonfanti et al., 2024).

Despite these advancements, the existing literature exhibits significant fragmentation and theoretical gaps, particularly concerning the unintended consequences of policy interventions and the complexities of organizational capability orchestration. For example, while public policies such as wage subsidies aim to support work integration social enterprises, empirical evidence suggests these tools can lead to high fiscal costs and inadvertently hinder the transition of marginalized workers into the open labor market (Baláž et al., 2026). Similarly, well-intentioned community capacity-building initiatives can backfire, resulting in elite capture and stalled social innovation if robust institutional frameworks are absent (Nurhasanah et al., 2025). Furthermore, researchers have identified a digital paradox where business model innovation negatively moderates the relationship between digital maturity and social impact due to resource overloads and strategic ambidexterity challenges (Herrera-Ballesteros et al., 2026). Structural integration remains another critical margin, with social enterprises facing severe capacity, visibility, and regulatory barriers when attempting to participate in broader economic frameworks like public procurement (Kuruneri et al., 2025). Finally, broader sustainability transitions reveal a troubling empirical lag, as technical innovations continuously accelerate while deep social innovations linger (Geels, 2026), highlighting a disjointed understanding of how social enterprises can systematically trigger large-scale systemic transformations.

To systematically address these theoretical margins and the highly fragmented nature of current research, a Systematic Literature Review is recognized as the optimal methodological approach. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, a systematic methodology guided by the PRISMA statement provides a rigorous, transparent, and replicable protocol to synthesize scattered empirical findings and disjointed theoretical perspectives. Previous reviews have examined the field's evolution (Dionisio, 2019), its multilevel foundations (Saebi et al., 2019), the relationship between social and sustainable entrepreneurship (Bonfanti et al., 2024), and antecedents of social impact (Quilloy et al., 2024). The present review builds on these contributions by comparing recent findings across organizational strategies, institutional environments, and community outcomes, with attention to the conditions that explain differing results. A Systematic Literature Review is therefore essential to consolidate disparate insights, resolve contradictory empirical evidence regarding social enterprise performance, and establish a cohesive theoretical foundation that bridges the identified gaps between social impact intent and actual operational execution.

Guided by the need to consolidate this evolving domain, the precise objective of this systematic literature review is to examine the recent thematic evolution of social entrepreneurship research, identify core theoretical and practical gaps, and propose an integrated agenda for future scholarship. Specifically, the review seeks to answer how the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship has evolved over time and what structural, strategic, and contextual factors most significantly impede or enable the scalability of social impact globally. To achieve these objectives, the paper is systematically structured. Following this Introduction, the Methodology section details the inclusion criteria and search strategy and study-selection process utilized for literature selection. The Results

section subsequently presents the thematic findings synthesized from the retrieved corpus. The Discussion section critically analyzes these findings against existing paradigms to propose new theoretical frameworks, while the Conclusion synthesizes the study, highlighting practical implications and outlining precise directions for future inquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social entrepreneurship research has evolved significantly since its inception, reflecting shifts in academic focus, methodological approaches, and conceptual frameworks. Early studies primarily sought to define and distinguish social entrepreneurship from traditional entrepreneurship, emphasizing its role in addressing social problems and improving social welfare through innovative business models and socio-technological solutions (Adithya et al., 2026; Varvara et al., 2021; Şengüllendi, 2022). As the field matured, researchers began to explore the characteristics of social entrepreneurs and the environments conducive to their emergence, often drawing from multiple disciplines such as sociology, economics, and management (Şengüllendi, 2022; Al Thabahi et al., 2026; Agatova, 2022). This multidisciplinary approach led to a fragmented yet rich body of literature, with scholars attempting to theorize and systematize the phenomenon through case studies and conceptual analyses (Agatova, 2022; Cardella et al., 2021). The intellectual structure of the field has been mapped using bibliometric and co-citation analyses, revealing key themes such as concept development, ecosystem relationships, and societal embedding (Varvara et al., 2021; Chen & Shabbir, 2025).

Over time, social entrepreneurship research expanded to include the study of its impact on social and economic development, particularly in the context of poverty alleviation and sustainable development (Dionisio, 2019; Vargas-Hernandez et al., 2025; During & van Dam, 2018). The field has been promoted globally as a market-based, innovation-driven mechanism for tackling complex challenges, yet knowledge remains unevenly distributed and conceptually fragmented (Dionisio, 2019; During & van Dam, 2018). Bibliometric analyses have highlighted the rapid growth of publications, especially in the last decade, and the increasing attention to sustainability-oriented outcomes (During & van Dam, 2018; Nkukpornu et al., 2026; Saebi et al., 2019). Researchers have also identified critical gaps, such as the need for more empirical studies and a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship in emerging economies (During & van Dam, 2018; Ferreira et al., 2017). The evolution of research themes has been traced through systematic reviews, revealing shifts from foundational definitions to more nuanced explorations of impact, outcomes, and barriers (Varvara et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2017).

Methodologically, the field has witnessed a transition from qualitative case studies to more sophisticated empirical and bibliometric analyses, enabling the mapping of intellectual trends and thematic evolution (Cardella et al., 2021; Majumdar & Ganesh, 2020; Şengüllendi, 2020). The use of frameworks such as Gartner's model has facilitated the classification of research topics and the identification of dominant themes, including social responsibility, innovation, and ecosystem dynamics (Majumdar & Ganesh, 2020; Tan Luc et al., 2022). Social entrepreneurship education has also emerged as a distinct area of inquiry, with studies examining teaching methods, intended outcomes, and the role of education in fostering social responsibility and sustainable impact (Tan Luc et al., 2022). The digital evolution and crisis contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have further influenced research directions, prompting investigations into the adaptability and resilience of social enterprises (Seema & Babu, 2021).

Despite its rapid growth, social entrepreneurship research faces ongoing challenges related to conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, and the integration of diverse perspectives (Al Thabahi et al., 2026; Agatova, 2022). The literature remains emergent, with scholars continuing to search for robust theories and frameworks to explain the phenomenon (Agatova, 2022; Cardella et al., 2021). The field's multidisciplinary nature has contributed to its richness but also to its fragmentation, necessitating comprehensive syntheses and systematizations (During & van Dam, 2018; Şengüllendi, 2020). As social entrepreneurship becomes increasingly recognized for its role in inclusive growth and institutional change, future research is expected to focus on bridging conceptual gaps, enhancing empirical evidence, and exploring the sustainability orientation of social ventures across different contexts (Al Thabahi et al., 2026; During & van Dam, 2018). The evolution of social entrepreneurship research thus reflects a dynamic interplay between theory, practice, and societal needs, with ongoing efforts to advance understanding and impact (Varvara et al., 2021; Al Thabahi et al., 2026; During & van Dam, 2018).

For conceptual clarity, social entrepreneurship is understood here as the process of pursuing opportunities and mobilizing resources to create social value. A social enterprise is an organization through which this activity is carried out, combining a social mission with entrepreneurial operations. Social innovation concerns new or adapted practices, services, or arrangements that address social needs and can occur in enterprises, public agencies, or community groups. Sustainable entrepreneurship addresses social or environmental sustainability challenges through entrepreneurial action. These concepts overlap where ventures pursue social and environmental goals, while their units of analysis and primary objectives can differ (Saebi et al., 2019; Bonfanti et al., 2024).

The thematic interpretation uses complementary theoretical lenses. Institutional theory directs attention to the legitimacy, regulatory pressures, and competing logics affecting social enterprises. Resource dependence theory examines how external funding and contracts shape organizational autonomy. Stakeholder theory concerns whose interests influence decisions and receive benefits. Social capital theory explains access to resources through relationships, while paradox theory examines persistent tensions between social and commercial demands (Freeman, 1984; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Smith & Lewis, 2011). These lenses support the comparisons below. Their use in this review should be distinguished from theories explicitly tested by individual studies. Figure 1 summarizes the broader concepts, methods, and research developments discussed in this literature review.

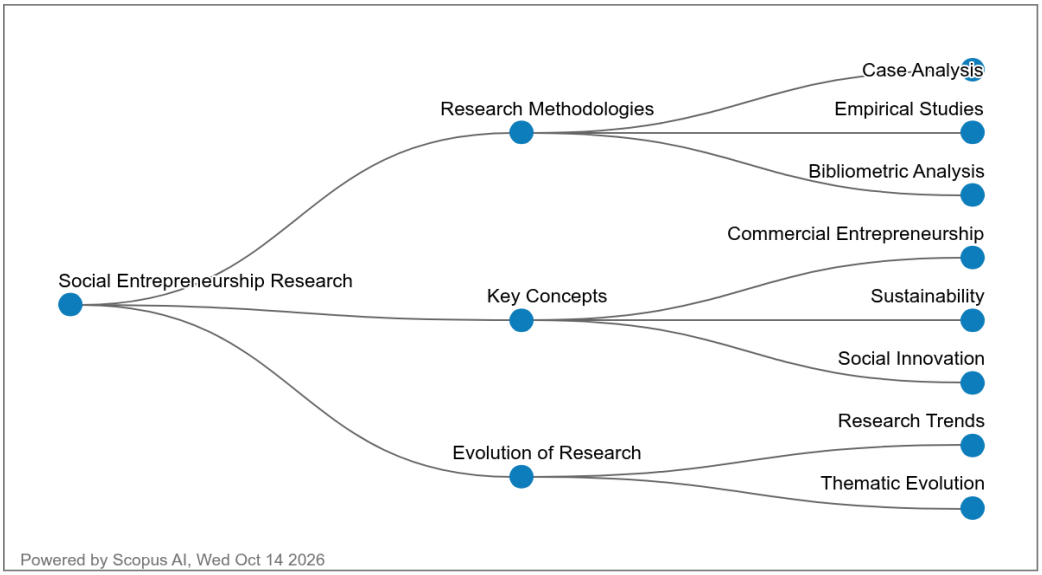


Figure 1. Concept map of social entrepreneurship research

METHODOLOGY

Identification

To assemble a comprehensive body of relevant literature, this study implemented the initial identification phase of a systematic review. The process commenced with the formulation of primary keywords, which were systematically expanded by consulting reference sources, including dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopedias, and prior studies. Following the identification of all pertinent terminology, targeted search strings were constructed and executed within the Scopus and Web of Science databases. This preliminary retrieval stage yielded a cumulative total of 1,200 publications relevant to the research subject, comprising 936 papers from Scopus and 264 papers from Web of Science. Table 1 presents the search expressions and database filters.

The intended publication window is 2021–2026, with searches reported in October 2026. Earlier publications cited in the literature review provide historical and conceptual background. The 2026 coverage is limited to publications available at the search date.

Table 1. Search expressions and database filters

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("Social entrepreneurship" OR "Social enterprise" OR "Social venture" OR "Social business" OR "Social innovation") AND ("Social impact" OR "Value creation" OR Sustainability OR "Impact measurement" OR "Triple bottom line") AND ("Business model" OR Governance OR Performance OR Financing)) AND PUBYEAR > 2020 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final")) Date of Access: October 2026
WoS	TS= (("Social entrepreneurship" OR "Social enterprise" OR "Social venture" OR "Social business" OR "Social innovation") AND ("Social impact" OR "Value creation" OR Sustainability OR "Impact measurement" OR "Triple bottom line") AND ("Business model" OR Governance OR Performance OR Financing)) AND DT=(Article) AND LA=(English) AND PY=(2021 OR 2022 OR 2023 OR 2024 OR 2025 OR 2026) Additional filter: Business Economics (Research Areas). Date of Access: October 2026

Screening

The screening phase involved assessing retrieved studies against the inclusion and exclusion criteria in Table 2 and removing duplicate records. The manuscript reports 1,200 initially identified records and 30 included articles, giving an aggregate reduction of 1,170 records across selection. Figure 2 presents the study-selection stages using the original PRISMA layout. The separate numbers removed as duplicates, excluded at title and abstract screening, and excluded after full-text assessment require verification against the screening log. The review was restricted to literature published in English.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	**Inclusion**	**Exclusion**
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2021–2026	Before 2021 or after 2026
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review
Publication Stage	Final	In Press
Subject	Business, Management and Accounting, Social science	Besides Business, Management and Accounting, Social science

Eligibility

The third stage of the selection process comprised the eligibility phase, during which the retrieved studies were systematically prepared for detailed evaluation. In this phase, the titles and core content of all candidate papers were thoroughly assessed against the established inclusion criteria to ensure strict alignment with the overarching research objectives. Following this screening process, a total of 30 articles successfully met all requirements and were retained for inclusion in the final systematic review.

The adequacy of the 30-study quantity depends on the relevance and range of evidence addressing the research questions. A focused thematic synthesis can compare mechanisms and contextual differences within that corpus. Its findings remain bounded by the search strategy, eligibility criteria, and settings represented in the selected studies.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

To synthesize the diverse research designs across the corpus of 30 selected publications, this systematic literature review utilized an integrative analysis framework to identify critical themes and thematic sub-categories governing the evolution of social entrepreneurship research. Theme development initiated during the data abstraction phase, wherein the 30 papers were meticulously examined to extract core arguments, methodological frameworks, and empirical findings relevant to the historical and conceptual trajectory of the field. The research team critically assessed these primary studies, evaluating their methodological rigor alongside their overarching outcomes. Through collaborative synthesis, the authors established contextualized themes reflecting the current state and progression of social entrepreneurship scholarship. Throughout the analytical process, an audit log was maintained to systematically record interpretive perspectives, analytical decisions, and emergent insights. Finally, the authors conducted cross-comparisons of their thematic frameworks to identify potential inconsistencies, resolving any conceptual discrepancies through structured discussion and consensus. Appendix Table A1 provides a provisional inventory of the 30 distinct publications cited in the Results and Discussion, with their study characteristics and fields requiring verification.

The questions are as follows below:

1. How have organizational strategies and hybrid business models evolved over time to balance financial sustainability with performance outcomes in social enterprises?

2. What role do policy frameworks, institutional environments, and broader entrepreneurial ecosystems play in shaping the development and scalability of social entrepreneurship?

3. How do social innovation processes drive community development and facilitate sustainable social impact creation across diverse context settings?

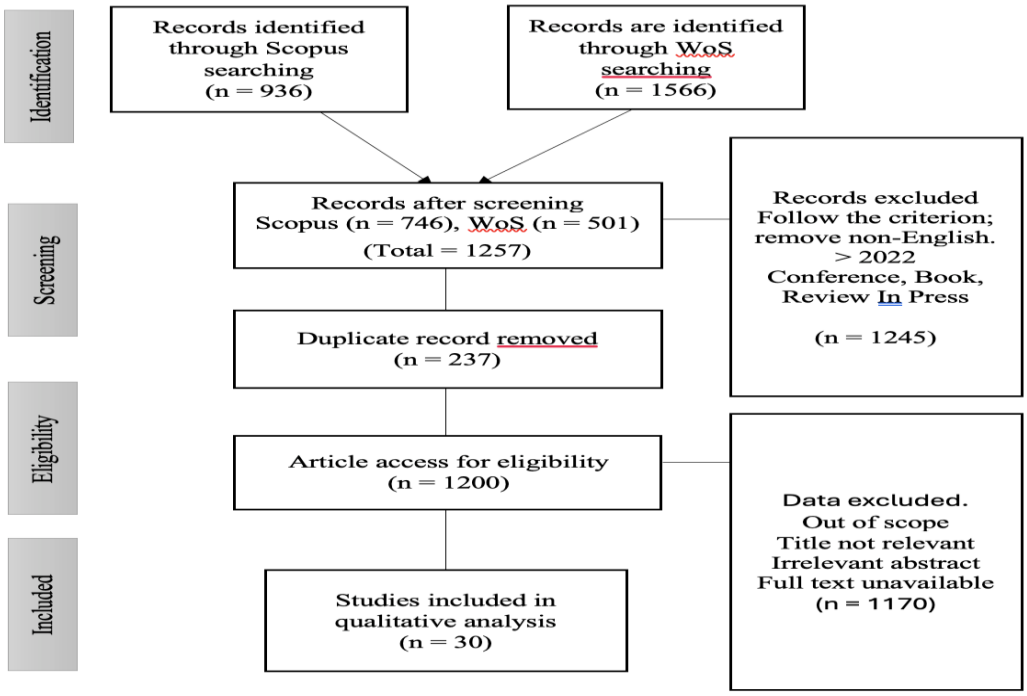


Figure 2. Flow diagram of the proposed searching study (Page et al., 2021)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Organizational Strategies, Business Models, and Performance

Internal strategic leadership and goal orientation serve as foundational drivers for the performance of social ventures. Transformational leadership consistently improves both economic and social outcomes while

enhancing job satisfaction among personnel (Jeong, 2024). In addition to strong leadership, maintaining an entrepreneurial orientation significantly boosts overall enterprise performance, a relationship mediated by strategic flexibility and social innovation (Althabahi et al., 2025). Furthermore, strategic communication plays a vital role in financial success, as organizations focusing external messaging on a narrow, specific set of sustainable development goals achieve stronger economic results than enterprises promoting a broad array of objectives (Culpi Mann et al., 2024).

Designing effective organizational architectures is critical for balancing competing social and economic demands. Social enterprises require highly conscious and adapted business models to achieve dual value creation and avoid operational shortcomings that hinder financial sustainability (Harangozo et al., 2026). Successful business model innovation enables organizations to manage conflicting institutional logics by systematically co-creating value with diverse community and commercial stakeholders (Singh & Pangarkar, 2025). Conversely, a failure to properly align core social purposes with viable revenue mechanisms and market strategies often results in severe financial distress, particularly when organizations attempt to transition into new client segments without securing mission alignment (Frota et al., 2023).

The integration of commercial and social principles creates complex operational environments characterized by hybrid institutional logics. The application of these hybrid frameworks varies widely across different enterprises, resulting in distinct organizational typologies such as socially dominated, balanced, and commercially dominated value systems (Jakob & Sundermeier, 2026). Maintaining this hybrid logic and actively adapting the organizational structure through mechanisms like social franchising or cross-sector partnerships acts as a primary determinant for the successful internationalization of social ventures (Misbauddin et al., 2025). Additionally, external institutional pressures, specifically coercive and mimetic isomorphism, moderate how internal entrepreneurial initiatives translate into tangible organizational success and regulatory compliance (Althabahi et al., 2025).

Technological capabilities and digital readiness strongly influence the capacity of organizations to generate social innovation and expand operations. Advanced digital maturity acts as a critical internal capability allowing enterprises to address complex societal challenges through innovative solutions (Herrera-Ballesteros et al., 2026). Similarly, firm-specific technological competencies, such as the development of digital service platforms, directly facilitate the cross-border expansion and internationalization of social businesses (Misbauddin et al., 2025). However, the drive for innovation requires careful orchestration, as simultaneous digital transformation and structural business model innovation can create organizational tensions and resource overload, which may ultimately suppress the benefits of social innovation initiatives (Herrera-Ballesteros et al., 2026). The successful deployment of these technological tools relies heavily on a supportive business environment and flexible strategic approaches to market challenges (Althabahi et al., 2025).

When scaling operations, social enterprises must carefully select expansion strategies to amplify community impact without compromising financial stability. Implementing a combination of strategies, including knowledge dissemination, structural growth, and contractual partnerships, yields significantly better scaling performance than relying on a single approach (Bi & Yu, 2023). Expansion efforts demand rigorous alignment between the organizational mission and market viability, as attempting to capture new commercial clients can jeopardize the foundational social purpose if stakeholder values clash (Frota et al., 2023). Throughout these growth phases, strategic focus remains essential, since organizations strictly targeting and communicating a narrow scope of objectives consistently achieve superior economic stability during expansion compared to entities with diluted orientations (Culpi Mann et al., 2024).

These findings concern different dimensions of performance. Scaling strategies in Chinese social enterprises (Bi & Yu, 2023) and mission alignment in a market-expansion case (Frota et al., 2023) together suggest that organizational growth and beneficiary outcomes require separate assessment. Similarly, the positive role of innovation in Althabahi et al. (2025) and the resource tensions described by Herrera-Ballesteros et al. (2026) indicate that the benefits of combining capabilities may depend on implementation capacity. Institutional theory helps interpret the external pressures on these choices, while paradox theory explains why commercial and social demands can remain in tension. Differences in samples, research designs, and outcome measures limit direct comparison.

Ecosystems, Policy Frameworks, and Institutional Environments

The social economy functions as a critical intermediary sector positioned between state interventions and open market dynamics, requiring robust institutional support and collaborative networks to thrive (Hernández-Perlines, 2025). Within this landscape, place-based social innovation ecosystems emerge as potent configurations capable of addressing complex societal challenges through a combination of entrepreneurial solutions, impact finance, and public administration backing (Sancino, Bellazzecca, Leone, Scarlata, Di Maso, Antonelli, Badgaoui, Chiodo, Mariani, Rizzo, Tricarico, & Tropeano, 2026). Furthermore, emerging ventures, particularly circular startups, serve as essential catalysts for environmental and technological advancement within these networks (Cerchione, Passaro, Quinto, & Sicardi, 2026). Fostering systemic collaboration across multiple stakeholders enables sustainable business model innovation and establishes a foundation for broad institutional transformation.

Government policies and procurement frameworks significantly influence the operational success and economic performance of social enterprises. Targeted interventions, such as direct wage subsidies and preferential access to public procurement, demonstrably increase organizational assets and worker compensation (Baláž, Jeck, & Balog, 2026). However, translating policy intent into practice remains difficult in developing regions, where structural deficiencies, lack of awareness, and inadequate legal frameworks hinder the inclusion of social ventures in public contracting (Kuruneri, Dube, & Obadire, 2025). Surmounting such barriers necessitates comprehensive capacity building, the establishment of dedicated oversight bodies, and the implementation of adaptive regulatory mechanisms capable of addressing market failures (Hernández-Perlines, 2025).

Work integration models highlight the ongoing tension between achieving social objectives and maintaining market competitiveness. Social cooperatives provide substantial community value through mechanisms like mentoring, specialized incentives, and the creation of local goods (Kiss & Rácz, 2024). Despite these benefits, structural challenges such as excessive product heterogeneity, visibility constraints, and limited financial capacity frequently undermine long-term sustainability (Kuruneri, Dube, & Obadire, 2025). Additionally, while financial subsidies support disadvantaged workers in the short term, such policies sometimes inadvertently trap individuals within subsidized enterprises, ultimately failing to facilitate integration into the mainstream open labor market (Baláž, Jeck, & Balog, 2026).

In rural and marginalized contexts, overcoming fragmentation requires a shift from isolated initiatives toward networked governance. Community-led projects frequently struggle to sustain operations once initial project-based funding expires, pointing to a need for alternative organizational arrangements (Gedminaitė-Raudonė, Lankauskienė, & Simonaitytė, 2026). Establishing vertically structured bridging relationships and local networks helps embed social enterprises into broader regional frameworks, thereby enhancing coordination and shared marketing efforts (Kiss & Rácz, 2024). These networked configurations mirror the multi-component nature of place-based ecosystems, demonstrating that sustained local economic development relies heavily on continuous cooperation among public authorities, businesses, and community groups (Sancino, Bellazzecca, Leone, Scarlata, Di Maso, Antonelli, Badgaoui, Chiodo, Mariani, Rizzo, Tricarico, & Tropeano, 2026).

As the field of collective entrepreneurship matures, implementing rigorous evaluation methods becomes essential for verifying actual social impact. Existing literature often displays a positive bias toward public support programs, which risks obscuring underlying inefficiencies, high transaction costs, and the misallocation of resources (Baláž, Jeck, & Balog, 2026). To address these shortcomings, researchers emphasize the necessity of developing standardized impact metrics and shared governance models that accurately capture both tangible economic outcomes and intangible community benefits (Hernández-Perlines, 2025). Ultimately, embedding circular and social startups deeply within formal innovation ecosystems ensures that public and private support translates effectively into sustainable, large-scale societal transitions (Cerchione, Passaro, Quinto, & Sicardi, 2026).

The geographical settings also clarify the conditions under which support operates. The Slovak work-integration study (Baláž et al., 2026) examines outcomes where public support exists, while the Botswana procurement study (Kuruneri et al., 2025) examines barriers to accessing contracts. Resource dependence theory connects these cases through the effects of funding arrangements on enterprise choices. Evidence from Hungarian

cooperatives (Kiss & Rácz, 2024) and Lithuanian rural initiatives (Gedminaitė-Raudonė et al., 2026) further suggests examining how local and bridging relationships sustain activity. These comparisons identify differences in policy access and network arrangements that require attention when transferring findings across developed, developing, and emerging settings.

Community Development, Social Innovation, and Impact Creation

Research on social and sustainable entrepreneurship often highlights the intersection of business models, impact measurement, and external enablers in driving positive societal change. Systematic reviews demonstrate that organizational and individual factors act as primary antecedents to social impact, though institutional contexts require further scholarly exploration (Quilloy et al., 2024). Scholars also note critical convergences and divergences in how sustainable and social ventures navigate financial constraints and innovate their business structures (Bonfanti et al., 2024). Despite widespread recognition of the need for transformative change, social innovations currently lag behind technical innovations in accelerating broader sustainability transitions (Geels, 2026). Unlike low-carbon technologies, purely social initiatives struggle to activate mechanisms that mobilize finance and secure strong socio-political support (Geels, 2026). Consequently, integrating extensive stakeholder cooperation is essential to move beyond basic organizational survival and foster truly regenerative development (Graci, 2025).

Agricultural social entrepreneurship serves as a vital mechanism for rural empowerment and sustainable community development in emerging economies. Case studies demonstrate that integrating creative business tactics with ecological goals in the agricultural sector effectively reduces poverty, generates local employment, and creates supplementary income for rural populations (Suresha et al., 2025). In tandem with these localized efforts, the introduction of climate-smart interventions through corporate social responsibility initiatives directly improves crop yields and secures farmer livelihoods (Dey & Bansal, 2026). Empowering local communities also involves reviving traditional knowledge, such as utilizing medicinal herbs and promoting organic farming practices to address holistic health needs while simultaneously supporting sustainable agriculture (Mohanty et al., 2025). However, scaling these interventions often presents dilemmas regarding whether to prioritize expanding technological solutions or strengthening the institutional capacity of producer enterprises (Dey & Bansal, 2026). Ultimately, founders in emerging markets must carefully balance mission integrity with market scalability when addressing systemic issues like food insecurity through functional product innovation (Tariq et al., 2026).

Social innovation is increasingly applied to peripheral territories and creative industries to stimulate localized economic and cultural regeneration. In the tourism sector, initiatives like astrotourism leverage natural heritage to build social capital, redistribute power, and form collaborative community responses to socioeconomic vulnerabilities (Santos et al., 2025). Similarly, broader tourism models are shifting toward regenerative principles that require active cooperation among immediate and distant stakeholders to secure sustainable livelihoods (Graci, 2025). In creative sectors, social enterprises collaborate directly with artisan communities to preserve traditional handicrafts through continuous co-creation and responsive market research (Gumulya et al., 2022). This capability for continuous innovation is nurtured by multidisciplinary teams and local champions who align product development with cultural sustainability and village governance frameworks (Gumulya et al., 2022). Together, these approaches illustrate how leveraging local assets and cultural traditions can drive sustainable local development when managed inclusively (Santos et al., 2025; Graci, 2025).

Despite the positive intentions behind social innovation, community development projects frequently encounter complex structural and governance challenges. In highly competitive local environments, capacity building efforts can inadvertently deviate from their original sustainability goals and lead to elite capture, thereby stifling genuine social progress (Nurhasanah et al., 2025). The lack of robust institutional frameworks often allows cash-based interests to overshadow community benefits, demonstrating the inherent fragility of some local development initiatives (Nurhasanah et al., 2025). To counteract these specific risks, self-monitoring strategies that integrate continuous capacity building and praxis sessions have proven effective in empowering local populations to analyze their own realities and advocate for their systemic needs (Ongkeko et al., 2025). Effective community engagement fosters deep ownership and ensures the long-term viability of health and social interventions (Ongkeko et al., 2025). Furthermore, leadership styles and founder identities significantly

influence organizational design, highlighting the urgent need for professionalized management approaches when navigating institutional voids (Tariq et al., 2026).

Financial mechanisms and innovative partnership models are critical for the survival and scalable impact of social enterprises focused on community development. High interest rates in conventional microfinance setups can diminish the effectiveness of poverty alleviation efforts and substantially lower loan recovery rates (Ayouche & Aligod, 2025). Conversely, alternative structures, such as the diminishing partnership contracts found in Islamic microfinance, position the financial institution as an invested partner rather than a mere lender, which improves both the sustainability of the institution and the poverty reduction outcomes (Ayouche & Aligod, 2025). Understanding the optimal capital structure and funding instruments of social ventures remains a significant knowledge gap, as enterprises must constantly adapt to overcome strict financial constraints (Bonfanti et al., 2024). Identifying external and environmental antecedents to social impact is essential for policymakers and practitioners aiming to design better support systems for these fragile initiatives (Quilloy et al., 2024). Ultimately, innovative financial partnerships and comprehensive support strategies are required to maximize the socio-economic benefits generated by social enterprises (Ayouche & Aligod, 2025; Quilloy et al., 2024; Bonfanti et al., 2024).

The contrast between community self-monitoring in the Philippines (Ongkeko et al., 2025) and elite capture in Indonesian ecotourism (Nurhasanah et al., 2025) shows why participation needs to be examined through decision-making authority and the distribution of benefits. Stakeholder theory asks whose interests influence outcomes, while social capital theory helps examine how relationships enable access or concentrate influence. The studies concern different sectors and interventions, so their findings support conditional explanations of community impact. The financing simulations discussed above also require interpretation within their modeling assumptions before drawing conclusions about observed poverty reduction.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review aimed to comprehensively examine and synthesize the thematic, conceptual, and methodological evolution of social entrepreneurship research within the intended 2021–2026 publication window. The primary scope focused on peer-reviewed academic articles published between 2021 and 2026, retrieved using explicit inclusion criteria that required rigorous peer review, full-text availability, and a direct analytical focus on social value creation mechanisms. The central research questions guided an exploration into how foundational theories have evolved, what dominant methodological approaches have characterized the field across different developmental stages, and how thematic clusters have shifted from early conceptual definitions toward nuanced empirical investigations. The synthesized findings address recent developments in organizational strategies, institutional environments, and community-level social impact. Dominant themes identified across the reviewed literature include the strategic management of dual institutional logics, financial sustainability alongside mission drift prevention, hybrid governance structures, and ecosystem-level cross-sector collaboration. Institutional theory, resource dependence theory, stakeholder theory, social capital theory, and paradox theory provide complementary lenses for interpreting these themes. The methodological diversity of the cited literature requires attention to differences in research design, sampling, and outcome measurement when comparing findings.

This review provides significant contributions to the broader academic landscape by systematically synthesizing fragmented, multi-disciplinary knowledge spanning strategic management, entrepreneurship, public administration, and economic sociology. By clarifying related concepts, the study establishes a structured thematic framework that organizes diverse perspectives into core operational domains, including hybrid identity management, innovative resource mobilization strategies, scaling mechanisms, and social impact assessment paradigms. Furthermore, the review advances theoretical clarity by articulating how social ventures navigate competing demands from commercial markets and social mission mandates. Beyond conceptual advancements, the synthesized evidence carries vital practical implications across multiple applied settings. For policy makers and public administrators, the review highlights the urgent necessity of creating flexible legal frameworks, specialized public procurement policies, and financial support systems tailored to hybrid organizations that fall outside traditional non-profit or purely commercial categories. For social enterprise practitioners and executive leaders, the operational insights provide strategic templates for mitigating mission drift, designing sustainable

revenue models, and establishing collaborative governance. Furthermore, educational institutions can use these structured findings to enhance business school curricula and training programs, equipping future leaders with the cross-disciplinary competencies required to balance financial performance with systemic societal value creation.

Despite the rigorous analytical procedures employed throughout this study, certain methodological constraints of the systematic review process must be acknowledged. The search boundaries were intentionally restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles indexed within selected major academic databases published between 2021 and 2026. Consequently, relevant insights published in non-English journals, book chapters, conference proceedings, or non-academic grey literature were excluded from the final analysis. To address these boundaries and advance the field, future research should prioritize cross-cultural comparative studies that examine how local institutional arrangements, cultural norms, and economic constraints impact the formation and operational sustainability of social enterprises. Additional research should focus on developing standardized quantitative instruments for measuring long-term social value creation and investigating the adoption of emerging digital technologies, platform business models, and data-driven decision tools within social enterprises. Ultimately, conducting systematic literature reviews in this academic domain plays a fundamental role in consolidating fragmented empirical findings into a cohesive, evidence-based foundation. Such systematic syntheses are essential for bridging the gap between theoretical development and real-world execution, ensuring that future empirical research continues to address pressing global challenges with high academic rigor and practical relevance.

The October 2026 search provides partial coverage of the final publication year. Differences between database subject filters and the English-language restriction may further limit coverage. The selected quantity supports interpretation within its eligibility boundaries, and the findings should be assessed alongside the completeness of study-level extraction and methodological appraisal.

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Use of Generative AI During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors made use of generative AI tools to enhance language clarity, grammar, and readability. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, edited, and validated by the authors to ensure accuracy and scholarly integrity. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of the article.

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APPENDIX 1

Table Appendix 1. Provisional characteristics of publications cited in the original analysis This table lists the 30 distinct publications cited in the Results and Discussion. It requires reconciliation with the final included-study list. Fields requiring verification are marked. A framework or focus may describe a focal concept where a named theory has not been established.

Publication	**Study setting**	**Design and sample or unit**	**Framework or focus**	**Finding, focus or eligibility**
Jeong (2024)	South Korea	Two-wave survey; 170 employees in 52 social enterprises	Leadership styles	Links transformational leadership with organizational outcomes.
Althabahi et al. (2025)	United Arab Emirates	Survey of 200 social enterprises	Entrepreneurial orientation and institutional isomorphism	Examines strategic flexibility and innovation as intermediaries between orientation and performance.
Culpi Mann et al. (2024)	Setting to verify	Quantitative publication; enterprise sample to verify	SDG communication focus	Examines the relation of focused SDG communication to economic performance.
Harangozo et al. (2026)	Published literature	Systematic review; verify corpus size	Socially extended business model canvas	Synthesizes how social missions can be represented in enterprise business models. Background review.
Singh & Pangarkar (2025)	Setting to verify	Organizational case; one work-integration organization	Business model innovation	Illustrates how a work-integration organization adapts its business model.

Frota et al. (2023)	Brazil	Teaching case; Clubinho Preto	Mission alignment and market expansion	Illustrates trade-offs in moving into new client segments. Verify primary-research eligibility.
Jakob & Sundermeier (2026)	Setting to verify	Taxonomy-building study; corpus and design to verify	Hybrid institutional logics	Differentiates the ways social enterprises combine institutional logics.
Misbauddin et al. (2025)	Bangladesh	Study of internationalized social businesses; design and size to verify	Internationalization and hybrid organizing	Identifies technologies and partnerships relevant to cross-border expansion.
Herrera-Ballesteros et al. (2026)	European Union	Quantitative analysis of Eurobarometer data; 12,615 companies in source survey	Digital maturity and business model innovation	Reports that the digital maturity–social innovation association weakens at higher business model innovation. Verify enterprise relevance.
Bi & Yu (2023)	China	Quantitative study of 293 social enterprises	Strategies for scaling social impact	Compares scaling strategies and their combinations.
Hernández-Perlines (2025)	Social economy literature	Historical and conceptual account; corpus to verify	Collective entrepreneurship	Traces how the social economy organizes collective action. Contextual source.
Sancino et al. (2026)	Place-based ecosystems; geography to verify	Ecosystem study; design and sample to verify	Ecosystem orchestration	Examines coordination among place-based actors. Verify direct relevance and design.
Cerchione et al. (2026)	Published literature	Literature review; verify corpus size	Circular startups and innovation ecosystems	Surveys the roles of circular startups within innovation ecosystems. Background review.
Baláž et al. (2026)	Slovakia	Counterfactual analysis of work-integration social enterprises	Public support and market and government failure	Evaluates enterprise performance and public costs against work-integration goals.
Kuruneri et al. (2025)	Botswana	Semi-structured interviews with 19 construction-sector stakeholders	Social procurement and institutional access	Identifies capacity and institutional barriers to participation.
Kiss & Rácz (2024)	Hungary	Study of labour-integration social cooperatives; analytic sample to verify	Substantive economy framework	Examines how cooperatives maintain social functions under commercial pressure.
Gedminaitė-Raudonė et al. (2026)	Lithuania	Study of rural community initiatives; design and sample to verify	Networked collective action	Examines how networking can sustain local initiatives. Verify enterprise relevance.
Quilloy et al. (2024)	Published literature	Systematic review; verify corpus size	Antecedents of social impact	Organizes individual and organizational antecedents of impact. Background review.

Bonfanti et al. (2024)	Published literature	Systematic review; verify corpus size	Social and sustainable entrepreneurship	Compares overlaps and differences in the two research streams. Background review.
Geels (2026)	Sustainability transitions literature	Conceptual comparison; corpus to verify	Sustainability transition mechanisms	Explores why social innovations encounter different scaling conditions from technical innovations. Contextual source.
Graci (2025)	Tourism; setting to verify	Design, sample and article type to verify	Social innovation and sustainable livelihoods	Discusses cooperation and livelihood outcomes. Verify primary-research eligibility.
Suresha et al. (2025)	Karnataka, India	Two rural case studies	Agricultural social entrepreneurship	Examines how agricultural ventures contribute to rural livelihoods.
Dey & Bansal (2026)	Agriculture; setting to verify	Teaching case; AgriNext	Climate-smart agriculture and farmer livelihoods	Illustrates a choice between scaling technology and supporting producer capacity. Verify eligibility.
Mohanty et al. (2025)	Setting to verify	Teaching case; Harinath's Moringa Bullets	Community enterprise and organic production	Illustrates links between organic enterprise and community support. Verify eligibility.
Tariq et al. (2026)	United Arab Emirates	Teaching case; RashTions	Sustainable entrepreneurship and food innovation	Illustrates a food venture's mission and market choices. Verify eligibility.
Santos et al. (2025)	Peripheral territories; setting to verify	Astrotourism study; design and analytic sample to verify	Place-based social innovation	Examines astrotourism as a route to local development. Verify enterprise relevance.
Gumulya et al. (2022)	East Flores, Indonesia	Artisan craft enterprise; unit count to verify	Innovation capability and co-creation	Describes collaboration around product development and cultural continuity.
Nurhasanah et al. (2025)	Pahawang Island, Indonesia	Ecotourism case; analytic sample to verify	Community capacity building and elite capture	Identifies mechanisms through which unequal influence can concentrate local benefits.
Ongkeko et al. (2025)	Rural Philippines	Pilot case study; two communities	Community engagement and self-monitoring	Examines how structured reflection supports locally articulated needs. Verify enterprise relevance.