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Innovation and Impact: Tracing the Footprints of Social Entrepreneurship Research

Dr. Mohit Kumar

Assistant Professor, School of Business Management,
Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur
Email: drmohit.kumar07@gmail.com

Dr Prashant Kumar

Assistant Professor
Study Hall College, affiliated to University of Lucknow, Lucknow
Email: prshntkumar6@gmail.com (*Corresponding author*)

Dr. Pravin Kumar Agarwal

Assistant Professor
School of Business Management, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur
Email: p.mnnit@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship is a growing sentiment in today's world as it creates an opportunity for the creation of positive change in response to acute social issues. This study understands the importance of social entrepreneurship and hence uses bibliometric analysis to map the literature on the topic between 1989 and 2024. This research looks at 3,000 articles over 1,047 sources utilizing quantitative methods like Lotka's Law to ascertain patterns of authorship in an attempt to underline the historical evolution of the subject. By recognizing pioneering countries, essential sources, and influential authors, and emphasizing collaborative networks, this study highlights the factors that influence social entrepreneurship scholarship. The analysis created by this bibliometric study, can be beneficial to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. Besides adding value to scholarly conversation, the findings also find immediate application in pointing out the future direction of further research and strategic intervention drawing on social entrepreneurship for addressing the essential societal issues.

Keywords: Social entrepreneurship, Sustainable development, bibliometric analysis, entrepreneurship, social concerns

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship is one of the most fascinating new fields of study due to its rising popularity in recent decades. Entrepreneurship is becoming more important for solving difficult social and environmental issues, as this interest shows. Social entrepreneurship is a relevant academic field that influences real-world solutions to global issues like poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability. In response to this interest, a wealth of literature on theoretical models and practical

research has emerged. Using bibliometric analysis, this study explores publishing bibliographic data to present a complete and insightful picture of social entrepreneurship research.

Social entrepreneurship, which solves social issues creatively and sustainably, combines corporate acumen and social effect. This convergence has created a significant body of scholarly work that requires more study. This bibliometric analysis was driven by the need to understand social entrepreneurship research's complexity. This study has three objectives. We'll start with a detailed social entrepreneurship studies historical trend study. We analyze trends across time to highlight periods of increasing academic engagement and themes that have remained popular, providing a complete account of how ideas in this discipline have developed. Second, by emphasizing significant publications, nations, and academic institutions, we want to illuminate global information diffusion. This spatial mapping may help us grasp the field's huge range of opinion. Finally, our research aims to illuminate the pioneering publications, networks of collaborators, and writers that have transformed social entrepreneurship.

We expect this bibliometric study will enrich social entrepreneurship conversation. By conducting a rigorous and thorough assessment of the academic literature, we seek to discover relevant patterns, numbers, and hidden insights that could inform future research.

This study aims to answer the following:

- RQ1: What are the historical trends and publication patterns in social entrepreneurship research from 1989 to 2024?
- RQ2: Which countries, authors, and institutions have been the most influential in shaping the field of social entrepreneurship?
- RQ3: What are the most frequently cited publications and dominant thematic areas in social entrepreneurship literature?

2. Literature Review

Over the past decades, the notion of social entrepreneurship has been depicting increasing real-world and scholarly interest. Made popular by Ashoka Foundation founder Bill Drayton initially, social entrepreneurship rests on the assumption that entrepreneurial practices can be applied not only to generate profit but to respond to the world's most urgent social and ecological challenges. Drayton emphasized two essential principles of social entrepreneurship: the necessity of social innovation to transform society, and the presence of visionary leaders who possess imagination, determination, and a strongly held social mission (Sophia, 2015; Kumar et al., 2023).

The concept has evolved over time as an interdisciplinary approach to application in education fields, health care, environmental protection, human rights, and art. Actually, entrepreneurship is three things-vision, action, and sustainability. Thompson et al. (2000) and Sykes (1999) make it clear that successful entrepreneurship rests on vision orientation, purpose definition, and strategic mobilization of resources. Converting this into the social realm, social entrepreneurs aim not only at profitability but at creating sustainable value to the poor and under-served segments of society.

This has been attributed by experts such as Granados et al. (2011) and Mair and Marti (2006), who have posited social entrepreneurship to be the instrument for creating economic and social value, by companies that could range from the not-for-profits to the cooperatives.

Cledo and McLean (2006) ascertain that such businesses try to uplift poor communities and improve the lifestyle of poor communities. Weerawardena & Sullivan-Mort (2001) also explain that the most obvious value proposition of social entrepreneurship is that it can offer a sustainable benefit with a bigger mission. As Domenico et al. (2010) argue, it's not just about a business plan, it's about emotional intelligence, stakeholder engagement, and unbending dedication to social values. Budumuru et al. (2022) also clarify that the first and foremost driver of such businesses is to serve the bottom-of-the-pyramid segment by innovation and value creation for society in the long run. In so doing, innovation is not only technological in nature but also includes process innovation, community engagement, and behavioral change. Indeed, it is the inherent social mission that distinguishes social entrepreneurship, typically emerging when government or market forces fail to meet societal needs (Tack et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2024, Sharma et al., 2025; Prakash et al., 2023).

Social capital and trust are crucial to sustaining such businesses. As Sengupta & Sahay (2017) uncover, social entrepreneurship is inhibited by limited-resource characteristics. This limitation, while a challenge to resilience and innovation, is actually one of the challenges, albeit, to which the sector remains susceptible. Researchers like Littlewood & Holt (2018) and Vieira et al. (2023) comment on the necessity of inclusive global and local vision frames that take into account developing countries' perceptions. Social capital and entrepreneurship is one of the most significant topics in this regard. Gedajlovic et al. (2013) provide a good insight into how networks, trust, and social cohesion contribute to entrepreneurial performance. In social enterprises, these factors are even more relevant as they open up access to resources, bring in community support, and generate legitimacy. To the point, Baron (2007) states that social entrepreneurs gain reward not through profit but through the social impact and the satisfaction that their efforts bring about. That is why the majority opt to set up CSR-oriented businesses instead of profit-oriented businesses. As the region is becoming mature, there is an increased necessity to study its growth and educational progress through bibliometric study.

Bibliometric study is a strong methodology that applies quantitative as well as qualitative methods for trend, structure, and dynamic analysis of scientific publications (De Bakker et al., 2005; Cobo et al., 2011). By using databases such as Scopus that include a broader and more comprehensive set of scholarly literature than others such as Web of Science (Falagas et al., 2008; Brzezinski, 2015), academics can follow the evolution of social entrepreneurship as an intellectual movement. Bibliometric analysis allows academics to determine publication patterns, leading authors, institutions, and countries, and highly cited articles and co-authorship clusters.

Various recent studies have used bibliometric methods to map the intellectual topology of social entrepreneurship. Hota et al. (2021), for example, analyzed more than 30 years of publications on Web of Science and explored trends in research productivity, patterns of citations, and the morality of social enterprises. Likewise, Cardella et al. (2021) reviewed 1,425 Scopus and Web of Science articles in a systematic analysis to construct a conceptual model of social entrepreneurship evolution,

determining grand themes and shifting study direction. Worth noting are others like Phan Tan (2021), who classified 1,361 articles according to authors' productivity, high-impact journals, and thematic categories, and Iskandar et al. (2021), who analyzed 453 articles to track priority areas of ongoing studies and research gaps. Yesmin, et al. (2021) performed keyword co-occurrence analysis of 1,763 articles, with attention given to 1,227 that provided additional information on future research directions. The scholars such as Celebi et al. (2020), Dionisio (2019), Campos et al. (2019), and Persaud et al. (2018) have constructed bibliometric information to include cross-regional, ethics, and innovation trend-based comparisons. What emerges from this set of books is a rich, cross-disciplinary field in the process of discovery but making a considerable contribution to business, social sciences, and policy studies.

3. Research Methodology

This research uses a bibliometric approach to trace the evolution of social entrepreneurship research across a comprehensive time frame. Data for this purpose was taken from the Scopus database, worldwide recognized as exhaustive and high-quality peer-reviewed papers. Downloading was performed through the syntax TITLE-ABS-KEY("social entrepreneurship" OR "social entrepreneur" OR "social enterprise"), ensuring precise retrieval of sought-after papers. The last dataset included 3000 articles from 1989 to 2024 and spanned 1047 sources like journals and books. This time frame emphasizes the consistent increase of the topic during the past 35 years. We employed two main tools for conducting the analysis: Bibliometrix (an R package for comprehensive bibliometric analysis) and VOSviewer, a leader in network visualization. Bibliometrix supported retrieval of descriptive statistics such as publication patterns, citation patterns, and authors' productivity. VOSviewer supported mapping of bibliometric networks which provided visualizations of scholarly connections.

4. Data Analysis

In the above Table, in the years under consideration from 1989 to 2024, the dataset grew 4.04% every year and contains 3000 documents from 1047 sources, including books and journals. Average document age is 4.85 years, reflecting a new and changing research scene. Literature has a big impact with 27.26 citations per document. 137,869 citations show that this work is extensive and linked. Keywords Plus (ID) and Author's Keywords (DE) disclose a wide range of issues, and 6275 authors, 556 of whom have single-author articles, enrich the region. The dataset averages 2.67 co-authors per document, with 23.2% from outside the US. Most of the documents (3000) are essays, highlighting scholarly discussion in social entrepreneurship. This comprehensive study prepares for future studies of field-specific factors, collaborative patterns, and topic concentrations.

Table 1: Main overview

Description	Results
MAIN INFORMATION ABOUT DATA	
Timespan	1989:2024
Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	1047
Documents	3000
Annual Growth Rate %	4.04
Document Average Age	4.85
Average citations per doc	27.26
References	137869
DOCUMENT CONTENTS	
Keywords Plus (ID)	2211
Author's Keywords (DE)	6116
AUTHORS	
Authors	6275
Authors of single-authored docs	556
AUTHORS COLLABORATION	
Single-authored docs	632
Co-Authors per Doc	2.67
International co-authorships %	23.2
DOCUMENT TYPES	
article	3000

Table 2: Annual scientific production

Year	Articles	Year	Articles
1989	1	2007	13
1990	1	2008	17
1991	0	2009	31
1992	0	2010	72
1993	0	2011	74
1994	1	2012	92
1995	0	2013	114
1996	1	2014	130
1997	0	2015	130
1998	1	2016	194
1999	0	2017	179
2000	2	2018	218
2001	3	2019	272
2002	2	2020	324
2003	3	2021	346
2004	7	2022	366
2005	5	2023	382
2006	15	2024	4

As demonstrated in the table above, social entrepreneurship research output has changed significantly over time. Late '80s and early '90s saw occasional works. However, manufacturing gradually increased in the early 2000s. The number of articles more than doubled annually between 2009 and 2013, indicating a surge in interest. The next decade saw significant annual growth. The years 2019–2023, which saw a remarkable increase to 382 articles in 2023, are noteworthy. Social entrepreneurship is gaining popularity and academic attention as scientific output rises annually.

Table 3: Citations per Year

Year	MeanTCperArt	N	MeanTCperYear	CitableYears
1989	6	1	0.17	35
1990	0	1	0	34
1994	5	1	0.17	30
1996	14	1	0.5	28
1998	21	1	0.81	26
2000	350	2	14.58	24
2001	52.67	3	2.29	23
2002	197	2	8.95	22
2003	24.67	3	1.17	21
2004	125.86	7	6.29	20
2005	147	5	7.74	19
2006	487.93	15	27.11	18
2007	69.77	13	4.1	17
2008	54.06	17	3.38	16
2009	120.35	31	8.02	15
2010	111.75	72	7.98	14
2011	56.54	74	4.35	13
2012	67.5	92	5.62	12
2013	48.3	114	4.39	11
2014	29.08	130	2.91	10
2015	31.01	130	3.45	9
2016	35.38	194	4.42	8
2017	34.2	179	4.89	7
2018	26.19	218	4.36	6
2019	17.38	272	3.48	5
2020	16.5	324	4.12	4
2021	8.18	346	2.73	3
2022	5.38	366	2.69	2
2023	1.54	382	1.54	1
2024	0.5	4		0

The above table details the number of Citable Years and Mean Total Citations per Year (MeanTCperYear) for social entrepreneurship research in a given year. As we go from the past to the present, the number of Citable Years decreases, whereas MeanTCperYear displays the average total citations received per document in a particular year.

There are 35 Citable Years in 1989, with a MeanTCperYear of 0.17. This indicates that the few papers published in 1989 have maintained their citability for the past 35 years, despite receiving a relatively low average number of citations.

The following years show a similar trend, with a declining number of Citable Years and fluctuating MeanTCperYear. Observably, the MeanTCperYear varies, suggesting that the citation impact of papers changes from one year to the next. As we go toward more recent years, the number of Citable Years decreases. This is because there are less years available for citation as time goes on.

Table 4: Most relevant sources

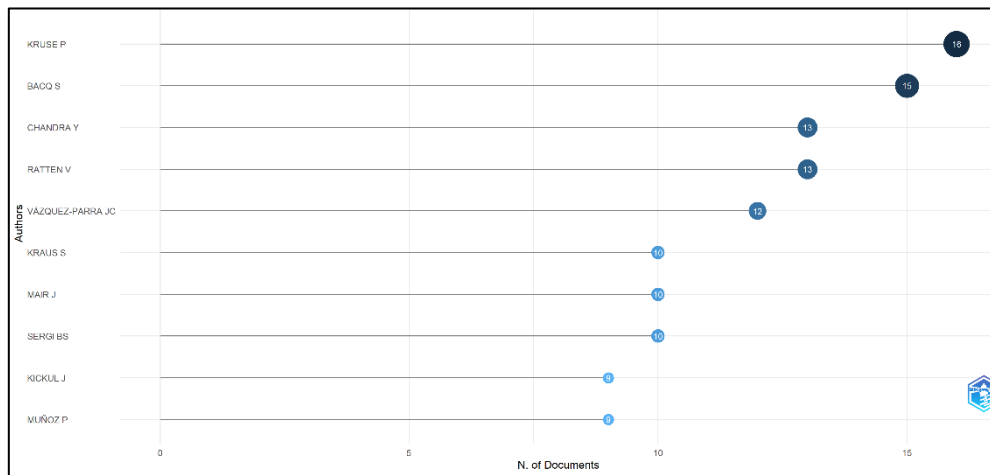
Sources	Articles
Journal of Social Entrepreneurship	172
Sustainability (Switzerland)	102
Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	83
Journal of Business Ethics	59
Social Enterprise Journal	51
Entrepreneurship And Regional Development	45
Voluntas	40
Journal of Business Venturing	35
International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business	34
International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research	33

In the table above, key sources contribute to scholarly discourse. The 172 papers in the "Journal of Social Entrepreneurship" demonstrate its importance in advancing social entrepreneurial knowledge. "Sustainability (Switzerland)" continues with 102 articles on academic debate on social entrepreneurship and sustainability. One of the 83 papers in "Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies" draws attention to its application of social entrepreneurship to emerging markets. Reputable journals like the "Journal of Business Ethics," "Social Enterprise Journal," and "Entrepreneurship and Regional Development" help us grasp social entrepreneurship's regional dimensions, ethics, and specialized studies. This carefully selected collection of publications, including "Voluntas," "Journal of Business Venturing," "International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business," and "International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research," gives scholars, practitioners, and researchers the foundational knowledge and diverse perspectives needed for social entrepreneurship projects.

Table 5: Most cited countries

Country	TC	Average Article Citations
USA	16818	40.5
United Kingdom	10559	62.1
Spain	6002	48.4
Canada	5525	75.7
Australia	3249	41.7
Germany	2691	34.1
Belgium	2232	74.4
France	2016	40.3
India	1938	13.8
Italy	1436	19.7

The above table provides a thorough review of the most referred nations in social entrepreneurship research to better comprehend its global influence and recognition. The US dominates social entrepreneurship literature with 16818 citations and 40.5 citations per piece. UK, with 10559 TC and 62.1 citations per article, is close behind. Spain's 48.4 citations per article and 6002 TC make it a dangerous opponent. Canada is creating an impression with 5525 citations and an amazing 75.7 per piece. Australian, German, Belgian, French, Indian, and Italian contributions demonstrate social entrepreneurship research's global reach and various citation trends. This statistic shows the field's global effect and academic recognition in various countries.

**Figure 1: Most Relevant Authors**

The above graph depicts most cited authors in the domain of social entrepreneurship. Kruse P is at the top with the maximum number of publications (16), followed by Bacq S (15), Chandra Y and Ratten V (13 each), and Vázquez-Parra JC (12). A list of other prominent authors such as Kraus S, Mair J, and Sergi BS have authored 10 articles each, reflecting a huge academic interest and consistent attention towards the topic.

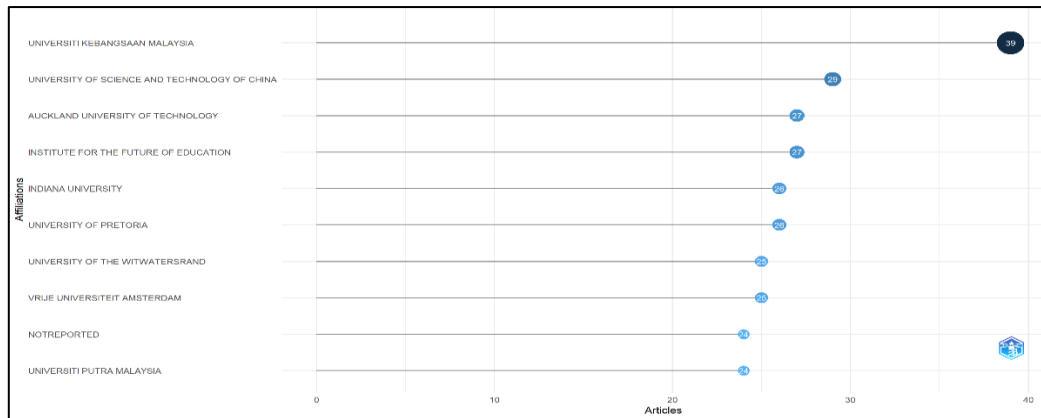


Figure 2: Most Relevant Affiliations

This spread indicates that the discipline is dominated by a core group of scholars who have played a major role in shaping it through their sustained contribution. Their research constitutes an essential body of knowledge for nascent researchers and contributes to the development of theoretical and practical aspects of social entrepreneurship, especially in fields like impact measurement, hybrid business models, and social innovation. The above graph is reflective of the most applicable affiliations in the area of intellectual contribution in social entrepreneurship. It shows that Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia has published the highest number of articles (39) regarding social entrepreneurship and thus is the most active organization in this area. This is followed by the University of Science and Technology of China at 29, then together by Auckland University of Technology and the Institute for the Future of Education at 27. Indiana University, University of Pretoria, and University of the Witwatersrand institutions also register high usage with over 25 per institution.

This is the type of trend that marks social entrepreneurship as a new field of study in many international institutions. The large university involvement from the institutions of Asia, Africa, and North America marks the international convergence of interests for applying entrepreneurship in leading change at the societal level. Such universities are likely to be at the vanguard of research, engagement, and innovation in this critical field.

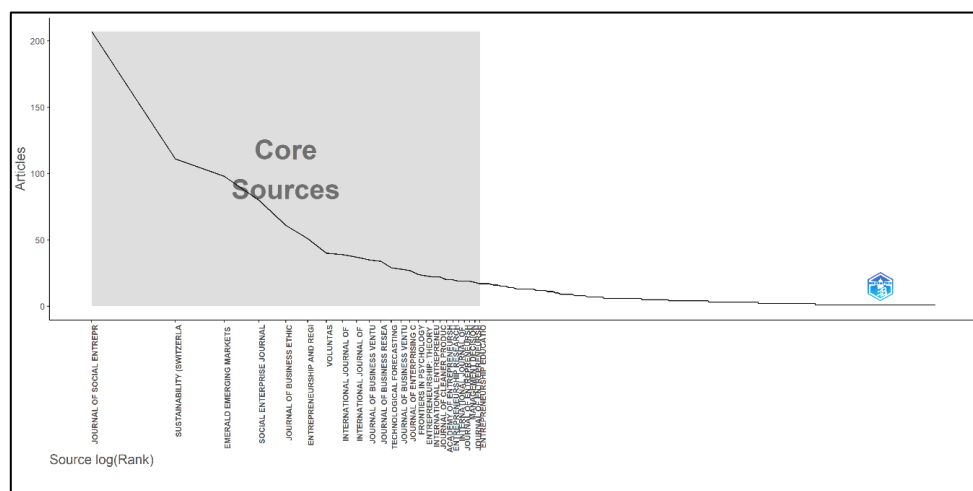


Figure 3: Core Sources by Bradford's Law

The Bradford's Law graph indicates the journals that publish the majority of the research on such issues as social entrepreneurship and innovation. The area marked indicates the dominant journals that have published most of the research. They include the Journal of Social Entrepreneurship, Sustainability (Switzerland), Emerald Emerging Markets, Social Enterprise Journal, and the Journal of Business Ethics. These journals are key sources to researchers and are frequently cited in scholarly research. As we continue further to the right along the graph, the articles from other journals drop off rapidly. This confirms Bradford's hypothesis that a few journals generate most of the key research on a subject area.

This distribution offers direction to researchers on which journals to target for both literature review and publication planning.

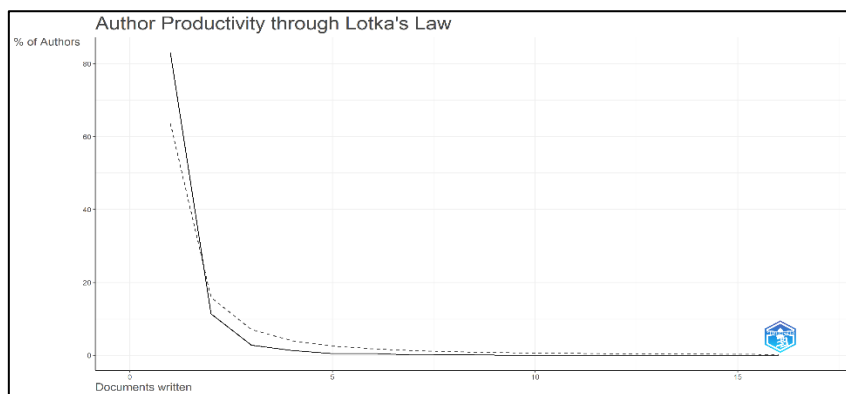


Figure 4: Author Productivity through Lotka's Law

The above graph illustrates how many papers various authors have authored, according to Lotka's Law. The law states that not many authors produce the majority of the papers in any discipline. The solid line in the graph is the actual data, and the dashed line is the expected by Lotka's Law. The majority of authors have written just one paper, and it contributes to over 80% of all authors. As the volume of papers published increases, the number of authors who have published that many decreases very quickly. Fewer than five authors published more than five papers. What this indicates is that although many individuals are in the field, most of what is published in research is from a few very productive authors.

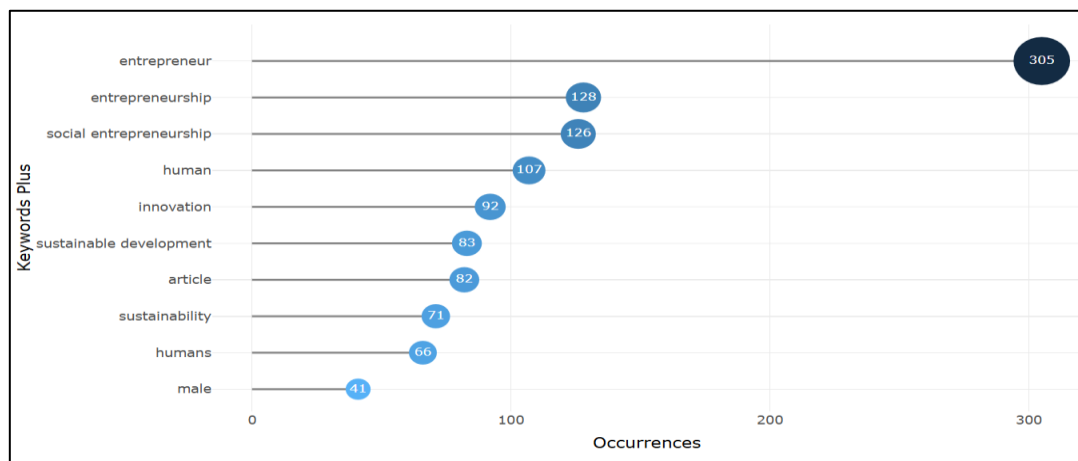


Figure 5: Keyword Plus Search

Keywords Plus search of the most significant words in the foregoing figure shows the major research focus area on entrepreneurship and its pertinent dimensions. Dominant above all is the use of the word "entrepreneur" that is used 305 times, thereby keeping the individual entrepreneur at the center of research in literature. This is then followed closely by "entrepreneurship" (128) and "social entrepreneurship" (126) with major academic attention paid to everyday entrepreneurial and socially oriented entrepreneurial activity. Other terms most commonly employed, such as "innovation," "sustainable development," and "sustainability," also suggest an increasing pattern of connecting entrepreneurship with wider ideals of innovation and sustainability. Finally, the occurrence of the words like "human," "humans," and "male" indicates the occurrence of demographic and human-based elements in the research, possibly due to behavioral research or gender-based studies. Generally, the results indicate that the current literature heavily leans towards entrepreneurial identity and power, with additional integration of sustainability and human dimensions.



Figure 6: Word Cloud

The cloud of words in the above figure visually confirms the prevalence of prominent themes in the literature, specifically with regard to the prevalence of the word "entrepreneur" that overpowers the visualization. On its heels are "social entrepreneurship," "entrepreneurship," and "sustainable development," all in larger letters, to indicate their high frequency and significance in the research corpus. Terms like "innovation," "human," "article," and "sustainability" are also well addressed, suggesting an interdisciplinary approach that bridges entrepreneurial action with human interest, scholarly debate, and sustainable practice. Additionally, terms like "female," "male," "economic development," and "education" suggest gendered and socio-economic themes in entrepreneurship research. The simultaneous occurrence with complex but complementary words for keywords provides evidence towards an integrative theme, which indicates that entrepreneurship is studied not merely as enterprise but also as a socio-economic and development phenomenon with human, environmental, and social undertones.

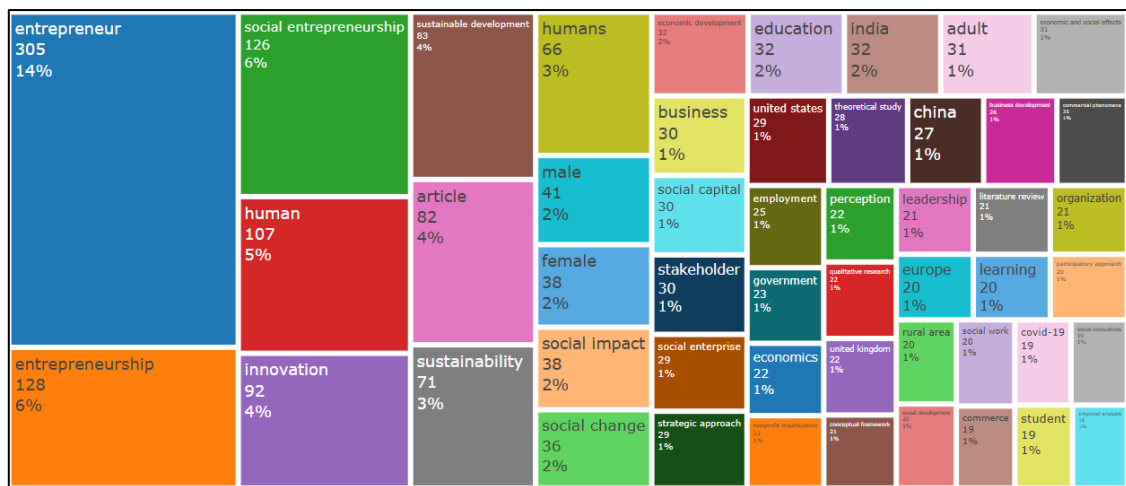


Figure 7: Tree Map

Treemap provides quantitative visualization of keyword frequency that presents an absolute image of common themes in the literature at hand. "Entrepreneur" is most with the highest frequency (305), indicative of its centrality throughout studies. Second is "entrepreneurship" (128), third is "social entrepreneurship" (126), and fourth is "human" (107), which indicates a manifest focus not only on the entrepreneurial process itself but on human and social ones as well. Other leader keywords are "innovation," "sustainability," and "sustainable development," which suggests that entrepreneurship is most often debated in regards to changing society and laboring for the planet. The prevalence of words like "education," "India," "female," "male," "social impact," and "economic development" suggests a multifaceted framework with gender, geography, policy, and socioeconomic dimensions. Fewer but still contextually significant words like "leadership," "student," "covid-19," and "employment" also show the changing and multidisciplinary nature of entrepreneurial scholarship. The treemap thus reflects a dynamic knowledge pattern with entrepreneurial activity at the core and broad developmental and humanistic connectivities.

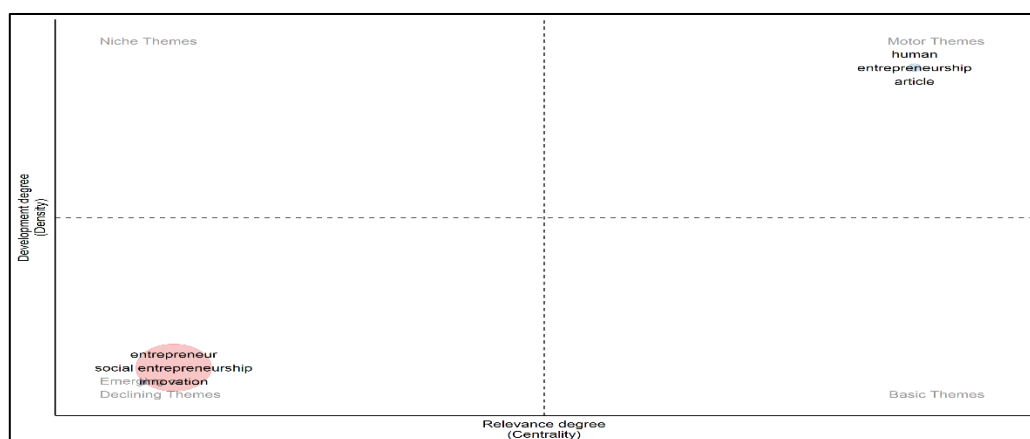


Figure 8: Thematic Map

The thematic map categorizes keywords by dimensions of centrality (relevance to the field) and density (evolution within the field). The top right quadrant (Motor Themes) contains words such as "human," "entrepreneurship," and "article," which signify that these are highly developed and highly

relevant themes in the existing research environment. Their positioning signifies that they are central and propel the intellectual structure of the field.

Conversely, "social entrepreneurship," "entrepreneur," and "innovation" are in the lower left quadrant (Emerging or Declining Themes), with low centrality and density. This indicates that although these topics might have been of recent issue, they are not currently well-integrated or established in the academic literature. Their location represents potential future research inquiry or the need for additional theoretical foundation and empirical derivation.

Researcher ties and social entrepreneurship collaboration can be better explained with the help of collaboration network analysis as depicted in the above figure. Cluster assignment, betweenness centrality, closeness centrality, and PageRank are some of the metrics available in the data, which corresponds to individual researchers depicted as the nodes.

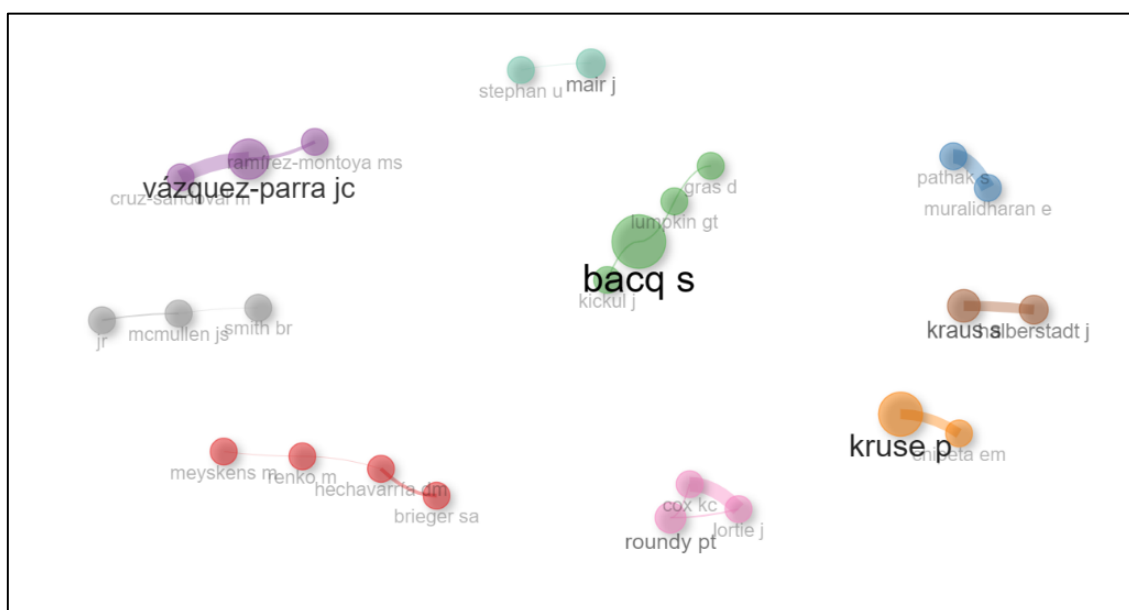


Figure 9: Collaboration network

The crucial role that researchers like Renko M and Hechavarría DM play in connecting different areas of the network is indicated by their considerable betweenness centrality (2) in Cluster 1. The comparatively high PageRank of 0.0432 and closeness centrality of 0.1667 both point to Brieger SA's central significance.

Researchers in Cluster 2, including Pathak S. and Muralidharan E., show a well-organized network with high PageRank, proximity, and centrality, indicating that information flows and influences efficiently within the cluster.

Similar to Cluster 1, Cluster 3 has researchers such as Bacq S and Lumpkin GT. Within this cluster, individuals exhibit considerable betweenness centrality, highlighting their significance in linking various portions of the network. Cohesion of the cluster is further helped by Kickul J and Gras D. By analyzing the relationships between scholars in the area of social entrepreneurship, this study sheds light on the dynamics of collaboration and the flow of information by identifying influential members in each cluster.

5. Conclusion

The above study provides a snapshot of the development and growth of studies on social entrepreneurship over the past three and a half decades from 1989 until the year 2024. The topic has seen an unparalleled acceleration in growth since these decades, and more than 3,000 research-driven publications have been released, recording a steady rise in scholarly concern. The growing volume of publications clearly indicates that social entrepreneurship has become a significant area of scholarly concern. The research of 6,275 authors in the corpus signify the intellectual diversity of the domain. 23.2% of the authors are from other countries, testifying to the increasing phenomenon of international cooperation in social entrepreneurship research. International cooperation not only diversifies the academic community but also promotes inter-disciplinary solutions to social problems through entrepreneurship. Same research also identifies most significant journals like the Journal of Social Entrepreneurship and Sustainability as most influential publication for research work in this research field. It has very high publication rate and also follows Bradford's Law, hence, being at the center sources of information. The same can be said of authors' distribution, based on Lotka's Law, where there are fewer multi-producer authors producing the lion's share of publications, and more authors producing at more infrequent intervals. This is a good balance of repeat scholars and new entrants to the discipline. Geographically, countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and India have been dominant, as per the findings. The universities and research institutions of these nations are adequately represented in this domain research. Network analysis and co-authorship also show an escalating amount of collaborative work by scholars from various corners of the world. Words like "sustainable development," "innovation," and "entrepreneurship" characterize and summarize the thematic concerns of investigation. They do not only reference the essence of social entrepreneurship but also imply that it can address big-scale international challenges of poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability.

The study also shows direction towards collaborative research in this area. Author network analysis illustrates how authors are collaborating, clustering, and building knowledge. The collaborations are not restricted at national levels but continue worldwide, meaning there is a worldwide phenomenon to understand and implement social change through entrepreneurial action. Lastly, findings of this bibliometric study provide important suggestions for future studies. Increase in number of publication, active research numbers, journal funding, and the trend of rising foreign collaboration altogether predict that social entrepreneurship is a subject of growing importance among scholars. The results from this research can be utilised fill existing knowledge gaps presently.

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