

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social ethics in social entrepreneurship and social innovation: A bibliometric analysis

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ABSTRACT - This research examines the evolution of ethics in social innovation (SI) and entrepreneurship, using bibliometric citation and co-word analysis. From the relevant 210 articles, the current study evaluated four clusters based on the analysis of network visualisation through the VOSviewer software. The four critical research clusters, ethical leadership, governance, institutional logic, and ethical governance were highlighted, and their interconnectedness and theoretical significance were discussed. The findings showed that Saebi, Foss, and Linder recorded the highest citations for their work published in 2023 and the highest number of publications in 2022. The treemap visualises business and ethics leads in the field, followed by environmental science and studies. This work contributes to academic scholarship and practical applications by demonstrating the importance of integrating ethical considerations into the governance and strategic decision-making processes within socially innovative ventures. Ultimately, it presents the essential role of ethics in fostering sustainable, equitable, and impactful solutions to societal challenges.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship (SE) and social innovation (SI) are key strategies for sustainable development (Břanda, Jozef & Urbančiková; Nataša, 2020). Nowadays, though it is increasingly crucial for the ethical approach to be ingrained in SE and SI to achieve sustainability, many still overlook this, despite its great potential. Therefore, this paper investigates the use of ethics in the SI and SE setting using the bibliographic review approach to understand the overall trend worldwide. According to various methodical studies on SE and ethics, these three components—SI, entrepreneurship, and ethics are relevant to current problems and future paths. Therefore, this paper intends to (1) assess and look at present ethical patterns in SE and SI using citation analysis and (2) assess future ethical trends in SE and SI using co-word analysis. This article is divided into four parts: related works, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

SI and SE have been known as important determinants for solving global challenges, such as climate change, the status of women, and the rich-poor gap. Conceptually, SI is seen as a means to address a social issue by creating goods or services for the advantage of society (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Phills et al., 2009). In other words, its usage is to create creative, commercially and socially viable ways to interact with others. SI is often a mix of technologies, processes, or services that fulfil an unmet demand or solve a social issue to benefit society. This may include everything from tiny projects to massive government policy. A substantial number of publications have made a correlation between SI and SE to understand their impacts as key forces of social change. Specifically, SE is the pursuit of possibilities beyond controlled resources. It is the combination of calculated risks and different inventions that drive social transformation (Al-Qudah et al., 2022). Therefore, especially in the nonprofit sector, keeping an entrepreneurial and societal mindset is essential to achieve a social effect (Ortíz et al., 2023). Most importantly, SI should always be ingrained in the SE setting. Although the principles of SE and SI seem to be inextricably connected, many studies contend that "SI is not social entrepreneurship" (Morris et al., 2021) and argue whether SI should be integrated into SE and vice versa, as well as whether SE must create SI (Anh et al., 2022).

From its inception, SE has frequently been associated with the typical commercial entrepreneur, who is sometimes depicted as having undesirable qualities. The issues are particularly evident when the opportunistic and narcissistic image of the commercial entrepreneur is contrasted with the SE, who is seen as a model of moral character and integrity. Goss et al. (2011) and Cukier et al. (2011) claim SE is based on good intentions and can bring about notable transformation. Often depicted as ethically righteous, SE is also considered an initiative to address systematic inequalities, including poverty. However, if there is a lack of ethical quality, it is difficult for SE to achieve its intended objectives. Dempsey and Sanders (2010) stated that social entrepreneurship is a greater calling because of the individual's moral obligations, and it usually involves acts beyond what the average person is willing to sacrifice.

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3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed bibliometric techniques to map scientific data and extract knowledge structures from highly impactful journal articles, as shown by Hulland (2024) and Sharma and Lenka (2022). A bibliometric analysis encompasses various methods modified to understand specific research objectives, including citation analysis and co-word analysis. Citation analysis involves quantifying the number of citations a publication received to assess its influence within the academic community (Sood, Kumar, & Saini, 2021). On the other hand, co-word analysis examines the co-occurrence of keywords within titles, abstracts, and author-delegated keywords to discover relationships between concepts and identify thematic clusters within a research field (Bascur et al., 2023). Moreover, this method facilitates the visualization of conceptual structures and aids in forecasting emerging trends (Fauzi, 2022). The analyses were conducted using VOSviewer software, which enabled the visualization of network relationships and the identification of principal research themes and trends. The specific search string utilized in this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Search string in WoS database

No	Keywords	Justification
1	“Social entrepreneurship” OR “social enterprise*” OR “social entrepreneur*” OR “social venture*” OR “social innovation*” OR “social innovator*”	To determine literature related to social entrepreneurship
2	“ethic*”	To identify literature related the ethics

A structured approach was used to find pertinent literature on social entrepreneurship, innovation, and ethics. Terms like social entrepreneurship and innovation were used, with ethics added to cover literature that discusses ethical considerations in this area. The search focused on publications from 2019 to 2024, which included journal articles, book chapters, conference proceedings, and magazine articles. We also obtained data from the Web of Science (WoS) database on April 17, 2024.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

This section describes the results of the WoS database search. From the initial search, which accumulated 230 documents, we filtered the types of documents and limited them to only five years, from 2019 to 2024. As a result, the number of searches was 210 documents. Figure 1 presents the bar chart depicting the number of publications and citations since 2019. Figure 1 shows a rising trend in research on ethics, SE, and SI, with a notable decline in 2023. The average citation per item stands at 18.11, accompanied by an H-index of 32. There is a strong possibility that these publications will continue to increase. Figure 2 illustrates a treemap visualization of the dominant categories in WoS related to SE, SI, and ethics.

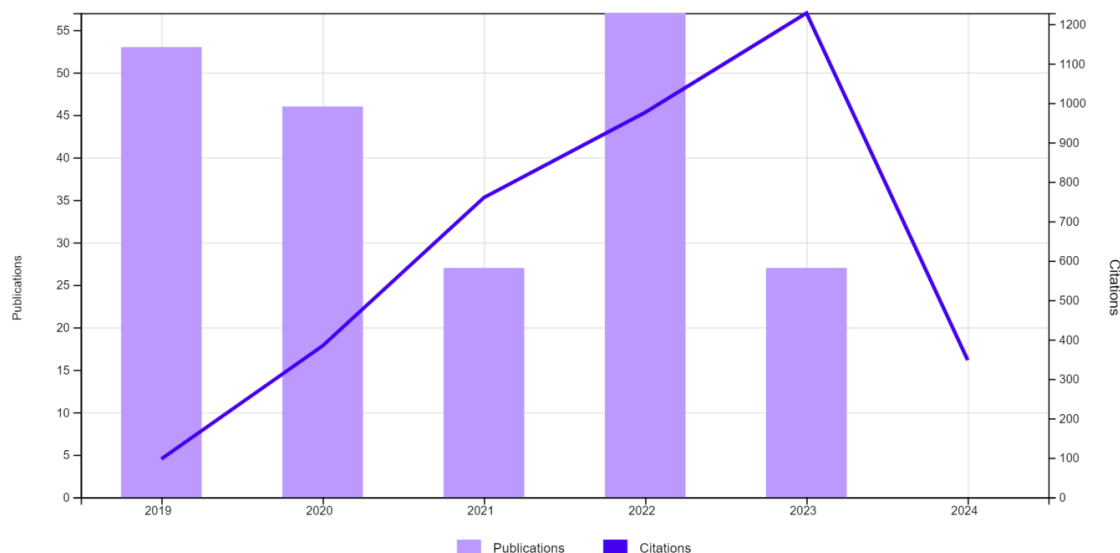


Figure 1. Number of publications and citations from the Web of Science database



Figure 2. Treemap visualization of dominant categories in WoS on social innovation, entrepreneurship and ethics.

This treemap visualizes which category in the Web of Science database is the most dominant under the areas of social innovation, social entrepreneurship, and ethics. It indicates business and ethics leads in this area, followed by environmental science and studies.

4.2 Citation Analysis

Of the 210 chosen papers examined presented in Table 3, the one by Saebi, Foss, and Linder (2019), titled "Social Entrepreneurship Research: Past Achievements and Future Promises", received the most citations, a total of 429. Presenting a consistent multilevel framework and proposing paths for further study, this paper combined prior work on social entrepreneurship at the individual, organisational, and institutional levels. The large citation count underlines its significant influence on research priorities and its broad acceptability in the academic community.

Table 3. Top 10 document citation analysis with the highest citation

Rank	Authors	Title	Citation
1.	Saebi, T; Foss, NJ and Linder, S (2019)	Social Entrepreneurship Research: Past Achievements and Future Promises	429
2.	Hota, PK; Subramanian, B and Narayanamurthy, G (2020)	Mapping the Intellectual Structure of Social Entrepreneurship Research: A Citation/Co-citation Analysis	195
3.	Hoogendoorn, B; van der Zwan, P and Thurik, R (2019)	Sustainable Entrepreneurship: The Role of Perceived Barriers and Risk	143
4.	Lashitew, AA; Bals, L and van Tulder, R (2020)	Inclusive Business at the Base of the Pyramid: The Role of Embeddedness for Enabling Social Innovations	79
5.	Gali, N; Niemand, T; (...); Brem, A (2020)	Social entrepreneurship orientation and company success: The mediating role of social performance	60
6.	Mitzinneck, BC and Besharov, ML (2019)	Managing Value Tensions in Collective Social Entrepreneurship: The Role of Temporal, Structural, and Collaborative Compromise	60
7.	Bhatt, B; Qureshi, I and Riaz, S (2019)	Social Entrepreneurship in Non-munificent Institutional Environments and Implications for Institutional Work: Insights from China	55
8.	Bull, M and Ridley-Duff, R (2019)	Towards an Appreciation of Ethics in Social Enterprise Business Models	53
9.	Phillips, W; Alexander, EA and Lee, H (2019)	Going It Alone Won't Work! The Relational Imperative for Social Innovation in Social Enterprises	53
10.	Litrico, JB and Besharov, ML (2019)	Unpacking Variation in Hybrid Organizational Forms: Changing Models of Social Enterprise Among Nonprofits, 2000-2013	43

Additionally, the paper by Hota, Subramaniam, and Narayanamurthy (2020), "Mapping the Intellectual Structure of Social Entrepreneurship Research: A Citation/Co-citation Analysis", also obtained 195 citations. Emphasising notable topics

development efforts (Wiktor-Mach, 2020). Initiatives like these, when done correctly, can enhance both public health and mental well-being. Social innovation has the potential to challenge existing neoliberal economic models and promote more equitable and sustainable paradigms (Mulgan, 2017). Redesigning ethical governance in social innovation projects is crucial since it can lead to positive societal transformation (Mehmood et al., 2020). Thus, ethical governance in social innovation networks is essential for long-term success and sustainability of social innovation initiatives.

Cluster 2 (green): This cluster contains 15 keywords titled ‘ethics and impact in social entrepreneurship for sustainable development’

Social entrepreneurship proves to be important in promoting sustainable development by tackling social, environmental, and economic issues with innovative and ethical business practices. Moreover, incorporating ethics in social entrepreneurship guarantees these ventures meet their financial goals while creating beneficial social and environmental effects. Ethics in social entrepreneurship include principles like fairness, justice, transparency, and accountability. These ethical foundations help entrepreneurs to make decisions that prioritize societal and environmental well-being rather than simply focusing on profit maximization. In turn, ethical social entrepreneurs show a dedication to generating value for every stakeholder, such as employees, customers, communities, and the environment (Sampaio & Sebastião, 2024). Social enterprises face notable difficulties driving meaningful societal change while upholding ethical principles. A key challenge is managing the trade-offs between conflicting goals, like achieving cost efficiency while ensuring fair labour practices (Hota et al., 2020). Social entrepreneurs embraced strong ethical frameworks to tackle these challenges and participated in ongoing ethical education. Gaining a clearer insight into how to measure the impact of social missions is also crucial for consistently improving results. This process involves identifying best practices and engaging with ethical advisors (Javed et al., 2020). Furthermore, utilizing support from government agencies and current policies is essential for the sustainability of social missions (Fauzi et al., 2022).

Cluster 3 (blue): This category has 14 keywords titled ‘ethical leadership and sustainable business: navigating challenges for future impact’

This theme emphasizes the role of leaders in upholding strong business ethics to sustain the social business. It highlights the essential importance of ethical leadership in maintaining social enterprises. Ethical leaders encounter a significant challenge in aligning the values and identity of the organization with its profitability. A good leader needs to promote ethical behaviour in their organization and maintain clear, open communication with all stakeholders. This openness helps manage expectations, address stakeholder concerns, build credibility, and evaluate investments' effects on their social enterprises (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Through these practices, ethical leaders can align robust business ethics with profitability and positively impact corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Zheng et al., 2022).

Cluster 4 (yellow): This cluster is an accumulation of 12 keywords titled ‘Institutional logics and value creation in sustainable innovation: strategies for addressing grand challenges’

Institutional logic and value creation significantly influenced organizational strategies and the implementation of sustainable innovations to tackle significant social challenges. Sustainable entrepreneurs face these challenges by embracing innovative strategies such as integrative leadership, engaging stakeholders, collaborating across sectors, and creating innovation ecosystems (Voegtlin et al., 2022). Moreover, based on stakeholder theory, social innovators and entrepreneurs must understand how institutional logic affects these innovative strategies (Bischoff, 2021; Thornton et al., 2012). Stakeholder theory emphasizes the importance of engaging various stakeholders to foster collaborative value creation (Attanasio et al., 2022). This approach aims to tackle important societal issues while ensuring profitability and following ethical standards. Table 5 presents the co-word analysis related to ethics in the context of social entrepreneurship and innovation.

Table 5. Ethics in social entrepreneurship and social innovation analyzed through co-word

Cluster	Cluster label	Number of keywords	Representative keywords
1 (red)	Ethical Governance in Social Innovation Networks	16	ethics, politics, social innovation, governance, responsibility, knowledge, networks, community, culture, education, enterprises, entrepreneurship, health, model, neoliberalism, perspective
2 (Green)	Ethics and Impact in Social Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Development	15	impact, social enterprise, business ethics, microfinance, diversity, mission drift, behaviour, creation, enterprise, gender, institutions, perceptions, social entrepreneurial intentions, social entrepreneurship, sustainable development
3 (Blue)	Ethical Leadership and Sustainable Business: Navigating Challenges for Future Impact	14	ethical leadership, values, identity, sustainability, business, challenges, framework, future, impact investing, legitimacy, organizations, performance, social enterprises, work
4 (yellow)	Institutional Logics and Value Creation in Sustainable Innovation: Strategies for Addressing Grand Challenges	12	institutional logic, value creation, innovation, grand challenges, self-efficacy, management, strategies, commercial entrepreneurship, hybrid organizations, models, stakeholder theory, sustainable entrepreneurship

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study offers a detailed examination of ethics in SE and SI, presenting a clear conceptual framework to highlight the relationships among important issues and key players in the field. The research employed a comprehensive bibliometric analysis to uncover the intellectual framework surrounding ethics in SE and SI, allowing future scholars to identify knowledge gaps and focus their efforts more efficiently. For example, future studies could build on the four main thematic clusters identified in the research by thoroughly examining the specialized literature to reveal important findings and ongoing discussions within each theme. The connection between ethical leadership, governance, institutional logic, and ethical governance stands out, carrying significant theoretical implications. This investigation presents a new viewpoint by examining co-word and citation patterns in 210 documents obtained from the WoS database. Since 2019, there has been an apparent increase in scholarly attention to this topic, a trend expected to continue, raising the importance of ethics in SE and SI. The co-citation analysis showed a publication with 429 citations, while the co-word analysis outlined four thematic areas related to ethics in SE and SI. The finding is important for social entrepreneurs and policymakers since it emphasizes the need to incorporate integrity and ethical considerations into everyday entrepreneurial practices. In addition, the study recognizes specific limitations, such as search strategy constraints and inclusion criteria that excluded non-English publications, non-journal articles and works not indexed in the WoS. The data collection ended on April 17, 2024, which means some publications from 2024 may not have been included, possibly affecting the completeness of the latest empirical insights in this area. Therefore, broadening data sources using databases like Scopus and Google Scholar is recommended to enhance the scope and inclusivity of future research on ethics in SI and entrepreneurship. These databases will provide a wider view of the existing literature from a broader range of scholarly work. Besides, including non-English studies can offer diverse global perspectives, which will help clarify how ethics and SI are viewed and applied in different cultural and regional contexts. Additionally, emerging themes, particularly integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in ethical entrepreneurship, deserve careful examination. The increasing role of AI in decision-making, governance, and innovation processes offers both opportunities and challenges for ethical practices in social ventures. Thus, exploring this intersection can offer important perspectives on upholding ethical standards in the face of technological advancements. These efforts are expected to enhance our understanding of the changing relationship between ethics, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

Husna Hashim (Conceptualization, writing)

Puteri Fadzline Muhamad Tamyez (Methodology, writing)

Azian Ibrahim (Writing)

Nor Emmy Shuhada Derani (Resources, writing)

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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