

Types of innovation in social entrepreneurship: categorization based on a systematic literature review employing the TCCM framework

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Abstract

Purpose – The article aims to delineate a typology of innovation in social entrepreneurship through a systematic literature review employing the theory, context, characteristics, methodology (TCCM) framework.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted a systematic literature review, identifying 3,295 articles from Web of Science, Scopus and Emerald from 2010 to Q1 2023. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, we selected 60 articles for in-depth analysis.

Findings – The study categorizes innovations in social entrepreneurship into five major types: outcome-driven, societal and ethical demand, collective and network-based, intensity-focused, and technology and digital innovations. Each type includes various subcategories reflecting different aspects and impacts of innovation in social entrepreneurship.

Research limitations/implications – The review is limited to articles published in English and available in selected databases. Future research could explore innovations in social entrepreneurship across different languages and databases.

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Practical implications – The findings offer valuable guidance for social entrepreneurs, policymakers and researchers by providing a clearer understanding of the different types of innovation in social entrepreneurship and their implications.

Social implications – The study emphasizes the role of innovation in addressing social and environmental challenges, promoting inclusive growth and driving sustainable development. It highlights how social enterprises can leverage innovation to create social impact.

Originality/value – This research provides a novel typology of innovation in social entrepreneurship, filling a gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive framework that integrates various dimensions of innovation.

Keywords Social entrepreneurship, Social enterprise, Innovation, Systematic literature review, TCCM

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

In social entrepreneurship, innovation has received increasing attention in academic discourse, reflecting a profound shift in perspectives toward meeting social needs, addressing a “wicked problem” and the grand challenges of the twenty-first century (Markman, Waldron, Gianiodis, & Espina, 2019). The dynamic nature of innovation, coupled with its multifaceted manifestations, makes a comprehensive understanding of its role within the context of social entrepreneurship essential.

Once predominantly conceptualized within the realms of technological advancement and economic growth, innovation has undergone a paradigmatic shift. Scholars such as Edwards-Schachter (2018) emphasize the expansion of innovation discourse to encompass sustainability, social responsibility and global engagement. This broader conceptualization acknowledges the complex socio-cultural dynamics inherent in the innovation process and underscores the importance of ethical considerations, cultural sensitivity and the involvement of diverse stakeholders in shaping innovative solutions to contemporary challenges (Chen & Yin, 2019).

Focused on social impact and business activity, social entrepreneurship represents a unique context for innovation (Kaushik, Tewari, Sahasranamam, & Hota, 2023). Social entrepreneurs navigate complex social and environmental issues, often pioneering novel approaches to address unmet needs and create positive social change. Innovation within social entrepreneurship encompasses a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from the development of new products and services to the reconfiguration of organizational structures and business models (Balan-Vnuk & Balan, 2015). However, despite the growing importance of innovation, there remains a notable gap in understanding the various types and categories of innovation employed within social entrepreneurship.

Social entrepreneurship literature largely focuses on social innovation (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017; Foroudi, Akarsu, Marvi, & Balakrishnan, 2021; Maclean, Harvey, & Gordon, 2013; Mortazavi, Eslami, Hajikhani, & Väättänen, 2021; Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O'Regan, & James, 2015; Pacut & Laurisz, 2025). However, it does not give much attention to other forms of innovation that are equally crucial for advancing the goals of social enterprises. This emphasis on social innovation has led to conceptual overlaps and a narrow understanding of innovation within social entrepreneurship. Moreover, many studies have taken a piecemeal approach, examining specific aspects of innovation such as business model innovation or organizational innovation, but neglecting to provide a comprehensive framework that integrates these various dimensions of innovation within social entrepreneurship (Colovic & Schruoffenegger, 2021; Davies & Chambers, 2018). This has also led to the babelization of the term (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017). We also notice here the need for a systematic review that synthesizes the diverse strands of literature on innovation in social entrepreneurship and provides a coherent framework for understanding the different categories and uses of innovation within this field.

Therefore, the primary aim of our research was to delineate a typology of innovation in social entrepreneurship through a systematic literature review employing the theory, context, characteristics, methodology (TCCM) framework. We focused on four specific objectives, i.e. identifying, describing, categorising types of innovation in social entrepreneurship and

synthesising the findings. We will also propose future research questions on innovation in social entrepreneurship.

The article discusses social entrepreneurship and innovation, identifies the research gap and outlines the TCCM framework for the systematic literature review. It then provides a literature overview, explores existing research and concludes by summarizing contributions, proposing future research avenues and examining limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Innovation

Spanning over 50 years, there is a well-established and significant field of research on innovation (Landström, Åström, & Harirchi, 2015). The literature on innovation contains innumerable definitions, approaches, aspects and typologies (Godin, 2015). Innovation is an umbrella term that encompasses myriad characteristics of innovation. For example, innovation has been defined as the process of translating ideas into new and useful products, processes and services, the creation and commercialization of inventions, and a specific tool entrepreneurs use to turn change into diverse business and service opportunities (Chesbrough, 2003; Drucker, 2006). The current Oslo Manual defines innovation as “a new or improved product or process (or combination thereof) that differs significantly from the unit’s previous products or processes and that has been made available to potential users (product) or brought into use by the unit (process)” (OECD & Eurostat, 2018, pp. 20).

Innovation studies are rooted in Schumpeter’s view of innovation (Hospers, 2005). According to Schumpeter, innovation encompasses “the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already being done in a new way” (Schumpeter, 1947, p. 151), “the setting up of a new production function” (Schumpeter, 1939, p. 84). Moreover, he included a list of various potential forms that innovation may take. While Schumpeter primarily recognized the impact of technological innovation on an economy, later researchers expanded upon the concept. For example, neo-Schumpeterian economics addresses multifaceted forms of innovation and recognizes, in addition to technological innovation, organizational, institutional and social innovation as a normative principle of the field (Hanusch & Pyka, 2007). Over time, perspectives on innovation have widened to encompass a range of factors, including socio-economic, technological, environmental, political and ethical ones (Flikkema, Jansen, & Van Der Sluis, 2007), as well as changes in the structure of knowledge production. These transformations have given rise to different types of innovation.

The Oslo Manual (OECD, 2005) outlines fundamental types of innovation of products, processes, marketing and organization forms. Flikkema *et al.* (2007) propose a distinction between technological and non-technological, and organisational innovation within organisations. Innovation has been variously categorized as radical and incremental (Dewar & Dutton, 1986) or radical, significant and incremental (Chen & Yin, 2019). Cooper’s (1998) multidimensional model of innovation encompasses numerous dimensions, including product, process, administrative, technological, incremental and radical innovation. Additionally, business model innovation is distinct from the above types (Demil & Lecocq, 2010).

Innovation concepts used in and derived from developing economies include pyramid-bottom innovation, indigenous innovation, blowback innovation, reverse innovation, shanzhai innovation, Jugaad/Gandhian innovation, frugal innovation, resource-constrained innovation and others (von Zedtwitz, Corsi, Søberg, & Frega, 2015). Hamel and Breen (2007) proposed a hierarchy of innovation comprising five levels: operational innovation, product and service innovation, business model innovation, architectural innovation and management innovation. Chen and Yin (2019) observed different types of innovation based on geographic regions, characterising them as paradigm shifts related to innovation. Innovation types described in North America include user innovation, disruptive innovation and open innovation. In Europe, the findings encompass design-driven innovation, social innovation, common innovation and

responsible innovation. In Asia, jugaad innovation, imitation, convergence innovation, indigenous innovation, total innovation, secondary innovation and embracing innovation.

Distinguishing between types of innovation is important because their implementation and development often necessitate different resources, competencies and different organizational practices, as well as distinct legitimacy strategies to engage key stakeholders (Baregheh, Rowley, & Sambrook, 2009; Rowley, Baregheh, & Sambrook, 2011). Despite this substantial body of literature, studies on innovation still have not answered the fundamental challenge of capturing the full landscape of innovation through precise definitions, effective operationalization and accurate measurement. Further research in this area is essential for addressing these challenges and reducing fragmentation within the field (Edwards-Schachter, 2018).

2.2 Innovation and social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship emerged as a popular area of research and practice in the second half of the twentieth century. The increased interest in social entrepreneurship may be attributable to the rise of social problems and inequalities, necessitating innovative approaches to address them. These imperatives arise against the broader backdrop of significant social, economic and political changes that have unfolded over recent decades (Kaushik *et al.*, 2023).

In general, social entrepreneurship aims to generate both social and economic value, while pursuing profitable and innovative ventures to drive social transformation (Hota, Subramanian, & Narayanamurthy, 2020). Scholars distinguish between the individual, organizational and process dimensions of social transformation and, in addition, the importance of the context in which people conduct this type of activity (Mair & Martí, 2006). In other words, it points to the activity of individuals, the initiators of ventures described as social entrepreneurs. The emanation of social entrepreneurship is the activity of organizations or projects or ventures described as social enterprises that pursue a social mission by using market mechanisms. Their primary objective is to effect long-term social change and generate social impact, prioritizing these goals over profits for their owners or shareholders. The process approach to social entrepreneurship refers to the way in which people achieve goals in social entrepreneurship and explains entrepreneurial behavior and actions, including the creation of both a new organization and value (Mair & Martí, 2006).

Studies show innovation as a main research theme within social entrepreneurship (Kaushik *et al.*, 2023), while social innovation is a sub-theme (Gupta, Chauhan, Paul, & Jaiswal, 2020). Social entrepreneurship and social innovation are closely linked. Maclean *et al.* (2013) hold that both concepts inherently entail the pressure to innovate alongside the creation of social value. Scholars consider social innovation as a specific case of innovation, which has two main conceptual elements: a change in social relationships, social systems or social structures, and such changes serve a shared human need/goal or solve a socially relevant problem (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016).

The literature on social entrepreneurship partly overlaps with the literature on social innovation. A central point of discussion in both concerns the use of the adjective “social,” which is subjectively defined in both discourses (Groot & Dankbaar, 2014). Furthermore, drawing upon the systems of innovation approach, Philips *et al.* (2015) claim that “social entrepreneurs exist within a social innovation system as a community”. This type of innovation dominates the discussion in social entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, the literature identifies an increasing number of new types of innovation that can be consistent in scope with the objectives and activities of social entrepreneurship. For instance, scholars identified and considered different types of inclusive innovation (Mortazavi *et al.*, 2021), responsible innovation (Stilgoe, Owen, & Macnaghten, 2013), holistic innovation (Chen & Yin, 2019), peace innovation (Miklian & Hoelscher, 2018), crisis innovation (Lien & Timmermans, 2023) and others. They advocate for inclusive growth and

sustainable development, in particular improving the living standards of individuals and the position and well-being of the excluded and the poor (Mortazavi *et al.*, 2021). These types of innovation resonate with social entrepreneurs, who seek social change and to drive sustainable development (Bansal, Garg, & Sharma, 2019). In this regard, one may analyze innovation as a tool for affordability, inclusion, capacity building and inclusive systems as well as social empowerment constraints (Mortazavi *et al.*, 2021; Pacut & Laurisz, 2025).

We contend that the distinction between social entrepreneurship and innovation remains far from clear, and a good deal of work remains to be done to understand the precise relationship between innovation and social entrepreneurship *per se*.

3. Research methodology

To identify the state of the art, integrate and synthesize the existing body of literature, and identify emerging research directions, we selected systematic literature review (SLR) methodology as the most appropriate research protocol. Multiple studies elaborate on the advantages of this methodology (e.g. Snyder, 2019; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). A systematic literature review aims to systematically synthesize the literature in a domain and propose future research directions based on the gaps identified in the literature synthesis (Paul & Criado, 2020). Its development follows a set of rigorous, predefined procedures, ensuring the development of knowledge, minimizing bias and allowing for research replication (Nightingale, 2009; Kraus, Breier, & Dasí-Rodríguez, 2020).

We chose this method of analysis based on a comprehensive review of techniques commonly used in systematic literature reviews. Paul, Khatri and Kaur Duggal (2023) demonstrated that review articles based on frameworks are generally more beneficial and influential, whereas bibliometric review articles tend to be less valuable. Bibliometric reviews focus more on authors, affiliations, countries, citations and co-citations, rather than on theories, methods and constructs (Paul & Criado, 2020). To report on the current stock of knowledge, identify gaps and suggest future research directions, we adopted the TCCM framework (Paul & Criado, 2020). The TCCM framework includes “theories (T), which represent different theoretical underpinnings and paradigms used to explain the inter-relationships between constructs; contexts (C), which can be understood as the realm of circumstances shaping the research setting; characteristics (C), which refer to the elements of a construct and their relationships with other variables of interest; and methods (M), which encompass details of samples, measurement scales, research designs, and analytical tools” (Paul *et al.*, 2023).

In the identification phase, we searched for peer-reviewed articles in the electronic databases Web of Science (WoS), Scopus and Emerald. We selected these databases to ensure a high level of transparency as suggested by Kraus *et al.* (2020). Given the diverse contexts, theoretical backgrounds and research domains that innovation spans, we chose a broad approach in formulating our search terms. This was necessary to capture the full spectrum of relevant studies, even though it involved the manual exclusion of a significant number of articles. We carefully designed our search query to encompass a wide range of terms related to social entrepreneurship and innovation. The search operators included: (“social ent*” AND “innov*” OR “social value added” AND “innov*” OR “social venture” AND “innov*” OR “social business” AND “innov*” OR “hybrid organisation” AND “innov*” OR “social firm” AND “innov*” OR “double mission firm*” AND “innov*” OR “blended value” AND “innov*” OR “social entrepreneurial venture” AND “innov*” OR “community purpose ent*” AND “innov*” OR “community ent*” AND “innov*” OR “community based ent*” AND “innov*” OR “impact ent*” AND “innov*”)

We selected these terms to capture multiple variations and perspectives on social entrepreneurship, with truncations (e.g. “social ent*”) allowing for the inclusion of terms like “social enterprise,” “social entrepreneurship,” and “social entrepreneur,” ensuring comprehensive coverage of this concept across the literature. The query reflects the

complexity and multi-faceted nature of social entrepreneurship, capturing everything from social value creation to hybrid organizational structures. Where possible, we simultaneously searched the three databases in title, keywords and abstract fields. We conducted the search in April 2023 and covered publications from 2010 to Q1 2023. We then constrained the search to encompass only peer-reviewed academic articles (full texts only) on management, economics or business written in English and published from 2010 onwards. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the field, we deliberately chose not to exclude any specific journals, recognizing that doing so could limit the scope of valuable insights (Czakov *et al.*, 2024). The search yielded a total of 3,295 results: 1,293 from Web of Science, 1,688 from Scopus and 314 from Emerald. After removing 2,455 duplicates, 840 unique records remained for screening.

In the screening phase, we assigned the remaining 840 articles to three pairs of coauthors, who independently reviewed titles and abstracts following the guidelines of Lattacher and Wdowiak (2020). Following this initial screening, we sought 320 records for retrieval, and we could not retrieve 11 records. At this stage, we excluded 249 articles based on two criteria: (1) a focus solely on social innovations and (2) innovation related to social activities within commercial enterprises. We applied these criteria to ensure that the selected studies aligned with our research scope, which examines a broader range of innovations beyond purely social innovations or those embedded in commercial enterprises. By doing so, we aimed to maintain a clear distinction between social entrepreneurship-driven innovations and other forms that do not directly contribute to the study's objectives. Then, three pairs of researchers carefully reviewed the final 309 eligible articles. Following Siemieniako, Kubacki, and Mitrega (2021), we used an Excel spreadsheet to extract data relevant to the study's research questions and potential future analysis. The extraction form included the year of publication, journal title, article type, research objectives, data collection methods, description of the type of innovation, countries and industries. We analyzed the content of each publication and excluded those that were not relevant to the research topic, identifying them as false hits. Following Kraus *et al.* (2020), we did data extraction to overcome bias, prevent the missing of important data and enhance overall objectivity.

Consequently, our final sample contained 60 articles from the period between 2010 and 2023 (see Figure 1 for the full flowchart of the search process). Appendix 1 presents a full list of studies included in the review.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the publication trend is clearly positive, with the number of articles published continuing to increase, particularly strongly in the last five years (since 2018).

The following sections of this article focus on synthesizing and reporting the results of our own use of the TCCM framework.

4. Results

In this section, we highlight the previous literature using TCCM framework. Based on previous research, we highlight the knowledge gaps and present suggestions for future research. Accordingly, the next section deals with theory development, context, characteristics and methodology.

4.1 Theory

The initial dimension subjected to analysis in TCCM was that of theory. The fundamental theoretical principles that underpin the explanation of the relationships between constructs are presented herewith. A review of the literature reveals that innovation theory is a prominent explanatory framework for understanding change within the domain of social entrepreneurship. Research findings contribute to our understanding of various types of innovation in this field, extending beyond the commonly employed social innovation perspective. Based on the analysis of the selected articles, we identified a total of 24 types of innovation, as shown in Table 1. The identification process followed a structured approach. First, we conducted a systematic review of the selected literature, focusing on the differences in how studies

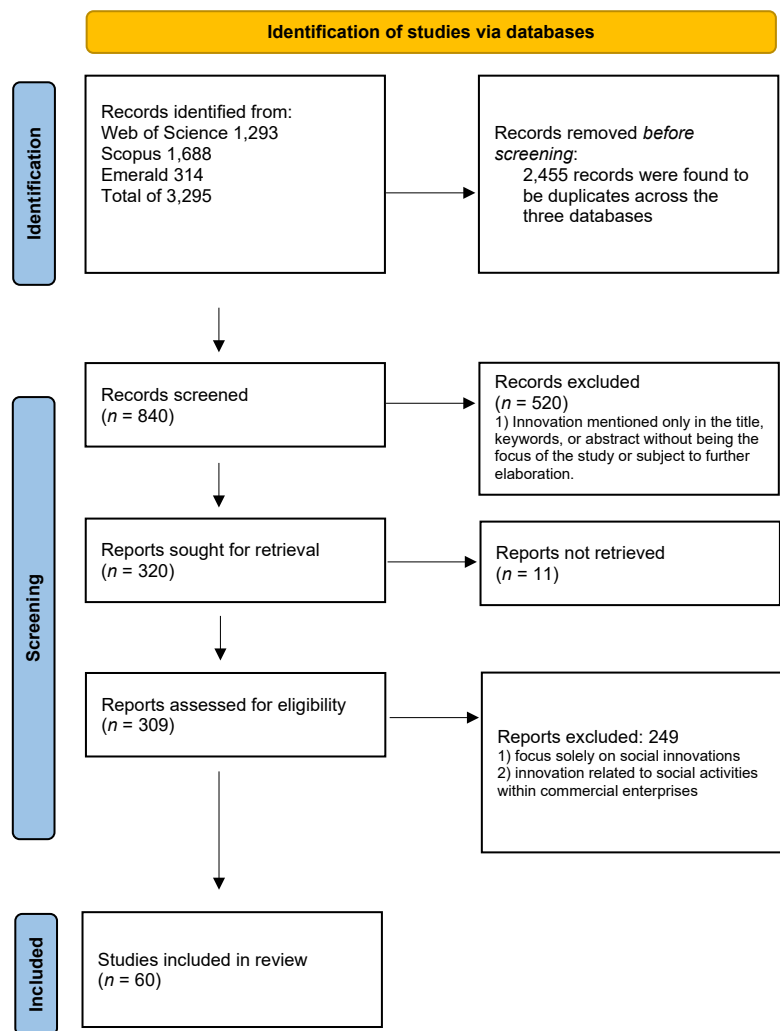


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. Notes: This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Sourced from Page et al. (2021)

conceptualize and categorize innovation in the context of social entrepreneurship. We then extracted and classified the identified types based on explicit terminology used by the authors and the definitions provided in the respective studies. To ensure consistency and reliability, three pairs of researchers independently reviewed the categorization and reconciled any discrepancies through discussion. We list the types of innovation in Table 1 and define them based on the authors' descriptions, with references to the original sources.

4.2 Context

The second dimension analyzed within the TCCM framework is context, which encompasses the circumstances shaping the research environment. Tables 2 and 3 summarize key contextual aspects, including the country, continent and type of collaboration in research on innovation in

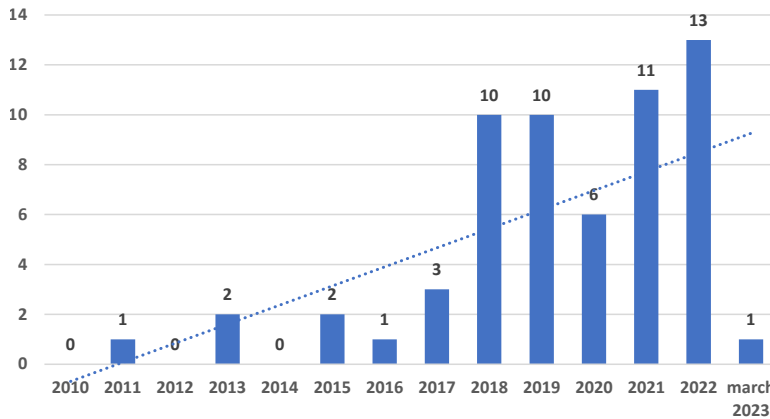


Figure 2. Distribution of studies that focus on innovation in social entrepreneurship from 2010 to Q1 2023.
Source: Own elaboration

social entrepreneurship. Analyzing 60 studies, we identified authors from 32 countries. To prevent duplication and artificially inflating results, we counted each country only once per article, even when multiple co-authors were affiliated with institutions in the same country. The distribution of authorship origin revealed a notable dominance of research from the United Kingdom (12), Italy (8) and the US (6). At the continental level, most scholars were affiliated with universities in Europe (38), followed by Asia (23), while contributions from North America (8), South and Central America (8), Australia/Oceania (6) and Africa (1) were comparatively lower (Table 2).

In Tables 2 and 3, we provide an overview of the authors' affiliations and collaboration patterns in the analyzed studies. We selected exemplary studies to illustrate each category, ensuring representation across different countries and types of cooperation. For Table 2, we identified the number of articles affiliated with each country and chose examples reflecting research conducted in those regions. For Table 3, we categorized studies based on collaboration types, selecting representative examples accordingly. Among the analyzed studies, 17 involved international collaborations, 10 of which spanned multiple continents and in 5 cases, authors represented three or more countries (Table 3).

While the authors of earlier publications were primarily researchers from the US and Europe, more recent studies increasingly include scholars from Asia. Furthermore, the number of first-time researchers addressing the topic has grown, along with a sharp increase in international collaborations over the past five years.

4.3 Characteristics

The next dimension analyzed within the TCCM framework is characteristics, referring to the elements of the construct and their relationship to other relevant variables. To distill key insights, we condensed the extensive literature set to highlight the most significant characteristics in the field, aiming to advance research on types of innovation in social entrepreneurship.

To identify and categorize these characteristics, we conducted a thorough review of the selected articles, extracting and grouping key elements based on how different authors defined and applied them in their research. Explicit terminology used in the articles, established theoretical foundations and the role of each characteristic within the broader innovation framework guided the classification process.

The following sections explore various types of innovation identified in social entrepreneurship, including product, process, business model, technological, digital, sustainable and disruptive innovation, among others.

Table 1. Types of innovation in social entrepreneurship

Concepts	Explanation	Sources
Product innovation	Launching a novel or markedly improved product or service that diverges from a company's prior offerings. It could entail modifications made to the product's specifications, envisaged applications, promotional approaches, or managerial procedures	Bunduchi, Smart, Crisan-Mitra and Cooper (2023), Carranza, Guzmán-Soria, Jorge, López-Lemus, and Martínez (2020), Cheng and Shiu (2022), Distanont, Khongmalai, and Distanont (2017), Garrido-Skurkowicz, Wittek, and la Roi (2022) Krejčí and Šebestová (2018), Monroe-White and Zook (2018), Ramus, La Cara, Vaccaro, and Brusoni (2018), Ranabahu (2020), Sharma, Singh, and Singh (2020), Son, Lee, and Chung (2018)
Process innovation	The implementation of new or significantly improved methods in the manufacturing, delivery, and management of goods and services. It involves the integration of novel technologies, reorganisation of tasks, and significant changes in techniques, equipment and software, and is intended to enhance operational efficiency and effectiveness	Bunduchi <i>et al.</i> (2023), Carranza <i>et al.</i> (2020), Cheng and Shiu (2022), Distanont <i>et al.</i> (2017), Garrido-Skurkowicz <i>et al.</i> (2022), Krejčí and Šebestová (2018), Monroe-White and Zook (2018), Ramus <i>et al.</i> (2020), Ranabahu (2020), Sharma <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Business model innovation (BMI)	The iterative process of modifying and reconfiguring the fundamental building blocks that delineate the structure of an established business model	Bunduchi <i>et al.</i> (2023), Colovic and Schruoffenegger (2021), Davies and Chambers (2018), Guerrero, Santamaría-Velasco, and Mahto (2020), Klein, Schneider, and Spieth (2021), Olofsson, Hoveskog, and Halila (2018), Phillips, Alexander, and Lee (2019), Reficco, Layrisse, and Barrios (2021), Wang and Zhou (2020)
Technological innovation	The development or adoption of technological solutions in response to social and environmental problems	Baek, Kim, and Harimoto (2019), Battisti (2019), Gerli, Calderini, and Chiodo (2022), Kim and Jun, 2022, Ratten (2013), Sacchetti (2022), Turker and Ozmen (2021)
Digital innovation	The development of product, service and process innovations that can address social problems by using information and communication technology or ledger technologies (e.g. blockchain, big data, Internet of Things and artificial intelligence)	Battisti (2019), Berardi and Valentineti (2023), Bonina, López-Berzosa, and Scarlata (2021), Cannon and Dart (2022), Ibáñez, Guerrero, Yáñez-Valdés, and Barros-Celume (2022), Javed, Yasir, Ali, and Majid (2020), Javed and Yasir (2019)
Sustainable innovation	Form of innovation that seeks simultaneous financial, ecological, social, or combined benefits	Abbasi, Ashari, Jan, and Ariffin (2021), Harsanto, Mulyana, Faisal, and Shandy (2022), Harsanto, Mulyana, Faisal, Shandy, and Alam (2022), Hechavarría and Welter (2015), Turker and Altuntaş Vural (2017)
Disruptive innovation	Introduction of simpler, affordable alternatives or novel practices, fundamentally altering market dynamics and societal norms	Pervez, Maritz, and De Waal (2013), Son <i>et al.</i> (2018), Turker and Altuntaş Vural (2017), Velázquez and Bielous (2019)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Concepts	Explanation	Sources
Service innovation	The dynamic process of creating novel services that address social needs, extending beyond the conventional emphasis on user utility and provider profit	Carranza et al. (2020) , Casini, Bensliman, Callorda Fossati, Degavre, and Mahieu (2018) , Muhamad, Adham, Alias, and Ali (2018) , Peng and Lin (2016)
Organizational innovation	Introducing new ideas, methods, or changes within an organisation to enhance its overall performance, efficiency and effectiveness	Chan et al. (2021) , Velázquez and Bielous (2019) , Vickers, Lyon, Sepulveda, and McMullin (2017)
Inclusive innovation	Designing new products, services and business models that respond to the needs of low-income and marginalized communities. It aims to promote economic, social and political inclusion by providing affordable and accessible solutions to pressing social problems	Duarte Alonso, Kok, O'Brien, and O'Shea (2020) , Parthasarathy (2022) , Peerally, De Fuentes, and Figueiredo (2019)
Open (social) innovations	A form of innovation that entails collaboration among diverse stakeholders to tackle social challenges	Ibáñez et al. (2022) , Tuckerman, Roberts, and Whittam (2022) , Yun, Park, Im, Shin, and Zhao (2017)
Responsible innovation	Steering innovation so it benefits society. The theoretical background for this type of innovation creates ethics, values and human rights	Lubberink, Blok, van Ophem, van der Velde, and Omta (2018, 2019) , Ranabahu (2020)
Catalytic innovation	Developing products and services aimed at underserved markets; providing “good enough” solutions to social challenges that have not been adequately addressed by established organisations using traditional methods and solutions	Auvinet and Lloret (2015) , Gundry, Kickul, Griffiths, and Bacq (2011) , Kickul, Griffiths, Bacq, and Garud (2018)
Frugal innovation	Product innovation that involves modifying products using limited local resources	Mishra (2021) , Nilsson, Samuelsson, and Meyer (2022) , Son et al. (2018)
Bottom of the pyramid (BOP) innovation	Introducing products, services, or business models that are affordable, accessible and sustainable for the largest and poorest socio-economic groups in the economic chain	Mishra (2021) , Pervez et al. (2013) , Sharma et al. (2020)
Workplace innovation (Employee focused innovation)	Changes in an organization's practices that improve both organizational performance and the quality of working life. It involves implementing novel solutions to increase productivity, develop workers' competences and implement flexible organization and innovation capacity	Casini et al. (2018) , Krejčí and Šebestová (2018)
Grassroots innovation	Involves organizations or activists developing novel solutions from the bottom-up to support sustainable development	Duarte Alonso et al. (2020) , Sharma and Kumar (2019)
Incremental innovation	Gradually improving technological processes, operations, business practices and products	Del Giudice, Garcia-Perez, Scuotto, and Orlando (2019) , Ranabahu (2020)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Concepts	Explanation	Sources
Transformative or Radical innovation	Involves a profound shift in thinking, radical redesign of products, advanced technologies, new forms of value creation and the development of innovative business models	Del Giudice et al. (2019) , Ranabahu (2020)
Inside-out and outside-in innovation	With inside-out innovation, the company identifies its core competencies through internal analysis and leveraging this understanding to create new products or services that align with its existing offerings. Outside-in innovation centers around customer-focused efforts and is driven by discovery	Reficco et al. (2021)
Collaborative innovation	As a form of OSI, collaborative innovation involves players in various sectors exchanging ideas and values. It also involves the shift of roles and relationships between the government and non-profit organisations, blending market-based principles and mechanisms with public and philanthropic support	Callagher, Korber, Siedlok, and Elsahn (2022) , Yun et al. (2017)
Public service innovation	Creating and incorporating new ideas, approaches and technologies to address growing demands, especially when resources are limited. It involves the government, businesses and community organisations all working together to address complex social problems	Vickers et al. (2017)
Systemic innovations	Systemic innovations extend beyond singular domains, operating within and forging connections with various systems, including the social care and health systems. The term “systemic” refers both to the existence of a co-ordinated innovation system and to situations where the overarching goal is to fundamentally change the nature of society	Green (2022)
Marketing innovation	Applying marketing principles tailored to the context of a business with the aim of making its products more accessible to customers and increasing sales. It uses marketing strategies and techniques	Distanont et al. (2017)
Source(s): Own elaboration		

Product innovation is the process of developing completely new or improved products that offer new or enhanced benefits to consumers ([Distanont et al., 2017](#); [Garrido-Skurkowicz et al., 2022](#); [Krejčí & Šebestová, 2018](#); [Ramus et al., 2018](#)). Scholars have identified breakthrough technology, architectural innovation and frugal innovation as crucial drivers of product innovation ([Garrido-Skurkowicz et al., 2022](#); [Son et al., 2018](#)). Others point to

Table 2. The authors' affiliations

Country	Number of articles	Exemplary studies
UK	12	Bunduchi et al. (2023) , Davies and Chambers (2018) , Tuckerman et al. (2022)
Italy	8	Battisti (2019) , Del Giudice et al. (2019) , Gerli et al. (2022)
USA	6	Gundry et al. (2011) , Hechavarría and Welter (2015) , Kickul et al. (2018)
Mexico	5	Auvinet and Lloret (2015) , Carranza et al. (2020) , Reficco et al. (2021)
Australia	4	Duarte Alonso et al. (2020) , Pervez et al. (2013)
India	4	Mishra (2021) , Sharma et al. (2020)
South Korea	4	Baek et al. (2019) , Kim and Jun (2022) , Yun et al. (2017)
Sweden	4	Garrido-Skurkowicz et al. (2022) , Nilsson et al. (2022)

Table 3. Collaboration among the authors

Kind of cooperation	Number of articles	Exemplary studies
International cooperation	17	Cannon and Dart (2022) , Ramus et al. (2018) , Reficco et al. (2021)
Intercontinental cooperation	10	Duarte Alonso et al. (2020) , Guerrero et al. (2020)
Cooperation with 3 or more countries	5	Chan et al. (2021) , Garrido-Skurkowicz et al. (2022) , Ibáñez et al. (2022)

personal and organizational factors that lead social entrepreneurs to achieve product innovation ([Carranza et al., 2020](#)). Innovation also characterizes the products and services offered by social enterprises, and it is essential to consider their dual purpose of generating economic returns and social value ([Sharma et al., 2020](#)). In terms of product innovation, the performance of social enterprises depends on various factors, including employees having a social entrepreneurship orientation ([Cheng & Shiu, 2022](#)). Some authors have explored how social enterprises implement radical changes in technology, design and business models to address social issues and achieve legitimacy ([Ranabahu, 2020](#)), while others have investigated the complex interplay between efforts to establish legitimacy and different forms of innovation ([Bunduchi et al., 2023](#)).

Researchers view process innovation mainly as the implementation of new procedures to manage production or service operations ([Bunduchi et al., 2023](#); [Krejčí & Šebestová, 2018](#); [Ramus et al., 2018](#); [Ranabahu, 2020](#); [Sharma et al., 2020](#)). However, [Bunduchi et al. \(2023\)](#), [Ramus et al. \(2018\)](#), and [Garrido-Skurkowicz et al. \(2022\)](#) recognize that process innovation involves modifying production processes, introducing novel technology, or implementing fresh tasks within an organisation, which in turn involves employing more efficient production equipment, implementing quality management practices in product or service creation, and standardizing processes for the production of goods and services ([Distanont et al., 2017](#); [Ramus et al., 2018](#)). Scholars identified personal, institutional and organizational factors as crucial drivers of process innovation ([Carranza et al., 2020](#); [Cheng & Shiu, 2022](#); [Sharma et al., 2020](#)). [Monroe-White and Zook \(2018\)](#) examined how social enterprise innovation (product, process, marketing) is affected by economic competitiveness, governance, culture and international aid. They found that macro-institutional factors predict social enterprise innovation, with different types influenced differently.

Some authors perceive the production of business model innovations (BMIs) as an ongoing, complex, collective, cyclical and interactive activity that involves active experimentation and learning ([Balan-Vnuk & Balan, 2015](#); [Olofsson et al., 2018](#)) or as the organizational architecture that sits between strategy and activities, forming the basis for

competitive positioning (Davies & Chambers, 2018). Others emphasize that BMI is a process of creating new ways in which an organization chooses to engage with stakeholders to create value for all exchange partners (Phillips *et al.*, 2019). Scholars view BMIs as beneficial for commercial firms, resulting in competitive advantages, increased financial performance, or new value propositions, such as social value (Klein *et al.*, 2021). In the context of social entrepreneurship, scholars understand BMIs as a means to making social impact in an economically sustainable way. The goal of creating “blended value” and using innovative business models to achieve this goal characterize social enterprises (Wang & Zhou, 2020). In this sense, BMIs represent a consistent and integrated approach to the way social entrepreneurs can capture the value created by their social innovation initiatives (Guerrero *et al.*, 2020). Researchers built on existing approaches to BMI, considering it as interrelated building blocks (Guerrero *et al.*, 2020; Reficco *et al.*, 2021) or identified dimensions included in the theoretical concept of social business model innovation (Colovic & Schruoffenegger, 2021). Bunduchi *et al.* (2023) explored the complex relationship between efforts to establish legitimacy and various types of innovation. They found that SEs focusing on product innovations mainly targeted customers and internal audiences, with limited attention to the SE community and government. Business model social innovators engaged with all stakeholder groups equally, while process innovators reached a wider range of stakeholders than product innovators but not as broadly as business model innovators.

Moreover, scholars analyze the pro-social use of technology also under the heading of technology/technological innovation. Scillitoe, Poonamallee, and Joy (2018) define social-tech innovation as the provision of “novel solutions that involve the development or adoption of technological innovations to address social and environmental problems” (Gerli *et al.*, 2022). Technological innovation is seen as a key driver of social e-enterprises, enabling them to use mobile online communities, communications and software devices to facilitate creative and innovative activities in the social sector (Ratten, 2013). Scholars also highlight the importance of technological innovation in supporting labor integration and ensuring financial sustainability (Sacchetti, 2022). Turker and Ozmen (2021) describe how social entrepreneurs navigate various institutional logics to develop technological innovations, essential for meeting market needs and addressing social challenges. Others highlight the roles of innovation managers, lead users, social entrepreneurs and online community leaders in ICT-enabled social innovations (Battisti, 2019). Technological innovation drives social enterprise performance, predicts business success, and offers sustainable solutions for economic and human development (Baek *et al.*, 2019; Kim & Jun, 2022).

When considering digital innovation within social entrepreneurship, some authors reference digital social entrepreneurship, which represents entrepreneurial initiatives with a social purpose, developed by incorporating digital technologies into one’s business model (Ibáñez *et al.*, 2022). Berardi and Valentinetti (2023) pointed to distributed ledger technologies – including blockchain, big data, Internet of Things and artificial intelligence – as an example of digital tools employed by social economy organizations. Moreover, scholars also define digital innovation as the creation of business innovations using information and communication technology (ICT) to generate high social and economic value (Javed *et al.*, 2020; Javed & Yasir, 2019). It includes social innovations enabled by technology, where digital social innovation involves innovators, users and communities collaborating with digital technologies to co-create solutions for various social needs (Cannon & Dart, 2022). Furthermore, scholars describe it as developing new products, services, or processes, embodied or enabled by IT, aimed at meeting social needs or stimulating social change (Bonina *et al.*, 2021).

Some argue that sustainable innovation integrates the streams of eco-innovation and social innovation (Harsanto, Mulyana, Faisal, & Shandy, 2022), while others posit that sustainable innovation represents a type of social innovation (Turker & Altuntaş Vural, 2017). However, there is consensus among authors that one can perceive sustainable innovation as the adoption or introduction of new processes, business models, or business systems (Abbasi *et al.*, 2021).

It can also encompass technological innovations, including product innovation (Hechavarría & Welter, 2015). Similarly, Harsanto, Mulyana, Faisal, Shandy, *et al.* (2022) found that within social enterprises, sustainability-oriented innovation predominantly takes the form of process innovation, organizational innovation, or product innovation. Crucially, sustainable innovation enhances performance on the triple bottom line, creating economic value while contributing to social and environmental sustainability (Abbasi *et al.*, 2021).

Disruptive innovation refers to a process or product that significantly alters existing market structures, relationships, or social norms (Son *et al.*, 2018; Turker & Altuntaş Vural, 2017). It introduces simpler, more affordable, or more accessible alternatives to established products or services, aiming to meet unaddressed needs in low-end or new markets (Son *et al.*, 2018). This innovation often challenges social hierarchies and power relations, bringing systemic change either rapidly or over an extended period (Turker & Altuntaş Vural, 2017). It includes technological advancements and new approaches in business models and social practices, with the aim of benefiting marginalized groups (Pervez *et al.*, 2013) or filling institutional gaps (Velázquez & Bielous, 2019).

Service innovation pertains to a continuous service process, one that moves from idea conception to specification (Muhamad *et al.*, 2018; Peng & Lin, 2016). It encompasses the creation of novel services built on idea generation, concept development, and the formulation of objectives or strategies for new services, followed by an analysis of the proposed service (Muhamad *et al.*, 2018). We may view service innovation as the process of developing new services that not only fulfill the needs of society but also transcend the traditional emphasis on user utility and provider profit (Muhamad *et al.*, 2018). Scholars confirmed the importance of the relationship between organizational factors and personal factors – such as the autonomy and creativity of the social entrepreneur – to the innovation of products and services (Carranza *et al.*, 2020). Interestingly, Casini *et al.* (2018) suggests that workplace innovation (WI) is related to service innovation.

Scholars see organizational innovation mainly as a process of creating and implementing new organizational structures, systems and practices that empower social enterprises to more effectively achieve their social and environmental goals (Velázquez & Bielous, 2019). Furthermore, organizational innovations strengthen democratic participation and empower staff by encouraging new approaches to public service and responsiveness to market opportunities and efficiencies (Vickers *et al.*, 2017). Examples of organizational innovations employed by social enterprises include changes in governance structures, democratic governance, decision-making processes, human resource management, collaborations with staff and user communities, partnerships within the social enterprise and organizational responsiveness to support business competitiveness and growth (Velázquez & Bielous, 2019; Vickers *et al.*, 2017). Of note, Chan *et al.* (2021) studied a Malaysian social enterprise in the creative sector, revealing that implementing organizational innovation and innovative delivery of cultural/creative products helped build an extended network and establish an influential position in the arts sector.

The inclusive innovation aims to foster economic, social and political inclusion by providing affordable and accessible solutions to urgent social issues (Parthasarathy, 2022). It produces solutions tailored to local needs, embodying a democratic approach to addressing developmental issues. Several authors (Duarte Alonso *et al.*, 2020; Parthasarathy, 2022; Peerally *et al.*, 2019) contend that, particularly for social enterprises, this serves as a method to establish sustainable impact and effectively confront complex social problems. Consequently, social enterprises, venture funds, philanthropic organizations and NGOs can address environmental sustainability, public health and global economic inequalities through inclusive innovation. Inclusive innovation is often associated with grassroots innovators who have extensive expertise about the local context and seek to develop solutions based on local needs (Parthasarathy, 2022).

Chesbrough and Di Minin (2014) describe open (social) innovation as the application of either inbound or outbound open innovation strategies, coupled with innovations in the organization's associated business model, to address social challenges. Authors studying open (social) innovation (OSI) often reference this definition. Importantly, scholars view OSI as a collaborative form of innovation that can effectively address complex social problems by harnessing the

collective knowledge, skills and resources of diverse actors (Yun *et al.*, 2017). Ibáñez *et al.* (2022) argue that external events like the COVID-19 pandemic and limited governmental capabilities encourage collaboration among stakeholders, leading to the rise of open social innovation. Yun *et al.* (2017) found that adopting open innovation strategies helps social enterprises grow, identify key success factors such as collaboration with external partners, co-create with customers and leverage digital technologies. Tuckerman *et al.* (2022) observed that social enterprises often use a blended approach to openness, proposing a spectrum of open social innovation (OSI) with significant implications for organizations involved in social change.

Responsible innovation brings solutions to wicked problems and delivers the right impact for society. It is based on socio-ethical values and the principles of “doing no harm” and “doing good.” Responsible innovation aims to achieve ethical acceptability, sustainability, and social desirability by focusing on ethics, values and rights (Ranabahu, 2020). Responsible innovation involves innovating both with and for society (Lubberink, Blok, van Ophem, & Omta, 2019). Lubberink *et al.* (2018) used the responsible innovation framework to explore how social entrepreneurs turn their initial ideas into solutions for social issues. Their study established a typology based on entrepreneurs’ engagement in anticipation, reflexivity, stakeholder inclusion, deliberation, responsiveness and knowledge management during the responsible innovation process. Stakeholder engagement and deliberation are essential for responsible innovation, providing a valuable framework for exploring the multi-stakeholder context in which social entrepreneurs develop their solutions (Lubberink *et al.*, 2019).

A subset of disruptive innovations, catalytic innovations provide sufficiently good solutions to social challenges that one cannot effectively solve by existing organizations using traditional approaches (Kickul *et al.*, 2018). Catalytic innovations aim to create scalable, sustainable and system-changing solutions (Auvinet & Lloret, 2015 p. 238). Gundry *et al.* (2011) applied the bricolage theory to study the link between innovation ecology, entrepreneurial bricolage and catalytic innovation in the context of social entrepreneurship. They found that catalytic innovation is associated with innovation ecology but moderated by the extent of bricolage. Auvinet and Lloret (2015) showed that catalytic innovation is a real strategy that allows social entrepreneurs to achieve both greater economic success and social impact. They also confirmed that social enterprises can use catalytic innovation as a strategy to create social change. In so doing, they provided empirical evidence that Christensen *et al.*’s theory of catalytic innovation (Christensen, Baumann, Ruggles, & Sadtler, 2006) indeed works. Moreover, Kickul *et al.* (2018) investigated the impact of social entrepreneurs’ bricolage behavior on creating “catalytic innovations” in resource-constrained environments. They examined the relationship between catalytic innovation, entrepreneurial bricolage and scale. The study revealed a positive relationship between bricolage and catalytic innovations, as well as scale/growth changes.

Frugal innovations emerge from either a top-down or a bottom-up process driven in resource-constrained spaces, and they require co-creation that involves both local producers and consumers (Nilsson *et al.*, 2022). Such innovations create faster, better and cheaper solutions for more people employing minimal resources (Mishra, 2021). As Son *et al.* (2018) indicate, it has distinct attributes: overcoming a lack of resources and environmental conditions in developing new products and lowering products’ costs. Mishra (2021) indicates that external events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, foster the utilization of frugal innovation and can provide a source of livelihood to low-income individuals while simultaneously serving low-end markets. Frugal innovations rarely aim to create breakthrough changes but instead exploit emergent economies by adapting, re-engineering and redesigning the technical specifications of product and service offerings (Nilsson *et al.*, 2022).

Bottom of the pyramid (BOP) innovation involves creating and implementing technological, process and business model advancements specifically designed to address the unique needs and challenges of the “bottom of the pyramid population” (Mishra, 2021; Pervez *et al.*, 2013; Sharma *et al.*, 2020). The objective of these innovations is to make products and services more accessible, affordable and acceptable to this segment, aligning closely with the social mission of the enterprises involved. Successful BOP innovation

requires a combination of three criteria: market co-creation, local embeddedness and BOP engagement (Pervez *et al.*, 2013). Enterprises can benefit from engaging with the BOP market segment by creating value for the BOP population while achieving economic and social success (Mishra, 2021). Moreover, BOP innovation often involves frugal innovation principles while leveraging limited resources for maximum effect (Sharma *et al.*, 2020).

Workplace innovation works to facilitate a more accessible and efficient working environment, create innovative solutions tailored to disadvantaged workers and implement flexible working arrangements (Casini *et al.*, 2018). The connection between workplace innovation and social enterprises serves to tailor inventive solutions to the unique challenges faced by workers within social enterprises (Krejčí & Šebestová, 2018). In their study, Krejčí and Šebestová (2018) described three distinctive levels of innovation activities: (1) employee-focused innovation, which reflects the enterprise's creation of innovative solutions tailored to its disadvantaged employees, such as adopting advancements that facilitate a more accessible and efficient work environment for the workforce; (2) product-oriented innovation, which examines the enterprise's initiatives in innovating the production and sales strategies of their products or services; and (3) enterprise-wide innovation, which encompasses innovation directed toward enhancing the enterprise itself, including modernizing business spaces or introducing innovative strategies for internal organizational processes.

Grassroots innovations are often cast as scarcity-induced innovations. They utilize locally available resources by individuals outside formal setups, developed to address needs frequently overlooked by the formal sector (Sharma & Kumar, 2019). The phenomenon encompasses a diverse range of initiators, including networks, movements, practitioners, activists and scientists, all seeking alternative approaches to innovation and knowledge creation. Grassroots innovation not only promotes inclusion but also enhances local development, potentially offering services to marginalized groups and encouraging their participation in technology design (Duarte Alonso *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, authors often distinguish between incremental innovation and radical innovation. The former seeks to improve existing products and services, while the latter aims to generate disruptive business ideas (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2019). For example, Ranabahu (2020) utilizes incremental innovation to describe a gradual enhancement of technological processes, operations, business practices and products, highlighting that this type of innovation is based on pre-existing knowledge and resources. It is characterized by small improvements made over time. In turn, radical innovation creates a revolution in society (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2019) and requires a considerable break from current knowledge and resources. This may lead to the formation of wholly new products, services, or industries (Ranabahu, 2020). In that sense, it completely changes the way of life by incorporating new technologies (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2019).

Inside-out is inward focused, while outside-in innovation looks outward. When a company uses the inside-out approach, it identifies its core competencies and capitalizes on that knowledge to develop new products or services related to its existing offerings (Reficco *et al.*, 2021). Conversely, a company using the outside-in approach focuses on understanding the needs and preferences of its customers and uses that knowledge to develop new products or services that meet those specific needs (Reficco *et al.*, 2021).

Collaborative innovation represents a facet of open social innovation, involving cooperation among diverse stakeholders, including social entrepreneurs, businesses, governments and civil society organisations (Yun *et al.*, 2017). It is characterized by the dynamic exchange of ideas and values across various sectors (Callagher *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, collaborative innovation necessitates a shift in roles and relationships between governments and non-profit organizations, seamlessly blending market-based principles and mechanisms with public and philanthropic support (Yun *et al.*, 2017).

Authors looking at public service innovation, such as Vickers *et al.* (2017), suggest that such innovation occurs in various organizational and service settings and is influenced by multiple institutional logics, including those at work in the public, market (private for profit)

and civil society sectors. Furthermore, public service innovation helps address complex social challenges arising from the combination of growing demand and severe resource constraints (Vickers *et al.*, 2017).

Authors studying systemic innovation often turn to the definition provided by Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan (2010, p. 108), who observe that such innovation is frequently “suddenly pushed forward by a crisis or a disruptive technology.” Indeed, systemic innovations have the potential to transform the world globally and build bridges towards greater social cohesion. For example, Green (2022) explores how disability arts initiatives disrupt social structures for systemic innovation. Departing from conventional product-based innovation and individualism, these organizations emphasize collective and representational mediums, particularly live performing arts, to address disability issues. Operating within multiple systems, including welfare, health, arts and local communities, these initiatives challenge the current discourse on innovation (Green, 2022).

Marketing innovation can benefit social enterprises by enhancing their competitiveness and effectiveness. Researchers sought a means of enhancing the efficiency of community enterprises and found that pairing local expertise with a contemporary management scheme can facilitate marketing innovation (Distanont *et al.*, 2017). The research results indicated that integrating local knowledge with a modern management system can yield various innovations, with process innovation and marketing innovation being the most notable. These innovations form the foundation for more effective organizational performance, contributing to product quality improvement and enhancing the social enterprises’ competitiveness.

5. Methodology

The final dimension analyzed within the TCCM is methods, which includes details of samples, measurement scales, research designs and analytical tools. In our review, we analyzed 60 articles to investigate the methodologies and approaches used to study innovation in social entrepreneurship. We adopted the methodology proposed by Phillips *et al.* (2015) with slight modifications. The resulting methodology categorizes articles into three types: (1) theoretical/ conceptual – those that introduce or challenge existing theories and/or present key concepts, variables and potential relationships; (2) empirical – involving studies using data that was either extracted or gathered; and (3) review – involving a bibliographic study. Table 4 below summarizes the findings.

To present the analysis results in more detail, we divided the research articles by the research methods used: (1) qualitative – research utilising non-ordinal data; (2) quantitative – studies that apply mathematical approaches and/or statistical analyses to explain a phenomenon; and (3) mixed-method – using both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Table 5).

Moreover, we provide details on the research methods and tools used: (1) single or multi-case studies; (2) questionnaire survey; (3) in-depth or semi-structured interviews; and (4) focus groups (Table 6).

Table 4. Distribution of article types

Article type	Number of articles	Exemplary studies
Empirical	51	Auvinet and Lloret (2015), Bunduchi <i>et al.</i> (2023), Tuckerman <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Theoretical/ conceptual	6	Abbasi <i>et al.</i> (2021), Curtis (2010), Pervez <i>et al.</i> (2013)
Review	3	Harsanto (2022b), Javed and Yasir (2019)
Source(s): Own elaboration		

Table 5. Methodological distinction in research approaches

Research approach	Number of articles	Exemplary studies
Qualitative	36	Distanont <i>et al.</i> (2017), Green (2022), Mishra (2021)
Quantitative	12	Garrido-Skurkowicz <i>et al.</i> (2022), Gundry <i>et al.</i> (2011)
Mixed method	3	Lubberink <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Source(s): Own elaboration		

Table 6. Distribution of research methods

Research method	Number of articles	Exemplary studies
Case study	27	Krejčí and Šebestová (2018), Sacchetti (2022), Sharma and Kumar (2019)
Questionnaire survey	17	Gundry <i>et al.</i> (2011), Hechavarría and Welter (2015), Kickul <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Interviews	13	Gerli <i>et al.</i> (2022), Velázquez and Bielous (2019), Yun <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Source(s): Own elaboration		

Empirical articles were the most common among those reviewed. The analysis showed a prevalence of qualitative approaches, with 36 studies using this method, while 12 employed quantitative methods. Some articles incorporated mixed research methods. Case studies were the most widely adopted analytical method, featured in 27 articles. The second and third most frequently used methods were interviews, documented in 17 articles and questionnaire surveys, documented in 13 articles.

6. Findings: typology of innovation in social entrepreneurship

Our study revealed a diverse range of innovations used to explain phenomena in social entrepreneurship, identifying 24 different types. In this section, we categorize the findings into five innovation types: outcome-driven, societal and ethical demand, collective and network-based, intensity-focused, and technology and digital innovations (Table 7). The selection of these criteria is deeply rooted in existing innovation theories, ensuring a comprehensive and theoretically sound framework for analyzing innovations in social entrepreneurship. We support each criterion with established academic models and perspectives:

- (1) The “subject of innovation” (What is being innovated?) category draws from the Oslo Manual and Schumpeter’s theory of innovation, distinguishing between product, process, organizational, marketing and business model innovations.
- (2) The “aim of innovation” (What is the primary purpose or motivation behind the innovation?) criterion aligns with theories addressing social and ethical needs, including Prahalad’s bottom of the pyramid (BOP) framework, which highlights the role of innovation in serving underserved populations.
- (3) The “nature of innovation” (How is the innovation created, and what are its defining characteristics?) incorporates open innovation and networking concepts, emphasizing the collaborative and cross-sectoral approaches that are particularly relevant in social entrepreneurship.

Table 7. Categories of innovation in social entrepreneurship

Criterion	Category	Type of innovation
Subject of innovation	Outcome-driven innovation	Product innovation Process innovation Organisational innovation Marketing innovation Service innovation Business model innovation (BMI) Workplace innovation (Employee focused innovation)
Aim of innovation	Societal and ethical demand innovation	Sustainable innovation Responsible innovation Inclusive innovation Bottom of the pyramid (BOP) innovation Frugal innovation Public service innovation
Nature of innovation	Collective and network-based innovation	Open (social) innovations Grassroots innovation Collaborative innovation Inside-out and outside-in innovation
Range of innovation	Intensity-focused innovation	Disruptive innovation Incremental innovation Catalytic innovation Systemic innovation Transformative or Radical innovation
Means of innovation	Technology and digital innovations	Technological innovation Digital innovation

Source(s): Own elaboration

- (4) The “range of innovation” (What is the scale or intensity of the innovation’s impact?) framework is informed by Christensen’s theories of incremental and transformational innovation, distinguishing between innovations that refine existing models and those that create disruptive change.
- (5) The “means of innovation” (What mechanisms and processes drive the innovation?) are shaped by Schumpeter’s technological theories and the network society framework, highlighting the role of technology and digital transformation in facilitating social impact.

6.1 Outcome-driven innovation

The first category of innovation, outcome-driven, encompasses a range of types, including technological, process, business model innovation (BMI), product, organizational, marketing, workplace and service innovations. These types of innovation demonstrate the complexity and diversity of social enterprises’ approaches to value creation, including social value.

The distinguishing factor of an outcome-driven innovation category is its focus on the market and business. [Khan, Ahmad, and Majava \(2021\)](#) proposed a similar category concept as a collection of innovations that aim to achieve a specific desired effect or impact on the organization, market, or society. The degree of impact can vary from incremental to radical change.

As implemented by social enterprises, these innovations possess strong market attributes and tackle social and economic issues by creating new processes, products, services, or business models to achieve social goals ([Grijalvo Martín, Pacios Álvarez, Ordieres-Meré,](#)

Villalba-Díez, & Morales-Alonso, 2021). The creation of economic value is a crucial element linking all types of innovation in this category.

In social enterprises, innovations of the outcome-driven category are considered to be more market-oriented than other types of innovation. This is because they directly impact the enterprises' economic activity, business efficiency and competitive position. This category reflects the complexity of the innovation approach, as well as its interdisciplinary nature, adaptability and capacity to create economic and social value (Gertner, 2023; Khan, Syed, & Azharuddin, 2023). Distinguishing this category is crucial for analysing and understanding the activities of social enterprises. It allows for a focus on measurable objectives and outcomes, facilitating the evaluation of activities implemented for social impact.

6.2 Societal and ethical demand innovation

The second category consists of innovations that result from societal and ethical demands and consist of sustainable innovation, responsible innovation, inclusive innovation, bottom of the pyramid (BOP) innovation, frugal innovation and public service innovation.

The common thread among these innovations is their shared objective, i.e. tackling Grand Challenges (GC), which encompass broad social issues that, if left unresolved, could have significant global consequences (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). In recent years, the magnitude of these Grand Challenges has rapidly expanded, along with the emerging imperative to understand and confront them. These challenges not only pertain to the goal of creating a sustainable future for the planet, as noted by George *et al.* (2016), but also impact the well-being and even survival of humanity. It has become clear that we cannot allow economic development to significantly and irreversibly disturb the environment, but we should significantly contribute to positive, large-scale changes. Therefore, all scientific disciplines were called upon to contribute to the collective effort to solve problems related to these Grand Challenges (Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022). Social entrepreneurship studies are no exception (Markman *et al.*, 2019; Ricciardi, Rossignoli, & Zardini, 2021). Given the widely acknowledged importance of creating new ventures on innovation, employment and economic growth, it is not surprising that entrepreneurship and new ventures have come to be seen as potential mechanisms for addressing Grand Challenges (Markman *et al.*, 2019). Some even claim that we can only address Grand Challenges through wide-ranging changes in technology, production, consumption and ways of life – that is, through innovation (Fagerberg & Verspagen, 2009).

6.3 Collective and network-based innovation

The third category, the collective and network-based approach, encompasses open (social) innovation, grassroots innovation, collaborative innovation, and inside-out and outside-in innovation. Based on a criterion such as the nature of the innovation, we distinguished between innovations characterized by a collaborative and networked approach, in which different stakeholders work together to generate new ideas, co-create solutions and bring about positive change. This category highlights the importance of collective action and networking in driving innovation, while the approach suggests that innovation emerges from collective efforts and is facilitated by interconnected relationships within a broader ecosystem (Isenberg, 2016). It recognizes the importance of the innovation ecosystem in fostering social entrepreneurship, an area of significant research interest (Trabskaia, Gorgadze, Raudsaar, & Myyryläinen, 2023). By prioritizing interaction as a fundamental driver of innovation processes, this approach recognizes that collectivity and relationships are not just enablers but integral components of the innovation process itself.

Furthermore, this group of innovations understands collaboration as a means of harnessing shared resources to address complex challenges and generate innovative solutions in social entrepreneurship. By harnessing the power of collective action and networked relationships, innovators can engage in collaborative problem-solving, foster creativity and catalyze positive social change.

6.4 Intensity-focused innovation

The fourth category centers around intensity-focused innovation, which encompasses disruptive innovation, incremental innovation, catalytic innovation and systemic innovation, as well as transformative or radical innovation. Based on criteria including the range of innovation, we drew a distinction between innovations characterized by the specific nature of their effects (O'Connor & Veryzer, 2001) and intended to aim to break established patterns. This category underscores the importance of altering reality, whereby such alterations can manifest in diverse ways – from gradual transformation in the context of incremental innovations (Kuratko, Goldsby, & Hornsby, 2018) to entirely groundbreaking perspectives that disruptive innovations bring about (Christensen, 2013). Intended to generate societal change, such innovations also serve as tools to achieve unprecedented increases in efficiency and effectiveness in addressing social problems (Christensen *et al.*, 2006). This approach also suggests that the changes these innovations bring about are also significant. Furthermore, it is in the nature of social enterprises, which are themselves a breakthrough, to challenge entrenched norms. These enterprises move beyond the classical goals of enterprises while seeking alternative means of satisfying emerging social and/or environmental needs, as well as the shift in mindset within the enterprises themselves (Wronka-Pośpiech, 2024).

6.5 Technology and digital innovations

The fifth category covers technological and digital innovation and describes innovations resulting from the technological and digital changes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Digital transformation is currently one of the most important development trends globally; hence, it is a criterion for distinguishing innovations within social entrepreneurship as well. Digital transformation is at the heart of Industry 4.0, changing the development trajectories of economies, affecting the public sector, the commercial sector, lifestyles and households, and transforming the interconnectedness of consumption, production and labor dynamics (Bruque Camara *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in adopting modern technologies. It emphasized the importance of integrating digital innovations into all aspects of life, driven by advancements in artificial intelligence, which are reshaping economies, work processes and data management. This exploration is vital for social entrepreneurship, as it expands the tools available to address social needs and challenges (Bryndin, 2018). Key issues include using technology for sustainability, supporting crisis response and prioritizing a human-centered approach (Huang *et al.*, 2022). The shift from Industry 4.0 to Society 5.0 focuses on using digital innovations to achieve sustainability goals (Khan *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, technology enables social enterprises to scale their impact and reach broader audiences, as seen with platform cooperatives (Scholz, 2016).

The selection of the above criteria is deeply rooted in existing innovation theories, ensuring a comprehensive and theoretically sound framework for analyzing innovations in social entrepreneurship. To establish this categorization, we applied thematic content analysis and systematically examined selected literature to identify key dimensions of innovation. This process involved analyzing scholarly contributions on innovation in social entrepreneurship, extracting recurring themes and grouping them based on conceptual similarities. By identifying patterns in how innovations are described and classified across different studies, we developed a structured framework that captures the diversity of innovation types in this field.

7. Discussion and concluding remarks

We aimed to delineate a typology of innovation in social entrepreneurship, revealing a diverse range of innovations used to explain phenomena in this field. Through a systematic literature review of key articles published between 2010 and Q1 2023, we identified 24 types of

innovation created and/or implemented by social enterprises, which we then categorized into five distinct groups. This categorization highlights the need for further exploration into how social enterprises use these diverse innovations to achieve both social and economic goals, addressing gaps in the literature and supporting prior research on the multifaceted impacts of innovation. As new types of innovation continue to emerge (von Zedtwitz *et al.*, 2015), this categorization may evolve, with new innovations fitting within the proposed five categories, thereby contributing to the advancement of innovation theory. It bridges gaps in prior research by systematically categorizing innovations and providing theoretical foundations for future empirical studies.

This study aligns with the neo-Schumpeterian approach, which defines innovation broadly, encompassing organizational, institutional and social innovations in addition to technological innovations (Hanusch & Pyka, 2006). Numerous other studies have examined the relationship between social entrepreneurship and social innovation (Groot & Dankbaar, 2014; Maclean *et al.*, 2013; Phillips *et al.*, 2015), two closely intertwined concepts that the literature has not clearly distinguished from one another. While some use the terms interchangeably, others emphasize their distinction (Morris, Santos, & Kuratko, 2021). According to Sottini, Zupic, and Giudici (2024), despite many links between them, the logic, challenges and nature of social entrepreneurship and social innovation processes are distinct. We acknowledge the growing importance of social innovation and social entrepreneurship as means of driving social change (Sampaio & Sebastião, 2024). Simultaneously, following Sottini *et al.* (2024), we argue that discussions and research should go beyond merely exploring the boundaries between social innovation and social entrepreneurship.

Our findings have significant implications for both theory and practice. By expanding the knowledge base on innovations for social purposes, this research contributes to both innovation theory and social entrepreneurship theory. Moreover, it offers valuable guidance for stakeholders seeking to leverage innovation strategies to support the growth of social entrepreneurs and enterprises (Gupta *et al.*, 2020; Kaushik *et al.*, 2023). These insights can assist policymakers in designing targeted innovation-support programs, funders in making informed investment decisions in social enterprises and practitioners in implementing effective innovation strategies for greater social impact. The proposed typology serves as a practical framework for assessing and developing innovation pathways in social entrepreneurship, helping organizations navigate the complexities of innovation-driven social change.

Our literature review is not without its limitations. Employing a systematic review methodology has both advantages and drawbacks (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & for the PRISMA Group, 2009; Paul & Criado, 2020). While it provides a replicable, scientific and transparent framework for data collection and analysis (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003), it also presents potential constraints arising from the strict research conceptualization and implementation. The first is that we relied solely on abstracts and discussion/conclusion sections to determine which manuscripts to include. While this is a common practice in conducting systematic literature reviews (Kraus *et al.*, 2020; Snyder, 2019), it may have caused us to overlook articles crucial to our theorisation. The second constraint is that we confined our search to academic journals. While this is standard practice (Moher *et al.*, 2009), it may have led us to overlook relevant manuscripts. Furthermore, the range of search operators was limited, and we could potentially broaden it. However, it is not necessary to cover the entire body of literature in a given field; a representative selection of relevant articles is sufficient. Furthermore, analyzing the content of articles within the identified categories is a qualitative and interpretive process. Different researchers might have identified different patterns. To minimize this risk and enhance the review's objectivity, we conducted the analysis as a team (Kraus *et al.*, 2020; Snyder, 2019).

Our investigation contributed to the discussion on the nature and role of innovation in social entrepreneurship an ever-evolving topic in contemporary social entrepreneurship research (Morris *et al.*, 2021). Simultaneously, it allows us to consider areas for future research that could explore how social enterprises navigate the intersection of multiple types of innovation,

such as technological, societal and network-based innovations, to achieve both social and economic goals. Moreover, there is a need to investigate how different cultural and geographical contexts influence the adoption of innovation in social enterprises, particularly in underexplored regions (Laurisz & Pacut, 2025). Examining how funding mechanisms shape innovation strategies and business models could further enhance our understanding of the financial sustainability of these enterprises.

Another important avenue is studying the long-term effects of different types of innovation, particularly disruptive and incremental innovations, on sustainability and scaling efforts. Understanding how these innovation trajectories evolve over time could provide insights into their broader social and economic impact. Moreover, research should explore how collective action facilitates the generation and implementation of innovative solutions, identifying key drivers and challenges in network-based collaboration.

Moreover, the role of digital innovation in driving social entrepreneurship remains a promising area, especially in enhancing collaboration and inclusivity in addressing societal challenges. Investigating the key factors influencing the adoption and successful implementation of digital technologies in social enterprises can provide valuable insights into their potential to improve operational efficiency and impact.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Martyna Wronka-Pośpiech, Norbert Laurisz, Agnieszka Pacut; Methodology: Martyna Wronka-Pośpiech, Norbert Laurisz, Agnieszka Pacut; Validation: Paweł Mikołajczak, Izabella Steinerowska-Streb, Agnieszka Żur; Formal Analysis Martyna Wronka-Pośpiech, Norbert Laurisz, Agnieszka Pacut, Paweł Mikołajczak, Izabella Steinerowska-Streb, Agnieszka Żur; Resources: Paweł Mikołajczak, Izabella Steinerowska-Streb, Agnieszka Żur; Data Curation: Martyna Wronka-Pośpiech, Norbert Laurisz, Agnieszka Pacut, Paweł Mikołajczak, Izabella Steinerowska-Streb, Agnieszka Żur; Writing – Original Draft Martyna Wronka-Pośpiech, Norbert Laurisz, Agnieszka Pacut, Paweł Mikołajczak, Izabella Steinerowska-Streb, Agnieszka Żur; Visualization Paweł Mikołajczak, Izabella Steinerowska-Streb, Agnieszka Żur; Supervision Martyna Wronka-Pośpiech, Norbert Laurisz, Agnieszka Pacut. Note: All authors contributed equally to this work.

Statements and declarations

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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