

Synthesizing Knowledge on Social Entrepreneurship in SMEs: A Dual Bibliometric and Systematic Review Approach

Shella Oktaviani¹, Sudarmiatin², Puji Handayati³, Naswan Suharsono⁴

¹²³⁴Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

Email : Shella.oktaviani.2604139@students.um.ac.id, sudarmiatin.fe@um.ac.id, puji.handayati.fe@um.ac.id,
naswan.suharsono.fe@um.ac.id

Abstract

Keywords:

Bibliometric Analysis;
PRISMA; Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs); Social Enterprise; Social Entrepreneurship; Systematic Literature Review.

Social entrepreneurship, social innovation, and sustainability are vital drivers for the resilience and long-term viability of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). However, research combining these dimensions often remains fragmented across different academic disciplines. This study systematically maps global publication trends, institutional contributions, thematic structures, and future agendas in this field by employing a hybrid approach that integrates bibliometric analysis and a systematic literature review (SLR) based on Scopus data. The refined bibliometric dataset comprises 62 documents published between 2021 and 2025.. Quantitatively, the findings identify the United Kingdom and the United States as leading research hubs, with "social entrepreneurship," "social enterprise," and "sustainability" emerging as the most dominant keyword clusters. Qualitatively, the literature synthesis uncovers critical internal motivational drivers (e.g., founder's prosocial orientation) and external systemic constraints (e.g., institutional voids and resource scarcity) that dictate how hybrid small firms balance social missions with commercial survival. This study provides a multi-level integrated conceptual framework that bridges macro-scientific trends with micro-level small business operations, offering practical insights for social entrepreneurs and policymakers in emerging economies.

INTRODUCTION

The transition of the global economy toward sustainable development models is heavily reliant on the operational dynamics of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Corazza et al., 2022). While larger for-profit organizations often deploy Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as an instrumental mechanism driven by profit maximization, social SMEs embed social, cultural, and ecological missions directly into their core strategic DNA (Myryläinen & Torkkeli, 2022). In contemporary business ecosystems, pushing for social innovation and alternative modes of organizational value capture has become a pressing necessity (Gasparin et al., 2021). Small firms are increasingly adopting sustainable business models to actively alleviate deep-rooted environmental and socioeconomic problems while simultaneously chasing long-term economic viability (Cortes & Lee, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). However, social entrepreneurship within the SME sector does not operate without friction. These hybrid organizations continuously navigate complex, multi-mandated environments where they must exploit economic opportunities without causing mission drift or jeopardizing their core social purpose (Osembo et al., 2025).

In resource-constrained settings, social SMEs face intense operational trade-offs, financial vulnerability, and structural scale barriers (Searing, 2021). Leaders' distinct cognitive competencies, particularly regarding social proactivity and proactive risk-taking, play a critical role in shaping how these small firms orchestrate their limited capital to spark green innovation performance (Álvarez-

García et al., 2022). To surmount resource scarcity and capture new market options, social entrepreneurs heavily embed themselves within symbiotic external ecosystems, weaving networks with local communities, non-profits, and regional governance actors (Sipahi Dongul & Artantaş, 2023; Sottini et al., 2022). Furthermore, contemporary waves of digital transformation have emerged as a prominent growth driver (Kotiranta et al., 2024). While advanced digitization projects have the potential to streamline internal business processes and enhance stakeholder trust (Upadhyay & Sarmah, 2025). The integration of these tools requires a comprehensive strategic orientation that balances market dynamics with community benefits (Munandar et al., 2025; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2022).

Despite the exponential growth of scholarly literature exploring these intersecting domains, current academic knowledge remains highly fragmented. Prior review papers have predominantly analyzed macro-level social work or focused on commercial business resilience in isolation. Consequently, there is a conspicuous lack of a unified quantitative and qualitative roadmap that clarifies how social entrepreneurship operates under the unique constraints of small business architectures. To bridge this empirical and conceptual gap, this study deploys a robust dual-methodological approach. By combining a quantitative bibliometric mapping of the Scopus database with a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) via the PRISMA framework (Salwan et al., 2025), this manuscript maps the intellectual boundaries of the field. Specifically, this study aims to systematically chart contemporary scholarly advancements by addressing the following four central Research Questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What are the temporal publication trends and growth trajectories of literature on social entrepreneurship within SMEs from 2021 to 2025?
- RQ2: Which are the most influential prominent authors, leading countries, and key institutional affiliations driving this research domain?
- RQ3: What are the dominant thematic clusters and keyword co-occurrence networks that define the intellectual structure of social entrepreneurship in SMEs?
- RQ4: What are the primary motivational drivers and systemic barriers faced by small and medium enterprises when adopting a social entrepreneurial orientation?

By answering these questions, this study provides a multi-level conceptual framework that serves both academic researchers and practitioners. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the PRISMA-based methodology and filtering protocols; Section 3 presents the quantitative bibliometric findings (RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3); Section 4 delivers the qualitative systematic synthesis of organizational practices (RQ4); and Section 5 concludes with future research agendas and comprehensive policy implications.

2. Methods

This section delineates the systemic methodological framework deployed to address the core research questions established in this study. To ensure academic replication, transparency, and a comprehensive mapping of the structural landscape, this manuscript utilizes an integrated mixed-methods research design that bridges quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The methodology coordinates a dual-stream approach consisting of a computational performance mapping via Bibliometric Analysis alongside a focused narrative synthesis guided by a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) framework. By overlaying these two distinctive modes of inquiry, this integrated methodology neutralizes common method bias and bridges macro-scientific publication configurations with micro-level organizational configurations. The subsequent sub-sections detail the specific research design, database data collection filtering protocols, science mapping properties, and integrated text data integration strategies applied to the definitive $n = 62$ sample.

2.1. Research Design and Data Collection

An integrated framework combining Bibliometric Analysis and a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was applied in this investigation to uphold scientific rigor, transparency, and repeatability (Lestari et al., 2026; Read & Sudarmiati, 2023; Suharsono et al., 2025). Bibliographic

data were gathered from Scopus, encompassing peer-reviewed publications (2021–2025) exploring sustainable entrepreneurship, green entrepreneurship, and ecopreneurship in the SME sector. In alignment with PRISMA protocols, studies underwent a structured screening pipeline including identification, abstract filtering, and criteria-based eligibility assessment prior to final synthesis. Network visualization tools via VOSviewer were then deployed to map key co-citation networks, authorship patterns, and thematic keyword clusters, uncovering the underlying intellectual trajectory of the topic.

2.2. Literature Selection and Screening

To ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability, this study adopts a mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative Bibliometric Analysis and a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on the PRISMA 2020 framework. Data collection was executed via the Scopus database on October 19, 2026, utilizing a comprehensive Boolean search string that initially retrieved a baseline dataset of 546 records. To secure dataset homogeneity and quality control, a sequential five-stage screening protocol was implemented within the database, which strictly applied predefined filters: limiting the timeframe to contemporary post-pandemic transitions between 2021 and 2025 (adjusting the meta-pool to 546 records after removing 298 out-of-scope files), restricting the document type strictly to peer-reviewed original Articles (96 records excluded, leaving 248), maintaining English-language publications only (7 records excluded, leaving 152), evaluating subject classifications to retain only Business and Social Sciences disciplines (17 records excluded, leaving 145), and executing a high-relevance advanced keyword verification (66 records excluded, leaving 128). Consequently, a definitive sample of 62 core articles was formally retained for ultimate inclusion. The quantitative metadata of these 62 articles was processed using VOSviewer software to map citation distributions, country collaboration linkages, and fractional keyword co-occurrences. Simultaneously, the qualitative stream subjected the full-text documents to an inductive open-coding thematic analysis to capture nuanced small firm strategic behaviors, and the final integration phase triangulated both streams to build a robust, generalizable multi-level conceptual framework that effectively neutralizes common method bias.

2.3. Bibliometric Analysis

The quantitative structural mapping of the definitive ($n = 62$) article dataset was processed via VOSviewer software (version 1.6.20). Bibliometric metrics provide an objective evaluation tool to dissect the intellectual architecture of the target domain. This study carries out performance analysis and science mapping across three distinctive units of analysis:

- **Performance Metrics:** Computing non-parametric publication volumes, publication weights, and cross-national citation distributions to answer RQ1 and RQ2.
- **Co-Authorship Analysis:** Charting country collaboration profiles and institutional network clusters.
- **Keyword Co-Occurrence Mapping:** Executing fractional counting networks on authors' keywords to construct visual networks. The Total Link Strength (TLS) is computed to uncover core thematic clusters, mapping the dominant intellectual landscape of social entrepreneurship in small firm ecosystems to satisfy RQ3.

2.4. Systematic Literature Review and Synthesis

Following the quantitative mapping, the ($n = 62$) retained articles were subjected to a rigorous qualitative content evaluation using thematic analysis. Unlike the automated clustering of bibliometrics, the SLR employs systematic descriptive coding to dig deep into the operational mechanisms of small businesses. Each full-text document was thoroughly read and systematically reviewed. Grounded on an inductive open-coding framework, qualitative data were categorized into distinct conceptual blocks to extract the underlying core strategic themes. This systematic text synthesis focuses heavily on identifying: (1) internal motivational factors, (2) external systemic constraints, (3) digital platform enablement features, and (4) joint value co-creation mechanisms, thereby providing a comprehensive qualitative answer to RQ4.

2.5. Integration of Findings

The final phase of the methodology involves the triangulation and integration of data findings from both analysis streams. The quantitative clusters generated via VOSviewer keyword co-occurrences were used as a structural grid to anchor the qualitative discussions of the SLR. By overlaying the mathematical results of the bibliometric mapping with the coded narrative data from the systematic content review, this study develops a multi-level integrated conceptual framework. This integrative synthesis bridges macro-level scientific trends with micro-level strategic configurations, effectively neutralizing common method bias and ensuring that the final conclusions provide robust, cross-cultural, and highly generalizable insights for social enterprise practitioners and policymakers alike.

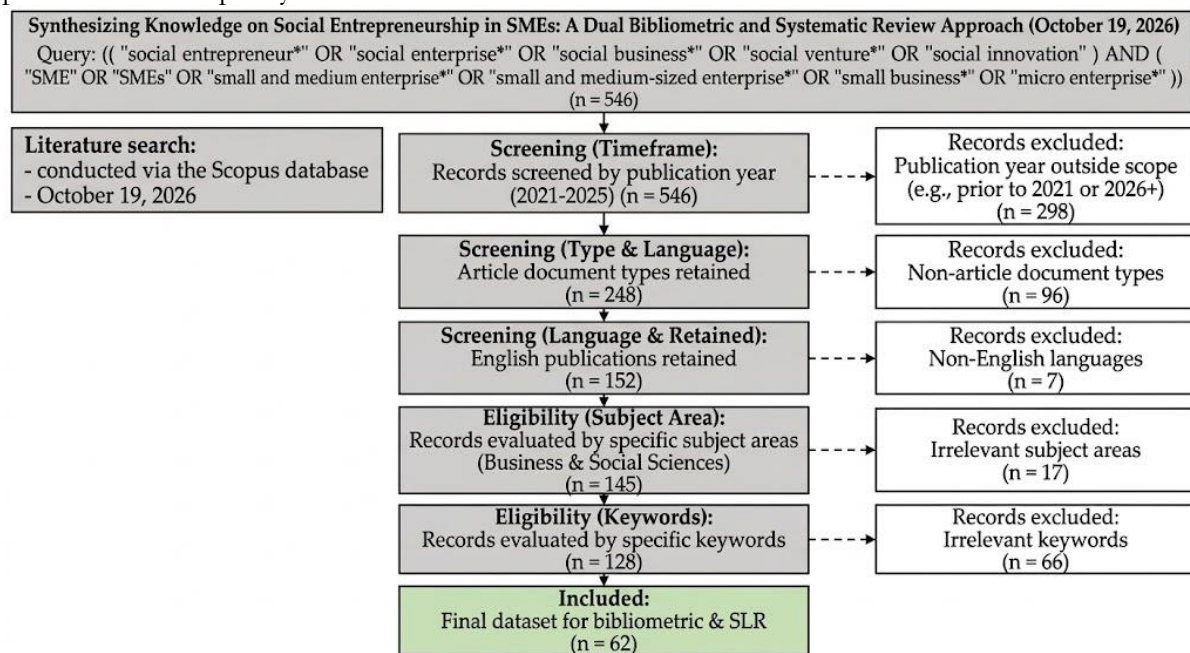


Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart illustrating the literature search, screening, and eligibility selection process for the systematic review and bibliometric analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings generated through the integrated dual-methodological framework. The results are divided into two complementary subsections: first, a quantitative mapping of the academic field using computational bibliometric metrics, followed by a qualitative systematic text synthesis that deconstructs the micro-level strategic configurations, internal motivations, and operational frictions within hybrid small business architectures.

3.1 Quantitative Bibliometric Mapping

The quantitative performance analysis and structural mapping of the definitive ($n = 62$) document dataset offer an objective, data-driven approach to dissecting the intellectual architecture of social entrepreneurship within the SME sector. By deploying science mapping tools via VOSviewer, this subsection systematically charts the evolutionary trajectory of the target domain, focusing on chronological publication volumes (RQ1), prominent contributors (RQ2), and author keyword co-occurrence clusters (RQ3).

3.1.1 Temporal Publication Trends and Growth Trajectory

The chronological distribution of the final refined dataset ($n = 62$) highlights an expanding scholarly interest in the intersection of social entrepreneurship and small business architectures between 2021 and 2025. The publication trajectory initiated the reviewed period with a baseline of 10 documents in 2021 (16.1% of the total pool), followed by an incremental rise to 11 documents in 2022 (17.7%) and an intermediate peak of 13 documents in 2023 (21.0%).

Although the trajectory experienced a minor temporary contraction to 11 documents in 2024 (17.7%)—frequently attributed to indexing time lags in academic databases—the domain

experienced a massive surge in 2025, peaking significantly at 17 documents (27.4%). This substantial expansion underscores an accelerating global academic drive to investigate hybrid organizational models as vital tools for local economic empowerment and community-centered resilience.

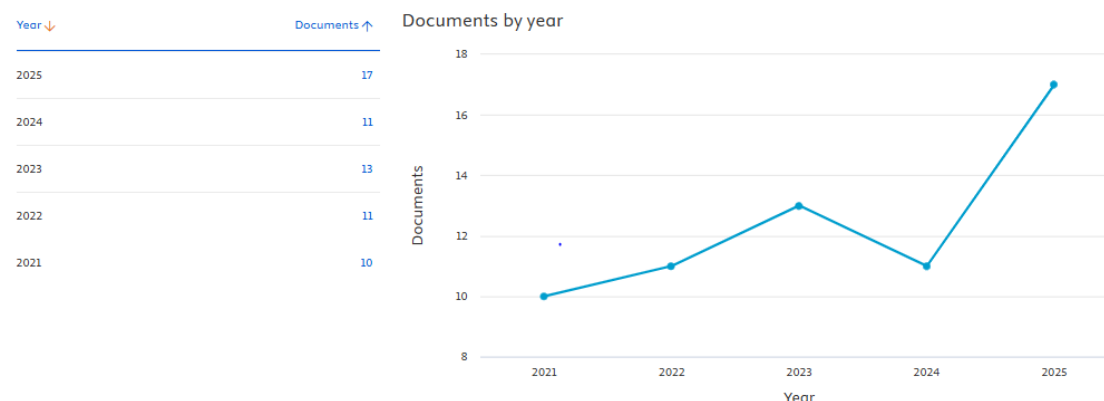


Figure 2. Annual publication trends and chronological growth trajectory of social entrepreneurship research in SMEs (2021–2025).

3.1.2 Leading Contributor Analysis: Authors, Affiliations, and Geographic Distribution

Evaluating author productivity uncovers the prominent academic voices spearheading the domain's intellectual growth. As displayed in Figure 3, the researcher landscape is actively spearheaded by Abubakar, A. and Bakheet, A.H., who both emerged as the most productive scholars with 2 documents each. Their collaborative research outputs are highly influential in clarifying how strategic sustainability configurations alter the overall business performance metrics of small manufacturing firms. Following these leading authors, the domain features a fragmented group of specialized scholars contributing 1 document each (e.g., Abdillah, Y., Agrawal, A., Ajgaonkar, S., Al Habsy, T., and Alamanda, D.T.), indicating that the field remains open and highly dynamic.

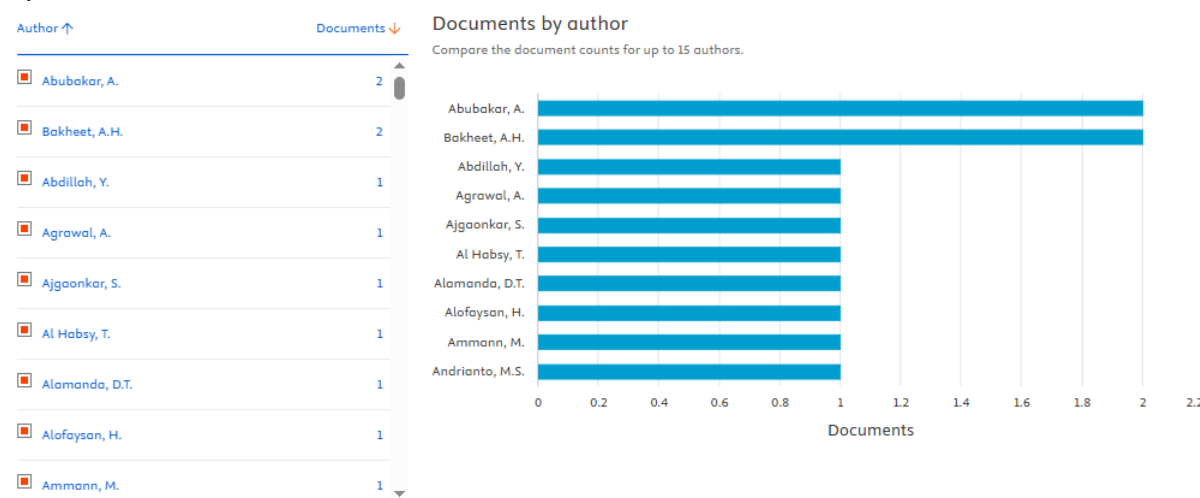


Figure 3. Prominent authors and academic contributors driving the social entrepreneurship and SME research domain (2021–2025).

The structural mapping of organizational nodes (Figure 4) displays a decentralized yet competitive institutional profile. A primary tier of four universities spearheads global productivity within the specified timeframe, with each contributing 2 core documents: LUT University (Finland), Universidad de Extremadura (Spain), Sacred Heart University Fairfield (USA), and Sohar University (Oman). Beyond this leading cluster, a rich and diverse secondary network of universities contributes 1 core document each, including Universiti Sains Malaysia, Thapar

Institute of Engineering & Technology (India), Stellenbosch University (South Africa), and Universitat de Barcelona (Spain).

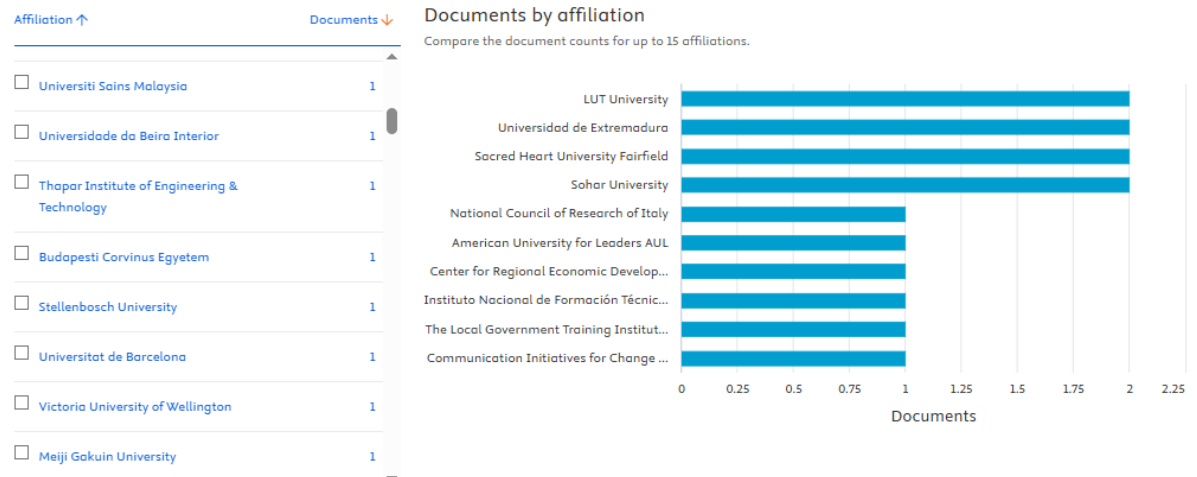


Figure 4. Highly productive institutional affiliations driving the research on social entrepreneurship in SMEs (2021–2025).

Dissecting the geographic distribution (Figure 5) sheds light on the sovereign territories driving the global intellectual agenda. The global mapping is jointly led by the United Kingdom and the United States, with both nations contributing 10 documents each, highlighting their mature funding structures and support ecosystems. Following closely is India with 9 documents, demonstrating massive scholarly inquiry into how small social ventures tackle structural resource constraints in subsistence marketplaces. Furthermore, developing economies feature heavily in the secondary tier, with Indonesia and South Africa contributing 4 documents each, supported by Italy, Malaysia, and Spain with 3 documents each.

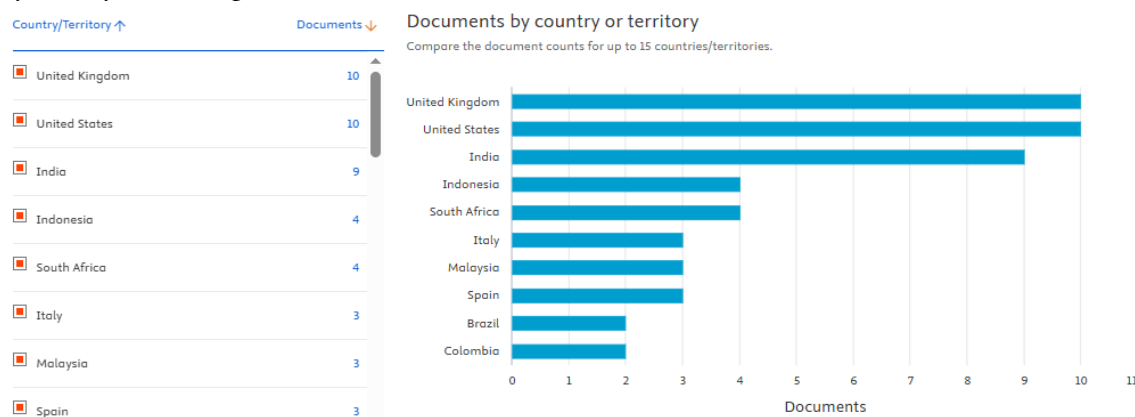


Figure 5. Geographic distribution and leading countries/territories by publication volume (2021–2025).

3.1.3 Intellectual Structure: Keyword Co-Occurrence and Thematic Clustering

Based on a fractional counting threshold applied via VOSviewer software, a network map of 9 critical items organized across 3 distinctive thematic clusters was extracted (Table 1 and Figure 6). The conceptual landscape is spearheaded by "social entrepreneurship" as the most prominent node (30 occurrences, 25 TLS), heavily reinforced by adjacent terms namely "social enterprise" (16 occurrences, 24 TLS) and "small and medium-sized enterprise" (15 occurrences, 22 TLS).

Table 1. Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis of Research

Keyword	Occurrences	Total Link Strength
Social entrepreneurship	30	25
Social enterprise	16	24
Small and medium-sized enterprise	15	22
Entrepreneurship	10	19

Sustainability	9	16
Smes	17	15
Sustainable development	6	11
Small business	5	10
Social innovation	5	6

A detailed systemic evaluation of the three extracted clusters uncovers the specific intellectual focus areas dividing contemporary scholarly inquiries:

- Cluster 1 (Red Nodes – Core Entrepreneurial Foundations): Comprising entrepreneurship, small businesses, social enterprise, and social entrepreneurship. This cluster explores how traditional small business strategic operations transition into value-driven, prosocial enterprise models, focusing on how individual founder characteristics and socio-psychological traits establish mission-driven hybrid forms.

- Cluster 2 (Green Nodes – Macro Sustainability Trajectories): Comprising small and medium-sized enterprise, sustainability, and sustainable development. This cluster maps the direct integration of small business strategic maneuvers with broader systemic goals, illustrating an academic drive to align SME operational capabilities and circular design adoptions with macro frameworks like the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- Cluster 3 (Blue Nodes – Operational Innovation Dynamics): Consisting of SMEs and social innovation. This cluster uncovers the practical tools—such as digital technology adaptations, external stakeholder co-creation, and localized community-embedded resource orchestration (bricolage)—that allow resource-constrained small firms to discover and scale innovative solutions to complex local challenges.

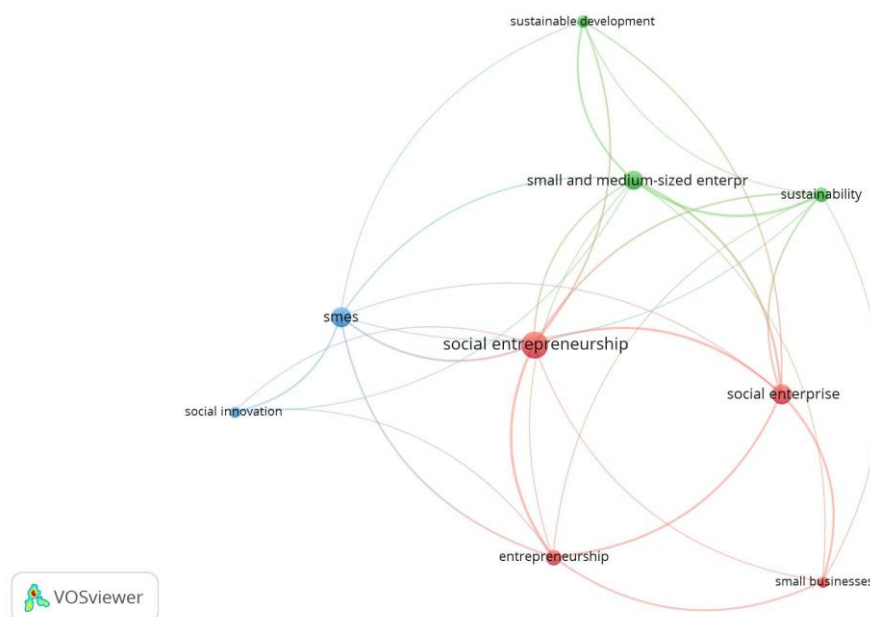


Figure 6. VOSviewer network mapping visualization of author keyword co-occurrences and intellectual clusters (2021–2025).

3.2 Qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) Synthesis

While the quantitative bibliometric mapping packages a macro-level structural grid of the publication landscape, it remains agnostic regarding the specific operational mechanics deployed within small firm architectures. To neutralize this limitation, the dual-methodological approach transitions into a qualitative SLR. The refined bibliometric dataset comprises 62 documents published between 2021 and 2025, from which 15 core articles were selected for deep systematic narrative synthesis

Table 2. Characteristics of Selected Studies for the Systematic Literature Review

No.	Author(s) and Year	Article Title	Main Focus	Relevance to the Present Study
1	Permatasari et al. (2025)	Creative Social Entrepreneurial Orientation: Developing Hybrid Values to Achieve the Sustainable Performance of Traditional Weaving SMEs	Investigating creative social entrepreneurship orientation and hybrid values to drive sustainable performance in traditional handweaving SMEs.	Provides direct empirical insights into how social entrepreneurial values create sustainable economic and social performance within specialized SME sectors.
2	Sipahi Dongul & Artantaş (2023)	Exploring the link between social work, entrepreneurial leadership, social embeddedness, social entrepreneurship and firm performance: a case of SMES owned by Chinese ethnic community in Turkey	Examining the structural impact of social entrepreneurship behavior and social embeddedness on the overall firm performance of minority-owned SMEs.	Crucial for the systematic literature review (SLR) to map how institutional, leadership, and network drivers impact small firm outcomes.
3	Khan et al. (2022)	Spurring competitiveness, social and economic performance of family-owned SMEs through social entrepreneurship; a multi-analytical SEM & ANN perspective	Analyzing how social entrepreneurial orientation (SEO) configuration triggers competitive advantage and social performance in family manufacturing SMEs.	Anchors the bibliometric analysis and SLR context regarding strategic positioning and quantitative performance trade-offs in social SMEs.
4	Cortes & Lee (2021)	Social entrepreneurship in SMEs: a note on three essential questions	Discussing the primary motivations, key barriers, and distinct types of social activities/initiatives undertaken specifically by small firms.	Serves as an excellent conceptual foundation for structuring the qualitative synthesis or Research Questions (RQs) in the review.
5	Osembo et al. (2025)	Aligning multiple mandates and mission simultaneously: a case of small and medium-sized social enterprises in South Africa	Exploring how small and medium-sized social enterprises (SMSEs) leverage community embeddedness to align multiple institutional logics and mandates.	Essential for mapping the internal operational mechanisms of hybrid social organizations in resource-constrained or emerging SME environments.
6	Munandar et al. (2025)	The Impacts of Business Sustainability Factors on Competitiveness and Marketing Performance: An Exploratory Approach to the Case of Indonesian Micro-, Small, and Medium Enterprises	Assessing how social entrepreneurship orientation alongside market orientation dynamically influences competitiveness and sustainability in MSMEs.	Strengthens the comparative overview in the literature review regarding how different firm sizes (micro vs. small-medium) handle social metrics.
7	Suriyankietkaew et al. (2022)	Sustainable Leadership Practices and Competencies of SMEs for Sustainability and Resilience: A Community-Based Social Enterprise Study	Examining the integration of value-based sustainable leadership competencies in a green, community-based social enterprise context within the SME sector.	Enhances the study's section on resilient business configurations and the development of alternative social business models for small firms.
8	Kotiranta et al. (2024)	Digitalization as a growth driver for social enterprises	Testing whether digital orientation and technologies can uniquely bypass trade-off costs to	Highly relevant for tracking the newest publication trends in the bibliometric mapping concerning digital

			unlock superior growth for social enterprises vs. traditional firms.	transformation and social SME growth.
9	Myyryläinen & Torkkeli (2022)	Corporate Social Responsibility in Social SMEs: Discourses of Prosocial Behavior in Individual, Organizational, and Societal Levels	Deconstructing how corporate social responsibility (CSR) boundaries intertwine with inherent prosocial motivations across northern European social SMEs.	Helps clarify the theoretical and conceptual distinctions between classical business CSR and genuine social entrepreneurship in the review.
10	Sottini et al. (2022)	Engaging symbiotic ecosystems to build community centred business models for the BoP: Evidence from small social enterprises in East Africa	Analyzing how small social enterprises (SSEs) surmount operational barriers by co-developing community-centered business models in bottom-of-the-pyramid markets.	Highlights the external network connectivity and stakeholder ecosystem clusters commonly found during bibliometric network mapping.
11	Álvarez-García et al. (2022)	Leaders' sustainability competences and small and medium-sized enterprises outcomes: The role of social entrepreneurial orientation	Verifying the causal relationships between leaders' core competencies, small firm social proactivity, and resultant eco-innovation performance.	Perfect grounding for the structural equation modeling (SEM) clusters in your bibliometric analysis, reinforcing the human capital aspect of SMEs.
12	Searing (2021)	Resilience in vulnerable small and new social enterprises	Using long-term panel data to model financial vulnerability, resilience tactics, and recovery indicators specifically for young and small social enterprises.	Enriches the systematic review's focus on the economic sustainability dimension and financial risk management profiles of small social ventures.
13	Salwan et al. (2025)	Resilience and sustainability of social enterprises: a systematic review and bibliometrics using PRISMA	Presenting a comprehensive bibliometric evaluation mapping specific organizational resilience, bricolage, and hybridity clusters in social enterprise studies.	Direct benchmark validation for your own bibliometric methodology, identifying established thematic clusters and recent research gaps.
14	Upadhyay & Sarmah (2025)	Digitalisation in Social Enterprises: A Mixed-Method Examination of Critical Success Factors in Indian Start-ups	Analyzing critical success factors behind enterprise digitalization projects within resource-constrained social entrepreneurial setups and SMEs.	Connects the technological adaptation trends with the realization of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8) in contemporary social small businesses.
15	Gasparin et al. (2021)	Business as unusual: A business model for social innovation	Developing and evaluating a novel strategic business model configuration for social innovation tailored directly to small and medium enterprises.	Strengthens the conceptual framework of your study regarding how social SMEs systematically capture alternative ecological and cultural value streams.

3.2.1 Primary Motivational Drivers for SEO Adoption

The qualitative content analysis uncovers that the strategic transition of SMEs toward a social entrepreneurial orientation (SEO) is propelled by three distinctive forces:

- **Founder's Prosocial Motivation and Personal Axiology:** In small firm architectures, the strategic DNA is tightly coupled with the leader's personal values. Intrinsic altruism, compassion, and "others-oriented" psychological traits at the individual level serve as the foundational spark for prioritizing societal welfare alongside basic operational efficiency, as demonstrated (Myrskyläinen & Torkkeli, 2022). This is heavily reinforced in later working-life setups, where nonpecuniary incentives stemming from a founder's need for personal fulfillment, experienced life transitions, and legacy construction dictate social entrepreneurial intentions (Djebali et al., 2023).
- **Symbiotic Ecosystems and Community Embeddedness:** Small social ventures heavily embed themselves within their near environment to solve local challenges. Small social enterprises weave connections with key local actors to create a symbiotic ecosystem to deliver community-centered business models at the Base of the Pyramid (BoP) (Sottini et al., 2022). Similarly, small businesses in rural villages exhibit a pronounced social embeddedness, relying on a pattern of combined paid and unpaid services to support local development (Ganany-Dagan et al., 2024).
- **Strategic Outcome Optimization and Trust Building:** Rather than treating social responsibility as an isolated philanthropic expense, social SMEs adopt an SEO to configure authentic competitive advantages. According to (Permatasari et al., 2025), a creative social entrepreneurial orientation acts as a strong antecedent factor that directly triggers long-term environmental, economic, and social performance. Furthermore, (Abubakar et al., 2025) note that integrating a sustainability orientation with cost-efficiency allows managers to build crucial stakeholder trust through social innovation pathways.

3.2.2 Systemic Barriers to SEO Adoption

Despite compelling motivations, the systematic synthesis uncovers severe structural frictions and operational trade-offs that threaten the continuity of hybrid small business structures:

- **Severe Resource Scarcity and the "Liability of Smallness":** Unlike larger organizations, social SMEs operate under intense capital constraints and thin operational margins. (Searing, 2021) models the high financial vulnerability of young and small social enterprises, proving the persistence of the "liability of smallness" when facing severe financial stressors. This resource deficit is further highlighted by (Cortes & Lee, 2021), who identify limited operational knowledge and a lack of immediate commercial incentives as rigid obstacles to social initiatives.
- **Dual-Mission Trade-Offs and Mission Drift Frictions:** Hybrid organizations must continuously navigate multi-mandated environments where market logics clashing with social logics can cause severe frictions. Structural equation modeling by (Khan et al., 2022) confirms that an intense focus on social entrepreneurial orientation can have a negative impact on a firm's immediate short-term economic performance (profit maximization), creating intense strategic trade-offs.
- **Institutional Voids and Incipient Support Ecosystems:** In many developing and emerging economies, small social firms are penalized by ambiguous regulatory and operational environments. That small social ventures in resource-constrained areas must deploy extreme mission agility just to simultaneously align competing external mandates with their core missions (Osembo et al., 2025). Additionally, (Upadhyay & Sarmah, 2025) point out that implementing digitalization projects to bypass these resource constraints often faces major barriers due to a lack of startup readiness and inadequate institutional support from the local environment.

4. CONCLUSION

This study presents a systematic evaluation of the global knowledge landscape surrounding social entrepreneurship within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by successfully integrating quantitative bibliometric mapping and qualitative systematic review methodologies. Analyzing a definitive pool of 62 documents from the Scopus database (2021–2025) allowed this manuscript to bridge micro-level enterprise behaviors with macro-scientific trends, resolving long-standing fragmentation in the field.

The structural performance findings demonstrate an expanding upward trajectory in social SME literature, dominated by academic hubs in the United Kingdom, United States, and India,

alongside strong operational contributions from emerging markets like Indonesia and South Africa. Keyword network clustering mathematically isolates three core conceptual pillars: Core Entrepreneurial Foundations, Macro Sustainability Trajectories, and Operational Innovation Dynamics. Concurrently, the systematic review content loop answers the core organizational question by showing that adopting a social entrepreneurial orientation is triggered internally by the founder's prosocial values and externally by community embeddedness. Conversely, sustainable scaling remains structurally constrained by the liability of smallness, intense dual-mission trade-offs, and profound institutional voids in developing market architectures.

Practical and Policy Implications

For social enterprise practitioners, the findings suggest that maintaining a resilient hybrid business structure requires developing value-based leadership competencies alongside proactive digital platform alignment. For policymakers, this study highlights the urgent necessity to build tailored legal classifications and customized social financing mechanisms (such as waqf or social incubators) that support small firms in balancing commercial viability with social impact, rather than forcing them into traditional binary for-profit versus non-profit regulations.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is bound by certain limitations, notably its reliance on a single database (Scopus) and a contemporary post-pandemic timeframe (2021–2025). Future scholarly investigations should adopt multi-database combinations (integrating Web of Science and Dimensions) and deploy longitudinal empirical frameworks to assess the long-term survival rates of small hybrid ventures. Additionally, there remains a prominent empirical gap regarding how advanced technological tools, such as generative artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain-driven tracking systems, can alter joint value co-creation mechanisms at the Base of the Pyramid (BoP).

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