



Intellectual Structure and Fragmentation: A Systematic Literature Review on Social Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Over the past decade, social entrepreneurship has gained immense attention to address complex social challenges, but this field remains conceptually fragmented and methodologically diverse. Despite a growing body of literature, this field lacks an understanding of how research on social entrepreneurship is structured across theoretical, conceptual and methodological dimensions. Therefore, current study conducts a comprehensive literature review using a structured synthesis approach. Ultimately, 31 relevant articles were selected during the review process, indexed in Scopus and Web of Science to ensure the quality and impact of the study. Through meticulous review, our research identifies key patterns in theoretical foundation, methodological practices and conceptualization, revealing inconsistencies and fragmentation in the literature. The finding also indicates limited use of the mixed method approach in studies and lack of specific context as most studies used general prospective and very few used a government or NGO context. Additionally, limited application of the theories, variation in research design and the absence of standardized framework were notice that inhibits theoretical integration. This study focuses on theoretical integration, methodological diversity and highlights the importance of context-based quantitative meta-analytical studies for empirical generalizability. Overall, current review contributes to the existing body of literature by identifying critical gap, synthesizing research trends and proposing future direction for methodological rigor and theoretical development of social entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Fragmentation, PRISMA Guidelines, Social Entrepreneurship, Systematic Review.

Introduction

Social entrepreneurship refers to identifying social problems and addressing them with unique approaches using entrepreneurial methods for sustainable, long-lasting solutions. Therefore, social entrepreneurship has gained substantial attention in the past decade, as it uses innovative approaches to address social challenges, unlike traditional entrepreneurship, which mainly focuses on economic profit. Social entrepreneurs design strategies to address societal needs such as environmental sustainability (1), quality education (2) and poverty alleviation (3). These strategies often mix with profit approaches and turn into a hybrid model that aim to accomplish operational sustainability and social impact (4). This nexus of sustainable development, entrepreneurship and social innovation make social entrepreneurship an important field of study. The relevance of social entrepreneurship in the real world becomes more and more apparent as the traditional models unable to tackle multifaceted social issues (5). In

response to the growing pressure on governments, private organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to develop sustainable solutions to problems that are not always addressable by conventional market mechanisms or public interventions. Social entrepreneurship in this context offers an alternative strategy that entails recognizing social need, recognizing and seizing opportunity and crafting sustainable solutions (6). Social entrepreneurship tends to focus less on giving back and more on generating social value and involves more in terms project sustainability (7). This feature renders the phenomenon relevant in a variety of sectors and institutional contexts. Social entrepreneurial activities can be independent social enterprises, community-based, NGO or public-private (8). This variety of organizational forms shows that social entrepreneurship is not bound to a mode of actors or institutional environment (9). Relatively, it is a general phenomenon in which entrepreneurial

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(Received 26th May 2026; Accepted 25th August 2026; Published 04th October 2026)

practices are used towards a social purpose in different institutional and resource settings. The participation of numerous scholars in social entrepreneurship research has enriched literature from various disciplinary and practical approaches (10, 11). As a result, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a key field of study to better understand the potential of innovative and entrepreneurial practices to enhance social value in a sustainable manner (12). The evolution of this field is therefore significant not only from an academic point of view, but also how the knowledge has been accumulated can aid future research and practice to tackle the changing needs of society (13).

Numerous scholars have examined how entrepreneurial methods can address societal challenges (14, 15). This growing interest is expanding the body of literature across different fields such as sociology (16), management (17), public policy (18) and development studies (19). Despite this, social entrepreneurship remains theoretically dispersed and conceptually fragmented. The extent studies on social entrepreneurship explored diverse contexts in different field of study but still lacks a coherent intellectual structure. Further, existing systematic literature reviews mostly focus on trends (20), geographical contexts (21), methodological distribution (22) and descriptive approaches (23). Although, such reviews are informative but provide limited understanding on how social entrepreneurship research is intellectually organized and why fragmentation prevail. Consequently, researchers face difficulties to understand evolutionary trajectories, underlying assumptions and research tradition in social entrepreneurship (24). Past systematic literature reviews and bibliometric analyses have offered useful insights on how social entrepreneurship research has evolved and has identified publication trends, who has published what, which journals are more influential, the citation network of social entrepreneurship research and origin of published contributions (10, 11). They also have pinpointed the increasing academic focus on the evolution of social value and understanding how entrepreneurial approaches can be used to create it and to tackle complex societal problems (25).

Although the significant contributions that available has focused more on mapping the

research activities, than on analyzing the intellectual structure of the field (26). Consequently, little effort has been made to understanding how theoretical approaches are applied, how methodological approaches have developed and how different contextual approaches influence the development of social entrepreneurship research. This prevents researchers from discovering general trends across studies, making comparisons of approaches and assessing the advancement of theoretical understanding over time. Furthermore, an integrated synthesis is lacking, thus it is hard to see where research is well established and where it needs to be conceptually and empirically advanced (13). It is especially crucial to know that the progression of any research field cannot be measured solely by the growing number of publications but also by the context of the research, the methods and the consistency of the theory (27). Given that these dimensions are interconnected, therefore, a systematic synthesis is needed to better understand the state of the art of social entrepreneurship research, uncover remaining areas of knowledge and build a solid basis for further theoretical development and research. Therefore, current study conducts systematic literature review using structure-based synthesis to guide future empirical work and theory development. The current study examines intellectual organization and research logics in social entrepreneurship rather than summarizing themes. This study also offered unique insights about social entrepreneurship and provide roadmap for theoretically coherent research.

Methodology

The current study used PRISMA guidelines to design methodology and a systematic review. It consists of a checklist that ensures transparency and iterative reporting of systematic reviews. The literature was searched across different databases, such as Google Scholar, Sage, PubMed, Elsevier, Taylor and Francis and Emerald, from 2021 to 2025, using the following terms: social entrepreneurship, social enterprise and social entrepreneur. This study used Boolean operators (e.g. and OR) to ensure reproducibility and comprehensiveness of search process. The searched articles were exported for text screening based on predefined exclusion or inclusion criteria.

A decided search protocol was adopted to ensure consistency in review process. The search strategy based on specified keywords, language, databases and publication period to enhance transparency. The filters were used to set the customer range and sort by relevance to confine the search results and obtain 500 articles.

Study Selection and Eligibility Criteria

The articles reviewed in this study were selected based on relevance and popularity. All the articles used in the review process were indexed in Scopus and ranked in Web of Science to ensure the transparency and impact of the study. Further, the popularity of the articles depends on their citation and articles with a citation score of 10 or more constitute 24% of the most cited articles and those that receive 100 citations constitute 1.8% of the articles (28). Therefore, the current study primarily included highly cited articles in the review process to enhance the study's legitimacy. This study used explicit eligibility rules: the population consisted of social entrepreneurship, defined as the source, from any sector or country.

Types of Studies Given Priority: empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods) and systematic reviews on social entrepreneurship.

Eligibility Criteria (Non-Selection): non-empirical studies, theses, editorials, no-data papers, non-English papers and instrument-only papers.

Relevance: studies on social entrepreneurship, designs that allow association, measures in the same domain and analyzable results.

Selection: dual independent screening, elimination of duplicates and adjudication from a third reviewer.

Figure 1 summarized the PRISMA flow diagram which enhances the study's reproducibility and transparency. Figure 1 shows that; 500 articles were downloaded that matched the mentioned keywords. In the screening process, 69 duplicate articles were removed and 431 research articles were screened based on title and abstract to check the eligibility for this study. In the second stage, 173 articles were excluded after careful screening of the abstracts and 258 articles moved to the next stage. In the third stage, 135 articles were also excluded after full-text review and in-depth screening. In the last stage, 26 articles were excluded due to study design and 66 due to contextual differences. Finally, 31 articles met the eligibility criteria and were included in the review as shown in Figure 1.

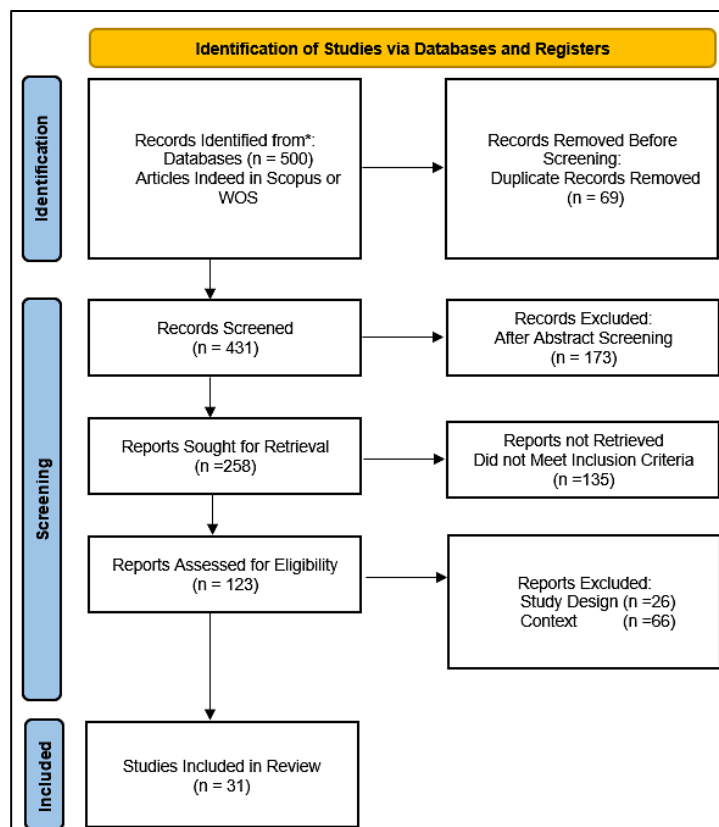


Figure 1: Search and Selection Process (PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram)

Common Characteristics of Review Articles

The classifications of research articles were based on sector, research settings and study nature. Table 1 shows that the majority were review articles were 11, followed by quantitative 10 and qualitative 8 articles and only 2 were based on a

mixed-methods study. Additionally, classification of articles was based on sector: 25 articles did not mention a specific sector; 3 used the public sector; 2 used the private sector; and 1 used only NGO for data collection as shown in Table 1. The main objective in examining the common characteristics of the articles is to understand the existing approaches used in the literature.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Review Article

	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed mode	Review	Total
Public	(29, 30)	(31)			3
Private		(32, 33)	(4)		2
NGO				(34)	1
General	(15, 35-41)	(17, 33, 42-45)	(46)	(20, 47-55)	25
Total	10	8	2	11	

Note: The numbers in () represent citation, whereas numbers without parentheses represent total articles of characteristic.

Results and Discussion

This systematic literature review study reveals that social entrepreneurship literature expanding rapidly but this expansion still not shaped it into intellectual consolidation. Contrary, literature disseminated across different directions, lacking structural coherent, theoretical foundations and methods. This fragmentation obscures intellectual organization and limits knowledge development in the field. The results of this review contribute to the existing literature on social entrepreneurship by providing proof that the theory of social entrepreneurship is in a fairly early stage of development. Although there has been an increase in the number of studies addressing social entrepreneurship, only 7 of the 31 studies reviewed in the study explicitly used a theoretical framework, with the most common being the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which was used in just 3 of the 7 studies. Some studies that use theory indicate that many empirical studies are found without a consistent theoretical foundation, limiting the accumulation of coherent and comparable knowledge. Moreover, methodological and contextual differences suggest that exploration of social entrepreneurship is still going on from various disciplinary viewpoints, although this variety of thought adds value to the field, it adds to the lack of coherence in conceptualizations. The findings do not dispute existing theories per se but rather, indicate that existing theories are being used in a disjointed and inconsistent way to underpin a limited capacity to explain the complexity of the social entrepreneurship phenomenon in various contexts. Therefore, it is

recommended that future research focus more on theory-driven studies and include complementary approaches to theory where relevant and create more logically consistent conceptual frameworks to enhance the cumulative development of social entrepreneurship research.

Methodological Imbalance

This study indicated that there is a clear and dominant pattern of review-based and quantitative studies in the field, while qualitative and mixed-mode studies are underrepresented. These studies can strengthen empirical rigor but limit understanding of social entrepreneurship. The social entrepreneurship phenomenon is socially embedded and a frequently reduced static relationship can result in unexplored dimensions. This study found that only 10 articles used quantitative method, 8 used qualitative method, 11 are review articles and only 2 used mixed mode method. The very limited presence of mixed-methods and qualitative studies also reinforces the imbalance and restricts the ability to capture the field in depth. Furthermore, most studies are in general prospective and fail to mention a specific context or institution. This lack of contextual presence limits the findings and increases the complexity of the field's development, which is important for institutional and social realities.

Theoretical Inconsistency

The findings also reveal the absence or inconsistency of a theoretical framework in the field, resulting in considerable theoretical fragmentation. The findings show that only 7

among 31 article used appropriate theory in the studies. The current literature highlights that very few studies have used established theories such as social cognitive theory, resource-based theory, or the theory of planned behavior and a substantial number of studies do not use specific theories as shown in Table 2. The articles that employ theories in their studies are also isolated and domain-specific, such as TPB, mostly used in social entrepreneurial intention studies and resource-based theory, used in organizational performance studies. This approach works within limited boundaries, with district boundaries at integration, resulting in a lack of theoretical coherence.

Conceptual Fragmentation

The current study findings highlight significant conceptual fragmentation in how social entrepreneurship is operationalized. This systematic literature review conceptualized social entrepreneurship through multiple lenses,

including interrelationships with entrepreneurial intention, social value creation, ecosystem development, community well-being and social innovation. Numerous studies have used social entrepreneurship, value co-creation and social innovation, while others focus on psychological drivers, social entrepreneurship and individual-level constructs. Many studies examine social entrepreneurship as a sustainable development factor or as part of a broader entrepreneurial ecosystem and adopt a broader perspective. These drivers imitate the significance of the field and indicate the absence of an integrated conceptual foundation. Intention-based studies focus very little on ecosystem dynamics or organizational performance; similarly, systematic literature reviews and conceptual studies propose frameworks without empirical validation. The lack of conceptual convergence develops a parallel research stream which grows independently and results in fragmentation.

Table 2: Source of Fragmentation

Conceptualization	Key characteristics	Theory	Analysis tools	Article Source/References
Interrelation of social entrepreneurship and social innovation	Investigate how SE and SI relate.	Conceptual framework	Bibliometric	(47)
Institutional and social impact on SE intentions	Examine social and institutional support effect on social entrepreneurship intention in two national contexts	Social cognitive theory	Survey method	(35)
Social entrepreneurial intention among student's behavior	Contextual and psychological factors of social entrepreneurial intention	Not mentioned	fsQCA and PLS-SEM	(36)
Social entrepreneurial intention among university students	This study focuses on the predictors of social entrepreneurial intention among Chinese study	TPB	PLS-SEM	(37)
Social entrepreneurship projects engagement through social entrepreneur motivational factors	Exploring contextual, engagement and motivational factor shaping social entrepreneurship. It highlights emerging themes and emphasizes on inductive development concept through interviews	Not mentioned	QSR-NVIVO 14	(42)
Change in entrepreneurial intention among university students	This examines how student's entrepreneurial intention develops through educational support, personality traits, external, cultural and social factors.	Not mentioned	QSR-NVIVO 12	(31)
Social enterprises performance research through cultural process consideration	This study examines how social enterprises research develop through cultural process in emerging economies while considering domestic and international knowledge.	Not mentioned	Statistical survey analysis and Thematic analysis	(46)

Social entrepreneurial intention among working adults	This study examines norms, value and beliefs with social interpleural intention in working adults	TPB	PLS-SEM	(38)
Social enterprises intervention to counter food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa	This study combined commercial sustainability with social mission and emphasize on innovation in community-based food distribution.	Conceptual framework	Synthesis and thematic analysis	(34)
Wellbeing notion in social entrepreneurship studies	This study review articles on social entrepreneurship and examines how well being studied in this filed	Conceptual framework	Thematic synthesis and qualitative content analysis	(48)
Social entrepreneurship importance in economic and social eco system	This study examines how social entrepreneurship value creation link with identity dimension and promotes community well being	Not mentioned	longitudinal analysis, multidimensional controlling model	(43)
Influence of social entrepreneurship orientation on social and economic performance	This study highlights utilization, integration and resource acquisition. It also highlights how strong SEO help to get dual benefits	Resource based view	SEM; FsQCA	(29)
Bridging social entrepreneurship with social innovation and economic value among youth	This study review articles between 2010-2022. It identifies three research clusters and research gap	Conceptual framework	Bibliometrics; R studio tools	(49)
Conceptualization of social entrepreneurship and innovation focusing on social value co creation	This study highlights the importance of social co creation with social innovation and entrepreneurship through hybrid model.	Conceptual framework	Thematic analysis; Bibliometrics	(20)
How Emotional intelligence influence on social entrepreneurial intention	This study emphasizes on the role of social intelligence in problem solving and manage emotion towards value co creation. I also highlight psychological traits play important role in SEI	TPB	PLS-SEM	(30)
Exploring social entrepreneurial sustainability dimensions within social entrepreneurship	This study highlights the long-term impact of social enterprises for social entrepreneurship sustainability and highlights societal challenges	Conceptual framework	Thematic analysis, NVIVO	(4)
The longitudinal study on social entrepreneurship intention influenced by organizational and individual factors	This study focusses on the role of youth in higher education and examines intentional determinants over time	Not mentioned	PLS-SEM	(39)
Social entrepreneurship conceptualized as social problem-solving driver in entrepreneurial ecosystem	This study reviewed Scopus indexed journals and identify key authors, tends, journals and countries and ecosystem role through bibliometric in social entrepreneurial domain	Conceptual framework	Semantic networking analysis, social networking analysis and VOS viewer	(50)
Social entrepreneurship activities in creating social and multistage economic value (macro, micro and meso)	This study reviewed articles on social entrepreneurship and proposed multistage, multilevel framework and identify five clusters	Conceptual framework	Systematic literature review and scient metric	(51)
Social entrepreneurship sustainability in covid-19 crises and maintain their impact on organizational survival	This study based on resilience of social enterprises during Covid-19 crises and highlights how organization balance their mission with sustainability during crises.	Not mentioned	Thematic analysis	(33)
Conceptualization of social entrepreneurship among youth as carrier transition	This study highlights the challenges faced by youth during carrier transition, such as limited finance, lack of policies and institutional support and sustainability	Not mentioned	Thematic analysis	(44)

Conceptualization of social entrepreneurship into social values in the presence of transformational leadership	This study examine entrepreneurship with social value in the presence of transformational leadership and highlights how entrepreneurship associated with social values	Institutional theory	SEM with AMOS	(40)
Identify trends and conceptual development of social entrepreneurship	This study highlights how social entrepreneurship concept evolve over time and examine hybrid model consist of social mission and sustainability	Conceptual framework	Latent sematic analysis	(32)
The influence of sociocultural and economic factors on social entrepreneurship and general activities in sustainable development	This study focusses on how sociocultural and economic variables relate with social entrepreneurship and general activity and how its entrepreneurship forms influence sustainability	Not mentioned	Systematic review and meta-analysis	(52)
Social entrepreneurship conceptualization as subjective practice where it engages with work value and community norms	This study illustrate that how barefoot college endorses subjective practice to strengthen social values in community for sustainable changes	Not mentioned	Nvivo-12	(17)
The conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as contested and multidimensional phenomena	This study highlights divisions in social entrepreneurship and emphasizes on how these divisions influence theoretical development, methodology and research priorities in the field	Conceptual framework	Conceptual review and interpretive analysis of literature	(53)
This study illustrate that how contextual factors and social entrepreneurship effect the pathway to different business model	This study reviews 347 articles from different data base and identifies 7 pathways to explain social entrepreneurs initiative impact of contextual factors	Conceptual framework	Systematic literature review	(54)
This study examines learning and teaching strategies to promote social entrepreneurial mindset among students	Comprehensive literature review and thematic mapping have been done on social entrepreneurship regarding, emphasizing to teaching and learning highlighting real-world problem	Conceptual framework	Systematic literature review	(55)
This study conceptualized social entrepreneurship and cultural tourism as antecedent of social value creation which contribute in environment sustainability	The structural equation model was developed to link social entrepreneurship, cultural value, environment sustainability and social value creation. The integrated model measured through validated scale.	self-determination theory	PLS-SEM	(41)
This study examined social entrepreneurship as lived experience from non-business disciplines	This study examines motivation, fears, expectations with business perception and course outcomes. It also highlights technical barriers, gender, culture on student outcomes	Not mentioned	Thematic analysis	(45)
Social entrepreneurship conceptualization in sustainable development goal and united nation agenda by generation g economic values	This study developed new assessment framework based on SDG indicators that reflect social enterprises and determine how it can use to asses' enterprises.	Not mentioned	Delphi technique and best word method (BWM)	(32)

Note: fsQCA = Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis, TPB = Theory of Planned Behavior, PLS = Partial Least Squares, SEM = Structural Equation Modeling, QSR = Quantitative Super Resolution, R Studio Tolls = Integrated Development Environment for R Programming, AMOS = Analysis of Moment Structures, Nvivo = Qualitative Data Analysis Software.

The results of the current review align with the results of previous systematic literature reviews and bibliometric analyses showing that the research on social entrepreneurship is rapidly growing and multidisciplinary. But whereas

previous reviews focused on the publication trends, citation patterns, geographical distribution and research productivity, the present review takes a different approach to its findings and offers a structured synthesis of the theoretical,

methodological and contextual peculiarities of the literature. Theory application, methodological imbalance and lack of context-specific investigations continue to be found in the field, indicating that social entrepreneurship's intellectual development is still fragmented despite the growing number of publications. The results of this review support the findings from previous reviews by revealing that there are problems that lie beyond bibliometric development and that this study suggests the necessity of a more profound theoretical and methodological integration in further research.

Conclusion

The current study findings provide more far-reaching implications for ongoing development of social entrepreneurship as a new research space. The evidence indicates that more knowledge needs to be built up within studies than more independent streams of research need to be developed in the field. The researchers should extend existing theoretical approaches and explicitly state the relevance of these approaches to social entrepreneurship and use of research designs that can provide more robust empirical evidence. The underexplored institutional and organizational contexts where social entrepreneurship meets government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) has warranted a greater focus. Further research can enhance the field by integrating the complementary methodological approaches and by creating empirically testable frameworks linking the entrepreneurial activities with measurable social outcomes. These would enhance the comparability of studies to build knowledge and literature. The study provides researchers insights to build more rigorous, context sensitive and more empirically based studies, since it identifies established patterns and areas need further investigation.

The current study reviews the social entrepreneurship literature through a synthesis approach, surpassing thematic review and provides a deeper understanding of the field. The absence of social entrepreneurship dimensions in the study shows that the field is still in a pre-paradigmatic stage; therefore, field knowledge remains fragmented. Further, this study identifies

fragmentation in the social entrepreneurship field due to its interdisciplinary nature and the lack of systematic alignment across theory, conceptualization and methodology. Hence, the existing literature provides only a partial understanding and fails to offer comprehensive insights into social entrepreneurship. Consequently, this research concludes that social entrepreneurship research needs to shift from inquiry to intellectual integration. The literature will remain dispersed, limiting its theoretical and practical relevance without this shift. This research also concludes that social entrepreneurship evolved without attaining intellectual cohesion and failed to form a unified field that connected research streams to design new methods, assumptions and theoretical perspective. Finally, it concludes that there are ample studies on social entrepreneurship but mostly lack of integration. Future studies should connect theories, methods and context to develop better understanding.

Limitations and Future Direction

This study has several limitations, despite the valuable understanding of fragmentation in social entrepreneurship studies. First, articles published only in Scopus and Web of Science were selected for review to ensure that only high-quality articles are included. This may exclude high-quality studies published in other formats, languages, or databases. Secondly, structured synthesis approach was used to review literature that highlights theoretical grounding, conceptualization and methodological practice. Future studies could use other techniques to reduce bias and improve inconsistency. Thirdly, this study examines entrepreneurship as a general and does not focus sector (e.g., education, health, digital platform) or developing or developed economies. Future studies can focus on context-based studies or review a particular sector. Finally, this study highlights conceptual, theoretical and methodological fragmentation, without conducting a meta-analysis and focuses on the social entrepreneurship literature.

Abbreviations

AMOS: Analysis of Moment Structures, fsQCA: Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis, NGO: Non-governmental organization, Nvivo: Qualitative Data Analysis Software, PLS: Partial Least Squares, PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items

for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses, R Studio Tolls: Integrated Development Environment for R Programming, SEM: Structural Equation Modeling, TPB: Theory of Planned Behavior, QSR: Quantitative Super-resolution.

Acknowledgement

None.

Author Contributions

Norhilmi Muhammad: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing and Editing. Fakhrul Anwar Zainol: Project Administration, Funding Acquisition, Review and Editing. Abdul Rauf: Writing – Review and Editing, Investigation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI to assist in the paraphrasing of certain parts of the manuscript. All content generated through AI was critically reviewed, edited and verified by the authors to ensure accuracy, originality and compliance with academic standards. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and validity of the manuscript

Ethics Approval

This study does not involve human participant; therefore, ethical approval is not needed.

Funding

This research was supported by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme for Early Career Researchers (FRGS-EC), Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, under Project No. FRGS-EC/1/2024/SS01/UNISZA/03/3 (RF087).

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How to Cite: Muhammad N, Zainol FA, Rauf A. Intellectual Structure and Fragmentation: A Systematic Literature Review on Social Entrepreneurship. *Int Res J Multidiscip Scope*. 2026;7(4):214-224. DOI: 10.47857/irjms.2026.v07i04.013114