

Mapping the Landscape of Social Innovation: A Bibliometric Analysis of Key Themes and Trends

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Abstract

Social innovation is an emerging subject attracting scholars' interest due to its societal impact and the growing acceptance of this business model. This article aims to aid academics in developing a theoretical framework and to direct novices in social entrepreneurship research towards relevant journals and authors for their studies. This study employs the Scopus database to identify the research domains with the highest output, the countries and languages contributing predominantly to social innovation research, the inception year of social innovation studies, the journals that publish the majority of this research, and the most significant authors in the field.

1. Introduction

There has been a significant growing interest in social innovation. From social perspective, Social innovation induces radical transformation at micro, meso, and macro levels (Drucker, 1987; Mumford, 2002; Oeij et al., 2019; Voorberg et al., 2015). The significance of concept resides in its influence on societal advancement and economy. Social innovation aims to solve social problems and bring value to society (Babu et al., 2020; Socci et al., 2020). In addition to resolving social issues in new ways, social innovation also generates wealth and employment opportunities. Social innovations seek to contribute to society through poverty alleviation and confronting environmental concerns (Vasudevan & Prakash, 2016; Lashitew et al., 2020; Adomako, S., & Nguyen, 2024). It aims to gather resources to address social and environmental issues and meet fundamental requirements in innovative ways. Nevertheless, despite the growing emphasis and an increasing number of studies, there is a paucity of research on the social innovation area, and knowledge in this domain remains fragmented (Foroudi et al., 2021). This restricts the scope of social innovation research and underscores the necessity of the current investigation.

This article presents a bibliometric analysis using the Scopus database to identify the most productive research areas, the countries and languages that produce the majority of social innovation research, the year of its commencement, the most research-publishing journals, and the most pertinent authors who have written about social innovation.

The remaining part of this paper is ordered as follows: Section 2 includes extant literature related to social innovation, section 3 comprises the research methodology. Section 4 presents the results and descriptive bibliometric analyses. Conclusions and limitations are covered in Section 5.

2. Social Innovation

Social innovation is about applying creative approaches to address emerging social issues (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Cisilino & Monteleone, 2020). The genesis of social innovation may be related to innovative ways and pragmatism when confronted with serious societal difficulties. One elementary issue of social innovation that has attracted a considerable deal of attention is the basic nature of social innovation. It involves multiple actors, systems and stakeholders, its roots lie in multiple disciplines such as history, economics, sociology, psychology, urban and regional development. Social Innovation has frequently been examined from diverse angles in the business and management fields, including business & economic advances, strategic change etc. It has given rise to multiple meanings, which results in the lack of a unified paradigm in its structure. Hence, it becomes important to generate diverse explanations of social innovation to provide insights for debate at the theoretical level.

Social innovation was initially established in sociological phenomenon works as to reflect the changes in social structures and behaviors (Ayob et al., 2016). Social innovation is described as “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals” (Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller (2008). As per Howaldt and Schwartz (2010), social innovation is “New combination and/or new configuration of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of better satisfying and answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices”. The definition lies in the field of sociology and basically shows that Social innovation indicates the changes in social practices that influences individual behavior but is silent on how society problems and requirements could be resolved. Pue, Vandergeest and Breznitz (2016) explained social innovation as “A process encompassing the emergence and adoption of socially creative strategies, which reconfigure social relations in order to actualize a given social goal”. This definition characterizes social

innovation as a sequence of stages and transformations, employing a social creative approach, yet neglects the fundamental aspect of social innovation, which is the satisfaction of social needs.

Social innovations appear in the form of new ideas, frameworks for action, models, structures, processes, facilities, regulations and new organizational forms. It promotes social relationships to involve and educate society for their holistic development, especially economic. Social innovation also touches the theories associated with sustainability. Remarkably, the idea of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is employed alongside social innovation theories to create sustainability models (Hull & Rothenberg, 2008).

Although earlier studies have shown promising evidence of social innovation, most studies have examined social innovation in conjunction with some other concept like CSR (Chu et al., 2022), Social Entrepreneurship (Sampaio & Sebastião, 2024), Circularity and Energy Transition (Popescu et al., 2022), philanthropy (Medias et al., 2024), Entrepreneurship and sustainability (Durán-Sánchez et al., 2018). There are only few studies exclusively on social innovation (Van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016; Foroudiet et al., 2021; Janik et al., 2021), leaving behind significant gaps in social innovation in particular that need to be filled.

Taking these into account and considering the growing interest of academics in the concept, we aim to present a current bibliometric analysis on social innovation in the business and management domain. We aim to identify the changing discourses, topics, and trends that influence social innovation. Recognizing the potential of the concept, the objective of the study is to provide a comprehensive intellectual framework, as well as the most significant writers, publications, and most established journals with research interests in the related to social innovation.

3. Research Methodology

This study used bibliometric techniques to conduct a thorough analysis in order to investigate the evolving field of "Social Innovation". This approach was first used in the 1950s and was refined by authors like Pritchard (1969) and Broadus (1987). It is currently being used in a wide range of subjects and fields. Utilizing computer analysis with mathematical, statistical, and graphical techniques, bibliometric analysis accurately examines vast volumes of data throughout time. A bibliometric survey and review is capable of preventing the subjectivity of the author's perspective and thoroughly and fairly illustrates the development state of a field.

As a first step of bibliometric analysis, we selected the keyword as "social innovation". We used the Scopus database to gather the data. Scopus database offers a higher number of articles as compared to other databases (Herrera-Franco et al., 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2021). In terms of bibliometric techniques, the current study conducted performance analysis to reflect authors' contributions and science mapping to reflect relationships in scholarly work. For database search, we used following Keyword formula in this study's:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (("social innovation")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "Social science" "Business Management and accounting")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "article" and "review")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBLICATION STAGE, "Final")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SOURCE TYPE, "Journal")) AND (LIMIT-TO (OPEN ACCESS, "Gold")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")).

In the initial search we used the keyword "social innovation" in "Article Title, Abstract", keywords field, and got 7317 documents. The second stage was the application of filters. The first filter was "Subject area" where the paper was limited to "Social Sciences" & "Business Management and Accounting", giving out 5484 articles. The second filter applied was "Document type". We limited the search to "article" & "review articles" and got 3612 papers. The next stage of filter "Publication stage" only final articles were included consisted of 3497 papers. "Source type" was the next filter where only "journals" were included and gave out 3465 articles. Afterward the next filter applied was "Language" where articles written in "English" were considered and included 2985 articles followed by filter criteria of "Open Access" where only "gold access" articles were counted in and finally received 701 articles for further analysis.

Two software programs specifically designed for bibliometric analyses were used to carry out the analyses: Biblioshiny (Rstudio version 4.1.1, Bibliometrix package version 3.1.4) & VOSviewer version 1.6.18.

4. Findings

4.1 Sample characteristics

The general results of the Rstudio software analysis are shown in Table 1. The publication period of 2011–2024 with an annual growth rate of 4.5 was reported. The Scopus search yielded 701 results from 215 peer-reviewed journals for publications about social innovation. The mean number of years since the first social innovation related publications were published in all 215 marketing journals was 4.5 years of publication. Average citations was calculated by dividing total number of citations by the total number of papers, average citations came out as 14.2. With 1,994 authors and 39,434 references and 2,420 keywords, these articles demonstrate the richness of scholarly collaboration in sustainable finance research. Besides, 22.11% of the document shows cross border collaboration.

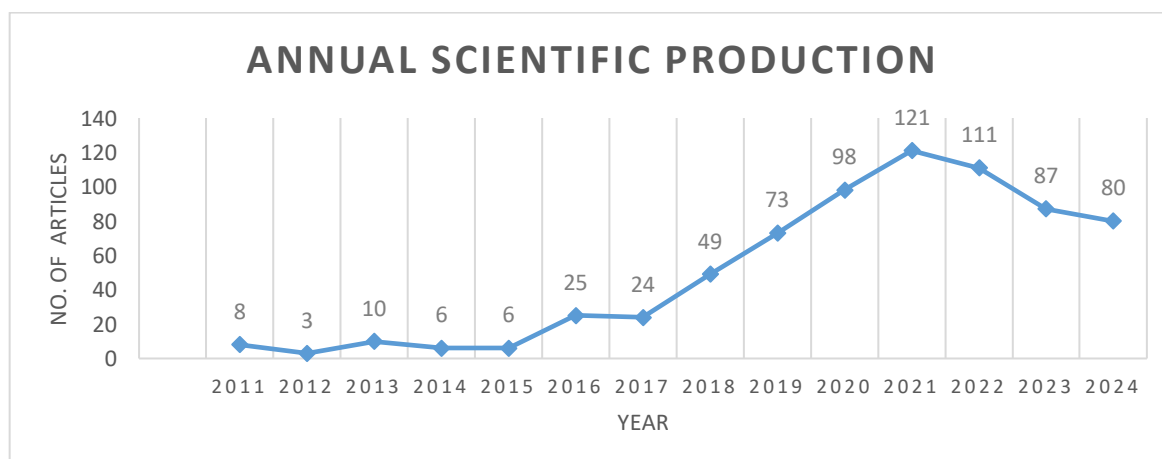
Table 1. Sample characteristics

Description	Results
<i>Main information about data</i>	
Timespan	2011:2024
Sources (Journals)	215
<i>Documents</i>	701
Annual growth rate	19.38%
Document average age	4.5
Average citations per doc	14.42
References	39434
<i>Document Contents</i>	
Keywords Plus (ID)	924
Author's Keywords (DE)	2420
Authors	
Authors	1994
Authors of single-authored docs	131
<i>Authors Collaboration</i>	
Single-authored docs	142
Co-Authors per Doc	3.16
International co-authorships %	22.11
<i>Document Types</i>	
article	663
review	38

Source: Authors' Elaboration in Bibliometrix R Studio

4.2 Annual scientific production

The annual scientific output on innovation is presented here, where it is identified that in the first few years very few papers were published on the subject, indicating the beginning of investigation. Thereafter the number increased significantly, in the initial phase, only 4.7% of the total output was in 2015 only while in the next decade (2016-2024) 95 % manuscripts were published. If we look specifically at the output after 2015, a massive jump of 76% is found from 2015 to 2016. In our view, the implementation of SGDs (Sustainable Development Goals) drew the attention of scholars towards this which led to this increase. However, no such increase was recorded in 2017. Afterwards, there was a good increase till 2019 which stopped in 2020. Maybe Covid pandemic is the reason for this. The output remained nearly stable after 2020 and in 2021 it crossed the century. However, in 2024, there was again a decline of -27 % which is unexplainable.



Source: Result generated by Bibliometrix R Studio

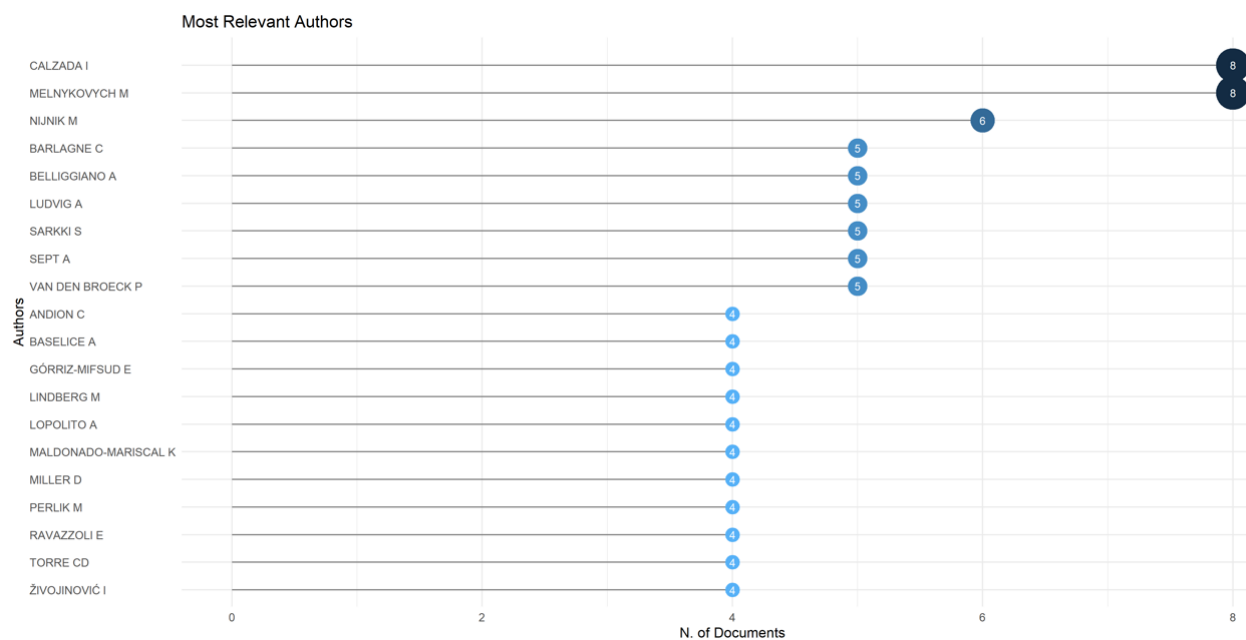
Figure 1. Annual scientific production in Social Innovation

4.3 Most Relevant Authors

In the top 20 social innovation researchers, the active authors are Igor Calzada and Mariana Melnykovych with eight articles. At second place Maria Nijnik published six articles. Five authors, each with five publications, ranked third: Carla Barlagne, Angelo Belliggiano, Alice Ludvig, Simo Sarkki, Alison September, Pieter Van den Broeck. Eleven authors namely Carolina Andion, Antonio Baselice, Elena Gorriz-Mifsud, Malin Lindberg, Antonio Lopolito, Karina Maldonado-Mariscal, Dale T. Miller, Manfred Perlik, Elisa Ravazzoli, Cristina Dalla Torre, Ivana Zivojinovich, have four publications placed at fourth rank. Data for fractional authorship, which quantify the unique contribution of individual researchers based on the assumption of uniform input by co-authors, are also included in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

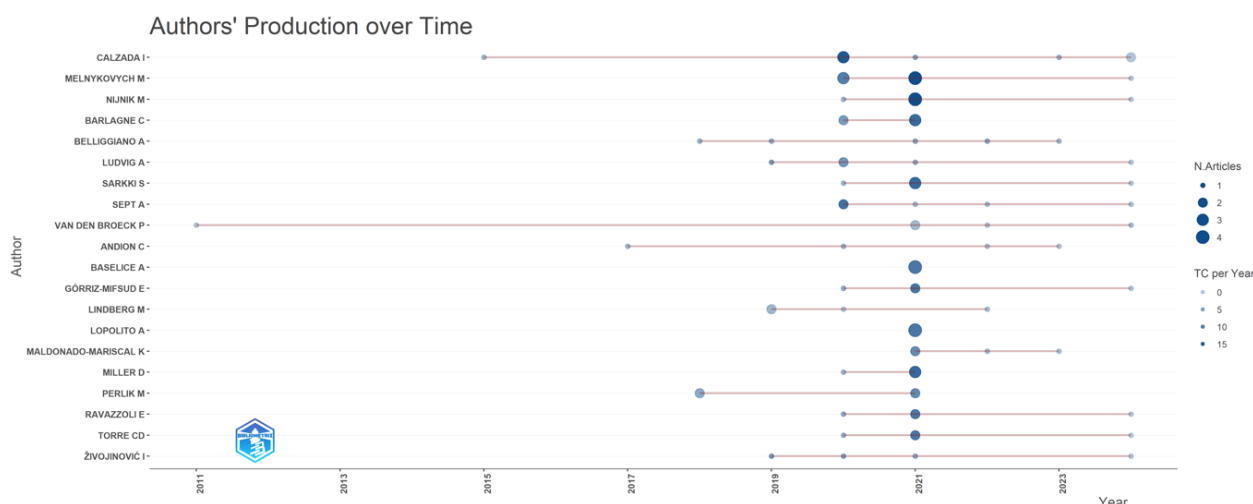
4.4 Most Impactful journal

In total, 701 publications were published in 215 journals (source). According to the data, the top ten journals have 331 publications, accounting for 47.21% of the total documents. Table 2 highlights the top contributing journals that publish articles in this area of SI from 2011 to 2024. The most contributing journal, 'Sustainability (Switzerland)', has contributed more to establishing social innovation practices that lead to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through environmental well-being, poverty eradication, social justice, followed by Open Innovation Journal and European Public and Social Innovation Review. Therefore, Sustainability (Switzerland) Journal is the top source title among the 215 source titles, accounting for 31.24% of the total contribution in the social innovation domain.



Source: Result generated by Bibliometrix R Studio

Figure 2. Most Relevant Authors



Source: Result generated by Bibliometrix R Studio

Figure 3. Authors' Production over Time

4.5 Most influential documents

The most influential documents are those that have been cited a maximum number of times locally and globally. The influential documents show how a particular theme of the study is further researched and expanded (Kumar et al., 2021). The top 20 most influential documents are exhibited in Table 2. The article “Socially responsible investments: Institutional aspects, performance, and investor behaviour”, written by L Renneboog et al. (2008), has been cited the most and attracted the scholar to extend the study to explore more about socially responsible finance. Another important contribution, “How do we conquer the growth limits of capitalism? Schumpeterian Dynamics of Open Innovation” of JJ Yun, published in 2015, gives a great insight into dynamics of an open Innovation economic system. Third most influential article “The nature and variety of innovation” by Edwards-Schachter, M. ,2018 talks about the outline of the most prominent types of innovations. Eleven of the twenty most influential articles were from the Journal of Sustainability, followed by the Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Markets, and Complexity, which published two such articles.

Table 2. Most influential documents

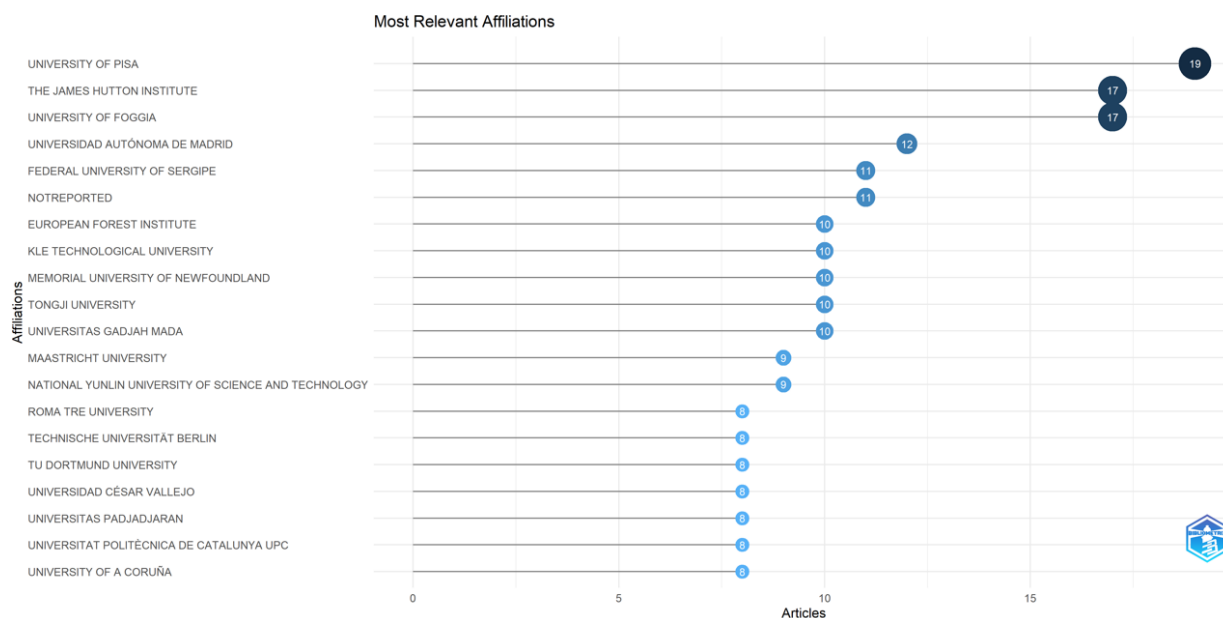
Document	Journal	DOI	TC	TC /year
Lubberinkl, 2017	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su9050721	225	25
Yun JJ, 2015	<i>J. of Open Innovation: Tech., Mkt, & Complexity</i>	10.1186/s40852-015-0019-3	175	15.91
Edwards. ,2018	<i>International J. of Innovation Studies</i>	10.1016/j.ijis.2018.08.004	166	20.75
Lan J, 2017	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su9091504	158	17.56
Sorrentino M, 2018	<i>Policy Soc</i>	10.1080/14494035.2018.1521676	152	19
Bock BB, 2012	<i>Studies In Agricultural Economics</i>	10.7896/j.1209	149	10.64
Hodson M, 2017	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su9020299	147	16.33
Eichler GM, 2019	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su11020522	144	20.57
Wolfram M, 2016	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su8020144	134	13.4
Lennon B, 2019	<i>Energy, Sustainability and Society</i>	10.1186/s13705-019-0218-z	132	18.86
Tejedor G, 2019	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su11072086	131	18.71
Bammer G, 2020	<i>Humanities and Social Sc. Communications</i>	10.1057/s41599-019-0380-0	129	21.5
Šlaus I, 2011	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su3010097	123	8.2
Wierling A, 2018	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su10093339	120	15
Fuchs C, 2013	<i>Triplec: Communication, Capitalism & Critique</i>	10.31269/vol11iss2pp428-443	111	8.54

Rabbani MR, 2021	<i>J. of Open Innovation: Tech., Mkt, & Complexity</i>	10.3390/joitmc7020136	102	20.4
Van NTT, 2020	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su12229523	92	15.33
Joy M, 2013	<i>Can. J. of Nonprofit & Social Eco. Research</i>	10.22230/cjnser.2013v4n2a148	85	6.54
Cattivelli V, 2020	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su12114444	82	13.67
Lavrijssen S, 2017	<i>Sustainability</i>	10.3390/su9071207	82	9.11

Source: Result generated by Bibliometrix R Studio

4.6 Top 20 most relevant affiliations

The most significant affiliations with regard to sustainable finance research are displayed in Figure 6. With 19 research papers, the University of Pisa, Italy is the most influential affiliation. The James Hutton Institute, United Kingdom and University of Foggia, Spain comes in second jointly with 17 research articles each. With 12 scientific papers apiece, Universidad Autónoma De Madrid, Spain, came in third. Federal University of Sergipe, Brazil with 11 articles is at fourth position. Five institutions namely, KLE Technological University, India; European Forest Institute, Finland; Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada; Tongji University, China; Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia jointly holds the fifth position.



Source: Result generated by Bibliometrix R Studio

Figure 4. Top 20 most relevant affiliations

4.7 Most influential countries

Table 4 shows how each nation contributes to the total amount of science produced. The top 10 nations that contribute to social innovation with the most significant nations being Italy, Spain, Germany, China, the UK, Brazil, Canada, the USA, India, and the Netherlands.

Table 3. Most influential countries

Country	Frequency	Citation
ITALY	250	1223
SPAIN	209	675
GERMANY	137	690
CHINA	132	403
UK	123	794
BRAZIL	100	60

CANADA	80	105
USA	76	147
INDIA	61	186
NETHERLANDS	60	637

Source: Result generated by Bibliometrix R Studio

4.8 Most frequent words

The evolution and theme of a certain field of study are demonstrated by the frequency of the words (Kumar et al., 2021). It is helpful in knowing about the most popular research streams and sub-streams as well as the most frequently used words by the authors. We used the Biblioshiny application to generate the most frequently repeated words and created a word cloud of the 25 most useful words as shown in the figure. Innovation, sustainability, sustainable development, Italy, stakeholder, rural area, entrepreneur, governance approach, knowledge, and rural development are the 10 most used words in this field, as shown in Table 5.



Source(s): Result generated by Bibliometrix R Studio

Figure 5. Most frequent words

Table 4. Most frequent words

<i>Terms</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Innovation	173
Sustainability	71
Sustainable Development	49
Italy	39
Stakeholder	31
Rural Area	28
Entrepreneur	24
Governance Approach	23
Knowledge	23
Rural Development	23

Source: Result generated by Bibliometrix R Studio

4.9 Keyword occurrence

The figure 6. illustrates a keyword occurrence map. Figure illustrates a keyword occurrence map. The figure was generated using VOSviewer software. The criterion for minimum occurrence is set as 5; out of 2,528 author's keywords, only 58 reached the threshold condition. The output map produced five clusters of these keywords where Cluster 1 (red) encompasses 17 keywords, Cluster 2 (green) has 11 keywords, Cluster 3 (blue) comprises 11 keywords, Cluster 4 (yellow) consists of 10 keywords, and Cluster 5 (purple) includes 9 keywords.

This study explored the recent trends in Social innovation research using the bibliometric analysis spanning 2011-2024. Using RStudio packages we determined the growth of the field, top contributing journals, country-wise production, most productive authors, key prolific affiliations and most used keywords. Finally, Using VOSviewer we performed co-occurrence of keyword we performed the analysis to identify mainstreams and sub-streams of social innovation. Governance, Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development, Empowerment and Social Impact, Co-Creation and Sustainable Strategies, and Urban Development and Cultural Heritage and the main themes and sub-streams of social innovation research.

To summarize, Studies highlight the interdisciplinary and transformative nature of social innovation research. Within the context of social innovation research, innovation is the central focus, providing new solutions to social, economic and environmental challenges, as well as key factors that underpin sustainability and sustainable development, with an emphasis on long-term viability and balanced progress. From an early stage, geographical contexts such as Italy and Spain have often been studied for their regional and community-driven initiatives, with Europe serving as an overarching hub for policy and collaboration.

Key actors in social innovation include governing bodies, people, and entrepreneurs. Where governing bodies provide robust strategies and infrastructure for implementation, people and entrepreneurs advances participatory and entrepreneurial approaches.

Social innovation frequently focuses on rural development and places since it can also address and resolve issues in non-urban contexts. It strives to accomplish social transformation, social development and empowerment via building resilience and fostering social well-being. In the later stage, social innovation also established itself in urban areas, involving not only imperial development, but also addressing the disparities, poverty alleviation and environmental problems created by urbanization and growing population and careless consumption. More recently, there is emerging literature on the interrelations between social innovation and other concepts like social entrepreneurship, circular economy, sustainable finance.

Though we have tried our best, but given these implications, there are some limitations in this study like firstly, the study reported the results based on the data obtained from the Scopus database. Taking more than one database would make the picture clearer. Secondly, there is a lack of evidence of strong theoretical arguments presented by these studies, which are included in the bibliometric analysis. In this order, through various literature view methods, researchers will be able to get a clearer picture of the theoretical aspects. In this way, future researchers can take this study further by doing a depth study in this area.

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