

Corporate social innovation: a systematic literature review and research agenda

Corporate
social
innovation

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Mennatallah Morsy

*School of Strategy, Marketing and Innovation, Faculty of Business and Law,
University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK and Business and Management,
Faculty of Commerce, Benha University, Benha, Egypt*

Paul Trott

*School of Strategy, Marketing and Innovation, Faculty of Business and Law,
University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK, and*

Daniel Sunghwan Cho

Digital Economy, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, University of Surrey, Surrey, UK

Received 2 June 2023
Revised 2 January 2024
Accepted 5 March 2024

Abstract

Purpose – The new concept of corporate social innovation (CSI) has witnessed a steady growth in the business and management academic world over the past 20 years. Yet its adoption by corporations has been notably slow. This paper aims to operationalize the concept and develop a research agenda for CSI.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic review of the current literature in the recent past (1999–2020) has been embraced in this research. The review is based on 40 articles and offers a descriptive and a thematic analysis of the literature.

Findings – The authors demonstrate the development of the concept over time and identify 12 themes to assist in the institutionalization of CSI.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to provide an enhanced overview of the current state of CSI. The paper shows how a variety of different definitions of corporate social innovation have been used in the business and management literature. The findings provide a unique conceptual framework and a detailed research agenda for scholars seeking to examine CSI.

Keywords Corporate social innovation, Shared value creation, Social innovation, Social impact, Corporate social responsibility, Institutionalization

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review the existing research on the adoption of corporate social innovation (CSI). CSI involves introducing social and environmental innovative solutions such as new products and services with both social and economic returns through a strategic investment. Introducing these social innovations requires the utilization of corporate assets such as people and skills, firms' knowledge, engagement in societally relevant research and development, internal collaboration and partnerships with other businesses or non-profit organizations (Alonso-Martinez *et al.*, 2019; Googins, 2013; Herrera, 2015; Kanter, 1999; Mirvis *et al.*, 2016).

Declarations:

Funding: This research was funded by a PhD full scholarship from the Ministry of Higher Education of the Arab Republic of Egypt.



According to the literature, little is known about how to implement CSI and it is not clear what can be done to support its growth and institutionalization. Thus, deeper knowledge is required to support social innovations in the business sector. Indeed, there have been calls from scholars to unlock the potential of CSI in the business sector after decades of confining the concept to governments and charities (Mulgan, 2006; Pol and Ville, 2009). To achieve this, research by Dionisio and de Vargas (2020) has suggested the use of institutional theory to examine how firms can mimic the CSI phenomena as soon as possible. Our research builds on this suggestion and adopts the idea of CSI institutionalization as recommended (Dionisio and de Vargas, 2020; Herrera, 2015; Pol and Ville, 2009). Thus, our principal research question is:

RQ1. How to institutionalize corporate social innovation.

To achieve this goal, our systematic review critically examined the extant literature on CSI. We analysed and synthesized our findings in a conceptual framework, and we identified knowledge gaps for future research. Our research contributes to theory and practice: Firstly, we extend the research of Dionisio and de Vargas (2020) and Herrera (2015) and address the theoretical desirability of CSI and its implementation in practice. Secondly, we provide a conceptual framework which serves as a practical guide for corporations to institutionalize social innovation. Finally, our detailed research agenda will help scholars seeking to examine CSI.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a theoretical background for consistent definition and operationalization of constructs that are used to analyse the reviewed literature (Sauer and Seuring, 2023, p. 1917), and then the methodology and review process are present in Section 3. Section 4 provides a descriptive analysis of the review. Section 5 contains our detailed analysis of the papers. Section 6 presents the future research agenda. Section 7 discusses our conclusions and the limitations of this research.

2. Theoretical background

Kanter introduced CSI as a concept for the first time in 1999, but it seems to have been overlooked within business society until 2010. This review shows that this was due to several difficulties including an unclear definition, the multidisciplinary nature of “social innovation”, claims that CSI is another synonym for corporate social responsibility (CSR) and a stigma limiting social innovations only to the public sector and NGOs (Drucker, 1987; Pol and Ville, 2009; Rueede and Lurtz, 2012). However, recent global turbulences and updates in perceptions of social responsibility have generated interest in how to embrace the concept of social innovation strategically. Changes which breathe new life into CSI include global challenges with negative financial, social and environmental consequences that have left governments unable to introduce social innovations individually (e.g. COVID health crisis); constant calls for blurring boundaries between communities to introduce social innovations through partnerships and collaborations (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013); academic reconsideration of social innovation from a strategic perspective (Phills *et al.*, 2008); and raising criticism towards CSR (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

Notably, the contemporary and novel nature of the concept has left it with limited insights. This has hindered efforts to understand and institutionalize CSI in the business sector; in other words, how to improve corporate shared value creation by integrating social innovations into business strategy (Dionisio and de Vargas, 2020; Herrera, 2015). This is particularly so given that CSI is not the same as corporate social responsibility (CSR) as explained by Dionisio and de Vargas (2020), Googins (2013) and Mirvis *et al.* (2016). Indeed, some researchers consider the new concept a further step toward more social responsibility (Portales, 2019) as highlighted in Figure 1 which is a simple visual aid showing the contributing streams of literature over time to CSI. This consideration was supported by the growing moral obligation and interest of firms, such as Intel, Nestlé, and Hitachi, towards

the emerging societal challenges. Since new problems require new solutions, CSI is a strategic option for businesses to create shared value in the shape of innovative solutions. This is unlike CSR, which is viewed as an additional cost (Kemper and Martin, 2010).

The notion of social innovation has been addressed from a variety of different institutionalization perspectives. For example, Cajasanta, 2014 examined social innovation from both an economic and a sociological perspective by using institutional and structuration theory as an effective lens through which we can understand social innovation. Adopting a different approach, Herrera (2015), suggests the need for three institutional pillars to institutionalize social innovations. Later (Turker et al., 2017) analysed social innovation through 34 Ashoka cases from the perspectives of institutional voids and supports. Cajasanta utilized institutional theory to reveal that social innovation are mostly stimulated by voids at the incremental and institutional levels. These contributions were a response to academic calls for improving the quality of life by institutionalizing social innovation through public or private actions (Moulaert et al., 2013) and especially in the private sector as an upcoming next step for CSI (Pol and Ville, 2009). In a systematic literature review, Dionisio and de Vargas (2020) suggested that further institutionalization of CSI is of great importance for the consolidation of the concept evolution. Significantly, Herrera (2015) called for more detailed narrative descriptions to understand CSI and build systemic theory than a large-scale yet superficial survey of many companies. Together, this research provides a base for expanding Herrera's (2015) institutional elements through a systematic literature review that addresses the following research question:

RQ2. What themes support CSI institutionalization?

As a starting point, we used the conceptual model by Herrera (2015) to explore further themes supporting the three main elements of CSI institutionalization:

- (1) operational structures and processes;
- (2) organizational culture; and
- (3) stakeholder engagement.

For example.

Stakeholder engagement. Successful social innovation requires stakeholder acceptance and cooperation (Enright and Bourns, 2010). Effective stakeholder mechanisms allow companies to identify social innovation opportunities.

Operational structures and processes. Operational structures and processes refer to policies, structures and processes that enable CSI. Operational structures and processes

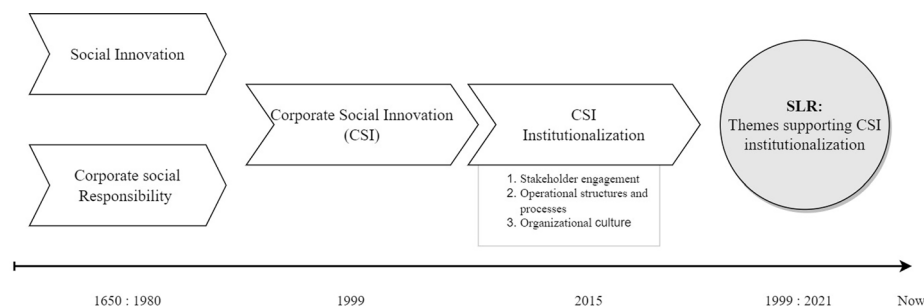


Figure 1.
Illustration of CSI literature development

Source: Authors' own work

include accountability structures, project initiation protocols, development and evaluation of new ideas, systematic procedures to socialize and propagate successful innovations and systems for providing innovation opportunities.

Organizational culture. Herrera explained that organizational culture reflects corporate values, organizational norms and employee attitudes. Management can encourage social innovation through corporate values supporting experimentation, risk-taking and collaboration.

3. Methodology and review process

A systematic review requires the search and selection of relevant literature on a subject and consists of three phases: Planning the review, conducting the review and reporting and dissemination (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003).

3.1 Planning the review

In this stage, as stated by Tranfield *et al.* (2003), the literature scope is identified to assess the relevance and size of the targeted literature and to prepare for the review plan/protocol. An in-depth review of social innovation literature has been conducted to understand the size and main characteristics related to the targeted research area. One of the main descriptions for SI literature is a multidisciplinary research area which has been discussed from various perspectives (Choi and Majumdar, 2015; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace, 2017; Pol and Ville, 2009; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). Secondly, CSI or SI research in the business and management domain specifically can be described as novel, limited and disintegrated so, this demonstrated many gaps. Additionally, previous systematic reviews in the same research scope by Dionisio and de Vargas (2020), at that time, confirmed that the targeted main research gap which is the idea of CSI institutionalization is still in need of further research. Subsequently, the next step is to explain the developed review protocol (Figure 2).

3.2 Conducting the review

For an unbiased search, Tranfield *et al.* (2003) explained that the process should be different from the process followed in a traditional narrative review to serve the objectives of the systematic review. Thus, the following steps will explain the identification and selection of relevant studies.

3.2.1 Keywords. A brief search of social innovation identified various sources to define the most related keywords for the systematic review objectives. Keywords for this review were adapted from the systematic review by Dionisio and de Vargas (2020) to represent CSI literature. After that, these keywords were modified based on institutional elements introduced by Herrera (2015) which are stakeholder engagement, operational structures and processes and organizational culture to examine the institutionalization of CSI (Section 2). Finally, the institutional theory's three pillars which are regulative, cognitive and normative were added to find organizational drivers for CSI adoption equivalently. The search string 1 was formulated by searching most related concepts and equivalent synonyms for the targeted research topic from the literature in addition to truncation of search terms to cover a broader range of literature to the research objective. This step was essential because a strict search through the concept of ("Corporate Social Innovation") provided approximately 25 studies at that time.

3.2.2 Databases. Using the search string, an initial search was conducted in different business and management focused databases then the decision was to be limited to Web of Science (WOS) and SCOPUS. This decision was due to the initial results from Web of Science (WOS) and SCOPUS were the most related results for the review objectives and their frequent use by other systematic reviews in the research area. Additionally, the two databases provided

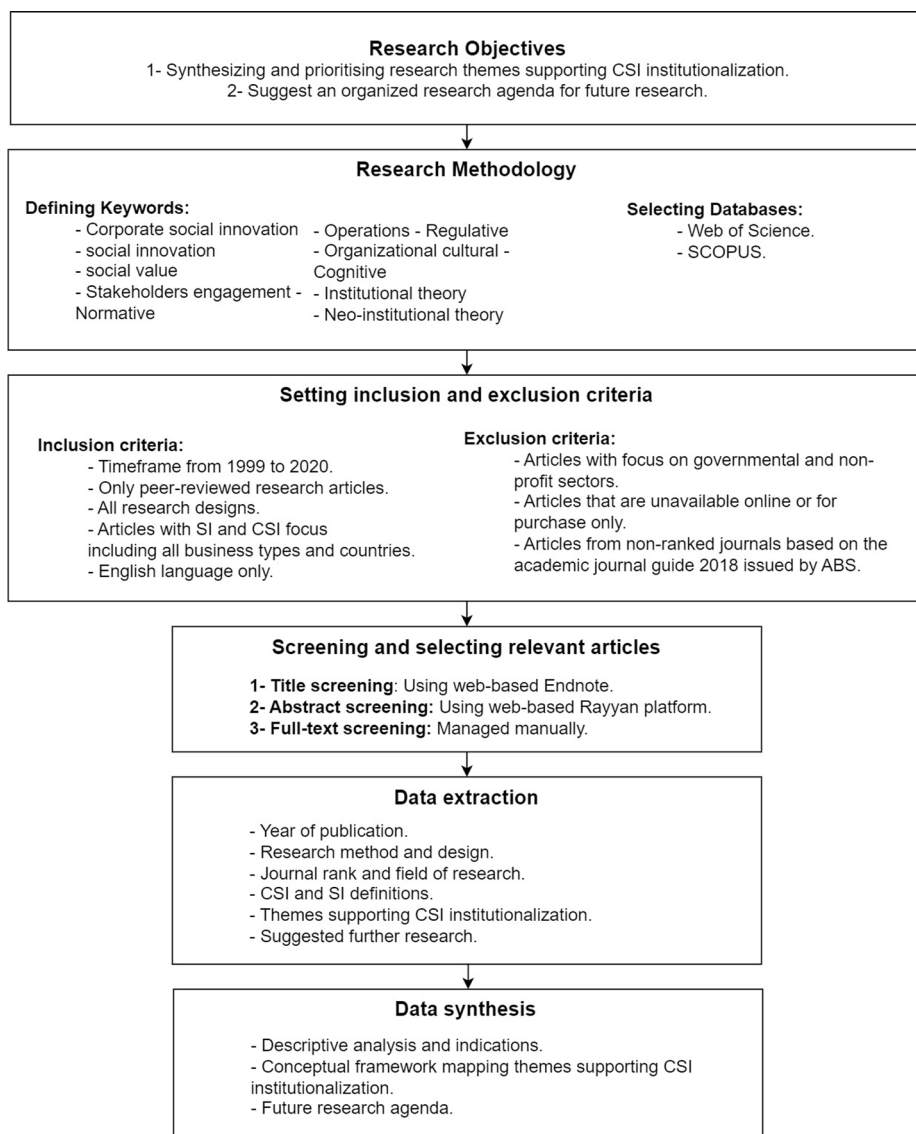


Figure 2.
Flow diagram for the
systematic review
process

Source: Authors' own work

a comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed business and management publications and this supported our interdisciplinary goal of covering the literature from innovation management and related disciplines. Finally, the search revealed 860 articles from SCOPUS by 56 articles and WOS by 804 articles. The variation in the articles' number obtained from the two databases is because SCOPUS was used after WOS and cleaned from duplications, conference proceedings and grey literature and books. Finally, data were merged to reach 859 articles.

3.2.3 Quality assessment. It is a common practice in systematic reviews to focus on articles published in peer-reviewed journals, as reliable sources of scholarly knowledge such as [da Silva Etges and Cortimiglia \(2019\)](#). This review will be limited to highly prestigious peer-reviewed journals from the Academic Journal Guide 2018 as in [Meindl et al. \(2021\)](#). Thus, books, book chapters, conference proceedings and other grey literature will be excluded.

3.2.4 Inclusion and exclusion criteria. The identified sample of articles was reviewed according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria shown in [Figure 2](#). These criteria have been suggested to gain a fully focused picture of SI and CSI in the business sector. For example, limiting the period of publications between 1999 and 2020 because the concept of CSI was mentioned for the first time in 1999 by Kanter and after 2020 the research topic has been affected by COVID-19 circumstances and this gives further implications which worth being reviewed separately. Also, using WOS and SCOPUS only because these two libraries provide the most related results compared to others. Focusing on only peer-reviewed research provides a different perspective especially as other reviews on the same research area such as the review by [Tabares \(2020\)](#) included grey literature.

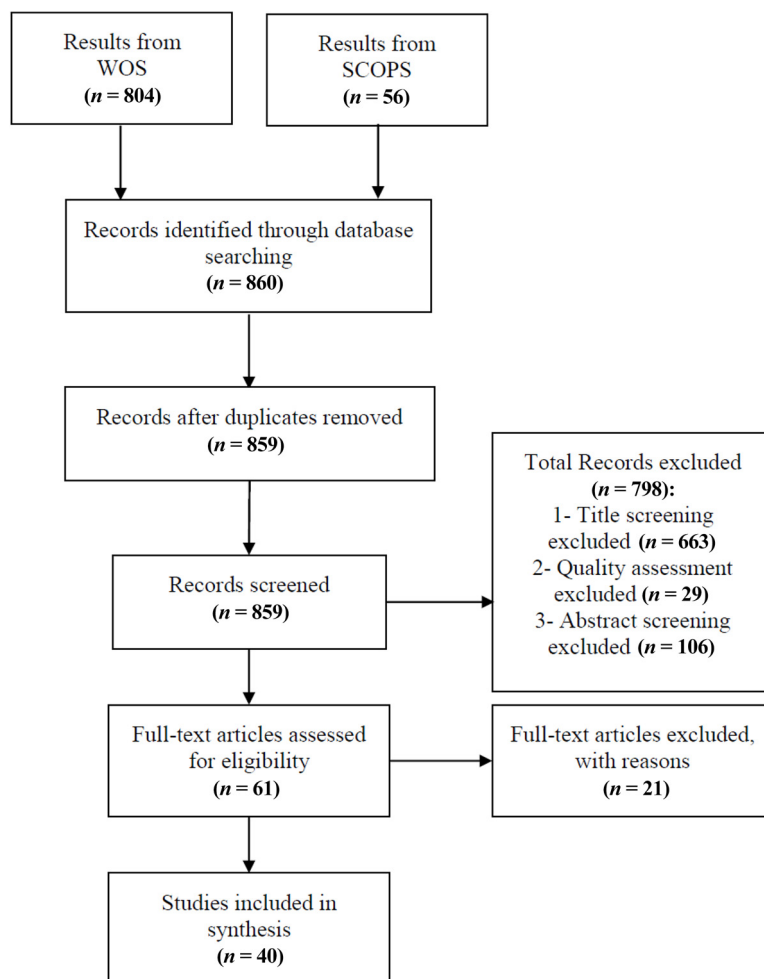
3.2.5 Screening and selecting relevant studies. The selected articles were computer-managed during title and abstract screening except during full-text screening which was manually analysed as presented in a Prisma chart adopted from [Moher et al. \(2009\)](#) and edited in [Figure 3](#):

- Article citations were uploaded from SCOPUS and WOS ($n = 860$) to web-based Endnote for title screening excluding 663 articles. Web-based Endnote helped in grouping and separating included and excluded article groups.
- Subsequently these articles were reviewed using a web-based Rayyan platform for abstract screening and quality assessment to reach 61 articles ready for full-text screening. The use of the Web-based Rayyan platform was due to its usability and helpful features (e.g. creating account – importing references... etc.) based on the recommendation of [Harrison et al. \(2020\)](#).
- Full-text screening for targeted articles ($n = 40$) has been managed manually. As shown in [Figure 3](#), we excluded 21 articles for several reasons which are social innovation partnerships and collaboration articles without research analysis of business side role, articles examined social innovations without economic return which is not in line with CSI objectives, articles with concepts similar to social innovation (e.g. open innovation with social impact) but not reflecting CSI characteristics and concept typology and evolution articles.

4. Reporting and descriptive review of the literature

4.1 Year of publication

Even though the concept of CSI was first suggested in 1999, papers started to explain what research themes are supporting CSI or SI in the business sector only from 2010 as shown in [Figure 4](#). Also, the figure shows that the research area was overlooked at the beginning but is still growing to a rapid degree, especially in the past few years. Most of the papers were published between 2017 and 2019 with more than 57% ($n = 23$ out of 40 papers) of the reviewed articles. In contrast, only 5 articles were produced from 2010 to 2014. The peak of produced literature was in 2019 with 27.5% ($n = 11$), while no publication was detected in 2011 ($n = 0$). This reflects how this research area has evolved and the increasing academic interest underlines the topic over the last ten years until now.



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 3.
Prisma chart

4.2 Research method and design

What stands out in Figure 5 regarding articles' diversity in terms of the method employed is the majority of the articles are empirical-qualitative (single and multiple case studies and interviews) with 57.5% ($n = 23$). Secondly, empirical-quantitative methodologies (online and paper-based questionnaires, secondary data from databases or surveys) were used in 20% ($n = 8$) of the studies. Surprisingly, mixed qualitative and quantitative methods captured the smallest contribution by 5% ($n = 2$).

Since most of the introduced contributions are qualitative, this allowed a general understanding of CSI or SI phenomena in the business sector from specific supporting themes or case perspectives. Qualitative research models are central in nature and most of the reviewed studies explain CSI or SI from a case study perspective. Thus, they cannot be

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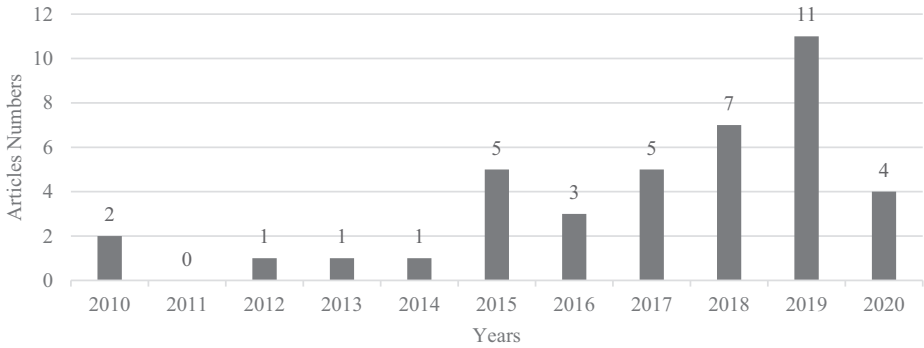


Figure 4.
Year of publication

Source: Authors' own work



Figure 5.
Research methods
and design

Source: Authors' own work

generalized and not introduce measurable scales for CSI or SI in the business sector. Consequently, this research area requires more generable results from empirical–theory testing (quantitative) research as well as conceptual papers.

4.3 Journal outlets and fields of research

Looking at [Figure 6](#), ABS journals rank (2018) for the included sample of journals shows that most of the published articles are in ABS 3 journals (i.e. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Business Ethics and Business and Society*) where $n = 19$ out of 40 (48%). Followingly, ABS 2 and ABS 1 journals, respectively, are present and only one article from ABS 4 journal. This indicates that the research stream is highly demanded in prestigious journals and needs more academic contributions to be available in ABS 4 journals.

Additionally, a multidisciplinary approach is clear in journals where the selected articles are published ([Figure 7](#)). The largest proportion of articles was published in ethics and corporate social responsibility management (ETHICS-CSR-MAN) journals with ($n = 15$) articles. This research field is represented through 5 journals most of which are ABS 3 journals. In the second row, innovation management (INNOV.) journals with ($n = 8$) articles.

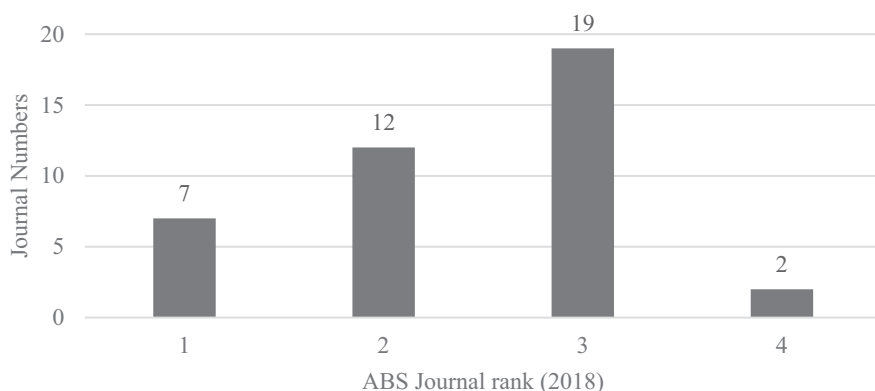


Figure 6.
ABS (2018) rank for
journals included in
the review

Source: Authors' own work

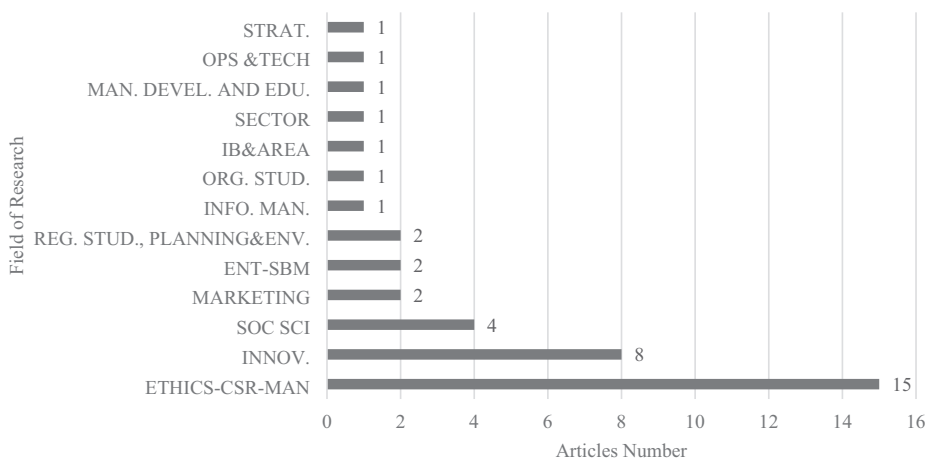


Figure 7.
Field of research for
included articles

Source: Authors' own work

Also, 5 journals represent innovation management field contribution and one of these journals is ABS 4 journal. The rest of the articles are distributed among a range of disciplines such as marketing, entrepreneurship and small business and strategic management. Given these findings, the cross-disciplinary nature of this research area in the business and management domain is rich and promising. That is why interdisciplinary research is encouraged to expand the understanding of current phenomena or to find solutions for social problems which are beyond the scope of a single discipline or field of research practice knowledge.

5. Analysis

Our analysis of the CSI literature identified some definitions (see [Appendix-Table A1](#)); from these, we identified six separate characteristics. Followingly, we adopt Herrera's theoretical dimensions of CSI as guidance for our search for supporting themes. We identify 12 CSI

themes that will need to be considered for the effective institutionalization of CSI (Figure 9). This enabled us to develop a research agenda. We capture this in a simple conceptual framework in Figure 8. The proceeding analysis discusses each part of the conceptual framework in more detail.

5.1 Institutionalization of corporate social innovation

This section presents our analysis, which identifies 12 primary themes. These have been developed to support the institutionalization of CSI. As recommended, evidence on which paper has been coded for developed themes that support the institutionalization of CSI has been provided (Figure 9) for improving the review process transparency (Sauer and Seuring, 2023).

(1) Partnership:

A partnership is the main and largest theme found in CSI definitions and projects. That is because social innovation in its nature starts from societal problems and requires societal knowledge and co-creation efforts. No wonder most of the studies in this review are trying to figure out why and how cross-sector partners are collaborating to introduce social innovations. Therefore, studies are following two research streams which are investigating partners' interactions and communications and secondly exploring the importance of stakeholders' engagement in partnerships in the CSI context.

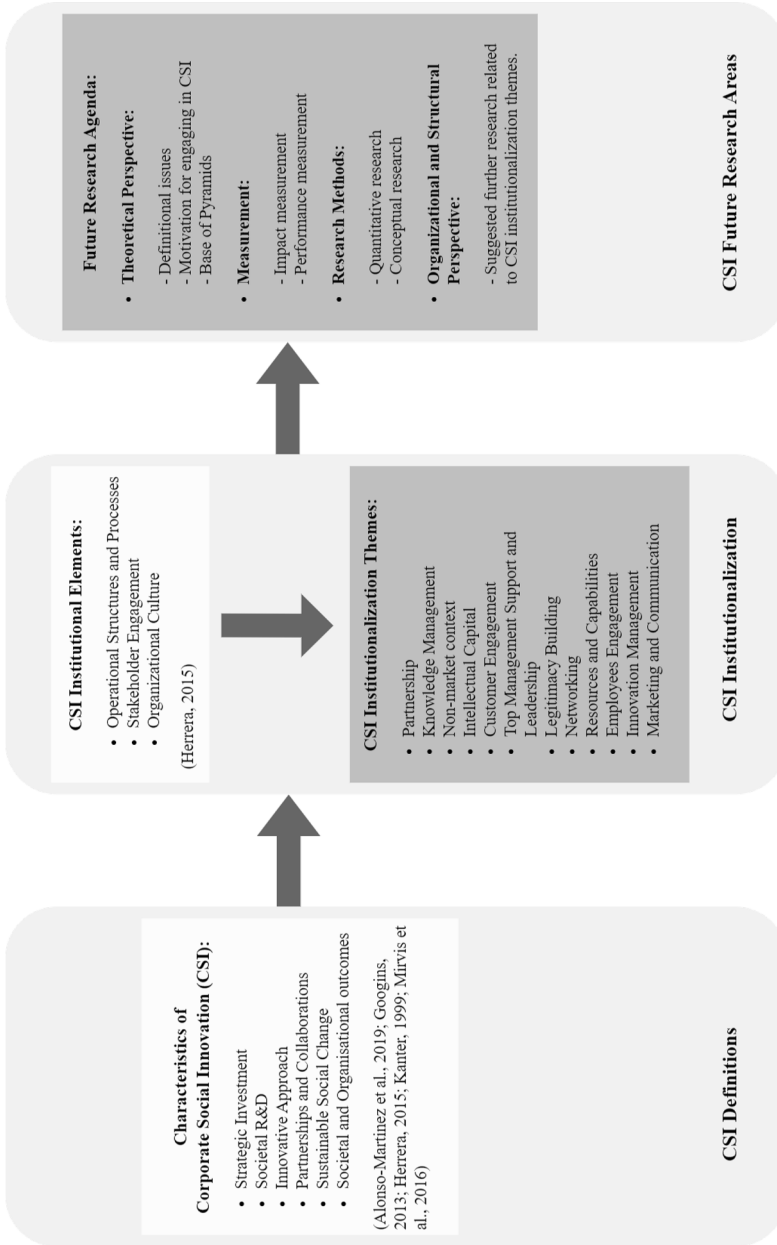
- Partners communication and interaction in partnerships:

Social innovation studies here are based on cross-sector partnership cases. Different partners mean various interests, objectives and backgrounds. That is why this research stream was started earlier than others to figure out partners' communication and interaction. Among these contributions, Saji and Ellingstad (2016) introduced an interesting model which was derived from a single case study on Hewlett-Packard. The model highlighted that the depth of partner relations is based on three partnership dynamics relational, structural and cognitive explains which social innovation will be introduced. For example, the strongest interactions between partners through the three dynamics will introduce strategic social innovation. Medium and low interactions between partners introduce transactional and philanthropic social innovations respectively. This model is interesting because it focuses on the strategic level of social innovation which is this review focus (i.e. CSI) and identifies other common characteristics among the rest of the studies based on the three dynamics (Le Ber and Branzei, 2010; Murphy *et al.*, 2012; Rey-Garcia *et al.*, 2019; Selsky and Parker, 2010).

The aforementioned studies pointed out the importance of managing competing logic and cultures and partners' organizational identities to agree on an interesting social value and a shared purpose of a partnership driven by social innovation orientation. Interesting social value is gearing up for identifying each partner's role by understanding partners' interdependencies, degree of stakeholder involvement in governance based on the pressure source for social innovation and roles recalibrations for future success. Based on studies, the partner's role involves sharing know-how knowledge by facilitating knowledge transfer, analysing the complexities of resource flows and strategic coordination activities between partners and co-creation efforts and piloting solutions to complex problems before implementation.

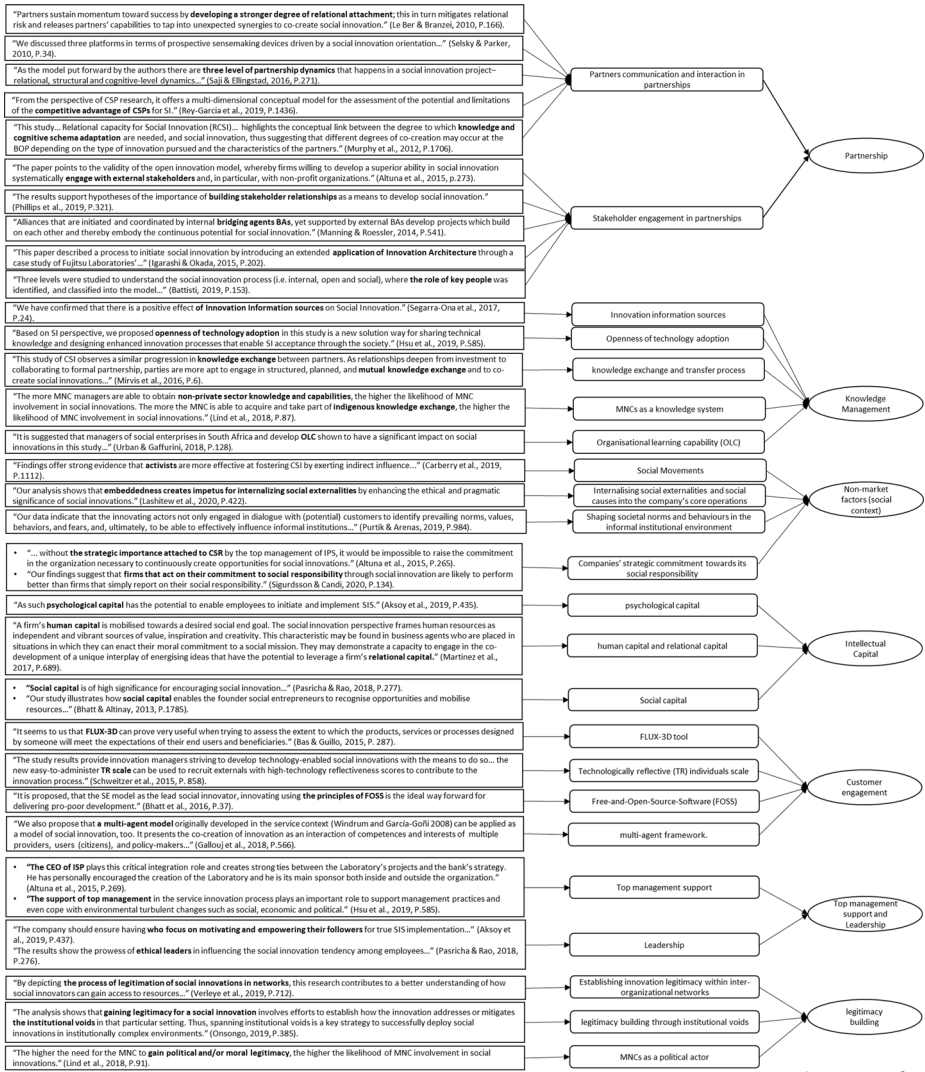
- Stakeholder's engagement in partnerships:

Generally, the concept of stakeholder engagement is central to CSI institutionalization as mentioned later, but we noticed this in the partnership context specifically. For example,



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 8. Suggested conceptual framework

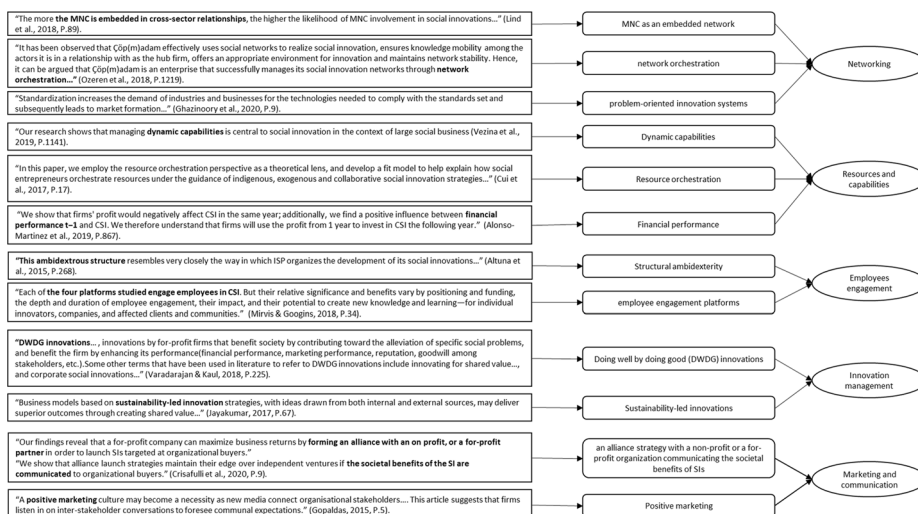


(continued)

Figure 9.
Themes supporting
CSI
institutionalization

developing stakeholder relational linkages, stakeholder engagement in the social innovation project process and usage of innovation architecture and future centres as tools for internal and external multi-stakeholder management were noticed to support social innovations in the context of a partnership (Altuna *et al.*, 2015; Igarashi and Okada, 2015; Phillips *et al.*, 2019).

Studies explained the necessity of stakeholders such as customers, non-profit organizations and media in various phases of the social innovation process. Identifying social innovation opportunities by addressing a relatable social need is based on dialogue around social issues and stakeholders' feedback (i.e. explorative phase). Stakeholder engagement



Note: Prepared by Authors based on the selected articles for this systematic review

Source: Authors' own work

Figure 9.

allows the introduction of social innovations using current capabilities through accessing new markets (consumers), new stakeholders and communities. Also, internal stakeholder engagement (departments collaboration) helps in suggesting new partners and further stakeholders to compensate for the shortage of existing technological capabilities, knowledge and specialized consultancy (i.e. strategic design phase). We noticed agreement about stakeholder involvement's importance in both operative design and new product management phases but is still overlooked until now. That is why despite that developing stakeholder linkages for implementing social innovation was not supported in one study, this was explained due to a lack of further expertise and capabilities as explained by Phillips *et al.* (2019).

Beyond the explained importance of stakeholder engagement in partnerships, two studies expanded the roles of people engaged in partnerships to support SI. Firstly, Battisti (2019) identified the key roles of people from various levels in the innovation process through a model for public-private partnerships. Secondly, the case study by Manning and Roessler (2014) explained how bridging agents shape project agendas and long-term alliances in cross-sector development partnerships. It is worthy of note that Phillips *et al.* (2019) explained that bridging agents could be a solution to overcome the lack of expertise and capabilities in the implementation phase.

(2) Knowledge management:

Knowledge management is a fundamental topic in the innovation research stream as explained by du Plessis (2007), but in social innovation, the concept is still growing. Our analysis reveals that knowledge management is an umbrella term for a variety of convergent terms, such as knowledge sources and creation, knowledge distribution and knowledge sharing. Several papers discussed the role of knowledge exchange in supporting CSI collaborations and designing social innovations (Hsu *et al.*, 2019; Lind *et al.*, 2018;

Mirvis *et al.*, 2016). For example, Mirvis *et al.* (2016) investigated various types of knowledge to be acquired and exchanged for social value creation such as indigenous knowledge, tacit knowledge and technical knowledge. In addition, Hsu *et al.* (2019) confirmed how the usage of openness of technology adoption within social innovation contexts works as a new technical knowledge-sharing solution for designing a socially accepted service innovation. Thus, business organizations should perform as a knowledge system while creating social innovations where high knowledge relatedness and low levels of experiential knowledge in business innovations are required (Lind *et al.*, 2018). Finally, a more structured, planned and mutual knowledge exchange process is required rather than an emergent process (Mirvis *et al.*, 2016) while creating or co-creating social innovations.

(3) Non-market factors (social context):

The surrounding social context for a business is the obvious environment for finding a relatable social need. However, the business needs to consider the strategic implications of scaling up an innovation to fulfil the social need. Yet it was noticeable how few studies failed to explain empirically how different types of social embeddedness could support the SI process. For example, Carberry *et al.* (2019) and Sigurdsson and Candi (2020) both measured SI quantitatively from different perspectives rather than the SI process.

Studies by Sigurdsson and Candi (2020), Altuna *et al.* (2015), Lashitew *et al.* (2020) and Purtik and Arenas (2019) identified various strategic considerations of social context and the influence each can have on social innovation. Firstly, a firm's commitment to social responsibility and its internal and external practices were identified as important factors in social innovation adoption (Altuna *et al.*, 2015; Sigurdsson and Candi, 2020). For example, Carberry *et al.* (2019) confirmed that "social movement activists" are very effective at fostering CSI. Such activists can create new regulative, normative, and cultural pressures on businesses, which leads them to consider social innovation. Secondly, social innovation requires an organizational change process inside and outside the company. Internally, Lashitew *et al.* (2020) explained how social embeddedness ignites change to a new mission-driven organizational identity. This new identity can sustain the company's societal engagement and provide a narrative to legitimize a social innovation for its stakeholders. Externally, firms can use the embeddedness of their social innovation to shape societal norms and behaviours of end users (Purtik and Arenas, 2019).

(4) Intellectual capital:

Many components of intellectual capital, such as social capital, human capital and relational capital, and psychological capital, have been mentioned in SI research (Aksoy *et al.*, 2019; Bhatt and Altinay, 2013; Martinez *et al.*, 2017; Pasricha and Rao, 2018). However, they lack empirical evidence for understanding how intellectual capital is supporting social innovation. For example, social capital and social capital orientation have been examined by Bhatt and Altinay (2013) and Pasricha and Rao (2018) but Saji and Ellingstad (2016) concluded that social capital as expected outcomes of partnership dynamics requires further research to support SI. Furthermore, the involvement of businesses in social innovation (from a human-centric approach) requires business actors and employees to be proactive with a moral commitment toward social missions. Research by Aksoy *et al.* (2019) and Martinez *et al.* (2017) examined a company's human capital and psychological capital by studying individuals engaged in social intrapreneurship and found they were able to develop high-quality solutions and deliver social change.

(5) Customer/User engagement:

The following studies explained how a variety of tools and techniques can be used to engage end users and consumers in supporting SI. Such as the technologically reflective (TR) individual scale (Schweitzer *et al.*, 2015), FLUX-3D tool (Bas and Guillo, 2015), Free-and-Open-Source-Software (FOSS) (Bhatt *et al.*, 2016) and multi-agent framework (Gallouj *et al.*, 2018). It should be noted that both Bhatt *et al.* (2016) and Gallouj *et al.* (2018) agreed, SIs are local, “bottom-up” solutions to social problems. Therefore, cultural and social intricacies must be considered in the implementation of the SI. Research showed how user inputs interact with producer competencies around service characteristics (as in a multi-agent framework) for the development and diffusion of social innovations. Finally, participant empowerment illustrates how customers are allowed to actively make selections self-manage and customize the introduced social innovation according to their preferences.

(6) Top management support and leadership:

Top management support has been mentioned implicitly to support SI in the service context as claimed by Altuna *et al.* (2015) and Hsu *et al.* (2019). According to their research, top management support promotes a strong commitment toward strategic corporate social responsibility. This, in turn, helps with engaging with stakeholders, both of which contribute towards the creation of SI opportunities. This is achieved through the allocation of sufficient resources and qualified employees to support activities for adopting service innovation in the social innovation context.

When it comes to direct leadership support for SI, Aksoy *et al.* (2019) and Pasricha and Rao (2018) identified leadership skills such as persuasive skills, motivation and empowerment skills, and leadership styles to be important for encouraging employees and supporting social innovation development. Finally, one leadership style which is ethical behaviour and leadership tested positive for their effect on employees’ social innovation tendency as stated by Pasricha and Rao (2018).

(7) Legitimacy building:

The idea of legitimacy building for seeking societal acceptance, gaining credibility among both internal and external actors and accessing resources has been discussed from different perspectives (Lind *et al.*, 2018; Onsongo, 2019; Verleye *et al.*, 2019). In a case study by Verleye *et al.* (2019), they present the establishment of innovation legitimacy while developing social innovation within inter-organizational networks where legitimacy building is accompanied by a set of actions or patterns. Each pattern is supported by driving factors for three types of legitimacy, which are inter-organizational, multilevel and external legitimacies. The case study targeted a broad audience of inter-organizational networks’ internal and external actors. A multinational corporation (MNC) perspective was adopted by Onsongo (2019) who studied legitimacy building for social innovation (the case of M-Pesa by Vodafone Group Plc and Safaricom Kenya Ltd). They revealed three institutional voids for discovering and creating entrepreneurial opportunities and gaining legitimacy for SI’s audiences. According to Onsongo (2019), legitimization strategies were directed to three types of external audiences: market audience, policy audience and contesting audience. Finally, following a similar MNC perspective, Lind *et al.* (2018) highlighted that MNCs should exploit their powerful position among dependent stakeholders and seek political and or moral legitimacy to gain social acceptance among external audiences. They added that MNC subsidiaries (as internal audience) can contribute to non-profit social endeavours and increase the likelihood of MNC involvement in SI.

(8) Networking:

Despite the expected benefits to a business from networking effects involving social innovation activities, few studies investigated why and how to involve and manage networks. Rather, studies encouraged corporations to interact with a variety of actors and to also consider non-traditional network actors such as governmental and charity sectors. Furthermore, [Ghazinoory et al. \(2020\)](#) argued that firms should engage with national-level networks such as the case of problem-oriented innovation systems to solve macro-level societal problems. Networking is believed to increase business involvement in social innovation because it facilitates understanding and offers the opportunity to gain intangible knowledge and managerial and non-managerial experience of social innovation practices ([Lind et al., 2018](#)).

The most significant findings come from two case studies ([Ghazinoory et al., 2020](#); [Ozeren et al., 2018](#)). Firstly, [Ozeren et al. \(2018\)](#) introduce the network orchestration concept to enhance knowledge and technology diffusion, utilization and dissemination among network actors. This concept offers an appropriate environment for innovation and maintains network stability in and between network actors. The second case study by [Ghazinoory et al. \(2020\)](#) argues that network actors should have specific roles or functions to exchange their expertise. For example, actors from industries in problem-oriented innovation systems have been mentioned to perform standardization and public awareness functions for the developed social solution in society.

(9) Resources and capabilities:

The management of resources and capabilities is one of the underestimated topics in corporate social innovation research. Strategic social innovation projects access societal knowledge and compensate for deficiencies in resources and capabilities. Our understanding of this theme in CSI research comes from two case studies research at the social enterprise level by [Cui et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Vezina et al. \(2019\)](#) and a quantitative research study by [Alonso-Martinez et al. \(2019\)](#). [Vezina et al. \(2019\)](#) used a dynamic capabilities perspective to examine capabilities management for SI. The study found that activities are adjusted based on SI characteristics (e.g. the multi-scalar nature of SI). From a resource perspective, [Cui et al. \(2017\)](#) highlighted three resource-focused actions:

- (1) coordinating;
- (2) linking or enriching (based on resource features); and
- (3) performance (based on the adopted social innovation strategy).

Finally, [Alonso-Martinez et al. \(2019\)](#) concluded that high investment in CSI affects profit negatively in the short-term, but positively in the longer term. This confirms the widely held view of strategic social innovation.

(10) Employees engagement:

Employees' engagement in social innovation has been discussed specifically concerning platforms ([Altuna et al., 2015](#); [Mirvis and Googins, 2018](#)). According to [Altuna et al. \(2015\)](#), employee engagement has been operationalized through the establishment of an independent business unit with a specific social mission and budget following the structural ambidexterity concept. [Mirvis and Googins \(2018\)](#) elaborated on this perspective by differentiating between four employee engagement platforms. These platforms were compared and assessed to guide companies in choosing whether to engage employees in:

- internal innovation labs and contests (Social Intrapreneurship Inside);
- connect with social entrepreneurs (partnering with Social Entrepreneurs);

- deployment in pro bono programs (Pro Bono Problem Solving); and
- enlist in enterprise-wide social innovation.

Selected employees for these platforms are socially conscious people with innovative inclinations and tend to be working with some freedom, which enables them to apply the concept of the corporate social intrapreneur. In these platforms, innovative ideas are developed to maximize the social impact in niche and less profitable markets, with strategic relevance to the platform's objective rather than with mainstream customers. Usually, these ideas are drawn from "outside-in" from stakeholders close to the situation and "bottom-up" from employees who can apply business know-how and resources to devise relevant solutions (Altuna *et al.*, 2015; Mirvis and Googins, 2018).

(11) Innovation management:

Different types of innovation have been used to support CSI. Such as service innovation (Galloj *et al.*, 2018; Hsu *et al.*, 2019), green innovation (Purtik and Arenas, 2019) and open innovation for stakeholder engagement (Altuna *et al.*, 2015). Significantly, sustainability-led innovations and doing well by doing good (DWDG) innovations have been researched directly as options for attaining CSI (Jayakumar, 2017; Varadarajan and Kaul, 2018). According to the conceptual paper by Varadarajan and Kaul (2018), DWDG innovations have been introduced as an equivalent term for CSI because this type of innovation targets the alleviation of social problems, which benefit society and enhance the firm's performance. Jayakumar (2017) found that sustainability-led innovations (environmental and societal sustainability) in conjunction with CSR initiatives are the most effective way to achieve CSI. In this case study the research showed that sustainability-led innovations are the results of firms responding to market and non-market (environmental and societal sustainability) triggers, using internal and external ideas based on CSR initiatives to address sustainability challenges and maximize business profit.

(12) Marketing and communication:

Marketing and communicating SI to stakeholders such as consumers and organizations is one of the indirect supporting themes for successful SI. The literature offers very little discussion of the benefits of informing those beyond the SI itself (Crisafulli *et al.*, 2020; Gopaldas, 2015). In terms of empirical evidence, Crisafulli *et al.* (2020) found that launching SIs in B2B settings through an alliance strategy with a non-profit or a for-profit organization achieves higher purchase intentions than an independent venture. For these alliances to retain their edge over independent ventures, it was necessary to communicate the societal benefits of SIs to other business organizations while launching SIs. Theoretically, Gopaldas (2015) argued that companies that adopt CSI can adopt positive marketing communications which are different from other pro-social marketing concepts such as green, and social marketing. The significant difference lies in the ability to employ "networked customers or activists". Such activists use new media to connect organizational stakeholders to foster a positive marketing culture by encouraging the fulfilment of human needs and applying pressure to adopt social innovations.

6. Avenues for future research identified through our thematic analysis

Given the aim of this research is to shed light on current conceptualizations of corporate social innovation and to advance theory and practice, our thematic analysis is concluded with questions to be addressed in future studies. Table 1 proposes detailed possible future

Table 1.
Research agenda

Area of gaps	Future research avenues	Observations
1. Theoretical related research	1.1 Defining social innovation and corporate social innovation	1.1.1 Ambiguity regarding social innovation in business research is clear, some articles did not define the concept, on the other hand, 28 definitions have been used from various disciplines
		1.1.2 Due to the novelty of the CSI concept, four definitions have been used out of five definitions stated through the systematic review Dionisio and de Vargas (2020)
		1.1.3 Thus, there is abundant room for developing detailed definitions for social innovation and CSI in business and management research
	1.2 The real motivation for business engagement in corporate social innovation	1.2.1 Identifying the why, when and how business organizations involve themselves in this non-profit social arena and turn it into a shared value CSI cases successfully
	1.3 Corporate social innovation research in the base of the pyramid (BOP) context	1.3.1 Considering less developed societies (BOP) in both developing and developed country contexts 1.3.2 Including another type of BOP which is also significant worldwide for people who can benefit from the capabilities that ICT industries can provide to combat a social issue 1.3.3 Considering the difference in institutional arrangements between both developing and developed country contexts which might not align with local norms and values or are difficult to implement due to resource constraints Onsongo (2019) 1.3.4 Replacing dominant innovation business models with new focused "BOP relevant" models of innovations Lind et al. (2018) and this is expected to entail tailoring new products and services that suit local social problems Onsongo (2019) 1.3.5 Considering new legitimacy-building strategies and adjusting the company's political strategies to appeal to the new POB audience while transferring ideas, skills and practices
2. Measurement-related research	2.1 Performance and Impact Measurement	It is challenging to design/develop matrices for performance and impact measurements due to the different nature of social innovation as described by OECD official innovation indicators (Oslo manual), thus, further research is required to: 2.1.1 Develop impact measurement that focuses on both the process and output of social innovation, including actors from multiple levels and reflects the characteristics and context of all level actors Aksoy et al. (2019)

(continued)

Area of gaps	Future research avenues	Observations
2.1.2		Develop performance measurement to assess organizations based on different facets of production while introducing social innovation
2.1.3		Validate calls by Aksoy <i>et al.</i> (2019) and Gallojy <i>et al.</i> (2018) which suggested the usage of pre-set multicriteria evaluation matrices from service research to be customized to the social innovation types (product, service, . . . etc), implementation levels, contexts, dynamics among stakeholders and allow adaptation, where space is left for the unexpected due to the dynamic context of social innovation process and most of social innovation emergence, is not following regular product development process and is designed for various social objectives in different contexts
3. Research design-related research	3.1 Quantitative research	3.1.1 Lack of clear pattern of relationships between the identified list of themes and CSI requires explanatory and descriptive empirical examination of causal relationships, predicting future results and generalizing the CSI concept more widely over a large number of populations
3.2 Conceptual papers		3.2.1 Lack of conceptual understanding of the phenomenon in big leaps (Jaakkola, 2020) requires expanding the theoretical boundaries of the research area
4. Organizational and structure related research	4.1 Partnership	Further research suggestions related to partnerships in the CSI area include:
4.1.1		Detailed analysis of partners' characteristics and the interaction between these characteristics such as their identity and learning process,
4.1.2		Exploring how partners with different intentions and expectations in the social innovation process shift the creation and capture of social value,
4.1.3		Exploring sources of pressure for social innovation in various types of partnerships such as sustainability or global ethics,
4.1.4		Investigating the potential promise, issues and mechanism behind the creation and governance of relationships networks inside and outside the partnership,
4.1.5		Studying the institutional environment and institutional support such as from universities and research institutions to explore externally the institutional processes and multiplicity of logics that could both constrain and support social innovations and the role of the partner's organizational culture in managing them internally,
4.1.6		Measuring returns from social innovation activities in the shape of social and business impacts using quantitative data and assessing the conditions for scaling up the innovation outcomes of partnerships into a systematic change

(continued)

Table 1.

Table 1.

Area of gaps	Future research avenues	Observations
4.2	Knowledge management	<p>Further research is required to</p> <p>4.2.1 Explain the significant role of non-private and indigenous knowledge in reducing the liability of social innovation newness in business</p> <p>4.2.2 Refine and theorize the process of tacit-explicit knowledge transfer across various types of social innovation is required in addition to the challenges, drivers and mechanisms of this process</p> <p>4.2.3 Examine through longitudinal research the potential link between organizational learning capability and social innovation. Also, the relationship could be tested to include contextual and environmental factors and it could be reversed to examine whether an increase in social innovation may affect organizational learning capability in business</p>
4.3	Non-market factors (social context)	<p>Expanding the support of social context for social innovation in business requires:</p> <p>4.3.1 Investigating social innovation adoption under activist pressures on different industries and services and identifying organizational level variables such as corporate reputation that may shape how firms respond to external pressure</p> <p>4.3.2 Examining how commitment to social responsibility towards different stakeholder groups (including internal and external stakeholders) would support social innovation in business</p> <p>4.3.3 Empirical evidence is required to test the developed propositions from the two single case studies about the role of social embeddedness and organizational change towards a more mission-driven identity in supporting social innovation</p>
4.4	Employee engagement and intellectual capital	<p>Future research is required on how firms can better source and develop socially innovative employees through</p> <p>4.4.1 Understanding how social innovations are changing the job spectrum in business organisations by identifying various distinct tasks that are involved in social innovation in firms such as resourcing, creative thinking, teaming and multi-part teaming and project management and differentiating those activities to interpreting, innovating and implementing change</p>

(continued)

Area of gaps	Future research avenues	Observations
4.4.2		Explaining to what extent embedding social innovation projects' employees in a separate structure which is known as structural ambidexterity is successful in various services and industries
4.4.3		Motivating traits and attitudes that predict employees' engagement in social innovation. More precisely, identifying critical success factors for employee engagement platforms mentioned by Mirvis and Googins (2018)
4.4.4		Examining how two types of social capital allow information flows within networks through lead to opportunity recognition in social innovation and how it could help in solving financial capital limitations related to the social innovation process
4.4.5		Understanding how other types of intellectual capital such as employees' psychological capital and relational capital can enhance social innovation emergence and success
4.5	Customer engagement	As most social innovations do not following new product development framework and their emergence depends on openness, interaction and informal non-programmed process, further research is recommended to explain customer contribution to co-creating social innovation in business
4.5.2		Since new technologies are allowing for a new role for customer engagement in the co-creation of social innovation such as in free and open-source applications (FOSS) based social innovation, further research is required to understand customer online participation and empowerment
4.5.3		On the individual level, expanding the involvement of technologically reflective individuals and empirically investigating the interaction of users' and producers' competencies through a multi-agent framework Gallouj et al. (2018) for the delivery of social innovation are required
4.6	Legitimacy building	Empirical work is required to
4.6.1		Investigate other sources for legitimacy building such as expanding how policy voids can be leveraged as opportunities for social innovations and legitimacy building in different industrial and service contexts
4.6.2		Understand how institutional shifts in transitional economics may enable or constrain business sector efforts to exploit those voids and gain legitimacy

(continued)

Table 1.

Table 1.

Area of gaps	Future research avenues	Observations
		4.6.3 From another perspective, investigating the impact of actors' characteristics engaged in establishing social innovation legitimacy
		4.6.4 Exploring how external and internal political processes for social acceptance and moral legitimacy support business sector involvement in social innovation activities
		Research is required to
	4.7 Innovation networks and systems	4.7.1 Highlight the role of cross-sector relationships and how multiple embeddedness in non-market environment networking (public and non-profit sectors) will support business sector involvement in social innovations
		4.7.2 Support innovation systems addressing international-level problems such as climate change through social value creation and explain how the business sector participates in these systems
		4.7.3 Empirically investigate how network orchestration within the framework of innovation networks supports social innovation in various cultural and geographical contexts or organization types or industries

Source: Authors' own work

research directions regardless of the type of social innovation or business organization type and in terms of four specific areas:

- (1) Theoretical related research: This group of questions refers to clarifying definitions, the motivation to engage in social innovation and the base of the pyramid contexts.
- (2) Measurement-related research: This group proposes avenues for inquiry around performance and impact measurement.
- (3) Research design-related research: These questions make suggestions for conceptual research and quantitative studies in the area.
- (4) Organizational and structure-related research: The final group of questions is the largest and focuses on themes supporting CSI identified in this research.

7. Conclusions

This is the first systematic literature review of the field of institutionalizing corporate social innovation and as such this provides a useful empirical contribution. Specifically, our research maps the literature on CSI and organizes its diverse research streams. We extensively analysed 40 papers which include a wide variety of business sectors and organizations' experiences of CSI. Our conceptual framework reveals 28 definitions of SI and CSI, thus confirming that this concept remains in its infancy. We make several additional contributions. Firstly, we extend the works of [Dionisio and de Vargas, \(2020\)](#) and [Herrera \(2015\)](#) by synthesizing a fragmented research field and providing an analysis on the theoretical desirability of CSI and its implementation in practice. For example, we identify a strategic capability, namely, dynamic capabilities, which is overlooked by Herrera's study. Secondly, our conceptual framework and 12 themes provide further understanding of CSI and offer practical help to corporations to institutionalize social innovation ([Figure 8](#)). Finally, our analysis identifies four separate areas for which we present future research directions with research questions and theory that relates to them ([Table 1](#)).

The descriptive analysis confirmed that the number of published studies is limited. Most of these are case studies or conceptual development, whereas research aimed at exploring broader data sets or samples is missing. Significantly, we noticed that the CSI research stream is noticeable by its absence in many of the more prestigious journals. Further, missing was interdisciplinary research to find solutions for social problems beyond the scope of a single discipline.

Two research objectives have guided this study. The first objective was to identify and integrate research findings that support CSI institutionalization. Our conceptual framework consolidates the results of previous studies and develops 12 themes to provide some managerial guidelines. The second objective was to identify a future research agenda and this is provided in the third section of our conceptual framework, with specific details in [Table 1](#).

Our findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, our findings call for necessary and significant actions. Significantly, CSI requires more conceptual development. Work is required from the academic community to improve the efficiency and efficacy of CSI. For example, the relationships explained in our conceptual framework have been partially tested in previous studies, but further research should explore and test more of these in different business contexts. From a practical perspective, this review reveals the growing spectre of firms embracing CSI. The main practical implication is that having a general statement on social responsibility is not enough for business organizations. This is

because social responsibility and shared value creation take many shapes. To extend CSI within different business entities, firms need to differentiate CSI from other types of social responsibilities. Using our identified themes firms can now devote the required resources and management support to CSI in a more targeted way (Figure 8). Together, these implications can guide those managers who are planning to adopt or improve the current strategic focus of social innovation in a profit sector context.

This research has some limitations represented in the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this review. Firstly, as the objective was to synthesize the findings into integrative themes, the research did not offer detailed propositions linking identified themes to social innovation but instead highlighted the possible connections. Secondly, this review did not include grey literature. Thirdly, we only used two databases, WOS and SCOPUS, it is possible that these databases may not have included some related research. Fourthly, the screening process employed may have omitted some relevant research due to the novelty of the concept. However, the intention behind the rigorous procedure of this systematic review is to base a categorization structure for themes that support CSI. Thus, even allowing for any omitted research, the SLR will nonetheless enrich these themes. This contribution should reduce the fragmentation of research on CSI and enhance both its research and practice.

Note

1. The identified keywords in conjunction with concepts were organized in a search string as the following: (“Corporat*”) AND (“Corporate Social Innovation”) OR (“Social Innovation”) OR (“Social value”) AND (“Stakeholder engagement”) OR (normat*) AND (operation*) OR (regulat*) AND (“ORGANIZATION* Cultur*”) OR (cognat*) AND (inst*) OR (neo-inst*).

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Table A1.
Corporate social
innovation
definitions

Corporate social innovation definitions	Sources
“Social issues that could serve as learning laboratories for firms to identify unmet societal needs and for developing solutions that could create new markets” Kanter (1999, p. 125)	Jayakumar (2017)
Corporate Social Innovation represents a strategic investment that companies manage more or less like other corporate investments, engaging a company in societally relevant R&D and applying the full range of corporate assets to the challenges at hand. CSI involves deeper collaboration across functions within a firm and with external parties to co-create something new that provides a sustainable solution to social ills and can be a source of competitive advantage Mirvis et al. (2016)	Mirvis et al. (2016)
Social innovation is a measurable, replicable initiative that uses a new concept or a new application of an existing concept to create shareholder and social value. Identifying drivers, enablers, and barriers to idea generation, experimentation, and implementation is critical to understanding CSI institutionalization Herrera (2015)	Sigurdsson and Candi, (2020)
we define CSI as the innovations developed by companies that contribute in new technological, environmental, and social ways to improving quality of life for society while also generating sustainable economic benefits Alonso-Martinez et al. (2019)	Alonso-Martinez et al. (2019)
Source: Authors' own work	

About the authors

Mennatallah Morsy is a PhD candidate at University of Portsmouth Business School. She won a scholarship to study for a PhD in the UK. Previously, she was an Assistant Lecturer in Business Administration department (English Section) at Benha University – Faculty of Commerce, Egypt. Mennatallah Morsy is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: mennatallah.morsy@myport.ac.uk and Mentallah.mosy@fcom.bu.edu.eg

Paul Trott is a Professor of Innovation Management at the University of Portsmouth and Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands. He received his PhD from Cranfield University. He has published over fifty articles on innovation management. He has published in a variety of top academic journals including: *Research Policy*, *R&D Management*, *IEEE*, *Public Management Review*, *Journal of Marketing Theory*, *Prometheus*, *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, *International Journal of Innovation Management*.

Daniel Sunghwan Cho is a Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK. He is also the Programme Lead in BSC Business Management (Entrepreneurship). His research focuses on both international entrepreneurship and university entrepreneurship, especially on the evolution of entrepreneurial ecosystems. He has published his work in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters

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