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The Role of Value Co-Creation in Social Entrepreneurship: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Objective: this paper proposes a theoretical framework based on a systematic literature review of applications of value co-creation in social entrepreneurship. **Methods:** following the PRISMA Protocol, 62 papers published between January 1, 2015, and January 5, 2026, were retrieved from Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals addressing both topics. Keyword co-occurrence through VOSViewer (v.1.6.20) mapped thematic clusters to minimize author bias, while providing pathways for abductive content analysis. **Results:** the findings suggest that value co-creation begins through collaborative sources and evolves to entrepreneurs' actions and possessions that promote value co-creation mechanisms, resulting in value-in-social-context and organizational viability, creating a feedback cycle. Social entrepreneurs, beneficiaries, and stakeholders can co-create benefits such as communitarian development, SDGs, regional sustainability, social well-being, resourceness, responsiveness, context reshaping, organizational growth, and social and economic performance. **Conclusions:** the framework guides further research, operationalizes co-creation for social missions in challenging institutional contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship conceptualizes entrepreneurs as agents of social transformation, providing outcomes that lead to community improvements and enhance social responsibility (Dees, 1998). Social entrepreneurs create social value propositions, helping to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Lorenzo-Afable et al., 2025). These impacts, central to the mission-driven nature of social organizations (Peredo & McLean, 2006), are co-created between entrepreneurs and their stakeholders (Zahra & Wright, 2016).

To understand these social and economic interactions, the metatheoretical lens of value co-creation (VCC) is paramount, as the concept sheds light on collaborative strategies for value creation (Pellicano et al., 2017). This construct explains how actors integrate operant and operand resources to generate benefit (Vargo & Lusch, 2017), under the influence of institutions, such as beliefs, norms, rules, and expectancies (Edvardsson et al., 2014). As co-creation processes expand beyond traditional marketing settings (Vargo et al., 2023), it offers a robust framework to analyze how social entrepreneurs, beneficiaries, and multi-stakeholders collaborate to generate efficiency, effectiveness, and legitimacy – elements of utmost importance for social value (Nicholls, 2010).

Recently, Saha et al. (2025) synthesized two decades of theoretical advancements in a VCC unified framework. They define the phenomenon as a communal, shared value process, affected by micro-, meso, macro-, and ecosystemic exchanges in the form of antecedents and outcomes. In the context of social entrepreneurship, this is manifested in social value, which increases public systemic viability (Hietschold et al., 2023), social and responsible innovation, and social structure change (Lima et al., 2025).

Academics state a significant gap in how social entrepreneurs create social value offerings and how these render social benefits (Lorenzo-Afable et al., 2025). Recognizing the multi-stakeholder dependence (Lima et al., 2025), the literature has been slowly addressing the application of VCC to social entrepreneurship. Azzari et al. (2024) analyzed this construct influence on social marketing, identifying dominant themes. Mathibe et al. (2023) made a recent systematic literature review approaching VCC and social entrepreneurship. However, they confined the review as a preparatory step to identify indicators for decision-making in an antecedents-and-outcomes model. While this provides an instrumental and empirical tool, it remains normative, deviating from the recommended positive theorization to understand co-creation (Vargo et al., 2023). Thus, there remains an opportunity to analyze the topics through a positive lens.

Our review addresses this by offering a theoretical contribution through a phenomenon-construct mapping framework, synthesizing antecedents, processes, procedures, resources, and results (Aguinis et al., 2023). Our main objective is to provide a framework that accounts for VCC in social entrepreneurship contexts in a narrative manner, from antecedents to outcomes, identifying theoretical interrelationships. The resulting framework stems from what Breslin and Gatrell (2023) label as miner review, as we offer conceptual contributions through systematic description and categorization of the topics. Our research question is: how is the literature conceptualizing the role of value co-creation in social entrepreneurship?

The corpus is subsequently analyzed with the support of thematic clusters. To preview the contributions of the literature, the papers cited in the next two paragraphs comprise the sample of the 62 studies analyzed in this review. Extant literature indicates that social entrepreneurs integrate and exchange resources through multiple collaborative sources, such as networks (Babu et al., 2020), partnerships (Visconti et al., 2019), and cause-based alliances (Ceesay et al., 2022). This sheds light on possessions, such as social intelligence (Juusola et al., 2024) and value co-creation capability (Weerakoon & McMurray, 2025), and actions, namely moral ownership (Castro-Martinez & Jackson, 2015), learning with the market (Sigala, 2019), and commercial strain management (Barraket & Loosemore, 2018), to cite a few. Empowerment (Altinay et al., 2016), market orientation (Czinkota et al., 2020), and engagement (Bonomi et al., 2021) are instances of promoted mechanisms that enable value co-creation.

Outcomes can be divided into value-in-social-context in the beneficiaries' view. Social well-being (You & Liang, 2025), communitarian development (Scorrano et al., 2025), embeddedness (Goyal & Sergi, 2015), and social inclusion (Barrios et al., 2023) are frequent outcomes. Social organizations (SOs) can benefit from entrepreneurial action-based value co-creation in the form of social innovation speed (Khan et al., 2025) – representing its resourceness (Kullak et al., 2021) and responsiveness (Abedin et al., 2021) to volatile contexts –, corporate social responsibility (Castro-Martinez & Jackson, 2015), and growth (Li et al., 2022), among other contributions. Research opportunities are presented at the end.

METHOD

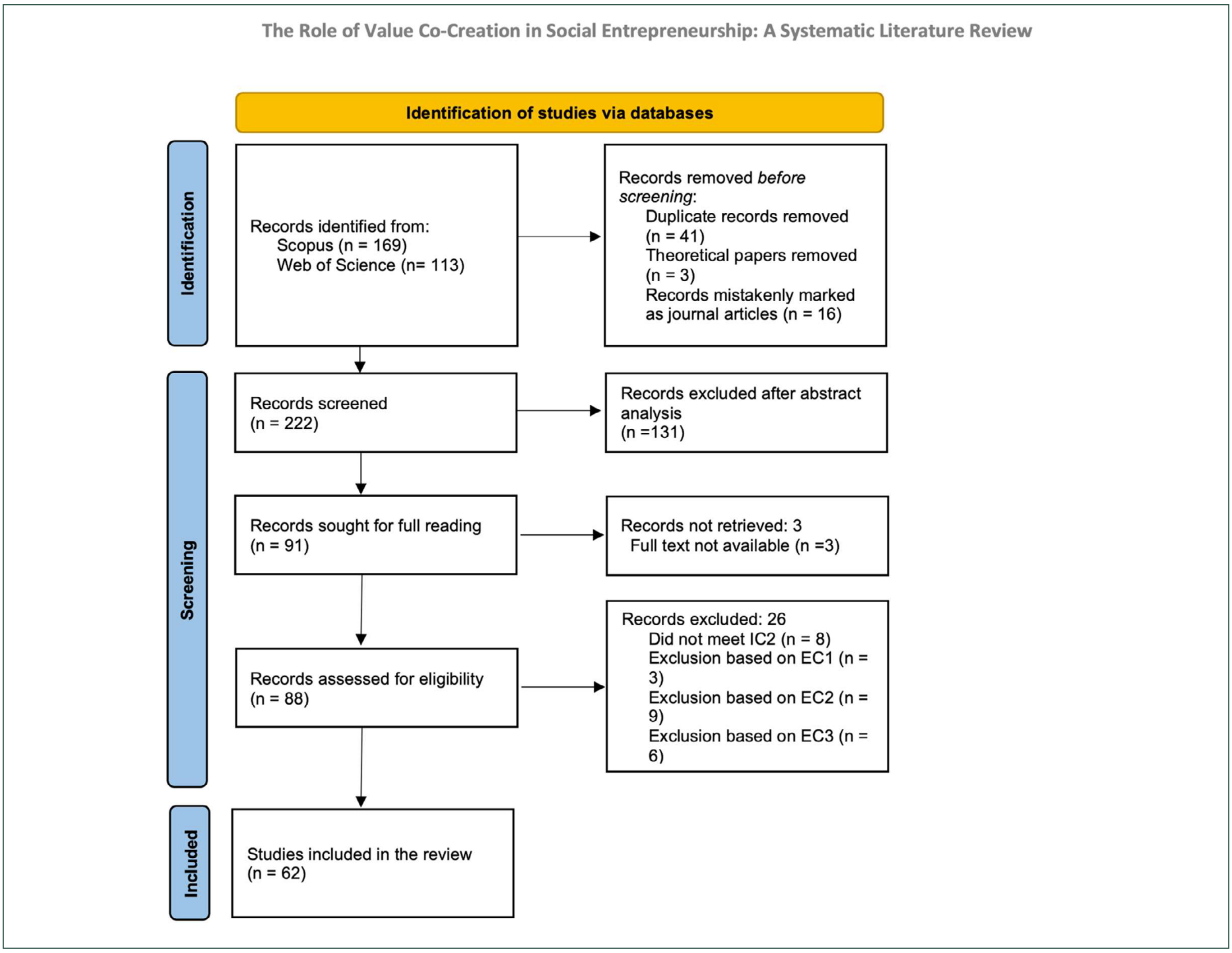
This study follows the PRISMA Statement protocol, which is suitable for a systematic review because it can structure reviews transparently and rigorously (Mishra & Mishra, 2023). Page et al. (2021) outline 27 steps to report systematic literature review papers, ranging from the introduction to the data synthesis. We followed most of the steps, but effect measures (12), sources of heterogeneity (13e), sensitivity analyses (item 13f), and certainty of evidence (item 15) were not executed, as they are associated with meta-analyses. Employing the PRISMA Statement protocol allowed us to comply with the need for methodological transparency and selective, systematic inclusivity of representative works (Aguinis et al., 2023).

This paper takes a bibliometric approach to the review process, with authors' co-occurrence mapping on VOSViewer (v.1.6.20) (van Eck & Waltman, 2010), Castro-Martinez and Jackson (2015) being the first located paper in the consulted databases that bridges VCC and SO. No generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were employed at any retrieval, screening, or analysis stage. The Boolean-based string selected VCC variants: 'value co-creation', 'value cocreation', 'cocreation of value', and 'co-creation of value', being commonly used in the literature (Saha et al., 2025). Social entrepreneurship papers were retrieved through the operator 'AND' by employing core index terms (Austin et al., 2012; Zahra & Wright, 2016): 'social entrepreneurship', 'social impact', 'social business', and 'social enterprise'. These terms were complemented (OR) by authors' keywords widely used in peer-reviewed business literature to classify SOs, their mission, benefits and/or entrepreneurial action: social innovation (Peredo & McLean, 2006), collective impact (Sigala, 2019), inclusion (Barrios et al., 2023), responsible innovation (Dees, 1998), social benefit orientation (Czinkota et al., 2020), and shared value (Cannas et al., 2019). The full database-specific strings are reported in Appendix A.

According to the inclusion criteria, only peer-reviewed papers were selected that were published in English to ensure broader coverage and addressed VCC as a theoretical construct applied to social entrepreneurship as an object of study and/or context. Peer-reviewed papers were prioritized due to the higher methodological rigor associated with review processes when compared to proceedings and book chapters. Scopus and Web of Science, the central databases recommended for management research (Sauer & Seuring, 2023), were searched. Data collection was finalized on January 5, 2026. Exclusion criteria eliminated misaligned works. Specifically, studies focusing solely on public organizations were excluded due to their limited relevance for analyzing VCC in entrepreneurial actions. Works concentrating on sustainability were excluded when disconnected from the social dimension. Unfinished papers were also excluded from the sample due to the outcome's unpredictability. While the corpus comprises literature systematically and exclusively retrieved, seminal works were integrated into the coding and discussion stages. Thus, works such as those of Austin et al. (2012), Edvardsson et al. (2014), and Vargo et al. (2023) aided the organization and conceptualization of the emergent, fragmented evidence on how VCC pertains to social entrepreneurship.

Selected works were clustered using VOSviewer software. This non-AI software builds clusters based on the co-occurrence of author keywords – terms that indicate related areas or phenomena (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Author keywords were chosen as they represent the original terms the authors used deliberately to categorize and frame their work (Linnenluecke et al., 2020), thereby reducing interpretative bias. Links between clusters are established based on their strength, indicating both the intensity and the relationships among topics.

Authors' keywords had their content analyzed in compliance with Seuring and Gold's (2012) process. Through an abductive approach, codes and categories emerged from terms used by the original authors rather than from solely researcher-imposed classifications, thus reducing interpretative bias. In cases where different authors used distinct terms to describe a construct, element, or variable we utilized a unifying terminology based on the codes. Each abstract was compared against the criteria during the initial screening. Figure 1 displays the flow of the selection process. The 62 works were consolidated into a .ris file using Zotero, being uploaded to VOSViewer through bibliographic data import. Duplicates were deleted manually (Aguinis et al., 2023). Three papers sought for full reading could not be retrieved due to full text unavailability, despite multiple access attempts.



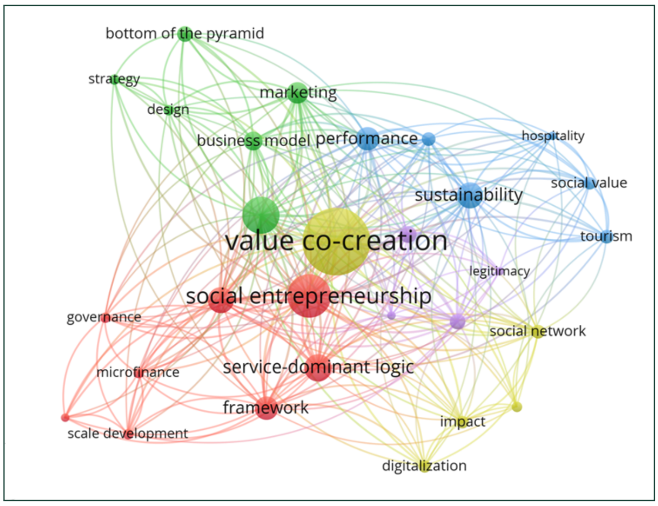
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

From the 382 identified keywords, 29 with a minimum of three co-occurrences were utilized, maximizing cluster generation. Duplicate items were corrected in the thesaurus. Appendix B displays the authors' keywords by frequency and link strength.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Co-occurrence results are shown in Figure 2. The nodes expand or contract based on the keyword co-occurrence. Their distance depends on the link strength. Every thematic cluster has its identity, although they might relate to nodes from other clusters. Thus, there are VCC phenomena in social entrepreneurship that share, to an extent, theoretical and empirical foundations.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Figure 2. Thematic clusters.

Miner reviews are linked to prior scholarly works (Breslin & Gatrell, 2023). Accordingly, the findings from each cluster are ordinally presented and discussed. Their author keywords are analyzed to comprehend their links with the cluster and the overall literature (van Eck & Waltman, 2010), based upon their content (Seuring & Gold, 2012). Table 1 displays the clusters keywords and number of papers.

Table 1. Clusters' thematic distribution.

ID	Keywords	Category name and papers quantity
C1	Context, entrepreneurship, framework, governance, microfinance, scale development, service-dominant logic, and social entrepreneurship	Contextual frameworks for social Entrepreneurship (11)
C2	Bottom-of-the-pyramid, business model, design, marketing, social innovation, and strategy	From bottom-of-the-pyramid markets to social innovation strategies (17)
C3	Hospitality, management, performance, social value, sustainability, and tourism	Tourism management role on social value and regional sustainability (14)
C4	Digitalization, impact, sharing economy, social network, and value co-creation	The roles of networks, sharing economy, and digital impact (12)
C5	Challenges, legitimacy, organizations, and stakeholder engagement	Engagement-based legitimacy strategies to overcome challenges (8)

Note. Elaborated by the authors.

Contextual frameworks for social entrepreneurship

Ge et al. (2019) show that VCC behaviors promote SO development by facilitating resource access and utilizing beneficiaries as temporary employees. They emphasize the role of environmental and contextual dynamics – which can moderate negatively organizational growth (Li et al., 2022). To sustain performance and development, innovation must involve the participation of beneficiaries and stakeholders (Yang et al., 2024). Prevailing economic and social conditions should be accounted for, as social entrepreneurs can face crisis, resource scarcity, uncertainty, and/or contexts characterized by institutional pressures.

In a similar vein, Barrios et al. (2023) investigate the financial exclusion context of women in Colombia. They show that social entrepreneurs and the beneficiaries co-create value through social innovation, catalyzing social transformations, social inclusion, social well-being, empowering and building the capabilities of individuals and communities, thus contributing to regional and communitarian development (Barrios et al., 2023). Scorrano et al. (2025) shift the analysis to a European context, demonstrating that operant resources integration and participatory governance link communitarian action to regional sustainability through communities of practice – contributing to information symmetry between parties. They also demonstrate that social entrepreneurial action can help to achieve SDGs.

Sari et al. (2022) diverge from Savall et al. (2024) regarding the mandatory nature of participatory governance in defining social business models. A possible explanation for this disagreement lies in the differing empirical settings. While Savall et al. (2024) analyze data from organizations across multiple countries, Sari et al. (2022) base their analysis on a specific community. Given the authors' samples, cooperative, rather than collaborative, relationships may predominate.

Zhang et al. (2023) shed light on how VCC can facilitate the transition of commercial organizations to SOs, due to legitimized, processual integration of stakeholders in the governance model. According to them, service-dominant logic axioms can guide 'pure' commercial organizations transition towards social purposes. Similarly, Lubberink et al. (2019) identify how social entrepreneurs scale impact through responsible innovation enabled by their activist antecedents.

Both Visconti et al. (2019) and Ostertag et al. (2021) develop social entrepreneurship frameworks. The former provides a framework for public-private partnerships in the healthcare context. Co-creation occurs in improving service while lowering costs, utilizing financing to align governance between the public and private actors, mitigating risks. The latter holds that informal governance is best suited for blended (social and economic) VCC through two approaches that differ between human and physical assets focus: anthropocentric versus structurally integrated. The partnerships involved in the governance can be upstream (resource integration before product/service launch), downstream (post-launch distribution and/or diffusion resources), or lateral (support, legitimacy building relationships resources). It is argued that the context explains the differences, similarly to Sari et al. (2022) and Savall et al. (2024).

Cluster 1 exhibits how contextual conditions shape co-creation in social entrepreneurship settings. This includes, without limitation, governance models, partnerships configurations, economic and financial uncertainty. Particularly, governance models and frameworks are emphasized as antecedents for outcomes such as commercial to social transition, public and private actors' resource integration, and value-in-social-context, through social well-being and inclusion.

From bottom-of-the-pyramid markets to social innovation strategies

Ahmed et al. (2020) address bottom-of-the-pyramid markets through the lens of a case study. They highlight the importance of continuous dialogue with stakeholders and the centralization of beneficiaries in the business model. This centralization requires managerial attention, as the commercial approach can lead to social mission isolation, according to Dumalanede et al. (2020). Both studies argue that business models should facilitate beneficiary participation. This is key for service ecosystem co-creation through social embeddedness, i.e., local capacity building (Goyal & Sergi, 2015). This enables bottom-of-the-pyramid contexts to accelerate social innovation through mutual problem solving and a shared vision of responsibility, according to Khan et al. (2025). They emphasize value-added intermediaries (local partners that can provide expert knowledge in market research, design, and distribution) as sources of collaborative resources. These are key actors for social innovation speed in rapidly changing contexts.

The centrality of stakeholders within BMs supports value co-creation as they are vision-holding, sustainability-enabling actors (Mihailova et al., 2022). You and Liang (2025) exemplify this in the social ecological model, highlighting the embeddedness of public and private actors that affect beneficiaries' well-being. Value co-created by beneficiaries and stakeholders in constellations promotes the triple bottom line of sustainability (Fiore et al., 2020).

Social innovation is positively linked to the VCC capability portfolio of social entrepreneurs, which includes governance management, learning, and market orientation (Weerakoon & McMurray, 2025). Evidence suggests that social entrepreneurs cannot act in isolation, as alliances, networks, and service ecosystems have become fundamental to resource pooling, facilitating the emergence of social innovation (Babu et al., 2020). For instance, Jayawardhana and Weerakoon (2024) indicate how social entrepreneurs' self-efficacy (self-confidence) and market orientation interact to co-create economic value during crisis. They emphasize the fundamental role of managerial artifacts, such as strategies and operational process design. Another managerial artifact is strategic planning, whose path-dependent effects on social organization performance are mediated by VCC (Mathibe et al., 2023).

Stakeholders' co-production and co-design strategies include service blueprinting and beneficiary mapping (Yang & Sung, 2016). Wu and Sung (2021), in this sense, propose a strategic communication process that drives participation and negotiation for social innovation in two axes. On the first axis, the service value offering is established, co-creating a system for continuous dialogue for ideas and opportunity discovery. On the second axis, the outcomes of those interactions are organized, tested, and created through cooperative design tools.

The role of communication between entrepreneurs and stakeholders is of particular importance to social marketing. Pimentel et al. (2023) demonstrate that communication of shared institutional logics enables VCC through integrated marketing communications. Power dynamics are institutionally manifested, coordinating interactions. The role of marketing in social entrepreneurship is 'curative' and serves as a path to achieve sustainability in social organizations through restituting traditional marketing practices (Czinkota et al., 2020). Moreover, social marketing achievements, capabilities, and antecedents linked to entrepreneurial action enhance social VCC capabilities (Cavazos-Arroyo, 2020).

Social marketing practices employed by social entrepreneurs engage relevant actors with the organization's mission, promoting awareness of its impact and thereby generating legitimacy and a positive reputation (Czinkota et al., 2020). Social entrepreneurs can use marketing to achieve their social goals. Their social innovation and VCC capabilities positively influence social and economic innovation at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Díaz-Perdomo et al., 2021). This is manifested in different SDGs.

The second cluster accounts for both the internal and the external environments. In the former, business model and strategic actions, such as curative marketing, are articulated to design and foster open social innovation. C2 pictures beneficiary participation and centralization, value intermediaries, and marketing capabilities as links to the external environment. This contributes to social entrepreneurs' acquisition and application of collaborative resources to promote social transformation in challenging contexts, such as bottom-of-the-pyramid markets.

Tourism management role on social value and regional sustainability

Dias et al. (2024) demonstrate that tourism communities' practices co-create social value through market orientation and collective proactiveness. To co-create social value, tourism is a central context that surpasses the physical barriers, according to Baratta et al. (2022). They indicate that management must utilize phygital resources to scale tourism reach, contributing to customer participation to co-create social value for the location. Furthermore, co-creation renders memorable tourism experiences that, as phenomenological, increase regional and cultural values' survivability.

Altinay et al. (2016) indicate the role of community engagement, collective decision-making, and empowerment in producing shared social value and capital for the region, directing it towards environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Tseng (2018) demonstrates that co-creation experiences, enacted through the behaviors of volunteers and customers, enhance tourism performance and contribute to local sustainability and tourist knowledge. Shrestha et al. (2024) demonstrate that grassroots indigenous associations support broader institutional social value networks with customer participation, empowering marginalized communities through collective social capital and shared, continuous learning. Their findings suggest that empowerment can enable or constrain VCC, requiring power coordination and knowledge exchange among associated members.

Beyond beneficiaries' and customers' participation, public and private actors engage in sustainable and heritage tourism, generating communitarian learning and cultural survival (Cannas, 2018). Cannas et al. (2019) advocate for collaboration among civil society, government, councils, educational centers, businesses, and tourists for resource integration through platforms. Context is a key concept, as they demonstrate that social entrepreneurs utilize social capital to alleviate social issues during crisis. On the civil side, communities are empowered, and social ties are strengthened. On the organizational side, social and economic sustainability fosters corporate social responsibility (CSR) and provides financial support for the survival of the actors.

Sigala (2016) leverages a social management framework based on organizational market learning by recognizing structures, practices, and representations in their segment. This improvement depends on resources integrated by geographically close partners who can co-create with the focal organization in a symbiotic manner, distributing social and economic benefits within ecosystems. Their joint performance results in sustainable development and market plasticity, i.e., the institutional reshaping of products, brands, services, and/or offerings (Sigala, 2019). For instance, a VCC outcome of indigenous women was the transformation of networks into regional, meso-value networks (Shrestha et al., 2024). Lin et al. (2019) show how interactions between providers and beneficiaries co-create an agreed service quality through service experience design.

Barraket and Loosemore (2018) criticize that overly commercial stakeholders can undermine social value goals. This is especially important for upstream supply chain analysis. Social entrepreneurs must manage this risk of commercial strain. Information sharing is vital in supply chain (Huang, 2020) for legitimacy building. This can provide solutions for the issue identified by Barraket and Loosemore (2018).

Tourism, being emphasized in C3, exhibits how multiple stakeholders' resources are integrated and exchanged through the hospitality industry, fostering co-creation of social, cultural, and economic value. The findings evidence how learning from the market act upon collaborative resources' decision making, engagement, empowerment, and participation to build regional sustainability, cultural values and communitarian development. The cluster holds the hospitality industry as a vital setting to comprehend these outcomes through micro-, meso-, and macro-lenses.

The role of networks, sharing economy, and digital impact

Cortese et al. (2024) evidenced that engagement with digital transformation can amplify stakeholder autonomy, engagement, and inclusion. However, in emerging markets, this process relies on resources integrated by multinational enterprises and non-governmental organizations. Digitalization is also shown to enable data-driven VCC in marginalized communities, according to Mursalzade (2024), who highlights the role of feedback loops and data utilization. Álvarez-González et al. (2023) manifest this by showing that social enterprises can optimize the 'collaboration journey' through omnichannel implementation, a managerial artefact. Digital technologies facilitate social entrepreneurs' offerings by enabling operant resource integration and social impact scaling, according to Iskandar et al. (2024). They also show that market competition stimulates cooperation, teamwork, and collective problem solving.

Abedin et al. (2021) argue that online communities potentially facilitate resource integration through what they call responsiveness. Their analysis is based on two perspectives: actor-centric and platform-centric. Community platforms offer agility, flexibility, and resource efficiency. Trust between actors constitutes a foundational mechanism in communities, resulting in social bonding and repatronage intention prediction based on citizenship behaviors (Yoon & Kim, 2024).

Social entrepreneurs might aid networks in potentially evolving to social cause-based alliances, which, through ethical and transparent dialogue, generate more social impact rather than acting in isolation (Ceesay et al., 2022). Brzustewicz et al. (2022) show that corporate volunteering (engaging employees in socially beneficial work) emerges through partnerships. This can boost antecedent traits (e.g., altruism, cultural openness, propensity for network formation) for VCC in social contexts (Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). Trust, satisfaction, and commitment are building blocks for co-creation in social entrepreneurship environments, stemming from privacy and security assessments, which, in turn, promote VCC intention (Chandna, 2022; Nadeem et al., 2021).

Cluster 4 accounts for how networked alliances, the sharing economy ecosystems, and digitalization expand the depth and reach of social entrepreneurs to co-create value. The analyses on virtual environments introduce opportunities (e.g., omnichannel, online communities, and resource integration) on digital applications for social entrepreneurship contexts. Possessions, such as trust – linked to social capital –, altruism, and propensity for networking comprise the nexus between the opportunities to be leveraged to enhance organizational viability and co-create social value.

Engagement-based legitimacy strategies to overcome challenges

Laurisz (2019) frames commercialization as a challenge for social entrepreneurs, as it can cause social goals to be redefined as economic goals, thereby creating a dual mission strain. Although growth is desirable, stakeholder engagement can be hindered, as he posits. Juusola et al. (2024) reveal a contextual challenge that social entrepreneurs might face: marginalized beneficiaries' lack of infrastructure, which can be mitigated through stakeholder engagement and participatory design. They state that social entrepreneurs must hold social intelligence, i.e., the empathetic capability to understand how service is connected to marginalized users' needs prioritization. This calls for strict management and a beneficiary-centered view, co-creating value for all stakeholders rather than shareholders alone.

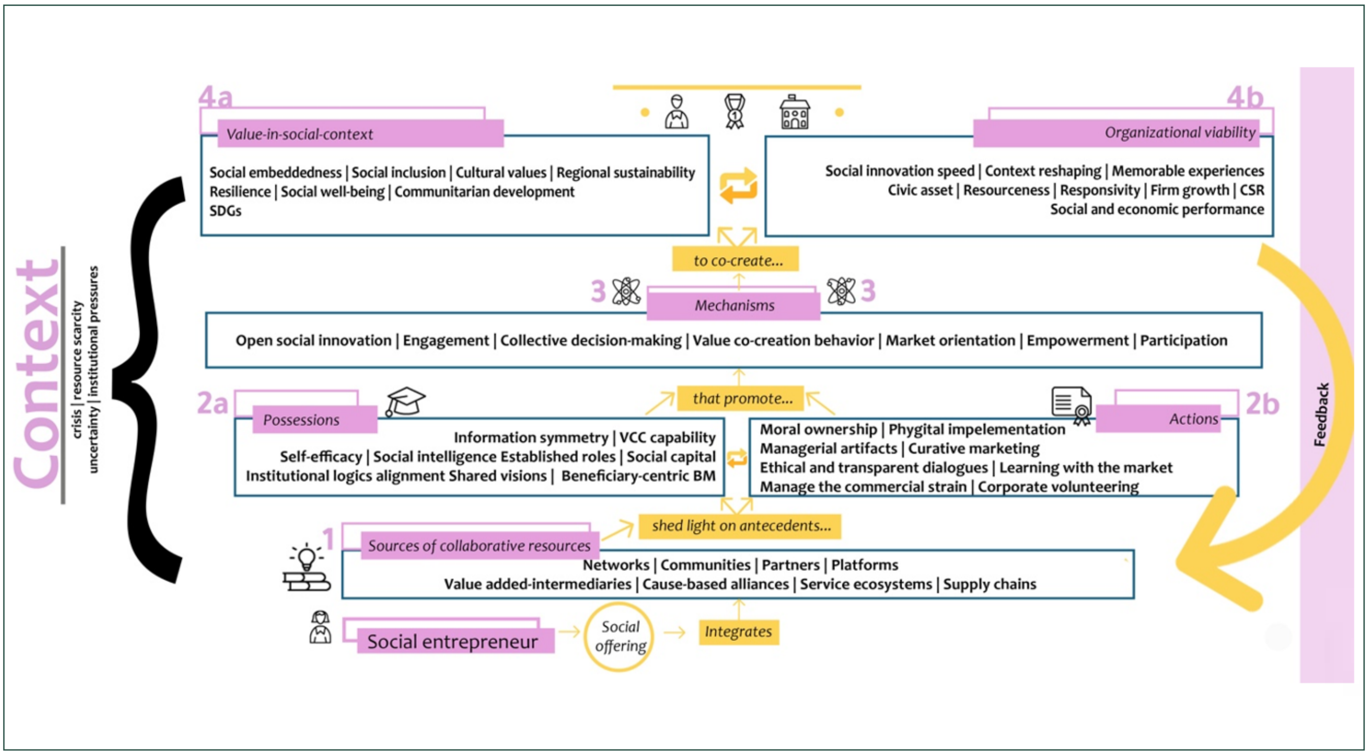
Precisely, Baker and Weerakoon (2024) reconceptualize SOs as stakeholder engagement platforms aimed at delivering social missions with beneficiary participation and legitimacy acquisition. Established roles foster co-creation, thereby reconfiguring social contexts through reflexivity. Their findings also state how legitimacy shapes market contexts by altering civil society perceptions. The exposure to vulnerable social situations can also increase stakeholder engagement intention with SOs in educational contexts. For instance, partnerships between universities and non-governmental organizations promotes resource integration, social capital exchange, and stakeholder engagement intention with SOs (Hamby & Brinberg, 2016), turning entrepreneurs and beneficiaries into long-lasting civic assets. Gharai et al. (2021) mention that agile entrepreneurial action is needed to address emergent social problems in resource-lacking situations. Stakeholder engagement is an aid to this.

In this line, Bonomi et al. (2021) portray stakeholder engagement as a mechanism for VCC, handling conflicting institutional logics, thus promoting legitimacy and social resilience. They name this phenomenon 'organizational bridging power', connecting institutions to social VCC. The sharing of institutional logics and the legitimized acceptance will enhance the social business's collaboration with stakeholders to access, maximize, and utilize their resources (resourceness), (Kullak et al., 2021). Trust is a building block for legitimacy, according to Castro-Martinez and Jackson (2015). They show that when a company's strategic social planning generates social projects with community participation, these initiatives can promote social change. This process enhances CSR. Their findings exhibit that moral ownership by the beneficiaries is a critical antecedent of legitimacy building.

Cluster 5 summarizes multistakeholder engagement as a mechanism through which entrepreneurs build legitimacy and respond to tensions and challenges. It involves entrepreneurial action to trigger SOs as legitimized, stakeholder platforms to overcoming scarcity and infrastructural gaps (e.g, bricolage scenarios). This strategy is designed upon a range of building blocks, including social capital elements, moral ownership, institutional logics alignment, and reflexivity.

DISCUSSION

Implications and contributions for organizations and beneficiaries are illustrated in Figure 3.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Figure 3. Social entrepreneurship VCC framework.

Sources of collaborative resources

Value co-creating social entrepreneurs seek to integrate resources from collaborative sources for strategic application. Service ecosystems enable collaborative approaches with commercial partners (Ostertag et al., 2021), like supply chain partners (Huang, 2020) to co-create symbiotic relationships (Pellicano et al., 2017). These stakeholders possess institutional logics that require alignment for co-creation (Edvardsson et al., 2014). Social networks might evolve into service ecosystems by creating reciprocal norms enhanced by shared visions (Khan et al., 2025). These collaborative sources are enabled by local proximity (Goyal & Sergi, 2015). Social entrepreneurs can focus their resources on creating and maintaining alliances with commercial and/or non-for-profit actors to increase proximity to beneficiaries and maximize resource density to co-create social value (Ceesay et al., 2022).

Collaborative sources address the well-known obstacle of low resource availability for social entrepreneurs (Zahra & Wright, 2016). For instance, value-added intermediaries, such as integrated expert consultants, enhance entrepreneurs' knowledge, reducing risks while supporting the fulfillment of social missions (Khan et al., 2025). The resource flows rely on the nature of upstream, downstream, or lateral relationships (Ostertag et al., 2021), i.e., these experts can be integrated into different streams to support pre-, during-, and/or post-offering launch.

Platforms for engagement extend the ability to obtain resources beyond the organization's physical limitations, representing a low-cost alternative for social innovation (Baker & Weerakoon, 2024). Communities of customers and beneficiaries nurture organic relationships among members, enabling access to perceptions that can either inhibit or promote VCC (Abedin et al., 2021). The presence of SOs in these environments is essential for resource integration. This way, entrepreneurs can identify market opportunities and gaps (Sigala, 2019).

Possessions and actions

The literature leverages elements social entrepreneurs should possess (2a) for VCC. Legitimacy-building is essential for social entrepreneurship, as it coordinates resource integration through institutional logics alignment (Bonomi et al., 2021). Externally, entrepreneurs must support beneficiaries and stakeholders in co-creating a moral ownership of the social offering, as it coordinates VCC mechanisms (Castro-Martinez & Jackson, 2015). This allows them to grasp contextual changes and to adapt dynamically (Ge et al., 2019).

It is recommended that BMs be beneficiary-centric (Mihailova et al., 2022; You & Liang, 2025). In supply chains, actors can appropriate symmetrical information to facilitate coordination (Huang, 2020) among social entrepreneurs (Shrestha et al., 2024) and legitimacy building. Thereby, social entrepreneurs must have effective communication (Pimentel et al., 2023) that meets stakeholders' institutional expectancies. As Khan et al. (2025) evidence, VCC is anticipated by shared visions, highlighting a goal to be achieved through ethical and continuous dialogue between stakeholders.

Authors such as Jayawardhana and Weerakoon (2024) demonstrate that social entrepreneurs must have self-confidence (contributing to their perceived efficacy) in their capabilities to promote social change. This motivating factor (Lubberink et al., 2019) enables social VCC (Díaz-Perdomo et al., 2021) to be linked to activistic antecedents (Shumate et al., 2014). Therein, through social intelligence (Juusola et al., 2024) and social marketing capabilities, for instance, entrepreneurs can achieve superior social and economic performance in achieving their goals (Cavazos-Arroyo, 2020). This establishes stakeholders' normative role (Baker & Weerakoon, 2024; Weerakoon & McMurray, 2025) and allows entrepreneurs to capitalize on their social capital, thus building trust and legitimizing resource exchanges (Nadeem et al., 2021). In this sense, reflexivity is a must, as it represents a key institutional work activity, challenging current contexts for social change (Baker & Weerakoon, 2024).

SOs can utilize participation in governance (Sari et al., 2022; Scorrano et al., 2025) and design (Juusola et al., 2024; Wu & Sung, 2021) to integrate beneficiaries in decision-making. This way, the collaborative offerings are more aligned with beneficiaries' needs and expectancies (Pellicano et al., 2017). These elements both influence and are influenced by (2b) necessary actions, such as establishing transparent and ethical dialogues with stakeholders (Nadeem et al., 2021). Trust is a foundational relationship marketing building block and thus is deemed necessary for value creation through relationship quality (Grönroos, 1990). Considering the goods-dominant logic roots in mainstream marketing, many predatory practices governed past exchanges (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Thus, it is no surprise that authors such as Czinkota et al. (2020) call for a curative marketing approach when commercializing social offerings.

Managerial artifacts can be integrated into social entrepreneurs' journeys. For instance, omnichannel marketing functions as a mechanism to turn every beneficiary touchpoint into a resource integration platform (Álvarez-González et al., 2023). This activates social impact scaling (Iskandar et al., 2024). Baratta et al. (2022) follow this line, exhibiting that seamless phygital objects allow further stakeholder reach, being an opportunity for corporate volunteering, enabling employee participation in social challenges (Brzustewicz et al., 2022). Thus, social entrepreneurs must manage physical and digital assets in every touchpoint to enhance and scale social VCC experiences. Role clarity is a must in this sense. We recommend that social entrepreneurs hold a broader VCC vision, clarifying how each stakeholder can contribute (Vargo et al., 2023) to the social offering.

Mursalzade (2024) proposes digitalization as a crucial action to acquire data, thereby contributing to organizational learning. Sigala (2016) shows that each market will dictate the necessity of beneficiaries and stakeholders through symbolic and institutionalized representations from which social organizations must learn. Sigala (2019) manifests this as a case of market plasticity. She states that social and value reshaping emerges as a property of markets. This is linked to emergence (Vargo et al., 2023), positioning social entrepreneurs within a feedback loop of value offering launch, probing, learning, and adapting (Álvarez-González et al., 2023). Beneficiary centralization capitalizes on this (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Thus, learning with the market is an essential step for social VCC.

Alongside operant resource integration and based on You and Liang (2025), we recommend that social entrepreneurs manage the commercial strain. This symbolizes the constant tension between the commercial and non-for-profit models (Czinkota et al., 2020), which is historically acknowledged in social entrepreneurship literature (Lima et al., 2025) and labeled as a duality (Austin et al., 2012). Managing this strain is a key action.

Mechanisms

VCC mechanisms emerge from the ascension of collaborative resources to decisions and possessions. To co-create, social entrepreneurs can signal the organization's open social innovation processes. Strategic communication and joint innovation can begin through negotiations with stakeholders and be sustained through constant dialogue and co-production (Wu & Sung, 2021). Social changes (Babu et al., 2020) and social innovation effectiveness (Pellicano et al., 2017) can thus be achieved or enhanced through a constant flow of collaborative resources, as collective problem solving and social entrepreneurial effectiveness are enhanced through VCC (Díaz-Perdomo et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2025).

The intention to co-create social value is seen as a form of VCC behavior. Evidence from Yoon and Kim (2024) shows how citizenship behavior is linked to repatronage intention. Co-occurring social offering acquisition enhances SO survivability, thus promoting its impact through collaborative behaviors, which could be fostered by market-oriented entrepreneurs (Weerakoon & McMurray, 2025).

Stakeholder engagement positively enables better service delivery (Juusola et al., 2024) as it facilitates social problem solving (Gharai et al., 2021) even with resource scarcity, as a form of bricolage (Yang et al., 2024). This leads authors to conceptualize SOs as stakeholder engagement platforms (Baker & Weerakoon, 2024) for a legitimacy-building mechanism (Bonomi et al., 2021), requesting special attention from social entrepreneurs under challenging contexts. Stakeholders can be empowered through collective decision-making (Altinay et al., 2016), which signals openness to innovate (Pellicano et al., 2017). These mechanisms drive social VCC from the micro- (Barrios et al., 2023), meso- (Shrestha et al., 2024), and macro-level (Cannas et al., 2019).

The symbiotic connection of value-in-social-context and organizational viability

Through VCC mechanisms, value-in-social-context and organizational viability represent how institutional arrangements, social norms, and shared practices build value for beneficiaries and for organizations (4b), respectively (Edvardsson et al., 2014). They represent an interdependent feedback relationship that is systemic, i.e., social value and organizational viability stem from a healthy and functioning collaboration based on VCC mechanisms. Viability allows the organization, through entrepreneurial action, to co-create offers capable of social VCC, while this value legitimizes the organization, contributing to its growth and sustainability. This symbiotic connection demonstrates how VCC mechanisms promote social change, one of the core goals of social entrepreneurship (Austin et al., 2012). Thereby, this deserves special attention from social entrepreneurs, as it allows for a feedback loop to the emergence or renewal of new collaborative sources.

Social embeddedness is shown to boost and enhance communitarian development; such outcome can institutionalize networks and service ecosystems (Goyal & Sergi, 2015), making a special contribution during periods of crisis (Jayawardhana & Weerakoon, 2024) through resilience building (Bonomi et al., 2021). Barrios et al. (2023) illustrate this by showing that social entrepreneurs co-create value offerings in tandem with excluded beneficiaries to reverse this condition. Social inclusion is a key element for their considerations.

Another way that social entrepreneurs' actions and offerings contribute to beneficiaries is through SDGs fulfillment (Díaz-Perdomo et al., 2021). This zoomed-out perspective allows actors to grasp how value is co-created from the micro to the macro level (Saha et al., 2025). By recognizing which SDGs are achieved, social entrepreneurs acquire a more tangible measure of social impact based on regional and communitarian development (Scorrano et al., 2025). Opportunities for other SDGs can emerge from this broad visualization.

A consideration in collaborative relationships is how the helices (academia, government, industry, and public) contract or enable institutional logics for VCC. Cannas (2018) shows how public and private actors' coordination is needed to co-create social, economic, and cultural value. This multi-stakeholder approach acquires special importance to promote social well-being (Barrios et al., 2023), while promoting the viability and survivability of a community and/or its culture (Dias et al., 2024; Sevisari & Reichenberger, 2020). Cultural tourism is shaped as an important nexus to this end (Baratta et al., 2022), revealing how each stakeholder helix can collaborate to co-create value.

The elements mentioned above can lead to expected outcomes for SOs, such as market growth (Ge et al., 2019) and performance improvement, that can affect organizational survival (Cavazos-Arroyo, 2020;Li et al., 2022) – all co-created values. Through the co-creative actions of social entrepreneurs, SOs can achieve triple bottom line sustainability (Fiore et al., 2020) and provide services and social innovations capable of transforming communities and beneficiaries that are underserved by markets and governments. These helices, however, must be considered by social entrepreneurs to maximize organizational performance and establish new collaborative sources.

Context reshaping occurs through social entrepreneurs' actions, such as learning with the market, which allows social and economic change through resource integration facilitation (Sigala, 2019). This highlights that social entrepreneurs must adapt to their markets, as economic, social, and dynamic ever-changing structures are maintained or disrupted through institutional arrangements, such as emergent laws, norms, and expectancies (Edvardsson et al., 2014). Reshaping the contexts can interpose a 'resourceless' scenario to a 'resourceness' situation, maximizing resource utility as an outcome of co-created impact (Kullak et al., 2021).

A myriad of stakeholders play a vital role in the resourceness process. Commercial organizations that co-create with social entrepreneurs may benefit from reputational effects, such as CSR (Babu et al., 2020; Castro-Martinez & Jackson, 2015) and the creation of memorable and unique experiences (Baratta et al., 2022). While this supports the opportunity for a transition from commercial to social organizational BM

(Zhang et al., 2023), we endorse that social entrepreneurs' foci should be on how to sustainably implement beneficiary participation, resourcing them as rare, civic assets (Hamby & Brinberg, 2016). We concur with Pellicano et al. (2017) view on VCC: stakeholder participation is needed to grasp a more complete understanding of beneficiary needs and possible solutions. Thus, entrepreneurial action can achieve higher and more efficient social innovation speed (Khan et al., 2025) as a form of responsiveness (Abedin et al., 2021) to dynamic and challenging social and economic contexts (Ge et al., 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A miner literature review is inherently dependent on further application and refinements for theoretical development (Breslin & Gatrell, 2023). To promote the evolution of VCC in social entrepreneurship, we propose a research agenda comprising: clusters, identified gaps, and research questions. Social entrepreneurship complexity causes some gaps to be naturally impacted by other clusters. Table 2 organizes this relation, employing the framework's dimensions, terms, and topics as lenses to orient further research.

Table 2. Directions for further research.

Cluster	Gaps	Research questions
C1	Conflicting evidence on participatory governance (Sari et al., 2022; Savall et al., 2024)	Under which conditions does participatory governance in SOs become mandatory for VCC?
	Knowledge-sharing dynamics and information symmetry as regional sustainability drivers studied solely in a European agri-food sector (Scorrano et al., 2025)	Do knowledge sharing and information symmetry drive regional sustainability and communitarian development beyond a European setting (e.g., in emerging markets)?
	Social innovation as a VCC mechanism to reduce financial exclusion remains untested quantitatively outside of a single Latin American case; technology as a mediator to this end is also untested (Barrios et al., 2023)	Can disruptive technologies mediation enable VCC to sustain social inclusion in financially excluded communities? Are the effects quantitatively consistent across contexts?
C2	Governance, learning, and market orientation are confirmed in a single country; digital capabilities analysis is absent from the capability portfolio (Weerakoon & McMurray, 2025)	Do digital capabilities, such as digital governance, communication, and platform-based engagement affect VCC? Do their effects vary across countries and institutional contexts?
	Social innovation speed predicted by VCC and moderated by shared vision tested solely in bottom-of-the-pyramid intermediaries' relationships, not accounting for multilevel relationships (Khan et al., 2025)	Do broader, meso-level stakeholder configurations predict social innovation speed in other SOs contexts? Are shared visions still predominantly moderating this relationship? If so, how are visions shared among multiple stakeholders?
	Integrated marketing communications effectiveness and power dynamics are qualitatively analyzed in a commercial SO context, without coverage for not-for-profit and hybrid SOs (Pimentel et al., 2023)	Do power dynamics affect marketing communication effectiveness in not-for-profit and hybrid SOs? Are the tensions similar to commercial contexts? Quantitatively, are there indirect effects in this relationship?
C3	The relationship between collective proactiveness and market orientation as antecedents for social, cultural, and economic VCC is untested ex post COVID-19 impacts on tourism (Dias et al., 2024)	Do collective proactiveness and market orientation longitudinally sustain social well-being and communitarian development through VCC? Is the effect akin to non-hospitality markets?
	Evidence of power and status tensions among indigenous marginalized entrepreneur communities constrained to a single rural tourism context (Shrestha et al., 2024)	Do power tensions from multiple stakeholders constrain VCC social outcomes for indigenous communities in broader tourism contexts? Are these effects longitudinally consistent across diverse institutional and cultural empirical settings?
	Memorable tourism experiences and phygital contribution to VCC are analyzed through the provider perspective, in a high-density tourism context (Baratta et al., 2022)	How do tourists and local residents co-create memorable experiences contributing to local culture survivability? Is this effect affected by tourism density? What are the short- and long-term benefits of this co-creation for local actors, through a quadruple helix lens?
C4	Enabling conditions for multiple networked stakeholders to engage in digital transformation exclusively from the multinational enterprise and non-governmental organization's perspective (Cortese et al., 2024)	In emerging contexts, under what conditions can grassroots social entrepreneurs autonomously develop digital transformation while reducing dependency on external actors?
	Social VCC is studied in a single organizational context; digitalization-enabled reach and local-based stakeholder engagement intensity reduction untested across diverse markets (Mursalzade, 2024)	Is there a tension caused by digitalization-based market reach and relational intensity reduction in stakeholder communities from diverse markets? If so, how can social entrepreneurs manage this tension?
	Antecedents and mediators of VCC behavior in social retail sector accounts solely for citizenship and not participation co-creation behaviors (Yoon & Kim, 2024)	Do social network traits and corporate image positively affect all dimensions of beneficiaries' participation VCC behavior? Does trust mediate this relationship?
C5	There is a lack of understanding on how marginalized beneficiaries develop co-creation capacity and self-efficacy to sustain participatory design (Juusola et al., 2024)	How can social entrepreneurs increase beneficiary self-efficacy? Does this lead to sustained participatory design?
	The use of online, offline, and phygital engagement platform strategies in SOs remains empirically unexplored (Baker & Weerakoon, 2024)	How can social entrepreneurs facilitate and optimize multiplatform engagement? How should these strategies be tailored to the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement of diverse actors?
	Social resilience as an effect of bridging power is tested in a single case, requiring cross-cultural context validation (Bonomi et al., 2021)	Does VCC-enabled, organizational bridging power mediate social resilience and organizational viability in different institutional contexts? Is this effect consistent across commercial and not-for-profit SOs?

Note. Elaborated by the authors.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the role of VCC in social entrepreneurship through the review of 62 papers. Our findings advance the theory through three contributions. Firstly, we unify scattered evidence into a procedural framework, flowing from collaborative sources, actions and possessions, and mechanisms to value-in-social-context, and organizational viability, identifying feedback loops for co-creation. Co-creation shapes how SOs access resources to design, enhance, and legitimize their social offerings through collaborative, entrepreneurial action. Next, this is presented and evidenced in a positive view of VCC (Vargo et al., 2023) that unfolds how social benefits are co-created through collaborative social value offerings – a gap evidenced by Lorenzo-Afable et al. (2025). Finally, our cluster-level evidence bridges empirical SOs practices and broader theoretical approaches under contextual considerations.

We suggest a departure-point research agenda to deepen the theorization process of VCC through social entrepreneurial action. Researchers can utilize Table 2 contents to either deepen each of the identified clusters, as they have a relatively limited number of works, or to compare the framework dimensions in a cross-clusters manner.

Inconsistencies in terms used by authors and/or journals may not adequately convey the content or may turn the placing into a subjective process, being an expected methodological limitation. The omission of conference papers, book chapters, and grey literature may have overlooked relevant contributions. Consequently, this paper's results do not eliminate the need for meticulous analyses of the presented works or for searches in other sources.

We agree with Mahdiraji et al. (2025) recommendation of international comparative analyses. The topic can benefit from contextual comparisons on how social entrepreneurs shape and are shaped by different institutions. This presents an opportunity to analyze entrepreneurial action in emerging economies, as most of the research is conducted in developed countries (Lorenzo-Afable et al., 2025). Thus, we encourage the framework application to welcome new additions, especially regarding the feedback relationship between the ultimate 'level' and new collaborative sources.

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2nd author: conceptualization (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (equal), supervision (equal), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing - review & editing (equal).

3rd author: conceptualization (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), investigation (equal), project administration (equal), resources (equal), supervision (lead), visualization (equal), writing - original draft (supporting), writing - review & editing (supporting).

4th author: conceptualization (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (equal), resources (equal), supervision (lead), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing - original draft (supporting), writing - review & editing (supporting).

APPENDIX A

Scopus – 1 (a)

```
( ( ( ( TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "Value co-creation" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (
"Value cocreation" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "co-creation of value" ) OR
TITLE-ABS-KEY ( " cocreation of value" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "create
social value " ) ) ) AND ( ( TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "Social entrepreneurship"
) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "Social impact" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "Social
business" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "social enterprise" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY
( "social innovation" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "social capital" ) OR
TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "Responsible innovation" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (
"inclusive business models" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "sustainable business
models" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "collective impact" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (
"For-benefit company" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "shared value" ) ) ) ) OR (
TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "Social value co-creation" ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "co-
creation of social value" ) ) AND PUBYEAR > 2003 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 )
AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "BUSI" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( DOCTYPE , "ar"
) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "English" ) )
```

Web of Science/WoS – 1 (b)

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( ( ( ( TS=("Value co-creation") OR TI=("Value cocreation") OR
TI=("co-creation of value") OR TI=("create social value") OR
TI=("cocreation of value") ) ) AND ( ( TI=("Social entrepreneurship")
OR TI=("Social impact") OR TI=("Social business") OR TI=("social
enterprise") OR TI=("social innovation") OR TI=("social capital") OR
TI=("Responsible innovation") OR TI=("inclusive business models") OR
TI=("sustainable business models") OR TI=("collective impact") OR
TI=("For-benefit company") OR TI=("shared value") ) ) ) OR (
TI=("Social value co-creation") OR TI=("co-creation of social value")
) AND ( WC=("BUSI") ) AND ( DT=("ar") ) )
```

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

APPENDIX B

Keyword	Occurrences	Strength
value co-creation	53	199
social entrepreneurship	29	146
Social innovation	23	112
entrepreneurship	14	94
Service-dominant logic	15	81
framework	12	73
Marketing	11	69
Sustainability	14	69
Performance	12	66
organizations	7	48
Business model	9	43
management	6	40
Social network	6	40
Stakeholder engagement	8	36
Microfinance	4	28
Bottom of the pyramid	7	27
impact	5	27
Scale development	4	27
Tourism	6	27
governance	4	26
Digitalization	5	25
design	4	24
Social value	5	24
hospitality	3	23
strategy	4	22
challenges	3	21
Context	3	21
Sharing economy	4	15
legitimacy	3	13

Source: Elaborated by the authors.