

# A critical appraisal of the social entrepreneurship paradigm in an international setting: a proposed conceptual framework

Sayem Hossain<sup>1</sup> · M. Abu Saleh<sup>2</sup> · Judy Drennan<sup>3</sup>

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**Abstract** The concept of entrepreneurship embedded in the backdrop of business has been increasingly applied to the context of addressing social problems and sustainability challenges. Known as ‘social entrepreneurship’ the topic has garnered the heightened attention of researchers in recent years. As a nascent stream of research social entrepreneurship is still in the early stages of development. Recent evidence suggests a growing body of scholarly research in this field; however, its conceptualisation remains obscure as it is predominantly dictated by definitional arguments. Consequently, the literature is still anecdotal in trying to unveil different dimensions of social entrepreneurship and its potential benefits that might help to battle sustainability challenges. To bridge the existing gap in social entrepreneurship research this study adopts an inductive content analysis approach. Accordingly, a sizeable number of prior studies were extracted from five major databases from 1991 to date. Findings from the prior studies were synthesised in a systematic manner to draw valid conclusions. Based on the findings drawn from prior literature the study also proposes a conceptual framework and prompts further empirical research. The implications of the study are two-fold: academic and practical. The academic implication is primarily to contribute to the relatively uncultivated area of social entrepreneurship literature. The practical

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✉ M. Abu Saleh  
abu.saleh@canberra.edu.au

Sayem Hossain  
sayem.hossain@canberra.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> University of New South Wales (ADFA), Northcott Drive, Campbell 2612, Australia

<sup>2</sup> School of Management, Faculty of Business, Government & Law, University of Canberra, Bruce 2601, Australia

<sup>3</sup> School of Advertising Marketing and Public Relations, QUT Business School, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

implications of the study are potentially instrumental for social entrepreneurs and policy-makers who are involved in social wealth creation. Moreover, the practical implication of the study is deemed to be very significant given the rising impetus of sustainability issues, where it is believed that entrepreneurs can play a vital role in this regard.

**Keywords** Social entrepreneurship · Sustainability · Content analysis

## Introduction

Research in the social entrepreneurship domain has experienced an upsurge during the past two decades. Much of this development has been catalysed by the growing attention from business, government, and the educational and research fields to find more social ways of behaving as an entity of society. In particular, the impacts of the global financial crisis, sustained poverty and environmental changes have forced organisations to find ways to do business with an embedded social purpose rather than pure profit-making objectives (Doherty et al. 2014; Mair and Marti 2006). In spite of this growing attention, the research domain of social entrepreneurship has remained in its infancy (Hall et al. 2010; Hoogendoorn et al. 2010; Montgomery et al. 2012; Perry et al. 1999; Toledano 2011), experiencing what Dacin et al. (2010: 1203) explain as a ‘muted reception’ by researchers. While evidence suggests that much of the social entrepreneurial initiatives have remained practice-oriented, in recent years there has been an upsurge in academic research resulting in a handful of published articles contributing to the relatively unexplored area of social entrepreneurship (Boyd and Vozikis 1994; Short et al. 2009; Weerawardena and Mort 2006). Paradoxically, conceptualisations of social entrepreneurship have remained very broad and ill-defined (Dacin et al. 2010; Hoogendoorn et al. 2010; Rocco et al. 2003), with researchers condemning this as ‘definitional debate’ (Huybrechts and Nicholls 2012: 2). In addition, some researchers have assigned social entrepreneurship as a separate branch of commercial entrepreneurship, which has spurred further debate among researchers (Kumar and Uzku 2010; Luke and Chu 2013). Not surprisingly, the field has achieved minimal progress in theoretical advancement even after two decades of research (Luke and Chu 2013; Pierre et al. 2014; Short et al. 2009; Zahra et al. 2014).

To address the aforementioned gap, and in response to Low and MacMillan (1988) call for an inventory of prior research in the social entrepreneurship literature, we took an exploratory approach, employing a bibliometric survey to gather relevant information from the existing body of knowledge. Accordingly, five major databases comprising a substantial number of published articles were analysed from the year 1991 till 2016.

In addition to the total number of papers analysed ( $n = 310$ ) we reviewed eight studies of an explorative nature that have made a marked contribution to rigorously examining the prior literature concerning social entrepreneurship. Building on the strength of and contributions made by these studies our study aimed to distil further insight and offer a comprehensive conceptual framework followed by some research propositions. While we situate our understanding on the present body of knowledge our paper makes some noteworthy contributions to spur further discussion and dialogue in the nascent stream of social entrepreneurship. Table 1 summarises the findings derived from these papers.

**Table 1** Summarised findings of the review papers

Author	Type of analysis	Study period (y=)	Sources used	Scope (n=)	Major findings
Desa (2007)	Citation analysis	1985–2006	ABI information	70	Four streams of social entrepreneurship identified: i) definitional, ii) resource-constrained environments, iii) governance regulations, iv) performance metrics
Short et al. (2009)	Content analysis	1991–2008	EBSCO, Web of knowledge, ABI information, ScienceDirect	152	Research domains on social entrepreneurship literature, citation analysis, categorisation of papers into conceptual and empirical, delimited boundaries of social entrepreneurship research
Hill et al. (2010)	Meta-analysis	1968–2008	Academic search premier, Business source premier, EconLit	212	Semantic network patterns of social entrepreneurship meaning that it led to schools of thought.
Hoogendoorn et al. (2010)	Review analysis	Not mentioned	Web of Knowledge	67	Gartner's framework classification for new venture creation, four schools of thought in social entrepreneurship literature examined
Cukier et al. (2011)	Content analysis, citation analysis	1986–2007	EBSCO, ProQuest, Google Scholar	567	The definition and boundary of social entrepreneurship identified
Danko et al. (2011)	Review of past literature	1991–2010	Leading peer-reviewed journals		Social entrepreneurship research classification, the organisational characteristics of social enterprises, influence of social entrepreneurship on the economic system, delineation and overlap between social and commercial entrepreneurship
Granados et al. (2011)	Bibliometric	1991–2010	ISI Web of Knowledge, Business Source Complete, and ScienceDirect	286	The publication trend in the social entrepreneurship domain examined from various dimensions: geographic distribution of researchers, publication types, the epistemological orientation of the papers
Kraus et al. (2014)	Bibliometric, citation analysis	Not mentioned	Emerald, EBSCO, ProQuest, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar	129	Future research directions identified: i) the goals of social enterprise, ii) the inclusion of social capital in social entrepreneurship literature, iii) the motivating factors for the creation of social enterprises

## A review of the social entrepreneurship literature

Researchers have argued over the evolution of social entrepreneurship (El Ebrashi 2013). When and how it was implemented has remained a contested concept and evidence does not clearly reflect the exact way it evolved. It is, however, found in the literature that the term ‘social entrepreneur’ was first mentioned by Joseph Banks in his 1972 seminal work on ‘The Sociology of Social Movements’. Though not directly related to ‘entrepreneurship’, Banks used the term ‘social entrepreneur’ to illustrate managerial skills specifically employed to solve different social problems (El Ebrashi 2013). Bacq and Janssen (2011) suggest that the origins of social entrepreneurship date back to 1983, when Young (1986) wrote on “innovative non-profit entrepreneurs” along the lines of Schumpeter (1934), who asserted that “the innovators who found new organisations, develop and implement new programs and methods, organise and expand new services, and redirect the activities of faltering organizations” (Young 1986: 162).

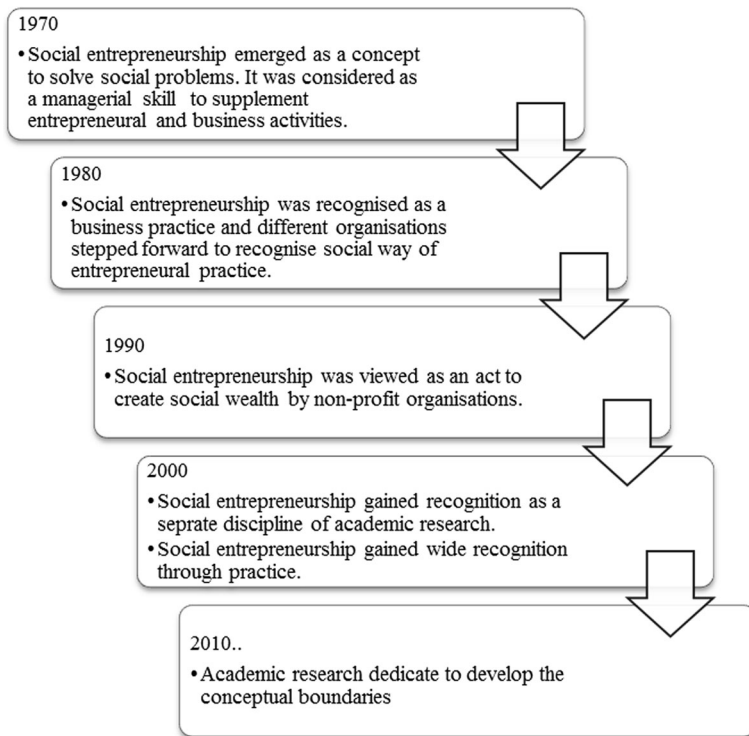
During the 1980s social entrepreneurship emerged as a field of practice after Bill Drayton founded ‘Ashoka’, which is an organisation that provides grants to innovators and their pattern-breaking solutions to social problems in the United States. The academic recognition of social entrepreneurship only occurred after Drucker (1990) introduced the concept of ‘social innovation’. He mainly viewed social innovation as a managerial practice to enhance efficiency by creating social wealth. The very first journal article on social entrepreneurship appeared in 1991, as is evidenced in the work of Dacin et al. (2010). Since then there has been a steady influx and rising impetus among researchers to claim social entrepreneurship as a separate and vital field of academic research. Figure 1 depicts the historical evolution of the social entrepreneurship domain during the past five decades.

### Definitional debate

Despite the mounting impetus of social entrepreneurship and the claim that it is a separate discipline of research its conceptualisation has remained inconsistent and debated. Literature suggests that a number of researchers have contributed to the definition of social entrepreneurship with a wide range of perspectives (Peredo and McLean 2006; Seelos et al. 2011; Short et al. 2009; Zahra et al. 2009). This has made the understanding even more ambiguous; as Montgomery et al. (2012: 375) assert, “definitional debate continues to plague the social entrepreneurship research”. Owing to the varying definition and diverse viewpoints, Choi and Majumdar (2014) comment that social entrepreneurship is an essentially contested concept and reaching a universal consensus is next to impossible.

We undertook a literature search primarily to explore the past contributions and existing state of research in the social entrepreneurship domain. While there is a growing number of authors showing interest in this nascent stream of research (Grimes et al. 2013; Short et al. 2009; Toledano 2011; Zahra et al. 2014) and the publication numbers are on the rise, a review of the existing literature on social entrepreneurship uncovers a variety of concepts. Table 2 summarises the varying definitions put forward by scholars and institutions engaged within the social entrepreneurship domain to distil the current state of knowledge.

As can be observed from Table 2, the social entrepreneurship domain is replete with conceptual ambiguities and the definitions lack any unified direction. To depict this



**Fig. 1** Evolution of social entrepreneurship

further, we identified the various typologies that exist in the social entrepreneurship literature, as summarised in Table 3.

These conceptual ambiguities and the definitional debate have largely hindered the development of an empirically-derived, coherent theoretical framework in social entrepreneurship. As such it has been argued that it is vital to develop a coherent and theoretical framework in order to advance this nascent—yet promising—research field. It has also been deemed essential to reach a consensus to minimise the gap in existing conceptualisations (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Dacin et al. 2010; Granados et al. 2011; Hoogendoorn et al. 2010; Toledano 2011). Through this explorative study we looked into a wide array of publications and synthesised them into key findings that have important research directions.

## Method

The method used in this paper is a bibliometric survey, which included an inductive content analysis and citation analysis. Having reviewed and found the literature on social entrepreneurship to be theoretically inadequate we followed the recommendation of Creswell and Clark (2007) to inductively derive a theoretical model from the phenomenon. The content analysis technique helps to replicate and establish valid inferences from contextual data. The objective is to create new knowledge, insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action (Rocco et al. 2003). Through content analysis it is possible to distil words into fewer content-related categories.

**Table 2** Social entrepreneurship definitions

Author/ organisation	Definition (adopted)
Ashoka <sup>a</sup>	Social entrepreneurs working together accelerate and spread social impact. They are the engines of social change and role models of the citizen sector.
Skoll Foundation <sup>b</sup>	The social entrepreneur aims for value in the form of transformational change that will benefit disadvantaged communities and ultimately society at large. Social entrepreneurs pioneer innovative and systemic approaches for meeting the needs of the marginalised, the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised—populations that lack the financial means or political clout to achieve lasting benefit on their own.
Schwab Foundation <sup>c</sup>	A social enterprise is an organisation that achieves large-scale, systemic and sustainable social change through a new invention, a different approach, a more rigorous application of known technologies or strategies, or a combination of these.
Mair and Marti (2006)	A process of creating value by combining resources in new ways . . . intended primarily to explore and exploit opportunities to create social value by stimulating social change or meeting social needs.
Zahra et al. (2009)	Recognition, formation, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities to create new businesses, models and solutions with a focus on achieving blended value.
Dacin et al. (2010)	Social entrepreneurship comprises four key factors: 1) the characteristics of individual social entrepreneurs, 2) their sphere of operation, 3) the processes and resources used by social entrepreneurs, 4) the mission of the social entrepreneur.
Estrin et al. (2013)	The actions of social entrepreneurs and the enterprises they create enhance cooperative norms within a nation, providing positive signals about caring for others through working to support societal objectives and group needs.

<sup>a</sup> <https://www.ashoka.org/>

<sup>b</sup> <http://www.skollfoundation.org/>

<sup>c</sup> <http://www.schwabfound.org/>

**Table 3** Social entrepreneurship typologies

Author	Social Enterprise Typologies
Austin et al. (2006), Bacq and Janssen (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurship is a separate branch of commercial entrepreneurship</li> </ul>
Alter (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurship is mission-centric</li> </ul>
Cohen and Winn (2007), Fellnhöfer et al. (2014), Hockerts and Wüstenhagen (2010), Schaltegger and Wagner (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurship has the same meaning as sustainable entrepreneurship and/or ecopreneurship</li> </ul>
Dees et al. (2002), Urbano et al. (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurship can be a mixture of both for-profit and non-profit types</li> </ul>
Elkington and Hartigan (2013)	<p>Social entrepreneurship can be a:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• leveraged non-profit business model</li> <li>• hybrid non-profit business model</li> <li>• social business model</li> </ul>
Seelos and Mair (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurship is the individual effort to achieve sustainable goals</li> </ul>

Content analysis has been widely used as a qualitative method (Denzin and Lincoln 2011); however, it also has quantitative characteristics. For that reason, it may be used either in an inductive or deductive way. Deductive content analysis is employed in cases where the researcher wishes to retest existing data in a new context. In contrast, inductive content analysis is utilised where there is not enough knowledge about the phenomenon or if this knowledge is fragmented (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Based on the recommendation of Elo and Kynäs (2008), we adopted an inductive content analysis to explore the social entrepreneurship antecedents and the relevant constructs to measure the relationship among the independent and dependent variables.

We reviewed five major databases: Ebscohost, ScienceDirect, Sage, Wiley Online, and Taylor and Francis. These databases are the most popular and include some of the most prominent journals of the social entrepreneurship discipline, such as the: *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, *Social Entrepreneurship Journal*, *International Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, and *Journal of Business Venturing*. The aim of this content analysis was to find all the published journal articles from 1991 (when the first article was published) to date. Next it was important to limit the search terms by which the published articles were synthesised.

Literature suggests that researchers have used alternative terminologies to describe social entrepreneurship, such as: social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, social venture and social innovation. This made it difficult to limit the search terms. Given that our main objective in this study was to analyse the antecedents of social entrepreneurship practice and their outcomes we therefore followed the recommendation of Luke and Chu (2013), where they made a clear distinction between social enterprise and social entrepreneurship. As such we kept our search term limited to ‘social entrepreneurship’. With this search term we performed a title search in all five databases. The search process involved both manual and computerised processes.

## Findings

Findings of the content analysis extracted substantial amount of information, which were synthesised in a manner consistent with our research objective. The manual and computerised search process initially yielded a total of 895 journal articles from the five selected databases. By applying different filters the search result was narrowed down and finally reached 310 articles. Next we analysed the articles using four classifier variables: i) type of paper, ii) yearly publication trend, iii) key antecedents discussed, and iv) key constructs to measure social entrepreneurship antecedents linking to their outcomes.

### Types of papers

We analysed the types of published papers based on the nature of research methodology adopted in the study. We then broadly narrowed down our classifier variable into conceptual and empirical papers. A considerable number of case studies were retrieved, which we also considered within the conceptual papers in order to keep the scope limited to our research objective. Table 4 shows the distribution of papers based on the type of methodological orientation found in the different databases. It also shows the overall frequency (%) according to the published numbers.

**Table 4** Type and frequency of the studies analysed

Database	Conceptual	Empirical	Total ( <i>n</i> )	Frequency (%)
Sage online	29	6	35	11
ScienceDirect	35	6	41	13
Ebscohost (Business source complete)	78	11	89	29
Taylor and Francis online	76	22	98	32
Wiley online	39	8	47	15
Total	257	53	310	100

### Yearly publication trend

Next we analysed the yearly publication trend of the papers in the total sample ( $n = 310$ ). The rationale behind this was to observe the yearly trend of scholarly publications in the social entrepreneurship domain within the different databases. Our analysis demonstrates that research related to social entrepreneurship has evolved through different stages. Following a similar approach to Carlborg et al. (2014) we divided these evolutionary phases into three different eras, known as the: i) formation era (1991–2000), ii) maturity era (2001–2010), and iii) multidimensional era (2011–2014). Each of these phases reflects an era of evolution where the research focus reflects a common pattern and characteristics composition.

#### *Formation era (1991–2000)*

The very first article on social entrepreneurship was published during this era. In this phase the overall publication frequency was very low, concurrent with a nascent stream of research. The limited number of studies were primarily exploratory in nature. Only 4 % of the total articles ( $n = 310$ ) were found to be published during this era.

#### *Maturity era (2001–2010)*

From 2001 to 2010 the number of published articles in social entrepreneurship took a sharp peak, which was the result of growing attention from academic researchers. This can also be largely attributed to the emergence of many social entrepreneurship organisations that started to spring up during this era. Of the total studies extracted through the content analysis 48 % were published in the maturity era.

#### *Multidisciplinary era (2010–to date)*

As of 2010 there has been a substantial development in the academic research practice of the social entrepreneurship domain. Researchers started to link and compare social entrepreneurship with many other dimensions which increased the exploration of this



discipline. One such example is that social entrepreneurship is increasingly being recognised as a significant panacea for sustainability (Kozinets 2002; Perry 1998). Different typologies started to occur within the field of social entrepreneurship, such as ecopreneurship, sustainable entrepreneurship and green entrepreneurship. We revealed that 48 % of the total articles published in this era—which is still advancing and promises to offer an abundant scope and further research directions—have a linkage to multidisciplinary areas.

## Quality overview of the journals

The publication trend in social entrepreneurship has taken an upward trajectory in the last decade (Kraus et al. 2014). To assess and evaluate the quality of the existing publications we undertook a quality overview, taking a similar approach to Bouncken et al. (2015). This was done with the aim to understand the depth and rigor of the research in the social entrepreneurship field so as to consolidate the literature across the domain (Tranfield et al. 2003).

To ensure the quality of the journal rankings the study only considered those articles in the sample that were published as either “C” graded or in higher-ranked academic journals following the available adaption list shown in Table 5. The study also considered ABS ranking in the sample with the cut-off of  $\geq 2$ .

Applying the above-highlighted filters our total search result of  $n = 310$  was reduced to  $n = 244$ . We spotted 66 journal articles published in non-ranked journals, which were eliminated from the total list considered for this study. Surprisingly, only 2.26 % of articles were published in A\* journals and the majority ( $n = 154$ ) of articles were published in C ranked journals. Table 6 describes the overall standings of the published articles as per the quality filter applied to conduct this search.

## A common discourse in social entrepreneurship

Despite all the differing conceptualisations within the social entrepreneurship domain we observed a common discourse among researchers more recently. A significant

**Table 5** Adaptation of leading academic journal ranking in this review

ABDC Journal Ranking <sup>a</sup>	ERA Outlet Ranking <sup>b</sup>	VHB Jourqual <sup>c</sup>	ABS <sup>d</sup>
A*	A*	A+	4*
A	A	A	4*
B	B	B	3*
C	C	C	2*

<sup>a</sup> Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal Ranking with the cut-off of  $\geq C$

<sup>b</sup> Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Outlet Ranking with the cut-off of  $\geq C$

<sup>c</sup> The German Academic Association for Business Research (VHB) “Jourqual 2.1” with the cut-off of  $\geq C$

<sup>d</sup> The British Association of Business Schools (ABS) “Academic Journal Quality Guide v.4 with the cut off of  $\geq 2$

**Table 6** Quality of the published articles

Journal rankings	<i>n</i> =	% of total
A*	7	2.26
A	16	5.16
B	67	21.61
C	154	49.68
Non-ranked	66	21.29
Total	<i>n</i> = 310	

number of researchers have expressed that the development and progress of the social entrepreneurship field is hindered by the lack of empirical examination. Most of these researchers echoed the call for a robust and empirical examination of social entrepreneurship with a large dataset (Grimes et al. 2013; Hoogendoorn et al. 2010; Short et al. 2009). Table 7 describes the common discourse posited by these researchers.

The above findings suggest the paucity of empirical work in the existing literature. To address this gap our study looked at the empirical papers and relevant dependent and independent variables to ascertain the key constructs. Through a rigorous examination of the present literature we spearhead the effort to list the key constructs of the antecedents of social entrepreneurship.

**Table 7** A common discourse of social entrepreneurship researchers

Author	Common dialogue
Kraus et al. (2014: 291)	<i>...further empirical investigations remain without question an essential requirement for additional insight into the exciting field of Social Entrepreneurship.</i>
Danko et al. (2011)	<i>...more extensive empirical research would be very beneficial for the field.</i>
Cukier et al. (2011: 111)	<i>The absence of an agreed upon, overarching conceptual framework for defining social entrepreneurship, combined with the lack of empirical research, makes it difficult to define success, undertake comparisons, evaluate outcomes, and suggest best practices.</i>
Granados et al. (2011: 214)	<i>...the use of more sophisticated analysis approaches, hypothesis testing, proposition generation, and a stronger and more adaptable research design, would allow SE [social entrepreneurship] researchers to analyse their research problems more appropriately.</i>
Short et al. (2009: 168)	<i>Social entrepreneurship research will remain in a developmental state if future research efforts fail to incorporate large sample empirical tests of the determinants and consequences of social entrepreneurship.</i>
Lepoutre et al. (2013: 694)	<i>...extant quantitative research does not utilise a consistent definition or yield from one large dataset that allows for a detailed empirical analysis of individual drivers and antecedents of social entrepreneurship.</i>
Hoogendoorn et al. (2010: 32)	<i>...a young field of study such as social entrepreneurship needs rigorous empirical assessments to evolve.</i>

## Top cited articles

To understand the existing state of research a citation analysis was conducted to identify the most cited journal articles. Citation analysis as a tool of systematic review has become very popular among researchers. It is based on the premise that citations provide a valid and reliable indication of the scientific interaction between researchers and a research area (Kraus et al. 2014). Sassmannshausen and Volkmann (2013: 15) find citation analysis useful for identifying ‘hot spots’ and ‘blind spots’ in research. Google scholar as a tool for citation analysis has, however, been criticised for its inaccuracy (Sassmannshausen and Volkmann 2013), yet it still remains a popular tool for citation analysis in the area of management owing to its coverage of a broader range of data sources (Harzing and Wal 2008). Using Google Scholar we retrieved the 10 most cited articles (Table 8) in the social entrepreneurship domain. The key words that were used to narrow the search were ‘social entrepreneurship’ and ‘social enterprise’. To gain a wider understanding of the extent of current research several aspects were observed, including: title, name of the journals, publication pattern, author (group), etc.

## Key antecedents and the construct measures

The lack of empirical research in social entrepreneurship can largely be attributed to the paucity of established construct measures and variables delineated in the antecedents of social entrepreneurship. This consequently has made it difficult to hypothesise the latent relationship of the various independent and dependent variables that denote the relationships.

As mentioned previously, our objective in this paper was to draw inferences from all the major studies undertaken previously to distil the measurement constructs of the various phenomena. Accordingly, we have looked into both conceptual and empirical papers to derive the measurement constructs. While some of these are already used in empirical settings a number have been extracted from conceptual papers. Table 9 summarises a list of key antecedents, the construct measures and the frequency of appearance in the sampled journal articles.

## A proposed conceptual framework

A key contribution of this study is to offer a conceptual framework. Based on the rigorous content analysis and the summaries drawn from the existing articles we embedded the rich findings into the following conceptual framework, as depicted in Fig. 2. The framework is further described by some research propositions which are discussed in the following section.

## Entrepreneurial orientation

Social entrepreneurship fundamentally includes the expression of entrepreneurial behaviour. While it has been debated as to whether social entrepreneurship is a separate branch of commercial entrepreneurship or not (Estrin et al. 2013), it is apparent that

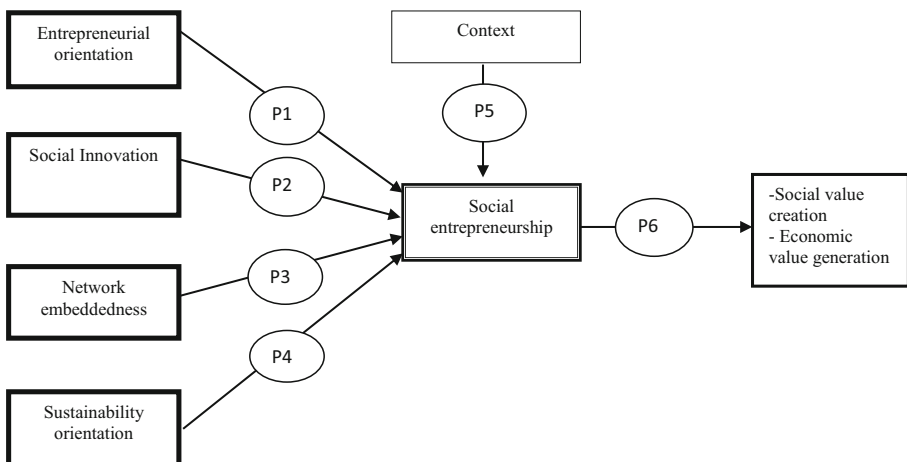
**Table 8** The 10 most cited articles in social entrepreneurship research

Author	Title	Citation	Journal
Dees (1998)	The meaning of social entrepreneurship	1926	<i>Harvard Business Review</i>
Austin et al. (2006)	Social and commercial entrepreneurship: Same, different, or both?	1702	<i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</i>
Mair and Marti (2006)	Social entrepreneurship research: A source of explanation, prediction, and delight	1590	<i>Journal of World Business</i>
Peredo and McLean (2006)	Social entrepreneurship: A critical review of the concept	958	<i>Journal of World Business</i>
Martin and Osberg (2007)	Social entrepreneurship: The case for definition	903	<i>Stanford Social Innovation Review</i>
Alvord et al. (2004)	Social entrepreneurship and societal transformation an exploratory study	901	<i>The Journal of Applied and Behavioural Science</i>
Weerawardena and Mout (2006)	Investigating social entrepreneurship: A multidimensional model	697	<i>Journal of World Business</i>
Sullivan Mout et al. (2003)	Social entrepreneurship: Towards conceptualisation	604	<i>International Journal of Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Marketing</i>
Seelos and Mair (2005)	Social entrepreneurship: Creating new business models to serve the poor	523	<i>Business Horizons</i>
Short et al. (2009)	Research in social entrepreneurship: Past contributions and future opportunities	517	<i>Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal</i>

**Table 9** Key antecedents and the measurement constructs

Key antecedents identified	Key constructs derived	Frequency
Entrepreneurial orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Innovativeness</i></li> <li>• <i>Pro-activeness</i></li> <li>• <i>Risk-taking</i></li> <li>• <i>Access to financial capital</i></li> </ul>	134
Social innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social change</i></li> <li>• <i>Novelty</i></li> <li>• <i>Creative processes</i></li> </ul>	51
Network embeddedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Cross-sectoral collaboration</i></li> <li>• <i>Cooperation</i></li> <li>• <i>Social linkage</i></li> </ul>	46
Sustainability orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social wealth creation</i></li> <li>• <i>Environmental safeguard</i></li> <li>• <i>Economic welfare</i></li> </ul>	18

social entrepreneurs are also proactive, risk-takers and innovative by virtue, which essentially makes social entrepreneurship comparable to any form of entrepreneurial act. Weerawardena and Mort (2006) consider social entrepreneurship as an overall abstraction of innovativeness, proactiveness and risk management within the constraints of the environment, sustainability and social mission. Seelos and Mair’s (2005: 243) conceptualisation goes further, declaring that there is no such thing as ‘non-social’ entrepreneurship, saying that they compared business entrepreneurship with social entrepreneurship, which also looks for new opportunities, creates solutions and invents new approaches. Moss et al. (2011: 3) contend that social entrepreneurship contains a dual identity: ‘normative’ identity and ‘utilitarian’ identity. The normative identity manifests in terms of commitment and responsibility, whereas the utilitarian



**Fig. 2** The conceptual framework

identity lies in whether an organisation is governed by economic rationality, revenue maximisation or cost minimisation. We therefore put forth the following:

**Proposition 1 (P1)** An entrepreneurial orientation is fundamental to the success of social entrepreneurship.

## Social innovation

As acknowledged by a large body of scholars, innovation is fundamental to the construction and development of any form of entrepreneurship (Phillips et al. 2015; Weerawardena and Mort 2006; Zahra et al. 2009). The Schumpeter (1934) school suggests that innovation is an essential characteristic of entrepreneurship. Innovation is also regarded as a precursor to change and renewal for the continued success of any organisation (Tushman and Anderson 2004). Any form of entrepreneurial act is embedded with a need to innovate if the enterprise's goal is to continue operations. Additionally, innovation can offer solutions to social problems and benefit the business with economies of scale, which ultimately contributes to economic growth (Duvnäs et al. 2012). A growing body of researchers, in defining social entrepreneurship, have posited that 'innovation' is at the core of social entrepreneurial actions (Austin et al. 2006; Mair and Marti 2006). As the term 'social' is increasingly associated with innovation, researchers debate on the difference between 'innovation' and 'social innovation'. A broad look into the literature, however, suggests that there is no agreed-upon definition of the term 'social innovation' (Phillips et al. 2015). As mentioned in the study by Phillips et al. (2015) the earliest evidence of social innovation appeared in 1998 in Kanter's recognition of the move by private organisations away from corporate social responsibility towards corporate social innovation. Their study showed an opportunity in the social sector to develop ideas and produce innovations that would not only serve new markets but also provide community payoffs (Kanter 1998 cited in Phillips et al. 2015). Pol and Ville (2009) assert that:

... social innovation is a term that almost everyone likes, but nobody is quite sure of what it means. Some academics would like to abandon the notion of social innovation altogether, arguing that it adds nothing to what we know about innovation and is too vague ever to be useful. (p. 12)

Social innovation encompasses the same definition consistent with innovation in general, which suggests that "new ideas that may offer better value", with the exception of new ideas that meet social goals (Mulgan 2006). Unlike commercial innovations, which are driven mainly by market and consumer needs, social innovations have a social and cultural focus, aspiring to address unmet human and social needs. In this regard Phillips et al. (2008) highlight that social innovation is "a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals" (p. 14). Mumford offers a rather clear definition of social innovation—"the generation and implementation of new ideas about social relationships and social organisation"—focusing attention on social

settings, relations and self-organisation (Mumford 2002: 253). Pol and Ville (2009) claim that:

... an innovation is termed a social innovation if the implied new idea has the potential to improve either the quality or the quantity of life ... innovations conducive to better education, better environmental quality and longer life expectancy being a few. (p.15)

In this sense, social innovation is potentially system-changing (Maclean et al. 2013). It can be conceptualised, therefore, that innovation and social innovation carry the similar notion of creating something novel and new to add further value; the main difference lies in the motivation to undertake the innovative acts. Social innovation exploits new ideas, creating social value and making society more efficient. In contrast, commercially-motivated innovation seeks to maximise financial profitability. Therefore, we propose that:

**Proposition 2 (P2)** Social innovation is inherent in social entrepreneurship.

### Network embeddedness

Networking has emerged as a key dimension within the entrepreneurship literature (Shaw and Carter 2007). While a number of researchers have asserted that an individual's charisma or effort is the key to social entrepreneurship it has been strongly argued that social entrepreneurship is embedded in a broad array of support, cooperation and alliances to build awareness, gain resources and to bring about social change (Montgomery et al. 2012; Sud et al. 2009). In addition, the duality in the term 'social' reflects that networked relationships are inherent in social entrepreneurship (Boyd and Vozikis 1994; Dacin et al. 2010). Montgomery et al. (2012) view social entrepreneurship from a collective lens and assert that much of the social problems that exist could be solved through collective action. The collective action of social entrepreneurship manifests through three different aspects—social movements, community cooperatives and cross-sectoral collaboration—which also caters the essence of social capital building. Social movements play an instrumental role in forming new markets since the social entrepreneurial activities involve the creation of new products or services aiming to create impact. Community cooperatives allow varied groups of consumers, organisations and other stakeholders to collaborate together so that social and economic welfare can be enhanced. Cross-sectoral collaboration delineates partnerships among different organisations in order to address different social issues. Initiatives like One World Health,<sup>1</sup> founded by Victoria Hale, which provides free medicine and treatment to the poor and underprivileged people in the developing world, spread through the rapid growth of the network and partnerships with other organisations (Seelos et al. 2011). It is therefore summarised that social entrepreneurship by nature is embedded

<sup>1</sup> In 2011 One World Health changed to 'Path', which is an international non-profit organisation that transforms global health through innovation. See <http://www.path.org/> for more detail.

within a networked relationship where mutual collaboration between different stakeholders is indispensable to achieve any goal. As such we postulate:

**Proposition 3 (P3)** Network embeddedness is inherent and essential to achieve social entrepreneurship goals.

### Sustainability orientation

The proliferation of global crises has driven demand for innovative social and environmental actions that are able to respond to the new challenges posed by numerous problems, such as inequality and poverty, lack of access to basic healthcare, climate change and environmental degradation, clean water and energy. In recent years researchers and practitioners have begun to consider social entrepreneurship as a panacea for many of the world's social problems where governments may have failed to provide solutions (Sassmannshausen and Volkmann 2013).

In recent times researchers have linked sustainability with entrepreneurship, which is predominantly based on environmentally-focused entrepreneurial practice—also known as sustainable entrepreneurship (Fellnhöfer et al. 2014; Hall et al. 2010; Schaltegger et al. 2013) or ecopreneurship (Hockerts and Wüstenhagen 2010; Schaltegger 2002). Cohen and Winn (2007) consider sustainable entrepreneurship as the result of market imperfections which contribute to ecological challenges leading to opportunities for innovation. They define sustainable entrepreneurship as:

... the examination of how opportunities to bring into existence future goods and services are discovered, created, and exploited, by whom, and with what economic, psychological, social, and environmental consequences. (Cohen and Winn 2007: 37)

According to Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) sustainable entrepreneurship includes the innovative business practices of commercial firms that produce environmentally- and/or socially- beneficial products. This may include both start-ups and established firms, for example the Body Shop. Ecopreneurship, in a similar vein, has been considered to be business with integrated environmental goals along with economic logic (Hockerts and Wüstenhagen 2010).

We consider the comparison of sustainable entrepreneurship or ecopreneurship with social entrepreneurship debateable, as these concepts are not free from ambiguity (Fellnhöfer et al. 2014). To juxtapose these concepts will warrant more research and better understanding. It is apparent, however, that social entrepreneurial acts can assist in achieving sustainable development goals. This is due to social entrepreneurial pervasive role that is not only driven by mere market imperfections or environmental focus, but to create social wealth which encompasses the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, societal and economic aspects. The practice-orientation of social entrepreneurship suggests that social entrepreneurs are at the forefront of creating a sustainable society. They have taken up innovative practices, especially in developing nations, for example enhancing education, productivity, socioeconomic status of marginalised groups, physical health, waste management, energy retention and self-reliance of



individuals and societies for the same. This advocates that an orientation towards sustainable goals is one of the major drivers leading individuals and organisations to step forward to achieve these goals. It is therefore proposed that:

**Proposition 4 (P4)** A sustainability orientation is inherent in social entrepreneurship.

### Social context

The social context in which social entrepreneurs operate has been found to play a mediating role in the success or failure of a social enterprise venture. Researchers have argued that the emergence and practice of social entrepreneurship is greatly controlled by the very country or social context in which it operates. Context has been defined as “those elements outside the control of the entrepreneur that will influence success or failure” (Austin et al. 2006: 5). Factors crucial to context may include the macro-economy, socio-political environment, economic environment, employment levels, technological advances and social movements. Dacin et al. assert that:

... defining social entrepreneurship by individual-level characteristics and processes and activities will inevitably lead to yet more discussion and debate about what these characteristics should be; it is a debate which can never be resolved, because it is unlikely that a definitive set of characteristics can be applied to all kinds of social entrepreneurial activity across all contexts. (2010: 41)

It is evident from many of the practical examples of social entrepreneurs that they were motivated to usher their ventures in order to bring equilibrium to the unequal state of the society. As previously mentioned, One World Health’s founder, Hale, is by profession a pharmaceutical scientist who became increasingly frustrated by the market forces dominating her industry. Hale decided to challenge the existing status quo in her social context and started with a small idea which paid off and resulted in social change for poor communities (Martin and Osberg 2007). Based on the above insights we put forth the following proposition:

**Proposition 5 (P5)** The context mediates social entrepreneurship performance and outcomes.

### Social value vs economic value

Researchers have debated on the outcomes of social entrepreneurship. As the various typologies in social entrepreneurship suggest, researchers dispute whether social entrepreneurship should be viewed as an act of philanthropy, a yielder of social and economic value, or both. Many have argued that social entrepreneurship emerged as a result of existing problems in society and creating social value is therefore the only objective (Mair and Marti 2006) of such an endeavour, while others have argued that social value creation does not necessarily negate economic value creation (Dacin et al. 2010). Social entrepreneurs may aim to achieve both social and economic goals

(Doherty et al. 2006; Zahra et al. 2009). There are instances where a number of social entrepreneurs started their venture with an embedded social purpose which later turned into a profit-making source in both a social and economic sense. The fundamental assumption for social entrepreneurship is that it begins with a social problem that the traditional market system cannot solve or has failed to provide a solution for. The social entrepreneurial act may or may not be profitable but it has to be financially sustainable. Abu-Saifan (2012) in this regard offered two different types of proposed outcomes of social entrepreneurship: i) non-profits with an earned income strategy, and ii) for-profits that are mission driven. Haugh (2006), in a much broader sense, posits that the outcomes of social enterprise are three fold: environmental, social and economic. We therefore propose that the outcome of social entrepreneurship is twofold. First, it aims to create social value, which can be expressed in terms of the intangible assets such as wealth, happiness and general well-being (Zahra et al. 2009). Second, it generates economic value, which the social enterprise venture can use as a source of sustainability and also profitability of the social entrepreneur. Based on this conceptualisation we propose:

**Proposition 6 (P6)** Social entrepreneurship generates both social and economic value.

## Limitations

The research methodology in this study was constructed to minimise the limitations and explore the significant gap which exists in social entrepreneurship research. However, it is still acknowledged that the study may have some obvious limitations. The construct measures we derived were generalised based on predictive summation given the lack of adequate literature and empirical works in this field. For example, a sustainability orientation has not been found to be an independent variable that leads to successful social entrepreneurial performance. Moreover, sustainability orientation is often regarded as a cost rather than a driver for better performance. However, we have argued that social entrepreneurs are inherently motivated to solve social problems, which is ultimately a response to sustainability goals. Reacting to sustainability is therefore no longer an expense but rather a strategy which is changing the competitive landscape. Stakeholders are then able to leverage these benefits.

The study is based on the findings of an analysis of five selected databases. We also had some classifier variables based on the core objective of our research, which further narrowed down our search list. While this may not be exhaustive enough given the wider scholarly outputs and databases emerging regularly it could be considered comprehensive enough to draw inferences. We suggest that elaborating on this list and examining it from a wider perspective could furnish a broader research dimension. We have associated a number of overarching areas with social entrepreneurship, such as sustainability and innovation. While there is academic research linking these areas with social entrepreneurship the conclusions drawn, however, are underdeveloped and need more clarity to better understand their relationship with social entrepreneurship. Despite the shortcomings of this study, we believe that it will help to augment and extend social entrepreneurship research. The findings may uncover new opportunities and present

social entrepreneurship researchers with new avenues that will have valuable implications.

## Discussion and conclusion

Scholars for a long time have debated the emergence of social entrepreneurship. Although the discipline has garnered heightened attention from academics and practitioners, its identity has remained fragmented. As Shumate et al. suggest, “there is no consensual understanding of what social entrepreneurship means” (2014: 405). The ongoing definitional debate has made the concept even more ambiguous, which some authors have viewed as nothing but a ‘tautology’ of the concept (Rivera-Santos et al. 2015: 74). Kraus and Halberstadt (2016) posit that social and commercial entrepreneurship are highly interrelated and making a distinction between the two will make the area more confusing. To support their arguments, the authors highlighted practical case studies of commercial businesses which are fundamentally grounded on social intentions. Moreover, it is quite logical to think that social entrepreneurship is not far from commercial entrepreneurship given that social entrepreneurs display the characteristics of an entrepreneur, which are pro-activeness, risk-taking and being innovative. The only factors that set social and commercial entrepreneurship apart are the contextual aspects and the challenges which originate from them (Austin et al. 2006).

Our aim in this paper was to extend the present state of research by underpinning the contributions made by scholars in this relatively unexplored, yet very promising, area of knowledge and practice. In doing so we examined the definitional debates within the literature, publication trends, theoretical frameworks and suggested a conceptual framework. We reviewed some early, but convincing, literature that helped to derive some vital conclusions. The findings from our study sought to make a marked contribution to further the development of social entrepreneurship research. For example, the publication types identified in this study suggest the marked paucity of empirical work, the yearly publication trend suggests the recent influx of publications, while the formation era shows a limited number of publications. The conceptual framework can be considered directional to show the proposed relationship of the various independent and dependent variables. Additionally, the antecedents discussed in this study can be used for further empirical examination to hypothesise the relationships of the various latent variables. We do this to encourage other researchers to explore the social entrepreneurship domain from an empirical setting. Moreover, the independent variables that we have proposed can each be separately examined in depth to conceptualise the strength of relationship with the dependent variable, which is the outcome of social entrepreneurship.

Examining both the contributions and ambiguities in social entrepreneurship research we come to the conclusion that social entrepreneurship is under-researched and not free from ambiguity—even after decades since the concept first originated as a separate field of academic research. We therefore propose robust examination from a wider perspective to explore this highly potential area of academic inquiry and untapped area offering pathways for human development.

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