

Literature Review on Grassroots Social Innovation within Technology Social Venture

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to review the literature that relates Social Innovation (SI), Grassroots Innovation (GI) and Technology Social Ventures (TSVs) in terms of how they are employed towards tackling social and environmental challenges from a bottom-up perspective. Also, since the fast development of technologies and increase in social entrepreneurial studies was booting at that TSVs came as novel entrepreneurship aggregating social entrepreneurship values with modern technology. Building on a meta-analysis of peer-reviewed literatures and case studies available from the Scopus database, applying keyword searches such as "social innovation," "grassroots innovation," "bottom-up social innovation," and "technology social venture", this paper helps to distinguish dimensions of agents, drivers, purposes, and process in SI, GI, and TSV. The review specifically emphasizes the case that technological developments in TSVs can provide novel, scalable social solutions and are compatible with bottom-up, grassroots-driven strategies. The results furthermore introduce a new theoretical lens for examining bottom-up SI progression within an emerging technology environment.

Keywords: Grassroots Innovation, Bottom-Up Innovation, Social Innovation, Technology Social Venture, Socio-Tech Enterprise

Introduction

As systemic inequities, environmental crises, and social challenges continue to accumulate globally, especially in developing nations, the pursuit of innovative solutions has become increasingly vital (Rigg, 2024). In response, there is a growing curiosity in technology within social entrepreneurship (SE), emphasizing the importance of adopting technologies for sustainability and competitiveness in a fast-paced market (Dettori and Floris, 2021). In this context, the concept of Technology Social Venture (TSV) have emerged as a promising model, offering a wide range of possibilities for addressing social challenges through innovative technological solution. (Bansal *et al.*, 2019; Eleonora and Laura, 2021). Shaped by SE ideals and powered by technological opportunities, these ventures strategically address the societal challenges with technological driven approaches (Calderini *et al.*, 2021). As social innovation

continues to gain particularly within grassroots movements, the integration of Grassroots Innovation (GI) and Social Innovation (SI) frameworks has become essential in understanding the unique role of TSVs in promoting social change.

The literature of SI and GI has highlight about community-driven, bottom-up approach as it is driven by society for solving social issues through solutions that are developed locally (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Smith and Seyfang, 2013; Patnaik and Bhowmick, 2019; Setiadi, 2020). Even though community participation and empowerment are promoted in these frameworks, embedding technological components within the models (especially for TSVs) has never been imperative. Based on the principles introduced by Pellicer-Sifres *et al.* (2017), a blend of SI, GI and the Capability Approach (CA) to unpack human development in alternative food networks, this study seek to re-establish their framework, tailored for the convergence among SI, GI and TSVs.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive literature review of GSI in TSV. By blending SI and GI with insights from TSVs, this literature review aims to provide comprehensive evidence illustrating a bottom-up SI process by TSV, especially in Malaysia. Debating on GI literature can provide a complex and multi-dimensional perspective for understanding agents, purposes, drivers and bottom-up processes of innovation (Pellicer-Sifres *et al.*, 2017; Farmer *et al.*, 2018), while TSV literature can provide fruitful managerial perspective on implementing technological solutions to solve social problems (Setiadi, 2020; Eleonora and Laura, 2021). Combining the existing literature will help researchers identify research gaps and provide suggestions for enterprise.

Literature Review

Grassroots Social Innovation

Grassroots social innovation (GSI) is a concept that combines grassroots innovation (GI) and social innovation (SI) to address social needs that traditional market cannot meet (Hubert, 2010; Pellicer-Sifres *et al.*, 2017). These are described as intervention initiatives built up from the bottom, with local community members taking the lead on addressing social and economic and environmental issues (Zajda *et al.*, 2020) enables common people, community initiatives and civil society to influence for a social good in creating innovative solutions (Sarkar, 2018). In the past decade, GSI has been explored in multiple realms including community-based sustainable development (Kirwan *et al.*, 2013; Martin and Upham, 2016; Calvo, 2018; Lambert *et al.*, 2019), food system sustainable development (Signori and Forno, 2019), and societal well-being (Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2022; Gomez and Niekerk, 2022). Those studies focus on social innovations in grassroots movement, such as innovative solutions and practices which civic society produces during a project. To comprehensively understand GSI, it is crucial to examine GI and SI separately.

Breaking down the concept of SI, it refers to new idea and activities widely disseminated by organisations with a social mission and driven by the desire of individuals, groups, or communities of to address a social need (Mulgan, 2006; Altuna *et al.*, 2015; Oeij *et al.*, 2019). Not limited to non-governmental and social organizations; profit-making organizations can also implement it to achieve social goals by fostering new social relationships through stakeholder engagement, strategic management, and corporate social responsibility (Altuna *et al.*, 2015; Rajagopal, 2021). Empirical study have further demonstrated that SI is essential

for empowering grassroots communities and can have greater influence in meeting social needs (Sanusi *et al.*, 2017).

Another hand, GI refers to innovative networks of activists and organizations drive grassroots solutions for sustainable development, creating responses tailored to the specific needs, interests, and values of the local communities involved (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Unlike focusing solely on technological advancements or market-driven solutions, GI emphasizes the importance of local knowledge, community engagement, and social and environmental impact (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016). Furthermore, recent GI literature highlights how social ventures employ technology-driven solutions to tackle local social and environmental challenges, promoting sustainability and empowerment at the community level (Bansal *et al.*, 2019).

Key Dimensions for Bottom-up Social Innovation

Previous research demonstrates that the key dimensions of agents, drivers, purposes, and processes can effectively capture the complexity of bottom-up social innovations, offering a nuanced understanding of their role in driving social transformation (Pellicer-Sifres *et al.*, 2017). First, agents are refer as individual or a number of heroic, active and impatient individuals (Mulgan, 2006; Nicholls *et al.*, 2015; do Adro and Fernandes, 2020), sometimes they also called innovator or social entrepreneurs (Westley and Antadze, 2010; Solis-Navarrete *et al.*, 2021). Second, the purpose of SI is to meet the social good, such as the well-being of the society (Calvo, 2018). Next, the drivers for SI are referred to the unmet social needs that fail to be addressed by the market (Hubert, 2010; Morais-da-Silva *et al.*, 2020) and also to industriousness and charismatic leadership of individuals (Oeij *et al.*, 2019). Lastly, the processes of SI referred as a collective action and social change that aims to create new forms of community development, involvement, empowerment and capacity building (Mulgan *et al.*, 2007; Foroudi *et al.*, 2021; Ozdemir and Gupta, 2021).

Technology Social Venture

The nature of the TSV has been categorized as a new form of entrepreneurship that inherits SE norms and operates in the context of technological opportunities (Calderini *et al.*, 2021). Such ventures leverage the capabilities of technology to create financial returns as well as social impact (Pankaj and Seetharaman, 2021) because technological advancements have made it easy for more streamlined and quick resolution of different societal challenges (George *et al.*, 2021). Such technological advances have markedly increased the scalability and replicability potential of TSV making them able to scale up their initiatives and models at large (Ismail *et al.*, 2012; Eleonora and Laura, 2021). To effectively intervene, TSVs actively interact with a variety of stakeholders, including beneficiaries, local communities, government agencies, NGOs, and potential partners, by leveraging digital tools to facilitate communication and collaboration (Karki and Thapa, 2023).

Additionally, TSVs frequently adopt sustainable business models that maintain equilibrium between profitability and their social and environmental missions (Desa and Kotha, 2006; Battisti, 2019; Pankaj and Seetharaman, 2021), making sure their endeavours sustainable in long run. An important feature of TSVs is that they focus on empowerment by funding infrastructure support activities. These programs prepare them with the knowledge, skills to lead a better social well-being (Ismail *et al.*, 2012; Scillitoe *et al.*, 2018).

Research Methodology

A literature review serves as an analytical approach used to organize and synthesize theoretical frameworks and the current state of research in a particular field. This study systematically reviews literature related to SI, GSI and TSV, focusing primarily on journal articles, conference proceedings, and case studies published in English. The Scopus database, known as the largest repository of peer-reviewed research, was selected as the primary source. Keywords like “social innovation,” “grassroots innovation,” “grassroots social innovation,” “bottom-up social innovation,” “technology social venture,” “technology social enterprise,” and “social-tech enterprise” were used to filter relevant articles. Studies containing these keywords in their titles and abstracts were sorted for further analysis. The process of literature screening is outlined in Figure 1.

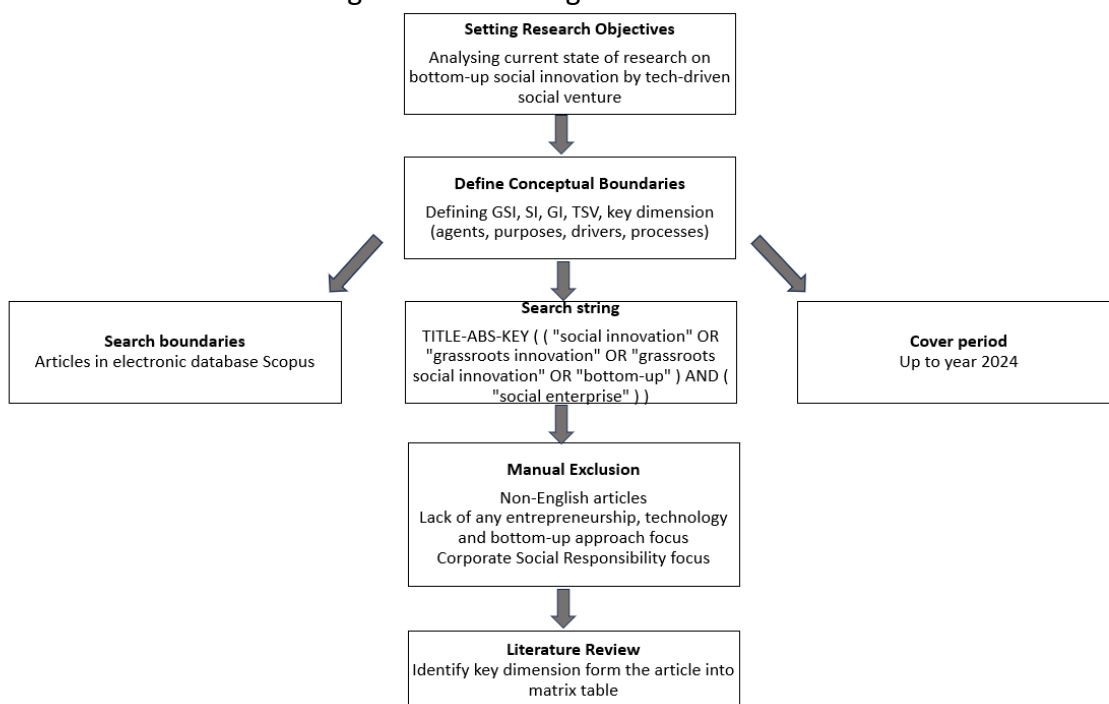


Figure 1. The process of literature review.

Results and Discussions

After gathering all the key dimension, it is possible to conclude that each of the proposed dimensions in SI is related to the idea in GI and TSV. Table 1 summarizes the ideas gathered from each SI, GI and TSV perspective by using social dimensions agents, purposes, drivers, and processes. The table shows that the ideas from each perspective are relatable to the key dimension from concept of SI. Begin with GI agent, they refer as the activist and volunteers in the bottom-up solution (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). While TSV agent involves technology experts, NGO and volunteers for a sustainable solution (Ismail *et al.*, 2013). Both share similar characteristic with SI agent who aim to solve social problems. They are heroic and impatient people who want to perform SI (Stephan and Drencheva, 2017; Eleonora and Laura, 2021; Au *et al.*, 2023).

Moving forward to the purposes, both of SI, GI and TSV objectives can be referred to solving the social challenges and creating positive social impact. While SI purposes is to meet unmet social needs and to create social benefits, with a focus on social wellbeing (Calvo, 2018), GI goal is to increase social capabilities and satisfy social and environmental demands by offering

localized services, particularly in situations where existing production and consumption systems fail certain communities (Lang *et al.*, 2020; Jones *et al.*, 2021). Notably, TSV is possible differ from SI and GI purposes which is to achieve financial sustainability while addressing societal challenges in a sustainable way through the utilization of innovative technology to solve problems that may be ignored or inadequately met by traditional entrepreneurs or the government sector (Ismail *et al.*, 2012; Pankaj and Seetharaman, 2021). This is because TSV normally faced challenges on fundings due to the complex process (Eleonora and Laura, 2021).

All drivers of SI, GI and TSV are mainly driven by the need to solve social needs as well as societal challenges. However, despite this difference in focus and the different context of these approaches, they are shared by a common motivation to address social needs, deliver governance failure and face societal challenges sustainably (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Westley and Antadze, 2010; Morais-da-Silva *et al.*, 2020). The results shows clearly that the process of SI, GI and TSV are collective action, innovation and transformation. However, the methods and approaches are different. GI encompasses bottom-up initiatives and capability development (Smith and Raven, 2012; Ng *et al.*, 2019), whereas SI addresses collective action, social innovation processes and practices (Foroudi *et al.*, 2021; Ozdemir and Gupta, 2021). TSV uses innovative technologies to solve issues in society and generates profit from that, profits are even invested for the continuation of the venture (PEDULLÀ, 2020). Overall, this combination of the key dimensions could contribute to a comprehensive understanding for analysing a bottom-up SI of TSV.

Table 1

Gathered ideas form each GI and TSV perspectives by using key dimensions of SI

| Dimension | SI | GI | TSV |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Agent | Social innovator, social entrepreneur, Activist | Activist, volunteer, leaders, organizations, local community, government | Technology-driven social venture, technologist, NGO, volunteers |
| Purpose | Create social goods, meet unmet social needs | Contribute change on regime level, increase social capabilities | Financial sustainability and solve social problems |
| Driver | Dissatisfaction of human needs | Failure of regime and landscape pressure, solution differ from regime to meet social needs | Address societal challenges in sustainable and technological way |
| Process | Identify social problem, Collective action, social transformation, practices | Bottom-up initiative, capability development, manage and form niches, building social network | Utilize the emerging technology for addressing social problem and income earnings. Reinvest the income into the venture for sustainability |

Conclusions

Overall, the literature review showed that SI, GI and TSVs provides a multifaceted dimension to study social transformation processes. The key dimensions of agents, drivers, purposes, and processes are interconnected across these literatures, where TSVs implement a critical technological dimension to grassroots-driven social initiatives. This integration underscores how advance in technology can create scalable, sustainable solutions for societal challenges. This study would facilitate further research on technology in social entrepreneurship, as well as provide valuable inputs for practice and instructive guidance for policy development on sustainable grassroots-driven innovations. For example, this study deepens the academic discourse on SE, specifically in relation to GSI, by investigating how bottom-up development process unfold within a unique regional context. This investigation provides valuable insights that not only advance understanding of the interaction between technology and grassroots initiatives but also contribute to the theoretical framework in SI, supporting academic exploration and offering new perspectives on sustainable development (Holzmann and Gregori, 2023; Kamaludin, 2023). The findings also offer practical insights that relevant to range of stakeholders. For SEs, the findings of the study help SEs better align with business approaches that combine resources and address social needs (Sarkar, 2018; Duarte Alonso *et al.*, 2020). Next, the findings are important for policymaker as guidance to developing policies that SI friendly and ensure long-term societal well-being (Ng *et al.*, 2019; Mens *et al.*, 2021). Through these contributions, this study extends existing knowledge and emphasized the potential of TSVs to drive transformative change.

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