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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to highlight different dynamics associated with social innovation and value creation, particularly by multinational corporations (MNCs) in the African context.
Design/methodology/approach: The paper is based on a systematic literature review of 159 published studies.
Findings: The literature review revealed corruption, nepotism, a lack of transparency and accountability, lack of trust in African government and numerous policy voids as barriers to social innovation activities particularly by MNCs in the region. Multinational corporations as well as social activists face further challenges in balancing the conflicting value logics between different interest groups. Also, the weak educational system, the African thought system and management approaches being used in Africa tend to limit MNCs' social innovation possibilities.
Originality/value: The current paper enriches Africa-focused social innovation literature, along with contributing to the debate on the influence of management thinking by establishing a link between the African thought system and the social innovation activities, particularly by multinational corporations in that context.

Key Words: Africa, Social Innovation, Multinational Corporations, and Value Creation.

1. Introduction

Multinational corporations (MNCs) and social innovation (SI) activities associated with their operations in different contexts have increasingly gained attention of academic scholars (e.g., Holmstrom Lind *et al.*, 2020; Ourhalouch *et al.*, 2025). At the same time, the presence and visibility of MNCs in Africa has increased as well over the years (Mendola *et al.*, 2022). However, the commitment of these MNCs to creating social value in Africa has received criticism in many cases (e.g., Nwoba *et al.*, 2024). SI scholars have stressed that MNCs operating in Africa need to utilize their enormous resources to create value in their host communities (Adomako *et al.*, 2024; Holmstrom Lind *et al.*, 2020, 2022; Nwoba *et al.*, 2024; Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2023). However, specific research on SI and associated value creation activities of MNCs especially in Africa, remains rather scattered. Hence, we aim to fill this gap in extant literature by undertaking a systematic literature review.

SI was developed as a theory to explain the innovative activities of businesses in pursuit of social benefits (Moulaert, 2016). It is the firm's capacity to create new products and services that have a social impact, that can tackle social problems, and benefit society via improved standard of living (Adomako & Tran, 2022; Dionisio & de Vargas, 2020). SI hinges on the idea that, as a member of the society, MNCs should address the societal problems in innovative ways (João-Roland & Granados, 2020; Nwoba *et al*., 2024). This includes an alteration of a firm's structure of innovation systems, corporate identities, and strategies to enhance its capacity to respond to complex or 'wicked' societal problems to enhance the firm's competitiveness while delivering social values (Dionisio & Vargas, 2020, pp. 1 – 2).

When implemented at the corporate level, SI is aimed at generating both shareholder value and social value, by altering the firm's innovation systems and corporate identities and strategies, while delivering innovative solutions to societal needs (Herrera, 2015; Mirvis *et al*., 2016; Kern *et al*., 2022). Researchers have linked SI to responsible business drive, which requires firms to accommodate community needs, environmental initiatives, supporting cultures, long-term success, sustainable business models, and stockholder advice in their pursuit of market opportunities (e.g., Nwoba *et al*., 2024). Whereas corporate social responsibility (CSR) is often narrowly seen as philanthropic initiatives aimed at addressing external pressures (Banerjee, 2008), SI embodies a premeditated project that is established and managed by a coalition of companies and their stakeholders through dedicated collaborations, committed assets and devoted expertise to co-create something new that defies traditional CSR initiatives while providing sustainable social value (e.g., Dionisio & de Vargas, 2020).

To collaborate and co-create values, SI activities rely on specific individuals – the 'social activists' and change agents – who actively drive such initiatives (Kern *et al*., 2022; Köse & Velibeyoğlu, 2025). These individuals lobby MNCs' corporate decision-making on issues that will bring about social value creation, and they stir up collaboration and commitment to social innovation (Kern *et al*., 2022; Mirvis *et al*., 2016). Researchers link such collaboration to creating shared value (e.g., Porter & Kramer, 2011). Consistent with the level of complexity and resource-intensity involved in realizing SI, researchers have found five key stages involved in SI – assessment, design, development, systematization, institutionalization and scaling up (Herrera, 2015). This underscores the intensity of investments and interactions involved in co-creating social value (Herrera, 2015; Mirvis *et al*., 2016; Ali *et al*., 2025).

In an era when MNCs are confronted with myriad challenges – rising public scrutiny (Mirvis *et al*., 2016), increasing rejection by their hosts, limited growth (Kern *et al*., 2022), increasing environmental issues and growing stakeholders' expectations (Nwoba *et al*., 2024), SI activities become critical (Dionisio & de Vargas, 2020; Herrera, 2015). Yet, the SI literature has remained rather fragmented (e.g., Nwoba *et al*., 2024), especially in emerging markets including Africa. Furthermore, identifying the drivers, enablers, barriers (e.g., Adomako et al., 2024; Herrera, 2015), and "the processes through which social innovations emerge, diffuse, and succeed (or fail)" (Carberry *et al*., 2019, p. 1084; Tabares, 2020), is critical to the theoretical development of SI literature. This is particularly required in the under-researched context of sub-Saharan Africa due to institutional voids – lack of regulatory frameworks, social amenities and specialized intermediaries, and underdeveloped economic and commercial activities in the region (Nwoba *et al*., 2024). Hence, our paper undertakes a systematic literature review to examine stakeholders and institutional contexts as barriers to MNCs' SI activities in the under-researched context of Africa. Earlier research on MNCs' SI activities especially in emerging markets (e.g., Adomako *et al*., 2024; Dionisio & de Vargas, 2020; Tan *et al.,* 2020) has adopted a systematic literature review approach because it ensures that only relevant articles are extracted, selected and put through rigorous screening and filtering process to ensure quality (Gupta *et al.,* 2020; Lehner & Kansikas, 2013; Tan *et al.,* 2020).

This research makes several complementary but distinctive contributions to extant literature. First, by linking institutional and cultural factors to MNCs' capacity to invent and apply novel ideas to facilitate new products, processes and services, to solve impending social problems or implement successful change interventions to foster individual and communities' wellbeing in Africa, the current paper adds to the Africa-focused SI literature. Secondly, by examining if, and how, management thinking influences the SI activities especially in African context, we contribute to the growing debate on the influence of different strands of management thinking on organizational strategies and performance. Thirdly, by establishing a link between the African thought system and the SI activities, our research adds value to the ongoing debates around universalism vs. contextualism and the convergence vs. divergence, in larger management and organization studies literature streams.

2. Literature Review

SI is key to addressing many individual and social problems. SI also fosters communities' wellbeing while advancing social progress (Adomako & Tran, 2022; Morsy *et al*., 2024). SI is also argued as a socially orientated organizational design, tailored structure, system, guidelines, actions, products, services, etc. (Nicholls *et al.,* 2015) that are directed towards solving existing social needs (Doherty *et al.,* 2014; Huda *et al.,* 2019; Ionescu, 2015; Tracey & Stott, 2017). Thus, SI is linked to social finance and investment, social enterprise identity and legitimacy (Weerakoon, 2024), and a catalyst for creating socio-economic value (Gupta *et al.,* 2020). Through their SI activities, MNCs boost entrepreneurship development and business innovation in their host communities (Toivonen, 2016). Therefore, SI is key to addressing the social and environmental needs of our modern society (Adro & Fernandes, 2022). Researchers also argue that due to its capacity to drive social change (Cuntz *et al.,* 2020), SI has provoked research interest, especially in the 21st century. Researchers and practitioners are keen to understand SI's boundaries (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014), as its boundaries still lack clarity (Baptista *et al.,* 2019). This is mainly due to a range of vague discussions of the subject, including its many competing definitions and different theorizing (Nicholls *et al.,* 2015).

The main aim of SI is to solve social inequality – unemployment, poverty, healthcare, food safety, energy, and global problems – climate change, security, and environmental pollution (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Due to the increasing attention to addressing social and environmental needs without a profit motive (Steinfield & Holt, 2019), there has been an increasing scholarly interest in SI. For instance, researchers have examined how national systems of innovation and social entrepreneurship interact to generate SI in emerging economies (Rao-Nicholson *et al.*, 2017). There is also a focus on how social entrepreneurs can develop technological innovation (e.g., Turker & Ozmen, 2021). Researchers also examine MNCs' involvement in SI (e.g., Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2022) alongside the issue of knowledge, networks, and power (Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2020). With such growing insights on various aspects of SI research (Rygh, 2020), we need to understand the barriers to MNCs' SI activities, especially in Africa.

Although researchers have examined MNCs' SI activities (e.g., Dionisio & de Vargas, 2020), MNCs' response to institutions voids in emergent markets (Koch, 2022), and how institutional factors shape MNC practices in Asia and Africa (e.g., Cooke, 2014). Studies examining how stakeholders and institutional contexts influence MNCs' SI activities in emerging markets of Africa, is, at best, limited. Yet, researchers have found that MNCs' compliance with stakeholders' demands is not only key to financial sustainability but a socially innovative business practice (Tran & Adomako, 2021). For instance, in response to the millennial customers' demand for environmentally friendly practices and sustainable products/services, many firms have now turned to renewable, recyclable, reusable and innovative business practices (Adomako & Tran, 2022; Tran & Adomako, 2021). These responsible business practices have been linked to positive impact on stakeholders' perception/wellbeing (Brower & Mahajan, 2013; Helmig *et al.,* 2016), societal development (Adomako & Tran, 2022), firm's legitimacy (Zheng *et al.,* 2015), and financial performance (McWilliams & Siegel, 2000; Torugsa *et al.,* 2012). Yet, there is still a lack of research examining if and how stakeholders' interests and institutional contexts limit MNCs' capacity to achieve these objectives (Adomako & Tran, 2022), especially in the emerging markets of

Africa. Although researchers have found economic, managerial, institutional, and spiritual factors that inhibit MNCs' capacity to develop their dynamic capabilities in Africa (e.g., Alo *et al.,* 2024; Alo & Arslan, 2021), research examining the barriers to these MNCs SI activities are lacking. To address this research gap, unlike previous SI research which has often taken a snapshot approach, we utilized three main theoretical lenses — social innovation, institutional theory, and stakeholder's theory — to examine the barriers to SI activities of MNCs operating in Africa.

At the heart of the mainstream SI literature is the process that leads to SI – the co-creation of value by networks of actors (Ayob *et al.,* 2016; Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2022), the interactions between members of these networks, and their roles in the process that leads to an improved quality of the lives of people (Babu *et al.,* 2020, p. 16). Despite a proliferation of SI research, existing studies have focused mainly on business innovation, technological innovation, or strategic change (Foroudi *et al.,* 2021; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Likewise, although there is a growing scholarly interest on how businesses can integrate SI into their routine practice (Dionisio & de Vargas, 2020; Tabares, 2020), most of such research did not focus on MNCs (e.g., Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2022).

3. Review approach and methodology

3.1 Review approach

Systematic literature reviews are appropriate for academic works aiming to consolidate research on specific topical areas and contexts (e.g., Kraus *et al.*, 2020, p. 1028). Also, it helps in narrowing the scope of our study (Donthu *et al.*, 2021), thus making the sources well suited to a confined area of our study – the barriers to the social innovation activities of MNCs in African context. By providing a theoretical structure/lens of our research topic, systematic literature review adds to the coherence in our research (Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2022), and facilitates the integration of a wide range of fields involved in our research into a cohesive whole (Gaur & Kumar, 2018, p. 281) in relation to SI in African context.

3.1.1 Protocol Development:

We commenced our protocol development by deciding our inclusion/exclusion criteria, as well as the key words on which our searches must base. At this stage, we decided on our documents' filtration and selection basis, which helped us to be strategic but also maximize our time and effort and not ignore any relevant source. Our next step was reading previous works that have direct bearing on our research topic. This helped us in identifying the articles to include in our review, as well as the gaps in such previous work. Then we reviewed their contexts, focus, and findings, ensuring they are fit for purpose. An in-depth review of these papers revealed a dearth of literature reviews on the barriers to SI in Africa.

3.1.2 Inclusion/Exclusion Decision based on Title and Keywords:

We commenced our data collection by developing a database of documents to guide our literature review. We followed Fink (2019) recommendation on using reputable business resources and based on our database of documents, we mostly used five search database – Google Scholar, Discovermore, web of science (WoS), Scopus, and Emerald Management. In addition, on a very few occasions, to strengthen our literature review, we also utilized EBSCO, due to its wide collection of eBooks. The search was conducted between October 2022 and October 2024. The search focused (mainly) on peer-reviewed articles.

3.1.3 Filtration and Final Selection:

To ensure that the data in each selected article was thoroughly extracted, we grouped the papers based on the similarities in their context, focus and findings. Through this open coding process, our articles were reduced from the original 1068 to 653 articles, then to the final 159 articles. This rigorous process also helped us to ensure that specific themes have been generated and explored (Gupta *et al.,* 2020). In qualitative research, validity is a necessary condition for reliability, i.e., reliability is the product of validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance the validity of this study, we utilized the services of two well-experienced qualitative researchers who served as both critical friends (Kember *et al*., 1997) and research auditors (Filho & Rettig, 2016) to vet our work at this stage. We compiled the results from the search into a single database and filtered them to eliminate repetitions, irrelevant studies that merely picked up the keywords from our search strings, as well as studies from non-business fields. Our next step was to read through the main body of each text to help us identify if the publication addresses our research question, or, at least, approaches the topic theoretically (Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2022). Finally, we added an additional control step by cross-referencing the reference list of all the papers that address our research question, and we found an additional 7 documents. We also checked the reference list of these 7 additional articles, but no new relevant article was found. This helped us to ensure that no new document that relates to our topic was left out (Gaur & Kumar, 2018; Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2022). Figure 1 below shows the filtering process of the studies used in our review.

"Insert Figure 1 here"

3.2 Data Coding and Analysis

For an effective systemic analysis of literature, we followed Ginsberg and Venkatraman (1995) recommendation on analytical review, and Tranfield *et al.* (2003) suggestion on data extraction. Using the following bibliographic categorization: authors, year of publication, title, journal type (e.g., empirical, conceptual), theoretical basis, research method (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, mixed method), we created a database. We then conducted our analysis of our articles in three phases. Phase 1 involved a descriptive analysis of key journals involved in our study, including the article types, number of publications, research method adopted, as well as the theoretical foundation of each paper. Phase 2 involved a theoretical analysis of each paper to ascertain any aspect of institutional and stakeholder factors that impact MNC involvement in SI in Africa. From this second stage the main themes for our third phase (our conceptual analysis) emerged. These themes are as follows. (1) *Institutional voids and MNCs' SI activities in Africa*, (2) *Stakeholders' influence and MNCs' SI Activities in Africa,* (3) *Challenges in Balancing the conflicting value logics between different interest groups,* (4) *Management Thinking in Africa and MNCs' SI Activities, and* (5) *African Thought System and MNCs' SI Activities.* See section 5. To provide a comprehensive application, scope, and flexibility during our conceptual/thematic analysis, we followed Gaur and Kumar (2018) suggestion on qualitative interpretative content analysis during thematic analysis. This required coding each data, either as a word, sentence, phrase, theme, paragraph, etc. We also followed Gioia *et al.*'s (2013) theory on first- and second-order coding, in addition to Gaur and Kumar (2018) and Drisko and Maschi (2016) recommendations on manual coding approach (for categorizing the data units), before providing a further description of each category. Playing the roles of research auditors and critical friends (Alo, 2020), we independently examined each other's work. Finally, we discussed the results and reached a consensus, before a further in-depth content analysis and final report writing. These research activities have helped us to enhance the accuracy, validity, and reliability of our study (Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2022).

4. Findings

Our literature review revealed that 90 percent of papers focused on SI in some way. Moreover, most of the studies which mentioned Africa, MNCs, or emerging markets have focused largely on technological innovation, business innovation and/or entrepreneurial behavior, rather than SI specifically. Recent African focused management literature (e.g., Alo, 2020, Alo *et al.,* 2024, Amankwah-Amoah, 2018) has also referred to relative lack of specific studies on Africa in different management fields. Hence, we found support for the argument that SI is still an emergent concept (e.g., Holmstrom Lind *et al.,* 2022), even in African context. Below we present detailed thematic findings from our literature review.

4.1 Institutional voids and MNCs' SI activities in Africa.

Unsurprisingly, all the studies that examine SI in sub-Saharan Africa found that the regulatory environment has a major bearing on individual MNCs' intention to invest, invent and transform the African market (e.g., Urban & Kujinga, 2017). Besides, over 75 percent of the studies which focused on Sub-Saharan Africa (15 articles) highlight how the high level of corruption, nepotism, a growing lack of transparency and accountability and an increasing lack of trust in African government (e.g., Alo & Arslan, 2023; Drayton, 2012; Herrington & Kew, 2014; Urban, 2013; Urban & Kujinga, 2017) discourage MNCs with good ideas from collaborating with government agencies to agree on a path for innovation (Herrington & Kew, 2014). Furthermore, researchers have found that the educational system in Africa may lack the capacity to develop the relevant talents and skills (Debrah *et al*., 2018) that will lead to MNCs' growth and international competitiveness and thus drive their SI activities (Amusan, 2018). The educational institutions and entrepreneurial skills development centers in Africa have been found to lack the capacity to develop skilled individuals at required massive scale (Jojo, 2019; Williams, 2011). Earlier studies have also linked the weak education system in the continent to the high level of poverty, lack of development and inequality in Africa (Bloom *et al.,* 2006; Mills, 2012; Spaull, 2013).

Due to resource constraints, institutional voids, cultural divergence, and the general lack of accepted rules and norms in complex environments such as Africa (e.g., Onsongo, 2019), researchers have found that to deliver social values, MNCs must overcome new institutional contexts which restrict their behavior. In fact, disruptive innovation in Africa is affected by both the social setting and institutional environment, which has important implications for MNCs' SI activities (Adegbile & Sarpong, 2017). For instance, the type of technology imported from Beijing are products of the Chinese geopolitical approach, often not tailored to address the challenges of unemployment, poverty, conflicts, and the falling standard of living in Africa (Amusan, 2018). Consequently, Chinese MNCs have been criticized for the rising unemployment and reduced quality of products in Africa (Robinson, 2015; Wallerstein, 2015; Xie *et al.,* 2022). Likewise, the SI model of many MNCs in the continent (such as the Trans-African Hydro-Meteorological Observatory (TAHMO) which is based in Nairobi, Kenya) has been criticized for being technology push innovation instead of a demand-pull, i.e., they fail to consider the needs of the end users (Howell *et al.,* 2018). But since MNCs' SI activities must be embedded within established institutions (Onsongo, 2019), researchers argue the need to look for African solutions to Africa problems, as many foreign technologies have little impact on Africa – economically, socially, and politically (Amusan, 2018), especially given the environmental hazards that have been perpetrated on the continent by foreign MNCs (Katz, 2015). Arguably, some foreign MNCs exploit the high level of ignorance and poverty in Africa, as most of their aid packages are Western-inspired, e.g., in areas of agricultural development, small and medium-scale manufacturing industries, health, infrastructure, and IT development. Yet, attempts to resist their activities by many African states have always failed (Amusan, 2018). Furthermore, recent research has decried MNCs' potential to exclude certain groups in Africa due to a lack of access to IT (e.g., Alo *et al.,* 2024). Despite these issues, the mainstream SI literature has focused largely on the SI activities of MNCs in large emerging economies, especially India, Brazil, China, and Russia (Onsongo, 2019), and with suggested solutions based entirely on Western market ideals (e.g., Mezias & Fakhreddin, 2015; Prahalad & Hammond, 2002). Consequently, we know relatively little or nothing about how the dynamic interactions between a wider range of institutional actors in Africa and foreign MNCs in the region may impact MNCs ability to deliver social values in the complex institutional environment of Africa. We view this as a significant omission in the theoretical development of Africa-focused management literature.

4.2 Stakeholders' influence and MNCs' SI Activities in Africa

More than 50% of the Africa-focused literature (10 articles) stressed how the lack of political initiatives, poor regulatory modifications, and a decreasing political confidence negatively impact MNCs intent to engage in any meaningful collaboration with African leaders or their representatives (e.g., Alo & Arslan, 2023; Baker, 2011; Schlaegel & Koenig, 2014; Urban, 2015). Moreover, over 60 percent of the Africa-focused literature (12 articles) emphasize the high level of corruption, institutional voids, the pre-existing general economic and social insecurities, institutional complexity and resource constraints as barriers to SI activities of MNCs in Africa (e.g., Alo *et al.,* 2024; Barnard, 2020b; Onsongo, 2019). For instance, some

MNCs in countries such as Ghana, Madagascar, Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa etc have been found colluding with corrupt government officials to satisfy their individual political/business interests at the expense of delivering social value to their host communities (e.g., Zekeri, 2016). Similarly, due to regulatory gaps (Davy *et al.,* 2021), social amenities delivered by MNCs in Africa – water, electricity, sanitation, public transportation, etc., are low both in quality and quantity – especially to consumers at the base of the market pyramid (Varadarajan, 2014). Consequently, the continent has persistent mal-development, deindustrialization, unemployment, and environmental crises (Amusan, 2018). This situation has driven consumers to often engage in ecologically harmful consumption behaviors (Varadarajan, 2014). Studies on the impacts of the institutional environment on African businesses (e.g., Zoogah *et al.,* 2015) have also shown that in most cases government involvement is detrimental to enterprise activities in Africa, including SI.

4.3 Challenges in Balancing the conflicting value logics between different interest groups

Several reviewed studies (28 articles) highlighted the challenges in managing diverse ethnic/interest groups, especially in a continent like Africa with over 3,000 different ethnic groups who speak more than 2,100 different languages. The theorizing around the institutional logic's viewpoint offers a theoretical framework for understanding how shared sets of assumptions, beliefs, values, and established principles can influence the creation of social value, such that multiple (or contradictory) institutional logics can lead to conflicts and tensions between individuals and organizations. For instance, with over 371 ethnic groups in Nigeria and coupled with the diversities in their languages, believes, and values, balancing their conflicting interests to stir up collaboration and commitment to co-create social value and value capture between these diverse regions and interest groups could be challenging for the social activists (Altuna *et al*., 2015; Esen & Maden-Eiyusta, 2019; Ghauri *et al*., 2014; Jo *et al*., 2018). Earlier studies have found that MNCs' SI activities are constrained by a substantial degree of institutional complexity (e.g., Voltan & De Fuentes, 2016) and institutional distance (Manning & Roessler, 2014) between collaborators from different regions with different mindsets and value systems. More recent studies have found that this could lead to mistrust, misallocations and mismatches of power due to misunderstandings and power struggles between MNCs and social activists representing diverse cultural/ethnic groups (Holmstrom Lind *et al*., 2022). Similarly, researchers have found that lack of social ties [between collaborators] (Mirvis *et al*., 2016) could lead to differences in organizational identities, structures, mission statements, and operational patterns, resulting in a low level of initial trust (Manning & Roessler, 2014), due to opposing values and logic (Harrisson *et al*., 2012; Muthuri *et al*., 2012), which could result in competition and rivalry (Holmstrom Lind *et al*., 2022), instead of co-creation of social value.

4.4 African Thought System, Management Thinking in Africa and MNCs' SI Activities

Expectedly, more than 80 percent of Africa focused papers (21 articles) have found management thinking in the region a barrier to MNCs' capacity to deliver social value to their host communities. Researchers (e.g., Adegbile & Sarpong, 2017; Dana *et al*., 2018) have identified indigenous managers' inability to understand the needs of the community and communicate such needs to MNCs', and which is crucial in tailoring their SI initiatives to capture such needs. This is consistent with earlier works that found managers' capacity to understand the market, to assess, adapt, and extend resources, and match those resources against the competitors in response to the market dynamics to typify successful MNCs operations (e.g., Buccieri *et al.,* 2021; Dimitratos *et al.,* 2016; Jie *et al.,* 2023). However, research examining managerial capabilities has mainly focused on the developed markets (Andersson & Evers, 2015; Pehrsson *et al.,* 2015; Weerawardena *et al.,* 2019), which presents an imbalance in the theoretical development of the management literature (Buccieri *et al.,* 2020; Park & Xiao, 2020). Hence, a visible gap exists for theory development in the management realms concerning the incorporation of management thinking in Africa.

Furthermore, over 60 per cent of Africa-focused literature (13 articles) linked the African thought system with the poor SI activities of MNCs in the continent. This is consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Ahiauzu, 1983, 1986) that examined the African workers' thought system in relation to their workplace behavior and their capacity to create and deploy SI activities to help MNCs meet their obligations to deliver social value to African society. The links between an individual worker's attitude, knowledge management capabilities, level of creativity (Jafari-Sadeghi *et al.,* 2021) their risk-taking behaviors, international entrepreneurial orientation, international entrepreneurial behavior, and innovative behavior (McDougall & Oviatt, 2000; Jie *et al.,* 2023) have also been highlighted by earlier scholars. Given that each person carries their thought system to their workplace, when compared with their Western-trained counterparts, researchers have found that the way an average African worker perceive their workplace environments and how they respond to issues at work seems to vary significantly from their counterparts from other cultures (e.g., Ahiauzu, 1986, p.37; Alo & Arslan, 2021; Barnard, 2020a). For instance, researchers have found that while Western-trained managers prioritize technical intelligence [which is key for inventing and distributing novel products and services to the African society] (Kerr *et al.,* 1973), their African counterparts prefer social intelligence (Ahiauzu, 1986). Consequently, African managers may prefer to retain a non-resourceful worker due to the fear of facing the wrath of their community or their kindred, unlike their Western-trained counterparts (Ahiauzu, 1986; Jackson, 2002). Such practices can potentially undermine an organization's SI capacity, including MNCs.

5. Discussions and Implications

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This paper contributes to the literature on SI by addressing the specific barriers that MNCs face in Africa, a region that remains underexplored in SI studies (Weerakoon, 2023). Using a review of 159 studies, the paper highlights how institutional voids, weak governance, and cultural barriers constrain MNCs' ability to implement SI effectively. Existing studies on SI have predominantly focused on developed economies or emerging markets such as Asia and Latin America (Adro & Fernandes, 2022). However, the African context presents unique challenges that require region-specific SI frameworks. This research offers a deeper understanding of how MNCs can adapt to SI activities to overcome the complex socio-political environment in Africa. Also, while institutional theory traditionally emphasizes the role of formal institutions in shaping organizational behavior, this study highlights the critical importance of addressing weak governance, corruption, and regulatory inconsistencies in emerging markets (Adegbile & Sarpong, 2017; Sahin & Mert, 2023), including Africa while focusing on SI. Specifically, our review showed that MNCs need to navigate the tensions between their home countries' institutional pressures and their host countries' socio-political realities and adapt their SI strategies to local conditions in Africa.

Moreover, our review showed that MNCs that engage with local stakeholders early in their SI processes can co-create social value, thereby enhancing both legitimacy and financial sustainability. By collaborating with local communities, MNCs can design SI initiatives that are more inclusive and aligned with local needs, which can help overcome institutional barriers and increase the impact of their efforts (Tran & Adomako, 2021). Hence, our paper enriches extant literature by specifically illustrating the challenges and opportunities of stakeholder-driven SI in the African context.

6.2 Managerial and policy implications

Our findings show the criticality of avoiding rigid innovation framework for SI activities in Africa especially by MNCs. Keeping in view, multiplicity of actors involved, visible role of culture, a better strategy for MNC managers in Africa is to co-create solutions with local communities, ensuring that innovation strategies align with indigenous thought systems, cultural values, and socio-economic realities. Moreover, given the widespread distrust in governments and institutions, managers should actively engage with trusted local intermediaries (e.g., NGOs, community leaders, religious groups) to build legitimacy of their SI activities. At the same time, to deal with conflicting value logics, MNCs must develop communication and governance mechanisms especially linked to SI activities, that openly acknowledge and mediate tensions between profit motives, and community needs. Talking of specific SI initiatives, we suggest supporting more educational and entrepreneurial development programs by MNCs is recommended so that SI activities lead to long term collaboration with competitive local actors including entrepreneurs.

A major policy implication of our paper relates to enabling regulatory environment to support SI activities while at the same time fostering cross-sector collaboration between government officials, MNCs, local businesses, civil society, and academia to collaboratively develop inclusive innovation agendas. Finally, even though corruption is a long-standing issue in that context, some policy efforts should be made to safeguard SI activities specifically as these activities have potential to have a significant spillover effect from a development perspective.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the barriers faced by multinational corporations (MNCs) in engaging in social innovation (SI) within Africa, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, despite adopting a systematic literature review approach, potential biases may arise from the authors' perspectives on Africa, which could influence the interpretation of some findings. Additionally, the review may inadvertently overemphasize the significance of certain studies in the SI field due to limitations in available literature specifically focused on Africa. Future research can mitigate these limitations by incorporating a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to expand on our findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing SI in Africa.

Future research should explore the application of diverse theoretical frameworks, such as institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and social entrepreneurship, in the African context.

Applying multiple theoretical lenses could enhance the depth and rigor of analyses, offering a broader understanding of SI dynamics in emerging markets.

Furthermore, empirical research across multiple African countries is encouraged to assess whether cultural and institutional influences on SI activities vary by region. Such comparative studies would help determine if specific country-level factors uniquely impact MNCs' ability to implement SI initiatives, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of SI in diverse African settings. Cross-country analyses can provide additional insights into region-specific challenges and opportunities, informing strategies that are sensitive to local contexts.

Lastly, longitudinal studies examining the evolution of MNCs' SI strategies over time would offer valuable insights into how institutional and cultural shifts influence SI in Africa. This approach could reveal how MNCs can adapt their practices in response to changing socio-political environments, enhancing both theoretical knowledge and practical guidance for SI implementation in emerging markets. In sum, this study establishes a foundation for future research on SI in Africa, urging researchers to pursue empirical, comparative, and longitudinal studies that further investigate the unique factors shaping SI activities across the continent.

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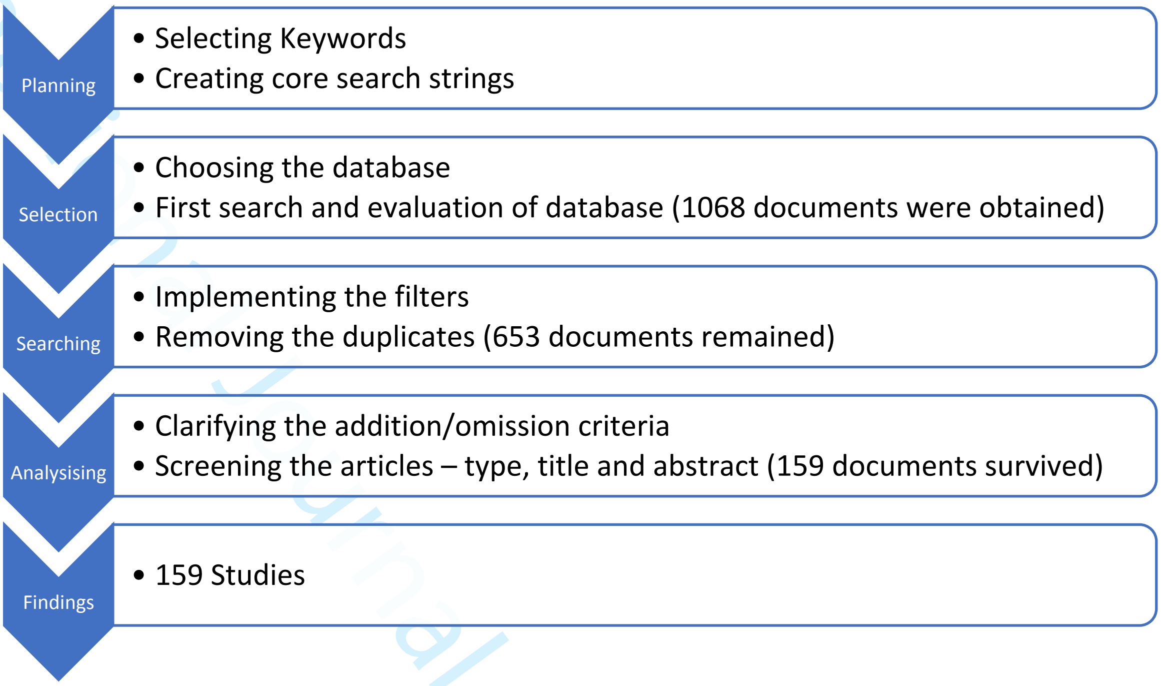
Figure 1: The filtering process of the studies



Source: Authors' own work