

Frequency of Use of SDGS in Entrepreneurship Research

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have gained attention for their societal importance and are being referenced in various contexts. In entrepreneurial research, they are often cited to tackle social issues. However, this differs in top-tier entrepreneurship journals, where references to SDGs are rare compared to the prevalent use of the concept of sustainability. This paper aims to explore how SDGs are treated in these journals and to provide guidance for future research in entrepreneurship. We analyze journals to see how SDGs are used in each paper. The findings show that while many articles mention SDGs, direct references to them are uncommon. This study highlights the challenge of fully addressing SDGs in entrepreneurial research. It also recognizes that this survey is just a snapshot, and results may change as we approach 2030, the target year for SDGs. There is ongoing debate on whether to define standards loosely or strictly based on SDGs. This survey is an interim report, and results may fluctuate as we near the significant milestone of 2030.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sustainability, entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneur, social entrepreneur

1. Introduction

The societal significance of the SDGs has been highlighted and referenced in various contexts. Entrepreneurs are sometimes positioned as agents capable of achieving economic growth while addressing global challenges. In Japan, under the "Startup 5-Year Plan," policies are being advanced to support startups and their founders, aiming at both economic growth and the resolution of global issues. This movement is not limited to Japan but seems to be progressing in various regions worldwide. In entrepreneurial research, there is often mention of SDGs as entities capable of addressing social issues.

Entrepreneurs are typically seen as individuals who pursue opportunities to gain experience in their businesses. From this perspective, if entrepreneurs can recognize and capitalize on new developments and initiatives surrounding sustainability, they can potentially reap benefits not only in economic terms but also in non-economic aspects. It was therefore expected that many papers in entrepreneurial research would reference SDGs.

Hence, Onose (2024) investigated the extent of SDG references in entrepreneurial research. The findings revealed, firstly, a decline in attention towards the term "SDGs" since November 2021, secondly, a discernible presence of SDGs in global entrepreneurial research, and thirdly, a relatively low number of references to SDGs in top-tier journals in the field of entrepreneurial research, contrary to the presumed deep connection between SDGs and this research domain.

The scarcity of referenced articles in top-tier journals, which are assumed to be closely related to SDGs, was an interesting result. However, as the study solely focused on the “use of SDGs,” it did not shed light on the contexts and extent to which SDGs are being addressed.

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate how SDGs are treated in top-tier journals and to guide future entrepreneurial research. To achieve this objective, articles referencing SDGs were extracted from top-tier journals as identified by Onose (2024), and an investigation was conducted into the extent and manner of SDG usage in each paper.

The findings of this investigation reveal that many articles published in top-tier journals that mention SDGs rarely directly reference the SDGs themselves. Furthermore, only a small subset of these articles extensively discusses the concept and practical application of SDGs. In other words, even among the limited number of articles in top-tier journals that reference SDGs, there is a strikingly minimal concrete demonstration of how closely they align with specific SDG targets, which presents an interesting fact.

This study identifies a challenge in presenting the comprehensive treatment of SDGs in entrepreneurial research. Additionally, it acknowledges that this survey represents an interim report, and there is a possibility for fluctuations in results as we approach the significant milestone of 2030, the target year for SDGs.

2. Literature Review

Entrepreneurship research is a field that seeks to elucidate entrepreneurs from various perspectives. Within this field, entrepreneurs are often viewed as agents of social innovation. Entrepreneurs are often seen as individuals who pursue opportunities to grow their businesses. Along these lines, if entrepreneurs can perceive and capitalize on opportunities for new developments and initiatives related to sustainability, they can contribute not only to economic benefits but also to non-economic advantages.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on September 25, 2015. The agenda introduced the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets (<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>). While the SDGs have become widely recognized, it's important to note that they build upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established in 2000. Consequently, in entrepreneurial studies, there is often a focus on sustainability and sustainable development rather than solely adhering to the UN-led SDGs.

Even before the introduction of the SDGs at the UN, sustainable development had been a subject of interest in entrepreneurial studies.

Several pieces of literature also confirm the relevance of sustainability and environmental considerations. Within entrepreneurship research, this area has witnessed the emergence of numerous concepts over time. Hall et al. (2010) conducted a review of past literature. Following their work, concepts such as "sustainable entrepreneurship" (Dean and McMullen, 2007), "environmental entrepreneurship" (Keogh and Polonsky, 1998), and "ecopreneurship" (Schaper, 2002) have been introduced to explain aspects of environmental sustainability.

Notably, in 2010, Volume 25, Issue 5 of the *Journal of Business Venturing* featured a special edition focusing on Sustainable Development and Entrepreneurship. The first paper by Hall et al. (2010) introduced the treatment of sustainable development in the field of entrepreneurship and positioned entrepreneurs within it. Many publications issuing dire warnings about environmental disasters often conclude with an optimistic tone, positioning heroic entrepreneurs as saviors. However, positioning entrepreneurship as a panacea is not always accurate. Academic discourse on sustainable development within the literature on entrepreneurship is sparse.

Despite the lack of substantial discourse at the time in 2010, given that the SDGs were announced in 2015, it was assumed that there would be some accumulation of discussion by the year 2024. However, opportunities to encounter academic papers specifically addressing the SDGs are limited. One exception is Günzel-Jensen et al. (2020), who discussed the SDGs from the perspective of social entrepreneurs, highlighting that "scholars have so far largely neglected the critical question of whether and how social entrepreneurs utilize the SDG framework." This indicates that discourse in the field of entrepreneurial studies related to sustainability remains sparse even today.

As existing research indicates, even before the concept of SDGs emerged, there have been portrayals of entrepreneurs who address environmental issues, solve various challenges, and drive innovation.

In the field of entrepreneurial research, the concept of entrepreneurs solving global challenges, such as social entrepreneurs, has been prevalent, thus it has a long history as a theme. This paper focuses on the term "SDGs," which was introduced in 2015. Therefore, it is not a valid argument structure to suggest that the field of entrepreneurial research lacks attention to global issues simply because there is limited use of "SDGs" in it. Noteworthy is the fact that Sustainable Development was a featured theme in the *Journal of Business Venturing* in 2010, indicating a history of conscious investigation and analysis concerning the resolution of global challenges.

The reason for addressing SDGs lies in the fact that they provide a set of goals to be achieved. SDGs outline 17 major goals and 169 targets to be achieved by 2030, offering relatively specific objectives. Their achievement is understood to be encompassed within the broader theme of Sustainability. While it may be argued that achieving Sustainability is the main goal regardless of SDGs, this implies there is no necessity to establish or reference the framework of SDGs. It remains unclear whether there is an inherent necessity for SDGs as a global truth, but this has not been definitively established at this point.

3. Research Method

Six top-tier journals are selected following the method outlined by Onose (2024). (Using the web-based database "Scimago Journal & Country Rank," (<https://www.scimagojr.com/>) and its indicator "SJR," top-ranking entrepreneurship journals are identified. Journals such as the *Journal of Business Venturing* and *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, which have traditionally been major publications in this field, were among the top rankings. Therefore, this

database was thought suitable as a data source. When viewed in order of SJR ranking, the top journals that ranked high included the *Journal of Business Venturing*, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, *International Small Business Journal*, *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, and *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*.)

Onose (2024) has already demonstrated the number of papers using Sustainability and SDGs. The frequency of Sustainability usage is overwhelmingly high, while the number of papers using "SDG" in any form is extremely low. Even if the context-ignoring search results show a small number, it does not necessarily mean the discussions in each paper are lacking in substance.

Table 1. Number of Papers Using Sustainability or SDGs

Journal title	Sustainability	SDG
<i>Journal of Business Venturing</i>	680	2
<i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</i>	701	8
<i>Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal</i>	228	3
<i>International Small Business Journal</i>	550	2
<i>Journal of Business Venturing Insights</i>	125	2
<i>Entrepreneurship and Regional Development</i>	578	4

On May 3, 2024, articles are examined on each journal's website by searching for "SDG" and counting the frequency of its usage in the text. The examination includes scrutinizing the articles that come up in the search results to determine how often "SDG" appears in the main body of the text. Among the articles identified by Onose (2024), those in which the initials of the authors match "SDG" are also counted, regardless of whether they are unrelated to sustainability. Additionally, the search is specifically for "SDGs" and not for "Sustainability," so it is not an exhaustive pursuit of theoretical lineage.

In conducting this survey, a new search was conducted in May 2024, resulting in an increased number of counted papers compared to previous searches. Additionally, to explore the relevance of the papers, VOSViewer was used to investigate mutual citations and other factors. However, due to the small sample size and the discovery that each paper was cited, no remarkable results were obtained.

4. Finding and Discussion

The results are shown in Table 2 below. Seven hits are attributed to author names, and one hit is identified as an abbreviation for a scale. These are unrelated to the original Sustainable Development Goals.

Table 2. Number of “SDGs” Used in each Article Published in Journals

Name	Journal	Year	SDG	Notes
Fernhaber & Zou(2022)	JBV	2022	16	Importance of SDGs and Potential Contribution to Entrepreneurship Research
Argiolas et al. (2024)	JBV	2024	2	Illustrative Introduction
Sauers (1983)	ETP	1983	0	Papers Before 2015 (Author Names and SDG Hits)
Sirmon & Hitt (2003)	ETP	2003	0	Papers Before 2015 (Author Names and SDG Hits)
Sirmon et al. (2008)	ETP	2008	0	Papers Before 2015 (Author Names and SDG Hits)
Chirico et al. (2011)	ETP	2011	0	Papers Before 2015 (Author Names and SDG Hits)
Johnson & Schaltegger (2020)	ETP	2020	14	Reference to the Relationship between SDGs and Various Goals in Past Literature
Gomez-Mejia et al. (2014)	ETP	2014	0	Papers Before 2015 (Author Names and SDG Hits)
George et al. (2021)	ETP	2021	7	Positioning SDGs as Achievements to be Attained
Clark et al. (2024)	ETP	2024	1	Introduction of Yadav et al., Referenced in EO Research
Chirico et al. (2011)	SEJ	2011	0	Papers Before 2015 (Author Names and SDG Hits)
Pahnke et al. (2023)	SEJ	2023	0	Author Names and SDG Hits
Bradley et al. (2021)	SEJ	2021	2	Reference to SDGs as Future Challenges
Vu et al. (2024)	ISBJ	2024	82	Paper on Family Ethics, Interpretation of Interviewees' Connection to Various SDG Goals, Linking Continuous Monitoring and Education (SDG 4) to Maintaining Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Relating to (SDG 12)
Riandita et al. (2022)	ISBJ	2022	1	Indication of SDG 12.3 as an Issue to be Addressed by Sustainable Ventures
Günzel-Jensen et al. (2020)	JBVI	2020	212	Acknowledgment of Limited Understanding Regarding SDGs from the Perspective of Social Entrepreneurial Ventures (Not Taking the Specific Relevance or Merits of SDGs for Granted), Instead Explaining How SDGs are Embodied and Practiced in the Daily Efforts of Local Social Entrepreneurial Ventures, Illustrating Issues with SDGs such as

International Conference of Organizational Innovation 2024

Proceedings

ICOI

2024

e-ISSN: 3064-6030
FMI, Vol 1
23-25 July 2024

				"Identification Tool" and "Convenience", Mentioning Rejection of Top-Down Approaches
Koomson et al. (2024)	JBVI	2024	5	New Implications Mentioned for Goals 8, 3, and 10
Coad et al. (2015)	JBVI	2015	6	Zero Counts? Symbols Used as Measurement Indicators
Manocha et al. (2024)	JBVI	2024	1	One Mention at the Beginning of Gender Equality
Baù et al. (2021)	ERD	2021	12	Family Business Research, Highlighting SDGs as International Issues
Gaddefors et al. (2024)	ERD	2024	1	Only Mentioned at the Beginning: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth
Biggeri et al. (2022)	ERD	2022	2	Reference to SDGs in the Context of the Significance of Immigrant Entrepreneurs
Lent (2022)	ERD	2022	1	Mention of SDGs When Expanding on Necessity
Haugh (2020)	ERD	2020	6	Overcoming Poverty Beyond the Importance of SDGs and the Potential Contribution of Entrepreneurship Research. Introduction of Case Studies Aligned with SDGs.
Aragaw et al. (2024)	ERD	2024	2	Degree of Mention in Literature Review
Jungk & Waldkirch (2024)	ERD	2024	2	Reference to SDGs as Issues to be Addressed

(note: JBV=*Journal of Business Venturing*, ETP = *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, SEJ = *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, ISBJ = *International Small Business Journal*, JBVI = *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, ERD = *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*)

(references: The author based this on the websites of the following journals: *Journal of Business Venturing*, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, *International Small Business Journal*, *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*)

The paper that used the most SDGs was Günzel-Jensen et al. (2020), citing them 212 times. This paper analyzed and discussed the utilization of SDGs from the perspective of social entrepreneurship. Following was Vu et al. (2024), referencing SDGs 82 times. This paper interpreted SDGs through the lens of family ethics. Family business research is closely related to entrepreneurship studies. It presents specific SDGs such as Education SDG 4, Maintaining Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), and (SDG 12), with explanations provided.

What is evident from these findings is that there are few discussions directly addressing SDGs, with Günzel-Jensen et al. (2020) being the only one to analyze SDGs from the perspective of

traditional social entrepreneurship. Vu et al. (2024) also analyze SDGs from the perspective of family ethics and relate them to several goals. However, most other articles take a stance or provide content that relates to their intended purpose, such as mentioning SDGs in interviews, with minimal frequency of usage. The situation is different from the active discussions on SDGs found in many other papers.

Papers that less than double digits number of use of SDG are unable to thoroughly discuss SDGs. Thus, many papers highlighted in this study indicate the reality that SDGs are scarcely addressed in entrepreneurship research. The findings of this survey suggest that SDGs, rarely used in entrepreneurship studies, have also been discussed in-depth infrequently. Even researchers utilizing SDGs have only made passing references to them.

Why are these results observed? Günzel-Jensen et al. (2020) suggest three ways SDG: SDG evangelism, SDG opportunism, and SDG denial. Some entrepreneurs embrace SDG evangelism, using the SDG framework to propel their endeavors forward, while others engage in SDG opportunism, responding to external pressures by incorporating SDGs into their strategies. Conversely, some adopt the SDG denial stance, believing that SDGs and management are incompatible.

Not all researchers who study social entrepreneurs or sustainable entrepreneurship subscribe to "SDG denial." Therefore, it's likely that many researchers fit into the category of SDG opportunism. Furthermore, grappling with the vague concept of SDGs while striving to maintain lofty ideals can be challenging for researchers. It might be simpler for researchers to define concepts using Sustainability, which isn't directly linked to the UN, when dealing with such ambiguity. Onose (2024) shows that Sustainability is far more prevalent in research than SDGs, due to these factors.

There is a question of what constitutes the SDGs and what is related to sustainability. Before explaining the survey, let me briefly explain. Shepherd & Patzelt (2011), who early on focused on sustainability, advocated for "sustainable entrepreneurship," which prioritizes the maintenance of nature, life, and communities through the pursuit of business opportunities. Following their definition, they explain what does not fall under "sustainable entrepreneurship." In their view, research that does not simultaneously consider what should be developed is not a study of sustainable entrepreneurship. Records of temperature change would not qualify because the developmental aspect is not considered. While climate change is currently an important issue, certain conditions must be met. Also, there must be an explanation of what is being sustained. Research on child survival through the creation of new antibodies for vaccination is excluded because it's unclear what is being sustained. It's worth noting they explained this within the context of sustainable entrepreneurship, unrelated to SDGs.

There are no strict constraints on whether an activity is related to SDGs. Speculatively, it may stem from a pure intention not to constrain SDGs usage. However, conversely, due to the lack of a defined scope, even with high ideals for problem-solving, the relevance of one's efforts becomes ambiguous. Similar occurrences may be happening about SDGs. For instance, is there a possibility that content that should not originally be announced as SDGs is included?

Conversely, is there a possibility that content that should be announced as SDGs is not announced due to hesitation in referring to SDGs? Since this analysis remains simple and limited to searching, it does not investigate deeply enough into this matter.

The issue of determining whether one's activities align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be particularly challenging for individuals engaged in sustainability or social issues. While their activities may outwardly align with the principles and directions of the SDGs, doubts may arise when considering the specific wording of the SDGs. For example, during a community campaign to promote geriatric medical care posters, I encountered this boundary dilemma. Determining which SDG goal this activity aligns with becomes important. While the responsible department might categorize it under "Goal 3," the specific targets of SDG 3 do not include items related to geriatric care. It is merely explained as related based on the broad wording of "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." In this case, can we confidently say that this activity or research is truly related to the SDGs? And if not, how should it be addressed differently? Are we neglecting the boundaries of the SDGs' scope in our discussions? Such instances highlight the need for clarity in defining the scope of SDGs and their practical application. It prompts a deeper reflection on whether activities genuinely contribute to the SDGs or merely superficially align with them. This emphasizes the importance of critically evaluating the relevance of actions and research to ensure meaningful contributions towards achieving the SDGs' objectives.

If we restrict our focus solely to SDGs rather than Sustainability, it would likely be after 2030 when we can rigorously identify the conditions under which SDGs are effectively achieved. What specific criteria must each goal meet to be considered accomplished? Is it sufficient for them to be relevant, or ultimately, have we not progressed much since the Journal of Business Venturing's special issue on Sustainable Development in 2010?

Is it better to loosely define standards and conditions and increase various experimental surveys, or to establish strict definitions and conditions based on SDGs, formulate initiatives accordingly, and strive to meet those goals? In the former case, while it allows for open discussion, there is a risk of scattered arguments and a decrease in research truly contributing to sustainability. In contrast, the latter approach may lead to more efficient progress in research, but the defined definitions and conditions of SDGs themselves may not necessarily contribute to sustainability.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, only a small fraction of the literature thoroughly discusses the concept and practical application of SDGs, with a remarkably low incidence of concrete demonstrations of their alignment with specific SDG targets. The study acknowledges its limitations in presenting a comprehensive overview of how SDGs are addressed in entrepreneurial research and suggests that fluctuations in results may occur as we approach the milestone of 2030. Only a very small fraction of the literature thoroughly discusses the concept and practical application of SDGs. In other words, even among the scarce top-tier articles that mention SDGs, there is a remarkably low incidence of concrete demonstrations regarding how closely they align with specific SDG

targets. This interesting fact was highlighted in this paper.

The study raises questions about the definition and practical application of SDGs, suggesting that rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness may not occur until after 2030. Furthermore, in light of the methodological rigor inherent in scholarly research, it becomes imperative to deliberate on the specific endeavors that have effectively advanced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such considerations frequently entail retrospective evaluations. Even in cases where research endeavors are presently ongoing, the dissemination of findings substantiating their contributions to the attainment of the 17 SDGs might not materialize until after the year 2030. Additionally, it is conceivable that there will be a surge in scholarly publications dedicated to assessing the impact of SDGs post-2030, aligning with the designated timeline for evaluating the SDGs' efficacy.

There is debate over whether to loosely define standards and conditions or establish strict definitions based on SDGs. The former approach allows for open discussion, but risks scattered arguments, while the latter may lead to more efficient progress in research but may not necessarily contribute to sustainability.

Furthermore, this survey represents an interim report, and there is a possibility for fluctuations in results as we approach the significant milestone of 2030, which marks a key point for SDGs.

Note: This paper used generative AI in some parts of the English translation process.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Chia-Hui Huang the Chairperson of Taiwan SDGs Association and Dr. Masayoshi Toma the Professor of Wako University for valuable contributions.

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International Conference of Organizational Innovation 2024

Proceedings

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2024

e-ISSN: 3064-6030
FMI, Vol 1
23-25 July 2024

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