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Digital Transformation in the Framework of Social Sciences: A Bibliometric Evaluation of the Web of Science Database

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the widespread use of the internet and the development of new technologies, the need for a fundamental technological change in public and private institutions has emerged. Especially in public institutions, the digital transformation process is critical to provide faster and more effective services to citizens, as well as to strengthen principles such as transparency and accountability. Furthermore, digital transformation plays a crucial role in developing sustainable public policies by optimising the use of public resources. Thus, academic studies on digital transformation have been increasing over the years. This study conducts a bibliometric analysis of research on digital transformation within the social sciences. With the RStudio-based Biblioshiny program, 4,563 articles published in the Web of Science database between 2002 and 2024 were included in the analysis. Because of the analysis, it was seen that China, Italy, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom were the countries with the highest number of publications. Chinese researchers are active and pioneering in the literature. It is thought that the bibliometric analysis of studies in the field of digital transformation will contribute to the creation of strategic road maps that emphasise the importance of this transformation for public institutions and organisations. This study presents a general literature review on digital transformation in social sciences and serves as a resource for researchers who want to conduct studies on the subject in the future.

Keywords Digital Transformation · Public Administration · Digitalisation · Innovation · Bibliometric Analysis · Biblioshiny

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Digital Transformation in the Framework of Social Sciences: A Bibliometric Evaluation of the Web of Science Database

Digitalisation, defined as the conversion of analog information into digital formats, is now prevalent across various domains, including individuals, businesses, public institutions, and social structures (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016, p. 1). Digital transformation is defined as the radical reshaping of the ways of doing business, organisations, processes and cultures of organisations by digital technologies (Hess et al., 2016, p. 124). While digital transformation contributes to economic growth by increasing innovation and productivity in businesses, public institutions and societies, it also has transformative effects on workforce structure, consumer behaviour, public services and social relations.

Since the 2000s, digital transformation has necessitated a radical technological shift in both the public and business sectors with the spread of the internet, the development of mobile devices, and the rise of technologies such as big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence. The new business model innovation that emerged as a result of digital transformation has radically changed the behaviour and expectations of consumers, creating a serious transformation pressure on traditional companies (Verhoef, et al., 2021, p. 889). In recent years, companies in almost all sectors have been implementing various digitalisation practices in their core business operations and organisational structures in order to discover new digital technologies and integrate these technologies into their companies (Matt et al., 2015, p. 339). Digital transformation processes require the use of new digital technologies, such as mobile, artificial intelligence, blockchain, cloud and internet of things technologies, to streamline operations or enable major business improvements to create new business models and enhance customer experience (Warner & Wäger, 2019, p. 326).

With the rapid development of technology and the widespread use of the internet, it has become necessary to integrate traditional management approaches with digital transformation in the public sector. The main objectives of digital transformation in the public sector are to improve decision-making processes, use public resources efficiently and provide fast and effective services to citizens (Uslu, 2023, p. 17). Because of digital transformation processes, it is seen that many digital information and communication technologies are used in the public sector. Applications such as electronic government, electronic municipality, artificial intelligence-based applications, and smart cities are some of the public services that are realised using these technologies (Yaman et al., 2020, p. 43).

In this study, a bibliometric analysis of the concept of digital transformation will be carried out using the RStudio-based Biblioshiny program. This analysis aims to determine the course of digital transformation-oriented studies and to reveal the trends that can guide the research in the near future with research inferences. Looking at the bibliometric studies in the literature addressing the concept of digital transformation, Henriette et al. (2015) conducted a detailed literature review on the Scopus database to explore the nature of digital transformation. Reis et al. (2018) conducted a systematic literature review of 206 peer-reviewed articles from the Institute for Scientific Information - Web of Science database to provide insights into the state of the art of digital transformation and to make recommendations for future research. Vial (2019) analysed the concept of digital transformation inductively through eight building blocks by accessing 282 peer-reviewed publications from three databases. Özispa and Akdaş (2019) applied bibliometric analysis with Microsoft Excel and MAXQDA programs to 31 postgraduate theses on digital transformation in the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) National Thesis Center and ProQuest databases between 2009-2019. Akgün Akan (2020) applied bibliometric analysis with SPSS 25 program to 309 doctoral dissertations on digital

transformation prepared in the field of communication between 1998 and 2019, which he scanned from YÖK National Thesis Center. Karaboğa and Karaboğa (2021) analysed 111 articles scanned from the Web of Science database by using the RStudio-based Bibliometrix package and VOSviewer program together to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on digital transformation studies. Zhu et al. (2021) selected 865 articles published in the Web of Science database between 2000 and 2020 and applied bibliometric and visual analysis methods to these articles. Nadkarni and Prügl (2021) developed inductive thematic maps by analysing 58 peer-reviewed articles published between 2001 and 2019 addressing different aspects of the concept of digital transformation. Kraus et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative analysis of 39 publications based on selected keywords in the context of digital business transformation. Hanelt et al. (2021) systematically analysed a total of 279 peer-reviewed articles selected from various databases and categorised into three groups for the literature review on digital transformation and put forward four perspectives. Shi et al. (2022) subjected 4,853 publications containing the concept of digital transformation between 1999 and 2021 to bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer, Harzing's Publish or Perish and SciMAT software. Ravšelj et al. (2022) subjected 9,175 documents scanned from the Scopus database between 2001 and 2020 under the concept of digital age governance to bibliometric analysis in VOSviewer software. Gündoğdu (2022) examined the studies in DergiPark and YÖK National Thesis Center electronic databases on the subject of governance in public administration between 2002 and 2021 using a bibliometric analysis method. Doru (2023) conducted a bibliographic analysis of 765 articles published between 1992 and 2023 with digital public service content in the field of political science and public administration using the VOSviewer software. Baysal (2023) analysed 3,000 articles on digital transformation published in the Web of Science database between 2011 and 2021 through the VOSviewer package program and reached various findings on the literature. Twinomurinzi and Gumbo (2023) conducted a bibliometric analysis by selecting 606 academic publications to understand the nature of digital transformation in African countries that consistently rank low in the United Nations E-Government Development Index. Pham et al. (2024) applied bibliometric analysis to 414 peer-reviewed articles and conference proceedings by searching the Elsevier's Scopus database for the keywords digital transformation and public sector between 2008 and 2023. Gökhan and Timurcanday Özmen (2024) visualised the data of 112 articles scanned in the Web of Science database that addressed the concepts of employee experience and digital transformation together through MAXQDA 2022 software. Virgilio et al. (2024) searched the keywords human resource management and digitalisation in the public sector on Google Scholar and Web of Science databases, selected 336 articles from 194 journals published between 1985 and 2022 and analysed them with RStudio-based Bibliometrix software.

As can be seen in the literature, bibliometric studies on digital transformation are becoming increasingly important and are the subject of extensive research in both the public and private sector. Research focusing on the impact of digital transformation elements on the structural transformation of organisations has been increasing significantly. Studies on the concept of digital transformation by researchers in various countries using various databases and analysis programs are supported by bibliometric analyses. This situation shows that the wide-ranging effects of digital transformation in academic, economic, social and cultural fields are increasing and that efforts to develop policies and strategies in this direction continue.

Methodology

In this section, the purpose of the study, the process of obtaining and analysing the data, and the findings are presented.

Purpose and Importance of the Research

This research aims to identify the prominent trends in studies on digital transformation. For this reason, it is aimed to present a general framework for the research area through bibliometric analysis on basic issues such as concepts, authors, trends, collaborations and citation analysis in articles in the field of social sciences where the concept of digital transformation is prominent. In this way, a general literature summary and research route will be created for researchers who want to study the subject in the future. The difference between this study and other studies is that it deals with the concept of digital transformation within the framework of social sciences and is the most up-to-date study in the field.

Data and Analysis

Bibliometric analysis employs statistical and mathematical methods to examine scientific publications and their content. Bibliometric analysis is an important and widely used research method. The techniques used in bibliometric analysis can be examined in four basic groups. These include bibliometric analysis of different subjects, bibliometric analysis of scientific journals, bibliometric analysis of scientific outputs in different regions and countries, and bibliometric analysis of universities and scientific institutes (Doulani, 2021, p. 917). With the increase in new information, conceptual developments and data volume, the bibliometric analysis method enables reliable and objective analyses to identify trends and research themes over time, to detect changes in disciplinary boundaries, to identify the most productive scientists and institutions, and to provide an overview of existing research (Crane, 1972) quoted by (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017, p. 959). Studies through bibliometric analysis play an important role in determining the direction of future research topics through the analysis of existing academic literature and in identifying gaps in a particular field by assessing publication trends (Özarı, 2024, p. 193).

Bibliometric analyses can be performed through various programs. Programs such as Vosviewer, Bibexcel, CiteSpace, and RStudio-based Biblioshiny are frequently used in bibliometric analysis studies. In this study, Biblioshiny software based on RStudio, an open source software, was used (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017, p. 960). The RStudio-based Biblioshiny program is considered as a program that offers ease of use and analysis to researchers who want to follow the changes in the literature through the processing of bibliometric data. This program allows for the analysis of data sets such as data visualisation, data tabulation, data mapping and detailed analysis of citations (Dirik et al., 2024, p. 676).

Metadata access for the bibliometric analyses created in this study was carried out on October 18, 2024 through the Web of Science (WoS) database owned by Clarivate Analytics. The Web of Science database is a platform that makes it possible to perform advanced searches through keywords, provide secure access to the data of studies, and systematically obtain big data for advanced data analysis. In this study, the keyword "digital transformation" was searched through the Web of Science database. 47,764 studies were found. To limit the search results to the field of social sciences, the fields of "management, business, economics, business finance, interdisciplinary social sciences, public administration, political science and international relations" were selected and the remaining fields were excluded from the study. With the field limitation, the total number of publications reached 11,971. Since the study examine the impact of the concept of digital transformation on articles, only articles were filtered as the type of publication. Thus, as a result of the data filtering process, data on 4,563 articles between 2002 and 2024 were made available for bibliometric analysis.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Main Information About the Data	Results
Timespan	2002-2024
Number of Articles	4.563
Annual Growth Rate %	3,06
Average Article Age	1,62
Average Citations per Article	15,22
Total Number of Articles Cited in the Bibliography	184.942
Number of Keyword-Plus (Publisher)	3.569
Number of Authors' Keywords	10.765
Number of Authors	10.969
Number of Authors Publishing Single Authored Articles	493
Number of Single Authored Articles	545
Number of Authors per Article	3,24
Rate of Articles Produced with International Collaboration %	29,38

Table 1 summarises the numerical data of articles on digital transformation published in the field of social sciences scanned from the Web of Science database. Of the 4,563 articles in the study, the oldest article is dated 2002 and the newest article is dated 2024. The average age of the articles in the study since their publication is 1.62 years, while the annual growth rate of the studies on the subject is 3.06%. The number of citations per article was 15.22; the total number of articles cited in the bibliography was 184,942. The number of keywords assigned to articles by publishers (keyword plus) is 3,569; the number of keywords used by authors (author keywords) is 10,765. Among the total articles, 10,969 authors were represented by 545 single authors. The average number of authors per article was 3.24. The rate of articles produced within the framework of international cooperation within the scope of digital transformation is 29.38%.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the bibliometric analysis. The findings obtained because of the analysis of the study are shown with the help of graphs, tables and figures.

Chart 1

Rate of Increase in the Number of Publications by Years (Annual Scientific Production)

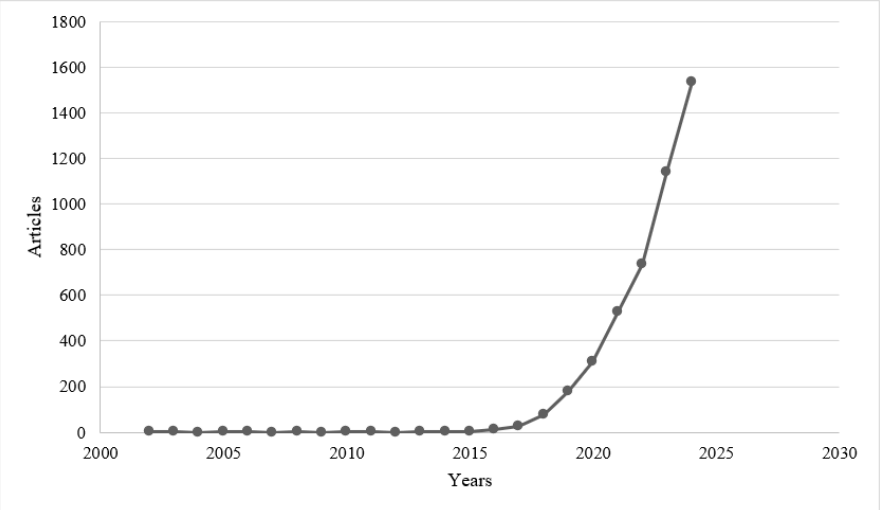


Chart 1 illustrates the yearly increase in the number of articles focusing on digital transformation within the social sciences. As seen in the graph, with the acceleration of digital transformation, academic studies in this field have increased significantly, especially since 2016. In this process, the number of publications following a rapid upward trend is expected to continue to increase as of 2024.

Chart 2

Increase in the Number of Citations Received by Studies by Years (Average Citations Per Year)

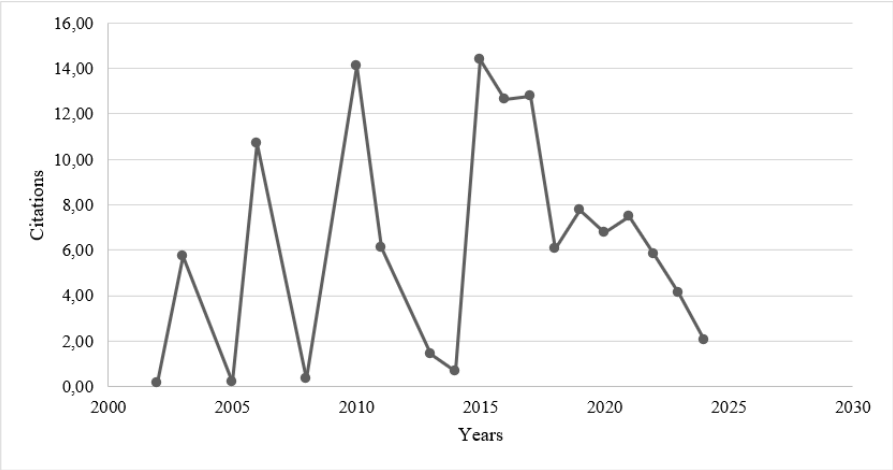


Chart 2 shows the number of citations received by the publications dealing with the concept of digital transformation in the field of social sciences by years. Since 2002, it is seen that the publications put forward have been in a leapfrogging upward trend until 2016. It can be said that between 2002 and 2016, interest in digital transformation in the field of social sciences increased rapidly and publications received more citations in a leapfrogging manner. However, since 2016, the number of citations to these publications has been decreasing. The reason for this situation can be said to be the decrease in the number of citations per publication due to the rapidly increasing number of publications after 2016, and the citation cycle has changed. The first studies on digital transformation were highly cited, albeit with a jumpy trend, but in recent years, citation rates have decreased due to the growth in the literature.

Figure 1

Most Used Keywords (Word Cloud)



Figure 1 shows the word cloud created with the keywords used by the publishers (keywords plus). In terms of the frequency of use of the words, innovation (758), performance (579), management (558), impact (501), and technology (453) come to the fore respectively. These concepts reveal the concepts that may be important and useful when conducting research or conducting studies in the field. The prominence of

concepts such as “innovation”, “performance” and “management” in digital transformation studies shows the significant impact of technological change on organisational processes and strategies.

Figure 2

Thematic Map of the Keywords

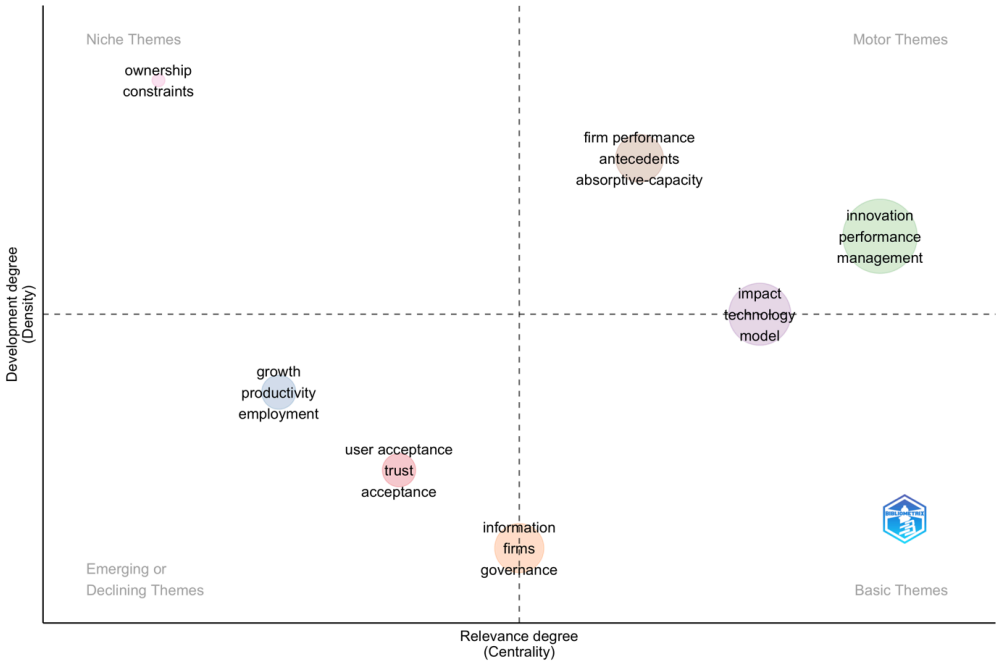


Figure 2 shows the thematic map prepared with the keywords. The thematic map consists of four regions, each of which shows the course of studies on the topic. The upper left region (niche) includes niche themes where there are fewer studies. The upper right region (engine) shows the pioneering concepts related to the areas where studies are concentrated. The lower left region (emerging or declining) shows emerging or outdated concepts. The lower right-hand region (basic) shows the basic concepts of all the studies conducted on this subject. In the thematic map, it can be said that the left side creates a background for future studies, while the right side includes the elements that should be taken as a basis for these studies (Dirik et al., 2024, p. 680) In the thematic map, it is seen that innovation, performance and management are the leading concepts in the studies, while ownership and constraints are the concepts that are less studied. When the map is interpreted in general, the core topics in digital transformation research include innovation and technology management, while emerging research areas include artificial intelligence and big data analytics.

Figure 3

Co-Occurrence Network of Keywords

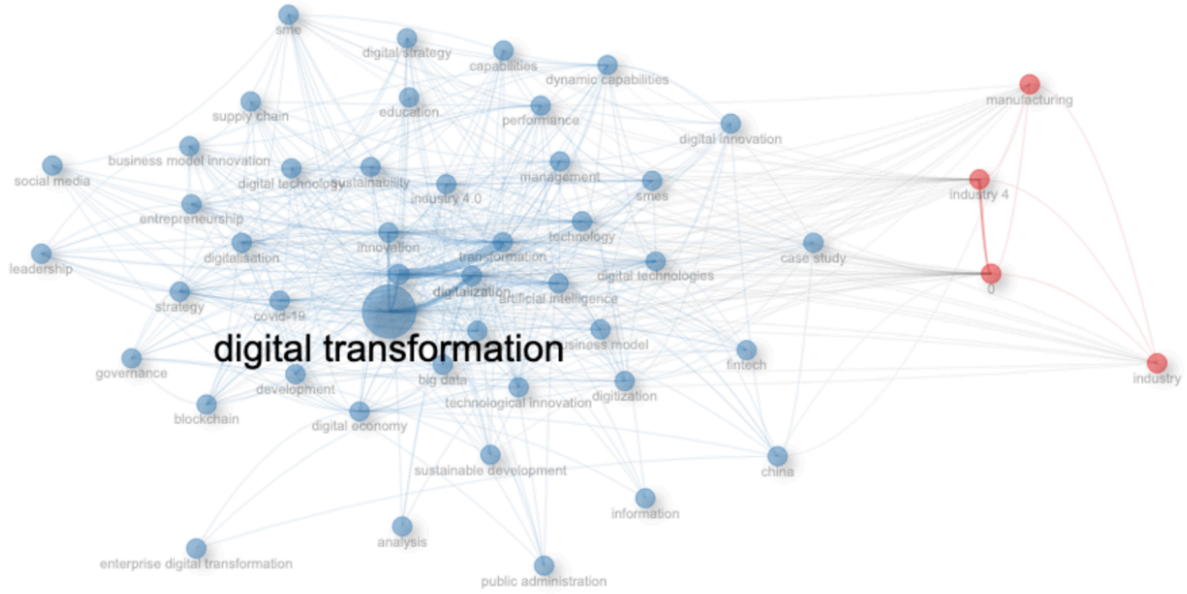


Figure 3 shows the most frequent co-occurrence network analysis prepared by including the keywords identified by the authors. According to the analysis, the keyword digital transformation (518.8 times) is in the central position and is the most frequently used keyword. In terms of intertextual usage, digital transformation was followed by digitalisation (32.7 times), digital (29.8 times), digital economy (23 times), logical innovation (17.9 times), innovation (14.2 times) and transformation (11.2 times). As seen in the figure, academic studies on digital transformation are often strongly associated with concepts such as "digitalisation", "innovation" and "digital economy".

Figure 4

Co-Occurrence Network of Countries

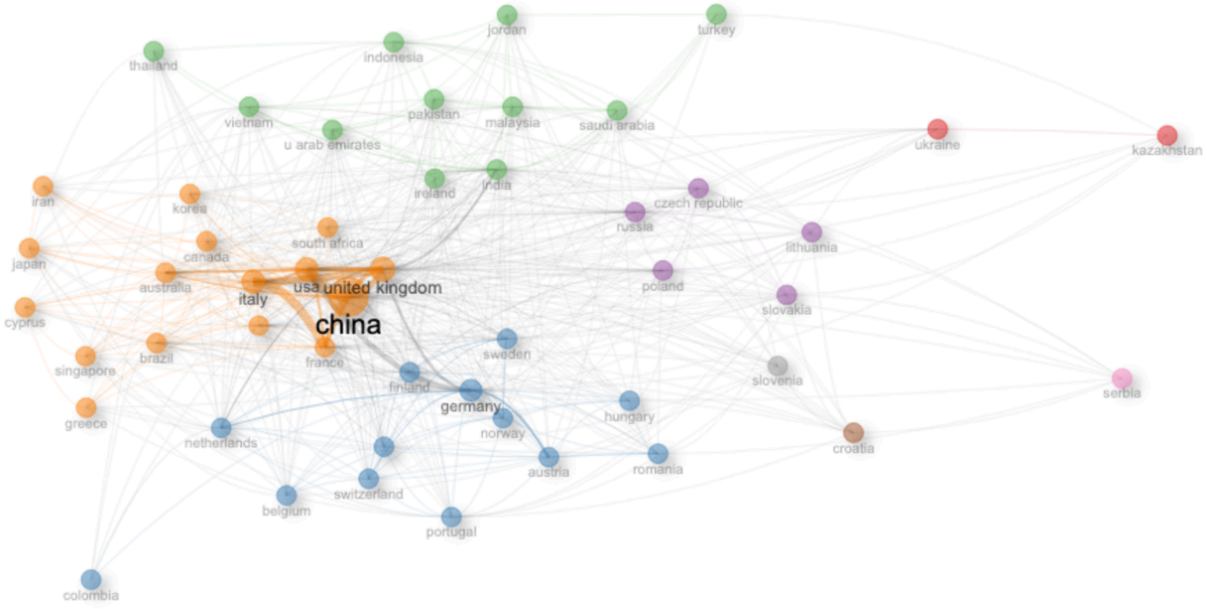


Figure 4 shows the cross-country collaboration network publishing on digital transformation. In terms of cross-country studies, the United Kingdom ranks first (201.1 times). It is followed by the United States (71.4

times), China (70.2 times), Italy (68 times), Germany (40.1 times), India (20.4 times) and France (17.9 times). Countries such as China, Germany, Italy and the UK play a leading role in digital transformation research and increase knowledge sharing through international cooperation.

Chart 3

Trend Topics

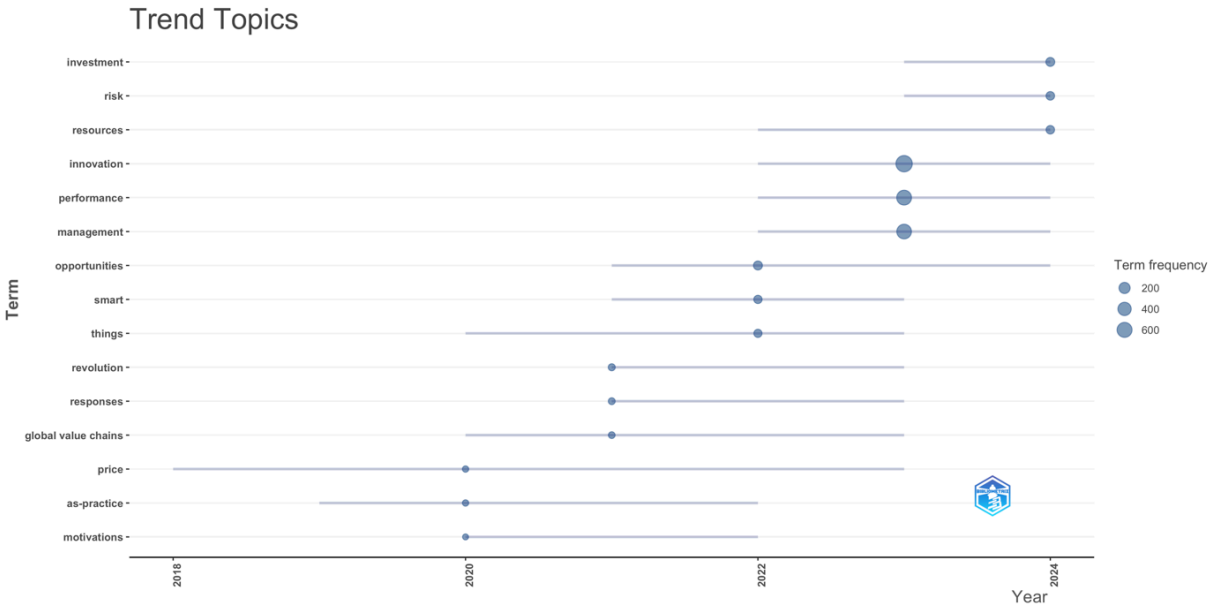


Chart 3 shows the prominent concepts by years according to the trend topic analysis of the keywords created by the publisher. In terms of frequent use of terms, it is seen that the keywords innovation (789 times), performance (579 times), and management (558 times) were used the most in 2023. The prominence of issues such as “innovation”, “performance” and "management" in recent years shows that digital transformation is not only a technological process but, also critical for organisational efficiency and competitive advantage.

Figure 5

Three-Field Plot of the Relationship between Keywords Plus, Authors, and Countries

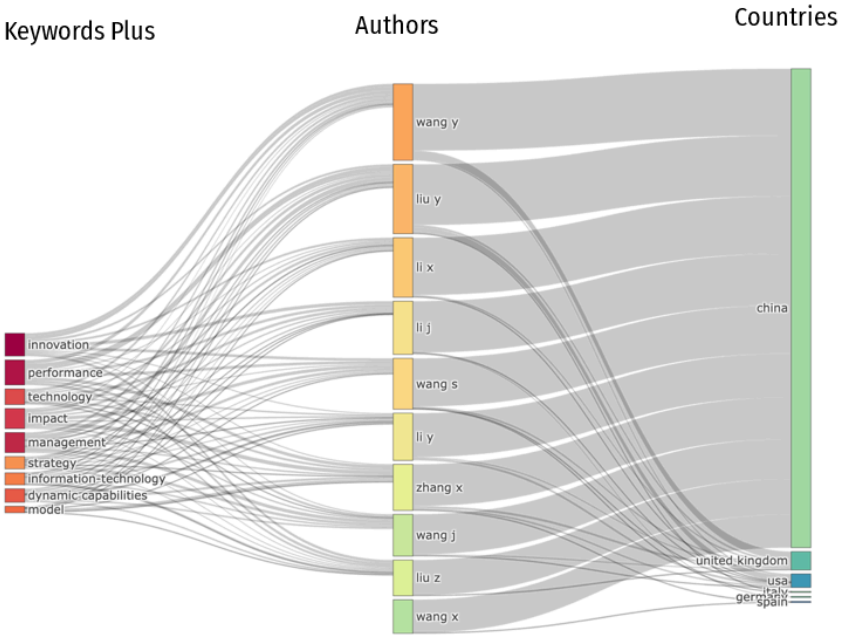


Figure 5 shows three area graphs of the relationship between keywords, authors, and countries. In the three-part graph, the most frequently used keywords on the left side, the most influential authors in the middle, and the most influential countries on the right side are shown in relation to each other. This triple graph presents a conceptual framework showing the most frequent usage among keywords, authors, and countries. Here, it can be seen that the keywords innovation, performance and technology are frequently used by Wang Y, Liu Y and, Li X and the most publications are produced in China. It is seen that certain authors and countries are dominant in digital transformation studies and that global knowledge production in this field is concentrated in certain centers.

Chart 4

Most Frequently Cited Publications in References (Most Local Cited References)

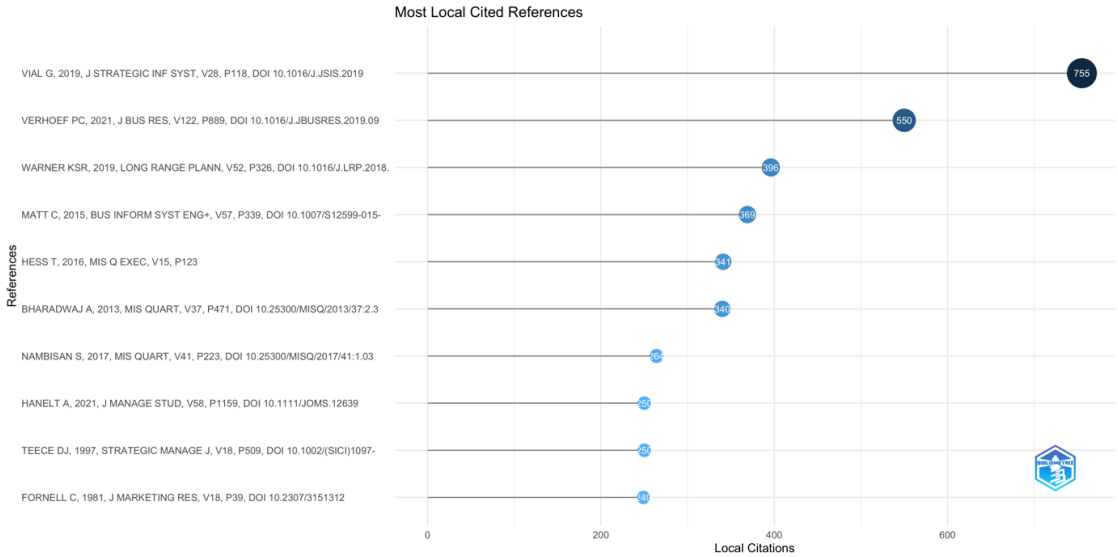


Chart 4 shows the top 10 most frequently cited publications with the highest frequency of co-occurrence in the bibliography when the references included in this study are evaluated within themselves. Vial (2019), Verhoef (2021), Warner (2019), Matt (2015), Hess (2016) and Bharadwaj (2013) are among the most frequently cited publications in the bibliography of studies on the subject. These results show that the above publications on digital transformation are accepted as high-impact studies in the literature. Such analyses highlight where the concentration of knowledge in the literature is concentrated and which studies are more trusted.

Chart 5

Citation Analysis of the Journals in the Study (Most Local Cited Sources)

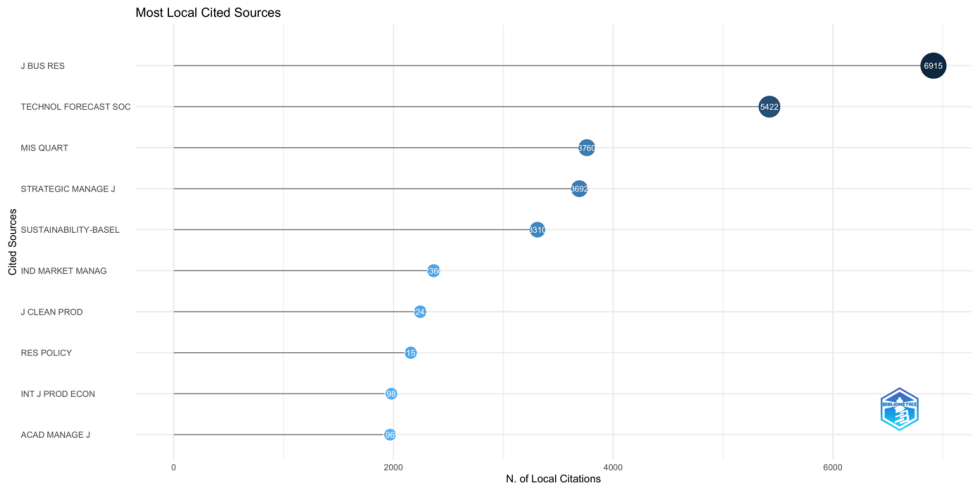


Chart 5 lists the top 10 most cited journals by evaluating the sources included in this analysis. The Journal of Business Research, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, Management Information Systems Quarterly and Strategic Management Journal are the most cited journals in the studies on digital transformation. These journals can be positioned as a strategic focal point in terms of literature tracking and publication targets for researchers who plan to study the subject.

Chart 6

Analysis of the Number of Publications by Journals (Most Relevant Sources)

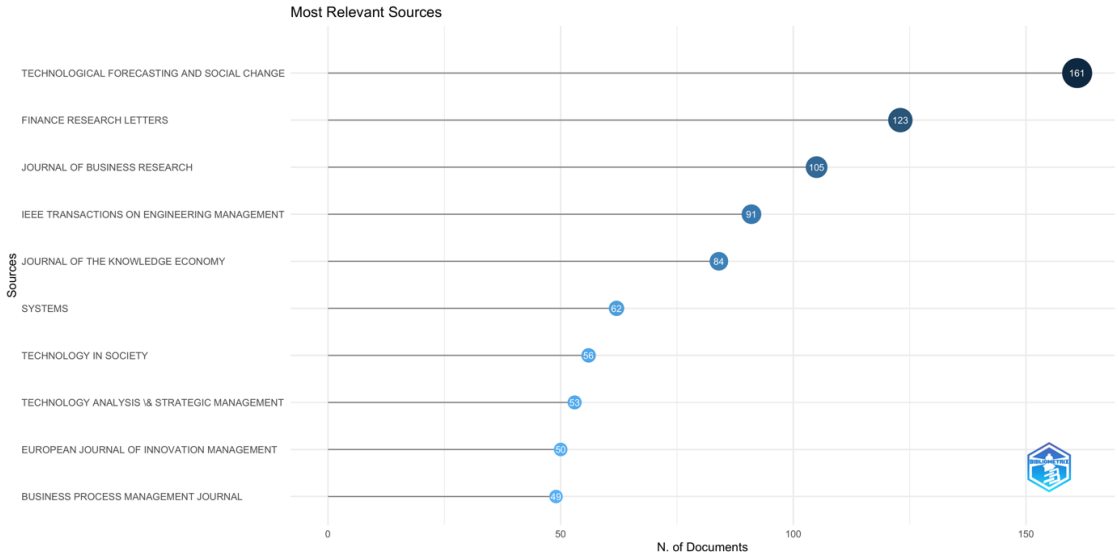


Chart 6 shows the top 10 journals where studies on digital transformation are published most frequently according to the publications included in the bibliometric analysis. Technological Forecasting and Social Change, Finance Research Letters, and Journal of Business Research are the journals with the highest number of publications on the subject. The studies published in these journals provide guidance to researchers on current theoretical approaches and methodology on the subject and make important contributions to the knowledge base in the field.

Chart 7

Most Cited Publications (Most Global Cited Documents)

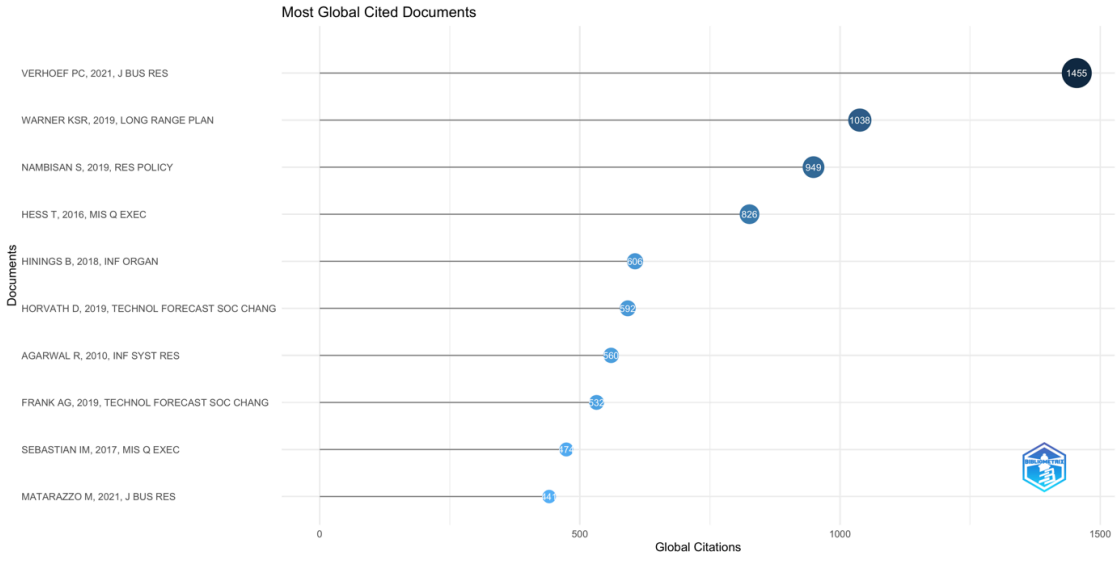
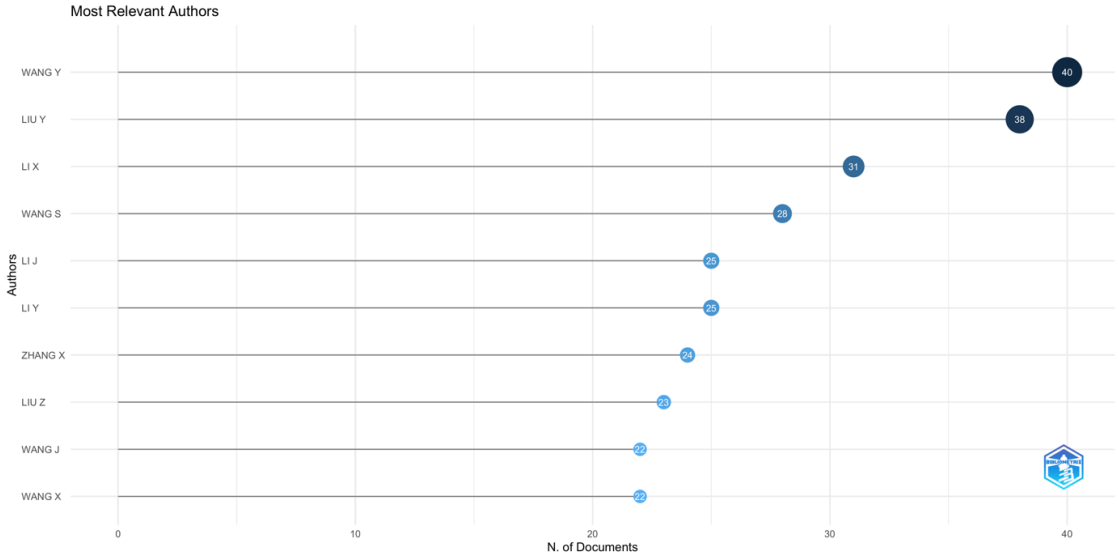


Chart 7 shows the top 10 most cited studies among all studies on the subject. Verhoef (2021), Warner (2019), Nambisan (2019) and Hess (2016) are the most cited authors among the studies on digital transformation. It is thought that it may be useful to examine these sources for researchers who intend to study the subject.

Chart 8

Authors with the Most Publications (Most Relevant Authors)



Because of the bibliometric analysis in Chart 8, the top 10 authors with the most publications on digital transformation are given. Wang Y, Liu Y and Li X are the authors with the highest number of studies in the field. The most active academics in the field of digital transformation are largely based in Asia. The productivity levels of these authors increase their impact on the development of digital transformation and ensure that they play a central role in the literature.

Chart 9

Countries' Production over Time

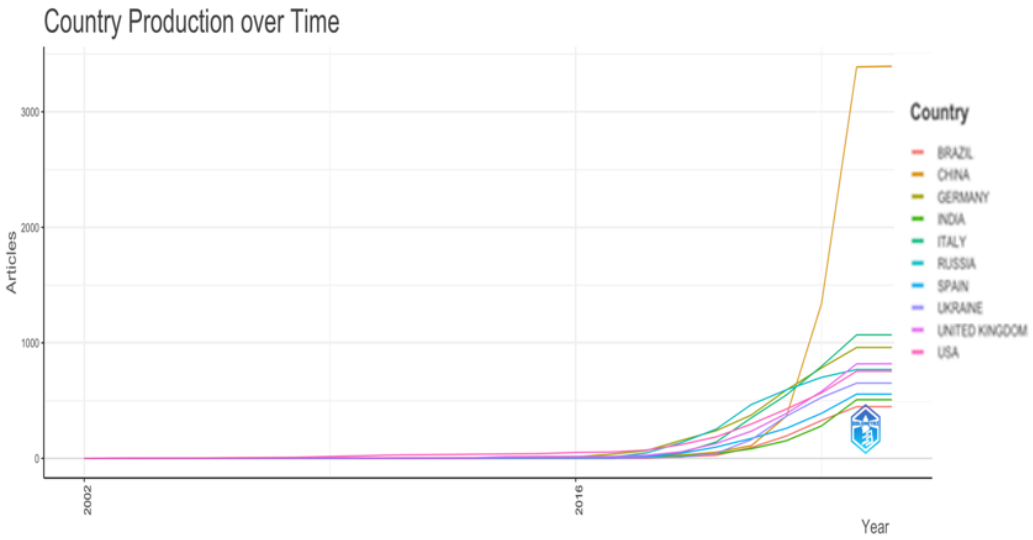


Chart 9 shows the distribution of countries' productivity analysis by years. The country with the highest number of publications in 2024 is China (3,394). It is seen that China has the highest number of publications

by 2024 and is assuming global leadership in the field of digital transformation. China is followed by Italy (1,069), Germany (960) and the United Kingdom (818).

Chart 10

Most Relevant Countries

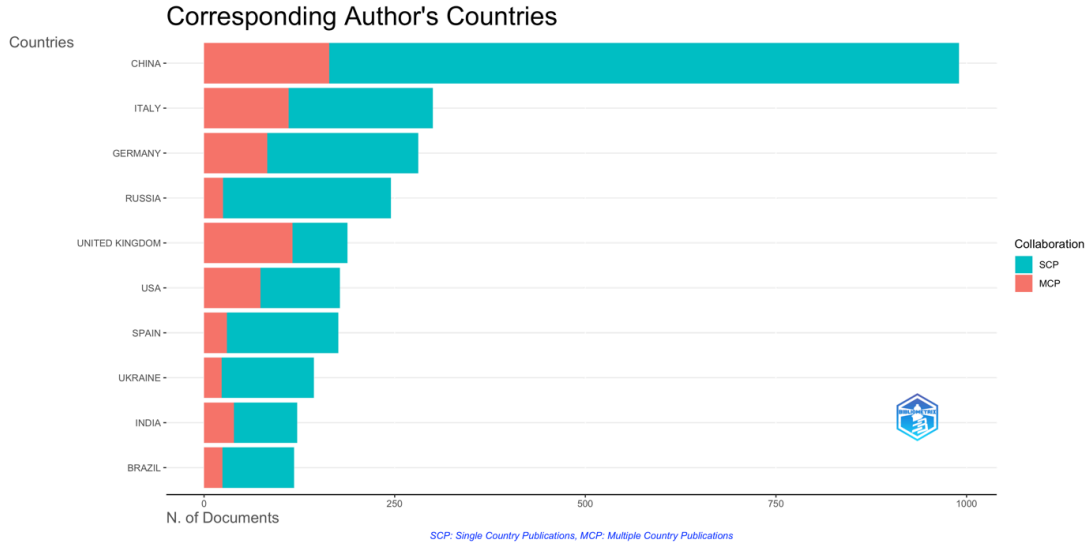


Chart 10 shows the countries with the highest number of publications and their types of cooperation. China ranks first with 990 publications, of which 826 are single and 164 are in cooperation with other countries. China is followed by Italy with 300 publications, 189 of which are single and 111 of which are in cooperation, and Germany with 281 publications, 198 of which are single and 83 of which are in cooperation. The low rates of international collaboration indicate a need for more interdisciplinary and global interaction in digital transformation research.

Chart 11

Most Cited Countries

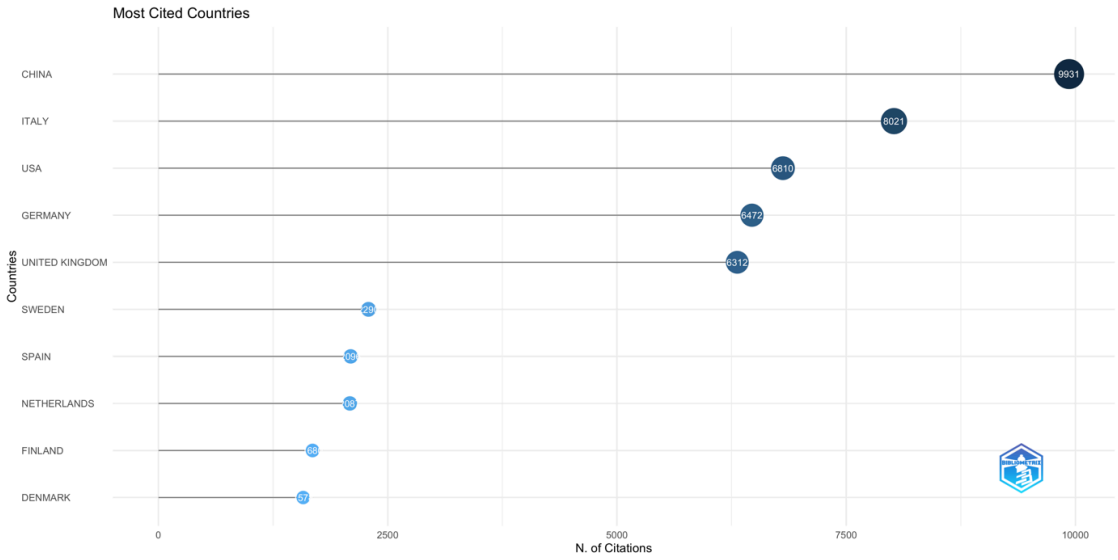


Chart 11 shows the countries with the highest number of citations. China ranks first with 9,931 citations. China is followed by Italy with 8,021 citations, the United States of America with 6,810 citations, Germany with 6,472 citations and the United Kingdom with 6,312 citations. It is seen that the most cited articles are from publications in the countries with the highest number of publications. The fact that the country with

the highest number of citations is also the country with the highest number of publications shows that academic influence in digital transformation research is regionally concentrated there.

Figure 6

Countries' Collaboration World Map

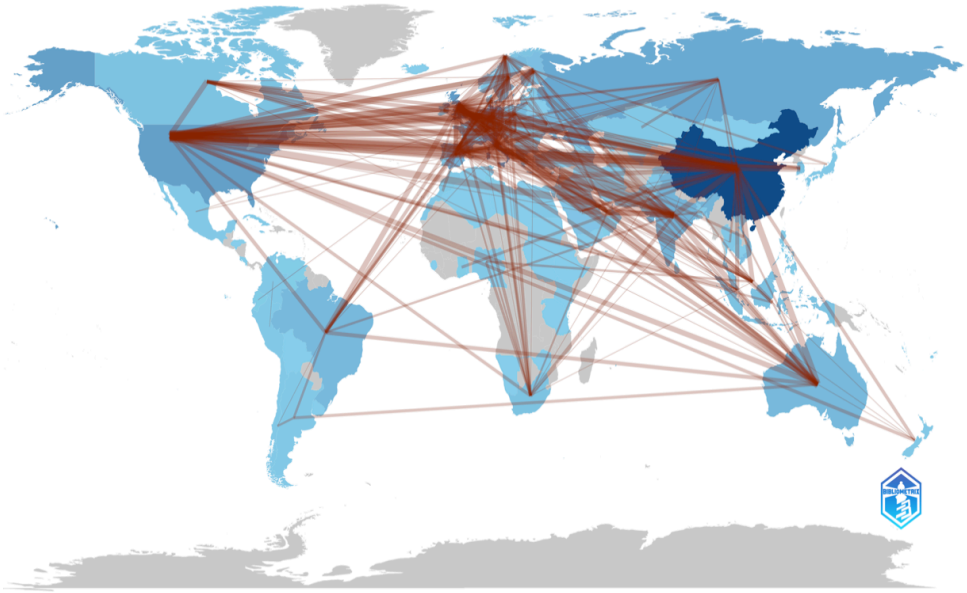


Figure 6 shows the cooperation between countries on a map. As can be seen in the map, the networks are concentrated on China, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and the United States. Strong academic collaborations between countries such as China, the US, Germany and the UK show that digital transformation research is shaped by global knowledge sharing.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study presents a general summary of the studies on digital transformation in social sciences through bibliometric analysis methods. Through the RStudio-based Biblioshiny program, 4,563 articles published in the field of social sciences between 2002 and 2024 scanned from the Web of Science database were examined through bibliometric analysis. The results of the bibliometric analysis of the existing metadata are visualised through the program and the findings are presented. In this context, a bibliometric analysis was conducted on key variables such as the annual number of articles on digital transformation, country distribution, active authors, preferred journals and number of citations. However, the fact that the study only deals with articles in the Web of Science database and does not include other important databases can be considered as a limitation that does not fully demonstrate the scientific contribution of countries to the subject.

The results of the bibliometric analysis reveal how research on digital transformation in social sciences has evolved and the main trends in the field. In general, there has been a significant increase in the number of articles on the concept of digital transformation since 2016. This may be attributed to the increased interest of researchers in digital transformation. However, although the number of publications increased after 2016, there is a decrease in the number of citations to these publications. For this decreasing trend, it can be inferred that the increase in the number of publications after 2016, there was reduced the number of citations per publication and the citation cycle has undergone a change.

When we look at the keyword analysis, it is seen that concepts such as "innovation," "performance," "management," "impact" and "technology" stand out in studies on digital transformation. These concepts

play a central role in research on digital transformation and guide the future studies of researchers who want to publish on the subject. Thematic map analysis reveals niche themes, core themes, emerging themes and pioneering themes in the studies on digital transformation. With this analysis, it is observed how the themes form a basis for the studies in the field.

Analysing the collaboration between countries, it is seen that China, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom have conducted the most research on digital transformation. China also stands out as the country with the highest number of publications and citations in research on digital transformation.

When the trend concepts analysis is analysed, it is seen that keywords such as "innovation", "performance" and "management" are prominent in digital transformation as of 2023. The increasing use of these concepts over the years shows that issues such as innovation and performance management in digital transformation have started to occur on the research agenda. This shows that digital transformation is not only considered as a technological transition process in the studies but, also as a change that will contribute to performance improvement and management processes.

The analysis of the most frequently cited studies and authors shows high-impact publications on digital transformation and important researchers in this field. Authors such as Vial (2019), Verhoef (2021), Warner (2019), Matt (2015), Hess (2016) and Bharadwaj (2013) are among the most frequently cited authors in studies on digital transformation. The fact that these publications are frequently cited reveals that the knowledge on digital transformation is shaped through these studies. It would be useful for researchers who want to conduct research in the field of digital transformation to examine these sources and build their own research on these foundations.

The Three-Field Plot analysis can reveal the relationships between keywords, authors, and countries. The triple-field analysis in this study shows which keywords are used most by which authors and in which countries these authors publish more. In this context, it is seen that words such as "innovation", "performance" and "technology" are frequently used by authors such as Wang Y, Liu Y and Li X and published in China. This situation reveals that Chinese researchers are pioneers in this field and that China has a strong position in the literature on digital transformation.

In conclusion, it is seen that the number of social science studies in the field of digital transformation is increasing rapidly, some basic key concepts stand out in this field, and countries such as China are in the leading position in digital transformation research. It is foreseen that bibliometric studies on digital transformation will form a basis for the creation of strategic road maps that emphasise the importance of this transformation for public institutions and organisations. This study offers a comprehensive literature review of digital transformation in the social sciences, serving as a foundational resource for future research. Researchers who want to study on the subject can improve this study by examining different databases, using different bibliometric analysis programs, and including all types of publications in their analysis.

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