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When method outgrows theory: a bibliometric map of forward-looking strategic management research, 2015–2025

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Abstract

Strategic management scholarship has produced a growing body of forward-looking writing: reviews, research agendas, and trend analyses that describe where the field is heading. Because such writing shapes what scholars choose to study next, this study asks what that literature actually contains and whether its structure resembles the field it claims to describe. This study analysed 310 open-access documents indexed in Scopus between 2015 and 2025, retrieved using a Boolean string that paired strategic management terms with future-oriented terms, and processed through performance analysis and co-word science mapping. Publication volume grew at a compound annual rate of 26.9%, and 57.7% of the corpus appeared in the final three years. Authorship is unusually dispersed: 1,013 of 1,029 authors contributed a single document and none contributed more than three. Citation impact runs the opposite way, with a median of 7 against a mean of 39.8 and one article holding 19.3% of all citations received. Co-word analysis of 68 keywords produced seven communities. The motor quadrant is occupied by bibliometric method terms and cross-sector applications, while dynamic capabilities and strategic management accounting fall into the low-centrality, low-density quadrant. This study concluded that this literature is organised around the practice of reviewing rather than around the theory being reviewed, which leaves the field's canonical constructs peripheral to the network its own forward-looking writing generates. Five testable propositions follow, together with implications for scholars in under-represented research systems, including Indonesia, and a reproducibility package accompanies the paper.

Keywords:
bibliometric analysis; emerging economies; open access; research agenda; strategic management.

JEL Code: M10; L10; O32; Q56

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Introduction

Strategic management has become a field that writes about itself. Alongside its empirical and theoretical output, the discipline now produces a steady stream of reviews, research agendas, thematic maps, and trend analyses whose subject is the direction of the field rather than the behaviour of firms. Öztürk et al. (2024) count this reflective genre as one of the fastest-growing formats in business and management publishing, and Verma & Gustafsson (2020) documented its sharp acceleration after 2020. That growth raises a question the genre rarely turns on itself: what does the forward-looking literature of strategic management actually contain, and does its structure resemble the field it claims to describe?

The question matters because reviews shape agendas. A doctoral student choosing a dissertation topic, an editor commissioning a special issue, and a funding panel ranking proposals all read this literature as a summary of where value lies. Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruíz-Navarro (2004) and Furrer et al. (2008) showed two decades ago that the intellectual structure of strategic management could be traced through its publication record, and both found a field organised around a recognisable core of theoretical constructs. Whether the reflective literature published since 2015 still carries that core is an open question, and one with practical consequences for anyone who uses reviews as a map. Ioannidis (2016) raised the parallel question in biomedicine. They answered it unfavourably, finding review output rising far faster than the research being reviewed, and Calderón-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano (2023) reached management by synthesising review articles rather than primary studies. Neither asked what that accumulation does to the structure of the literature it produces.

The forward-looking literature makes a public promise. A review, a research agenda, or a thematic map claims to tell a reader where a field is going, and that claim can be checked against the structure of the literature that makes it. Four lines of prior work bring us to the point where it can be checked, but each stops short of doing so.

Existing bibliometric work in strategic management partitions the field either by outlet or by sub-domain. Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruíz-Navarro (2004) mapped a single journal. Furrer et al. (2008) content-analysed the field's core outlets. Schilke et al. (2018) reviewed dynamic capabilities, Chawla & Goyal (2021) and Plekhanov et al. (2023) reviewed digital transformation, and Guandalini (2022) reviewed the digital-sustainability intersection. Each of these takes a portion of the field as its object and characterises that portion well. Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruíz-Navarro (2004) traced intellectual structure through one journal's citations but did not extend beyond it; Schilke et al. (2018) read the empirical record of one construct but did not position that construct relative to others; Plekhanov et al. (2023) assessed the theoretical grounding of one research stream but treated the stream, not the reviewing, as the unit. The reviewing literature itself has been the instrument in each case and the object in none.

Second, open access has changed which strategic management research is freely readable, and the consequences for the field's visible intellectual structure are unexamined. Bibliometric mappings of the field report on whatever their database indexes, and access status is not among the variables they separate. Öztürk et al. (2024), setting out a design framework for bibliometric research, treat database choice at length and access status not at all, leaving open whether the intellectual structure visible to a reader without subscription access resembles that visible to one with it.

Third, the field's geographic concentration is well documented, but its consequences for scholars outside the main producing systems remain stated rather than measured. Meyer & Peng (2016) argued that theories developed in institutionally mature settings travel poorly to emerging economies, and Alatas (2003) described the resulting division of labour in which theory is generated at the centre and tested at the periphery. Indonesia offers a useful case for examining what that position looks like in the publication record.

Fourth, the reviews describing the post-2023 acceleration were themselves written during that period. Verma & Gustafsson (2020) documented the earlier rise. They closed their window before the steepest part of it, so a scholar entering the field now has no dated account of which topics grew, which consolidated, and which stayed connected to the constructs the field uses to theorise.

The objective of this study is to map the structure, growth, geographic distribution, and thematic organisation of the open-access forward-looking strategic management literature indexed in Scopus between 2015 and 2025, and to establish where the field's canonical constructs sit within that structure. Four research questions follow from the four gaps:

RQ1. How has the volume and temporal composition of forward-looking strategic management publishing changed between 2015 and 2025?

RQ2. How are authorship, publication venues, and citation impact distributed across authors, sources, and countries in this literature?

RQ3. What thematic structure does author-keyword co-occurrence reveal, and where are the field's canonical constructs positioned within it?

RQ4. Which thematic areas combine high publication growth with low network centrality, and what research agenda does that combination imply?

Two established analytical frameworks underpin the study. Co-word analysis uses term co-occurrence to examine conceptual proximity and positions thematic communities according to centrality and density, enabling systematic assessment of their interconnectedness and internal coherence. Bibliometric distribution models provide reference patterns for publication concentration across journals and author productivity, allowing observed deviations to be interpreted systematically. Both frameworks are discussed in the Literature Review.

This study makes three contributions. Empirically, to the best of the authors' knowledge, it provides the first bibliometric map of the open-access, forward-

looking segment of strategic management, with all analytical parameters explicitly documented and a reproducibility package provided. Diagnostically, it identifies a previously unreported asymmetry: methodological themes occupy the motor quadrant of the thematic map, while the field's canonical constructs remain peripheral. Programmatically, it develops five propositions grounded in specific positions within the map, providing an explicit analytical basis for the proposed research agenda.

Literature review

Competing accounts of competitive advantage

Strategic management inherited three accounts of where advantage comes from, and they compete rather than succeed one another. Porter (1980) identified industry structure as a source of advantage, arguing that a firm's position relative to five competitive forces explains performance better than anything internal to it. Barney (1991) inverted the logic, locating advantage in resources that satisfy the VRIN criteria of value, rarity, imperfect imitability, and non-substitutability, and treating industry structure as a constraint rather than a cause. Teece et al. (1997) and Teece (2007) proposed a third account in which advantage rests on a firm's capacity to sense opportunity, to seize it, and to reconfigure its asset base accordingly, making the durability of any resource position contingent on the speed of environmental change. Eisenhardt & Martin (2000) contested that account from within, arguing that such capabilities take the form of identifiable best practices rather than firm-idiosyncratic routines, and that under high-velocity conditions they collapse into simple and unstable rules, thereby removing the mechanism by which they could sustain advantage. Helfat et al. (2007) later negotiated a working definition across these positions without resolving the disagreement.

These are not three stages of a single argument. Each locates causation in a different place, and each has been challenged on that ground. The resource-based view has been criticised for definitional circularity, since a resource is identified as valuable partly by the performance it is invoked to explain. Dynamic capabilities have attracted the same objection in a stronger form: Schilke et al. (2018), reviewing the construct's empirical record, found that measurement was dominated by perceptual instruments and that there was a persistent gap between the theory's micro-foundational claims and the evidence brought to bear on them. Nag et al. (2007) showed that even the field's own definition of itself is a negotiated consensus rather than a settled position. A literature that summarises these three accounts as a progression, as many reviews do, obscures a disagreement that remains live.

Sustainability and digital transformation as strategic problems

Two research streams have grown quickly enough since 2015 to reshape what strategic management writes about. Bansal & Song (2017) distinguished corporate sustainability from corporate responsibility and argued that conflating the two has held back theory in both domains. Hoffman & Jennings (2015) framed

environmental degradation as an institutional rather than a technical problem, and Geissdoerfer et al. (2017) traced the conceptual boundaries of the circular economy against sustainability more broadly. Hermundsdottir & Aspelund (2021) reviewed the evidence linking sustainability innovation to competitiveness and found it conditional rather than uniform.

The digital stream developed along a parallel track. Vial (2019) synthesised digital transformation into a process model linking technology use to structural change, and Nambisan et al. (2019) argued that digital technologies alter the units of analysis on which innovation theory rests. Plekhanov et al. (2023), after reviewing 537 articles, found that this research remained loosely connected to established organisational theory. Mariani et al. (2021) reached a comparable verdict for artificial intelligence in adjacent management fields, identifying 412 distinct theoretical lenses across the studies they reviewed and reading that dispersion as evidence of a literature not yet organised around shared constructs.

The two streams have converged into what policy discourse calls the twin transition, and the convergence deserves more scepticism than it usually receives. Ghobakhloo et al. (2021) and Müller et al. (2018) treat digital and sustainable objectives as mutually reinforcing. Tabares et al. (2025) reviewed the twin-transition literature directly and found the concept under-specified. The empirical record is even less accommodating. Bianchini et al. (2022), analysing European regional patent and emissions data, found emissions falling where environmental technologies were adopted and rising where digital ones were, with beneficial interaction only where regional endowments in both are strong. Montresor & Vezzani (2023) reported a similar conditional pattern across more than 150.000 Italian firms, in which the digital contribution to eco-innovation was driven mainly by artificial intelligence investment rather than by digital investment more generally. Feroz et al. (2021) and Guandalini (2022) both found the intersection fragmented rather than integrated.

Prior reviews therefore establish that the two streams have grown, that scholars increasingly write about them together, and that the relationship between them is contested. What they do not establish is where these streams sit relative to the constructs strategic management uses to theorise, which is an empirical question about the structure of the literature.

Structural properties of research literatures

Bibliometric analysis rests on a small set of regularities. Author productivity in most fields approximates an inverse-power distribution in which roughly 60% of contributors publish once, an inverse-power pattern that Coile (1977) re-examined and partly qualified. Source concentration follows the zoning proposed by Bradford (1976), in which a compact set of journals accounts for the bulk of articles on a subject. Citation counts are skewed, with a minority of documents carrying most of

the citations, and the skew interacts with publication age because recent work has had fewer years to accumulate citations.

Co-word analysis, introduced to research evaluation by Callon et al. (1991), treats the co-occurrence of terms as evidence of conceptual proximity and positions clusters on axes of centrality and density. Cobo et al. (2011) formalised the resulting strategic diagram into four quadrants. The interpretation of the low-centrality, low-density quadrant is deliberately ambiguous, covering both emerging and declining themes, and resolving the ambiguity requires information the map itself does not contain.

Method guidance for management applications is now well developed. Zupic & Čater (2015) set out the design choices, Donthu et al. (2021) provided procedural guidelines, and Öztürk et al. (2024) proposed a framework covering research design rather than technique alone. Aria & Cuccurullo (2017), supplied the software implementation used here, and Moral-Muñoz et al. Cobo (2020) compared it against alternatives. Van Eck & Waltman (2014) described the association-strength normalisation applied to the network. Gusenbauer & Haddaway (2020) evaluated the suitability of search systems for reproducible retrieval and provided guidance relevant to corpus construction.

Taken together, these gaps highlight the need to map the acceleration of the literature, examine the open-access filter, and analyse the forward-looking literature as a unit of analysis in its own right. They also call for closer examination of the implications of agenda-setting for scholars in under-represented research systems.

Research method

Design and data source

This study combined bibliometric performance analysis with co-word science mapping, following the design framework of Öztürk et al. (2024) and the procedural guidance of (Donthu et al., 2021). Scopus supplied the data. Mongeon & Paul-Hus (2016) show that Scopus indexes business and management titles more broadly than Web of Science, and Martín-Martín et al. (2018) find the same advantage across social science categories while also documenting how severely both databases under-represent non-English scholarship in those categories. Visser et al. (2021) further demonstrate that differences in database coverage can materially affect bibliometric conclusions. These findings support the selection of Scopus while underscoring the partial nature of its representation of the field, an issue addressed further in the Limitations section.

Records were retrieved on 11 November 2025 with the query: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("strategic management" OR "strategy research") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("future" OR "evolution" OR "trend*" OR "systematic review").

Six filters were then applied: subject area restricted to Business, Management and Accounting or Social Sciences; publication year 2015 to 2025; document type Article or Review; publication stage Final; language English; and open-access

records only. Appendix 1 shows the full workflow, including the counts surviving each filter. Those counts come from a replication run on 16 September 2026, because the cascade was not recorded at retrieval. The run returned 5.717 records before filtering and 857 after, of which 742 fall within the 2015 to 2025 window. The analysed corpus remains the export of 11 November 2025. The same replication run supports one observation about precision that a reader should have. In 67 of the 857 retrieved records, or 7.8%, neither search phrase appears in the title, abstract, author keywords, or Scopus index keywords.

Accordingly, the corpus includes a minority of documents whose relevance depends on indexing decisions that cannot be independently inspected. A pilot precision check addresses the same concern from the other direction. Fifty records were randomly drawn from the analysed corpus using a documented seed and coded by the first author as on-topic or off-topic, where on-topic means that the document addresses strategic management or the management of an organised activity and presents itself as forward-looking. All fifty were coded on topic, giving a pilot precision of 100%. The two figures measure different things, and the second is the more permissive: a reader who restricts the field to firm strategy rather than to the management of organised activity generally would code some of these records differently. The coding rule is therefore reported explicitly to enable readers to assess the corpus against their preferred disciplinary boundaries. The asterisk in trend* is a Scopus wildcard and admits trend, trends, and trending; a replicator who omits it will retrieve fewer records. Scopus is also a live index, so the same query run after 11 November 2025 returns a larger set as new records are added and existing ones are reclassified. Exact reproduction therefore runs on the deposited export rather than on a fresh retrieval, and the export is included in the reproducibility package for that purpose.

The open-access filter represents a deliberate design choice supported by three considerations. First, it aligns the corpus with the study's substantive concern: the research agendas accessible to scholars in under-represented research systems. For researchers without comprehensive institutional subscriptions, openly available publications may constitute a substantial share of the forward-looking literature they can consult. Restricting the corpus to open-access documents therefore enables examination of this accessible segment. Second, the filter supports transparency by allowing readers to consult the underlying texts and assess the interpretation of the co-word structure. Third, the concentration of publication growth in open-access outlets makes this segment particularly relevant to understanding the expansion of forward-looking scholarship.

The filter also determines what the study cannot claim. Subscription-only outlets, among them several of the field's highest-prestige journals, are absent by construction. The corpus therefore provides no basis for claims about venue prestige, publication hierarchies, or elite legitimation. Whether the observed

structure is specific to open-access publishing or extends to the broader field remains an empirical question, formulated as a testable proposition below.

Twin transition was not a retrieval criterion and is not the unit of analysis. Neither this phrase nor the terms digital transformation, sustainability, or artificial intelligence appeared in the search query. Their presence in the corpus therefore reflects document content rather than explicit search requirements, and they are examined solely as emergent substantive themes. The query also determines the object of study in a second way. Requiring a future-oriented term selects documents that explicitly frame themselves as forward-looking. An article advancing acquisition theory without announcing a trend or agenda does not enter the corpus. Accordingly, the object of analysis is the field's explicitly forward-looking reflective literature, rather than strategic management scholarship as a whole. This narrower designation is maintained throughout the study.

Analytical procedure and parameters

Data were processed in Python 3.11.15 using networkx 3.6.1, numpy 2.4.4, and matplotlib 3.10.9, replicating the analytical routines of the bibliometrix R package Aria & Cuccurullo (2017) rather than calling that package itself. The reported analysis is therefore the Python one throughout. For comparison with an established tool, the same BibTeX export was also processed using bibliometrix 5.5.0 in R 4.6.1 through Biblioshiny on 14 September 2026. The results of this comparison are reported below. Community detection used the Louvain implementation for network community detection. The exported record set was deduplicated on Scopus EID before analysis, and metadata completeness was verified for the fields the analysis reads: year, source title, author list, affiliation string, citation count, and author keywords. Author names were normalised by case folding and whitespace collapse; no further disambiguation was attempted, and the Limitations subsection states what that leaves unresolved. Performance analysis covered annual production, author productivity relative to the Lotka distribution, source concentration via Bradford zoning, and country-level production and citation impact. Country attribution used the final element of each affiliation string, with a variant-name lookup applied before counting; a document was classified as internationally co-authored when its affiliations resolved to more than one country.

Citation impact is reported three ways. Raw totals and means are given for comparability with other bibliometric studies. Medians are given because the distribution is heavily skewed. Citations per document per year are given because the corpus spans eleven years and recent documents have had fewer years in which to accumulate citations, so age normalisation is the only basis on which cross-country impact can be compared.

Science mapping used author keywords, lower-cased and whitespace-normalised. Terms occurring in at least three documents were retained, representing 1.0% of the corpus and yielding 68 terms from 1,326 unique keywords. A threshold

of three was selected instead of five to accommodate the dispersed keyword vocabulary. Raising the threshold to five retained only 24 terms across four communities, substantially reducing the thematic detail available for interpretation.

Sensitivity analyses were conducted at occurrence thresholds of 2, 4, and 5 to assess the dependence of the community partition on threshold selection, with threshold 3 as the baseline. The results indicate differing levels of stability. A community, as defined by bibliometric analysis, occupies the motor quadrant at thresholds of 2, 3, and 4, so the position of the method vocabulary is not an artefact of a single threshold. Individual substantive terms are less stable. Dynamic capabilities fall in the low-centrality, low-density quadrant at thresholds of three and five, but move to the basic quadrant at four; circular economy moves between the motor and low-low quadrants across thresholds. Community counts also vary, from 10 at a threshold of 2 to 4 at a threshold of 5. Readers should treat the quadrant position of any single term as provisional, and the position of the method community as the more robust result.

A second sensitivity analysis examined the influence of terms directly related to the search query. Three retained terms matched the query phrase or related search terminology: strategic management (46 documents), systematic review (6), and strategic management accounting (6). The last was included in the exclusion rule because it contains the phrase strategic management. Removing these terms produced a network comprising 65 terms and 205 edges and reinforced the principal finding. The community centred on bibliometric analysis recorded the highest centrality in the network (1.101), exceeding all substantive communities, and remained in the motor quadrant. The community centred on dynamic capabilities incorporated terms reassigned following the exclusions and expanded to 12 members. Nevertheless, it remained in the low-centrality, low-density quadrant, with a centrality of 0.796, below the network median of 0.818.

Edges were weighted by association strength Van Eck & Waltman (2014) to control for differences in term frequency. Communities were detected using the Louvain algorithm Blondel et al. (2008) at resolution 1.0 and a fixed random seed, with node ordering sorted alphabetically to make the partition deterministic across runs. Cluster centrality and density follow Callon et al. (1991), and quadrant boundaries are set at the median centrality (0.854) and median density (0.081) of the seven communities, following Cobo et al. (2011). These thresholds are explicitly reported to enable reproduction of the quadrant classifications.

Two analyses common in bibliometric studies are absent because of the export format, not the database. Co-citation and bibliographic coupling require cited-reference data, which the Scopus BibTeX export omits; bibliometrix flags CR as a missing field when it converts that file. The Scopus CSV export does carry cited references, as a replication run on 16 September 2026 confirmed, so the two analyses are available to a study that begins from that format. Neither analysis was

approximated in the present study; the Future Research section outlines the questions that their inclusion could address.

The division of the study period into three phases represents an interpretive analytical choice. Phase boundaries were informed by external developments: the maturation of Industry 4.0 programmes, the COVID-19 disruption to strategic practice and strategy research documented by Wenzel et al. (2021) and Kraus et al. (2020) and the public release of generative artificial intelligence systems. No change-point analysis or structural-break test was conducted; accordingly, these boundaries should not be interpreted as evidence of discontinuous shifts in the field. Alternative boundaries would yield different phase-level publication counts. Annual figures are therefore provided in Table 1 to facilitate alternative temporal groupings.

The two implementations agree on every corpus-level descriptor. Both return 310 documents across 200 sources, 263 articles and 47 reviews, 38 single-authored documents, 3.37 authors per document, a compound annual growth rate of 26.9%, and a mean of 39.8 citations per document. Both find a maximum of three documents by any one author, and both place the same four journals at the head of the Bradford core, followed by seven sources carrying four documents each.

Three quantities differ, and each difference is definitional rather than a discrepancy. Bibliometrix reports an international co-authorship rate of 42.58%, compared with 43.23% in the Python analysis, a difference equivalent to two documents in the 310-document corpus. This variation arises from differences in country attribution. The Python analysis considers all affiliations when identifying international co-authorship; the bibliometrix estimate is reported to facilitate comparison. Bibliometrix also identifies 1,023 unique authors and 1,331 author keywords, compared with 1,029 authors and 1,326 keywords under the Python normalisation procedures. Despite these differences, the proportion of authors contributing a single document remains similar: 97.9% in bibliometrix and 98.4% in the Python analysis. The interpretation of author productivity therefore remains consistent across the two procedures.

The thematic partition exhibits greater divergence, limiting the interpretation of individual terms. Under the default settings used in the comparison, bibliometrix combines author and indexer keywords and retains terms occurring at least twice, producing a network of 250 terms, compared with 68 in the Python analysis. In this configuration, dynamic capabilities belongs to the same community as strategic management rather than forming a separate community with low centrality. This result provides a substantive qualification to the term-level interpretation and is consistent with the threshold sensitivity analysis: the positioning of individual substantive terms depends on analytical specifications. The comparatively stable position of methodological vocabulary across the tested Python specifications therefore warrants greater emphasis than the location of any single substantive term.

All code, parameters, and derived metrics are available in the reproducibility package described in the Data Availability statement. The selection workflow, from the database query through the six filters to the final 310 documents, is given as Appendix 1.

Results

Corpus composition and publication trajectory

Table 1 reports the corpus characteristics. Two features of it shape everything that follows: the corpus is young, and it is spread thinly across many outlets and authors. Annual counts run 6, 6, 14, 16, 16, 28, 23, 22, 50, 64, and 65 across 2015 to 2025. Growth is not steady. Output roughly doubles between 2022 and 2023 and holds at the new level, and 2025 already exceeds 2024 despite covering only ten and a half months. Either compound rate in Table 1 is an order of magnitude above the long-run expansion of the scientific literature, which Larsen & Von Ins (2010) show has continued at a steady rate for a century without deceleration. The three interpretive phases contain 42, 89, and 179 documents. More than half the corpus therefore appeared in the last three years of an eleven-year window.

Authorship, sources, and geographic distribution

Author productivity in this corpus does not follow the pattern reported for most research literatures. Of 1,029 authors, 1,013 contributed exactly one document, 15 contributed two, and one contributed three. No author appears more often. The share of single-document authors is 98.4%, against the approximately 60% that Coile (1977) reports as characteristic of a Lotka-type distribution. The corpus is therefore more dispersed than the inverse-power model predicts, not more concentrated, and no productivity elite exists within it.

Source concentration is similarly weak. Bradford zoning produces a core of 27 sources supplying 104 documents, a second zone of 70 sources supplying 103 documents, and a third zone of 103 sources supplying 103 documents. The most frequent outlet is Cogent Business and Management with 12 documents, followed by Administrative Sciences (8), Journal of Management (6), and Journal of Risk and Financial Management (5). Seven further sources each carry four documents: Journal of Business Research, Business Strategy and the Environment, International Journal of Management Reviews, and Long Range Planning.

Citation impact runs in the opposite direction to productivity. The mean and median differ by more than a factor of 5, as shown in Table 1. One article, Jacobides et al. (2018) account of ecosystem emergence, holds 2.379 citations, or 19.3% of everything the corpus has accumulated, while 46 documents have none.

Country-level production is concentrated. The United States carries 48 documents, the United Kingdom 42, and Italy 25; no other country reaches 20. Reading by mean citations per document, the ordering is different again, with Italy at 157.7 ahead of the United Kingdom at 120.5 and the United States at 65.3, while

reading by median citations, Germany and the Netherlands at 42.0 lead both. Neither column is wrong, and the two disagree because a handful of heavily cited documents drive the means. Full figures for the sixteen most productive countries, including citation totals, medians, age-normalised impact, and collaboration rates, are given in Appendix 1. Collaboration rates vary more than production does. Indonesia contributes 12 documents and has the lowest multiple-country rate among those sixteen countries, at 25% against a corpus figure of 43.23%, with a median of 1.5 citations per document.

Table 1.
Descriptive characteristics of the 310-document corpus, 2015–2025

Category	Indicator	Value
Documents	Total documents	310
	Articles / reviews	263 / 47
	Sources	200
	Mean document age in years, relative to 2026	3.9
	Annual document counts, 2015–2025	6, 6, 14, 16, 16, 28, 23, 22, 50, 64, 65
	Annual growth rate, 2015–2025	26.9%
	Annual growth rate, 2015–2024 (complete years)	30.1%
Authors	Total authors	1,029
	Author appearances	1,046
	Authors per document	3.37
	Single-authored documents	38
	Maximum documents by one author	3
	Authors contributing exactly one document	1,013 (98.4%)
Citations	Total citations	12,328
	Mean citations per document	39.8
	Median citations per document	7
	Citations per document per year	7.0
	Documents with zero citations	46
	Share of all citations held by the single most-cited document	19.3%
Keywords	Unique author keywords	1,326
	Keywords occurring in ≥ 3 documents	68
Collaboration	Documents with authors from > 1 country	43.23%

Note: International co-authorship denotes the share of documents whose affiliations resolve to more than one country. Growth rates are compound annual rates computed on first and last year counts; 2025 is a partial year, so the 2015–2024 figure is the more conservative estimate
Source: Authors' work (2026)

Thematic structure

Author keywords are dispersed 1,326 unique terms across 310 documents, of which 68 occur in three or more. The seven most frequent are strategic management, bibliometric analysis, systematic literature review, literature review,

strategy, sustainability, and dynamic capabilities. Three of those seven name a research method rather than a research object.

Table 2.
Thematic communities with strategic diagram position and representative terms

Cluster	Terms	Centrality	Density	Quadrant	Representative terms
C1 Cross-sector applications and circularity	13	1.105	0.204	Motor	Circular economy; international business; systematic review; competition; economics; tourism.
C2 Sustainability and AI research agendas	11	0.701	0.081	Niche	Systematic literature review; sustainability; artificial intelligence; resource-based view; sustainable development; machine learning.
C3 Strategic management, digital transformation and knowledge	11	1.293	0.052	Basic	Strategic management; strategy; digital transformation; climate change; bibliometrics; knowledge management.
C4 Bibliometric method and emerging-market contexts	10	1.168	0.160	Motor	Bibliometric analysis; management; VOSviewer; business performance; COVID-19; emerging markets.
C5 Operations, innovation and performance management	9	0.854	0.064	Basic	Innovation management; supply chain management; organizational performance; governance; impression management; performance.
C6 Competitive advantage and social responsibility	7	0.601	0.086	Niche	Literature review; competitive advantage; business strategy; corporate social responsibility; competitive dynamics; competitive strategy.
C7 Dynamic capabilities and strategic accounting	6	0.349	0.051	Emerging or declining	Dynamic capabilities; strategic management accounting; bibliometric; accounting; risk management; technological innovation.

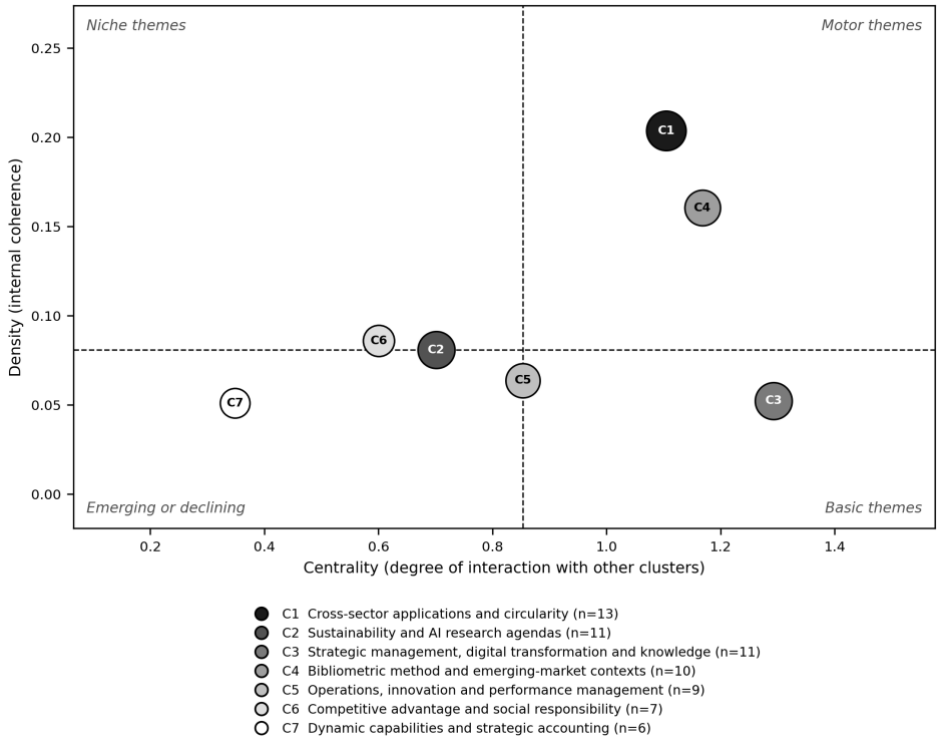
Note: Representative terms are the six most frequent in each community. Sizes total 67; the sixty-eighth term, *real options*, formed a singleton and is excluded
Source: Authors' work (2026)

The co-occurrence network built from the 68 terms contains 262 edges, and Louvain detection returned 7 communities with 3 or more terms. Table 2 gives each community's composition and its position on the strategic diagram.

Figure 1 positions the seven thematic communities according to their centrality, reflecting their interaction with other clusters, and density, indicating

their internal coherence. The two motor communities are C4, built on bibliometric method terms, and C1, built on circular economy and sector labels. Neither is a theory community. C3 carries the field's own name and is the most central community in the network, but its density is the second-lowest, placing it among the basic themes rather than the motor ones. The canonical constructs sit in the two low-centrality quadrants. Competitive advantage and its relatives form the niche community C6. Dynamic capabilities anchor C7, the least central community in the network. The resource-based view is separated from both and appears instead in C2 alongside sustainability and artificial intelligence.

Figure 1.
Thematic map positioning communities by centrality and density



Note: Quadrant boundaries are set at the median centrality (0.854) and median density (0.081) of the seven communities, following Cobo et al. (2011)
Source: Authors' work (2026)

Thematic areas with growth but weak connection

Ranking keywords within each phase separates areas that grew from areas that grew and stayed peripheral. No method term appears among the leading keywords of 2015–2018, where strategy, strategic management, and dynamic capabilities tie at the top. The 2019–2022 bibliometric analysis and the systematic literature review rank second and third, respectively. By 2023–2025, they hold those positions with 14 documents each, behind only strategic management.

The substantive topics that grew over the same window are sustainability, artificial intelligence, circular economy, and digital transformation. All four fall in

C1, C2, or C3, and none of those communities combines high centrality with high density. Circular economy does sit in a motor community, but its neighbours there are sector labels rather than strategy constructs. Dynamic capabilities run the other way. It ties for the most frequent term in the first phase, drops out of the top eight by the third, and anchors the least-central community in the network.

Discussion

What this corpus can and cannot support

Three boundaries delimit the interpretation of the findings. First, the search strategy selected documents that explicitly adopt a future-oriented, evolutionary, or review-based framing, rather than a representative sample of strategic management scholarship. The findings therefore characterise the field's reflective literature within the defined corpus and should not be generalised to strategic management research as a whole.

The open-access filter compounds this. All 310 documents are freely readable, which means subscription-only outlets are absent by design. Strategic Management Journal appears in the corpus only through open-access documents. Claims about venue prestige, elite publishing, or hierarchy in knowledge legitimation cannot be made from these data, and the absence of such claims in the Results is deliberate.

Co-word proximity indicates that terms appear together more often than chance would predict. It is not evidence that the underlying constructs are theoretically integrated, that firms combining them perform better, or that one produces the other. Öztürk et al. (2024) make this point about bibliometric design in general, and Zupic & Čater (2015) made it earlier in the context of management applications. Accordingly, findings are reported as associations, and interpretive claims are explicitly distinguished from the observed network patterns.

Geography, and why the impact comparison had to be rebuilt

Production concentrates in a small number of research systems. One hundred and one of the 310 documents carry an affiliation in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Italy, and the remaining 82 countries in the corpus share what is left. Indonesia contributes 12 documents. Given this uneven distribution and the database's English-language coverage bias, the corpus cannot substantiate claims about worldwide research activity. The term *global* is therefore avoided. As discussed in the Research Method section, the observed distribution reflects database coverage as well as patterns of scholarly production.

The comparison of citation impact changes substantially with the summary statistic employed. Consistent with Adler et al. (2009) critique of citation-based comparisons, mean citation counts are particularly sensitive to highly cited documents in skewed distributions. Italy and the United Kingdom lead the mean-based comparison in Table 2, whereas Germany and the Netherlands rank above

them when medians are used; China similarly ranks Sweden below in the median-based comparison. Citation concentration is pronounced: a single article accounts for nearly one-fifth of all citations received by the corpus. Means and medians thus capture different aspects of the citation distribution, with the former reflecting the influence of highly cited publications and the latter indicating the citation count of the typical document. Both are reported in Table 2, but neither is interpreted as a measure of national research quality.

Merton (1968) described how recognition accrues to those who already have it, and the citation distribution here is consistent with that account. The authorship distribution is not. Ninety-eight per cent of these authors published once, and the most productive published three times, yielding a flatter distribution than the inverse-power model predicts, rather than a more concentrated one. Concentration operates on documents, not on people. The two are routinely conflated, and separating them matters for anyone reading this literature as evidence about who controls a field.

Indonesia's position, reported above, illustrates what peripheral participation looks like in the record. Alatas (2003) frames such positions as academic dependency, in which peripheral systems supply empirical settings while theory is generated elsewhere. Wagner et al. (2019) associate international collaboration with atypical knowledge combinations while highlighting the continued prominence of high-capacity research systems. The observed pattern is compatible with these accounts but does not establish the mechanisms they describe. The study design cannot distinguish among structural exclusion, topic selection, citation-window effects, and Scopus coverage of Indonesian outlets as potential explanations.

What the data do support is a narrower claim about where contribution is available. Khanna et al. (2010) argue that institutional voids in emerging markets change which strategies are feasible, not merely how well existing strategies perform, and Whetten (2009) makes the parallel methodological argument that context enters theory as a boundary condition rather than as a control variable. Bruton et al. (2018) extend the point to method, showing that indigenous theory-building yields constructs that survey instruments designed elsewhere cannot capture. Considered alongside the clustering of emerging-market terminology with methodological rather than theoretical terms, these arguments suggest an opportunity to strengthen the theoretical contribution of contextual research by explicitly connecting contextual conditions to substantive constructs. The observed co-word structure identifies this opportunity but does not establish that existing studies treat context solely as a descriptive setting.

The review-methodology asymmetry

The principal finding emerged from the analysis rather than from an a priori expectation. In the thematic map of the literature about the future of strategic management, the motor quadrant contains bibliometric method terms, and the

community holding dynamic capabilities has the lowest centrality in the network. Three of the seven most frequent keywords in the corpus name a method rather than an object of study.

Part of this is a design artefact and must be conceded first. Including "systematic review" among the four future-oriented search terms favours the inclusion of review-based documents and may influence the resulting thematic structure. A different string would place these terms differently. What the string does not explain is the *position* of the method terms relative to the substantive ones. A string that merely admitted reviews would produce a method cluster somewhere in the map. It would not, by itself, push competitive advantage into a niche and dynamic capabilities into the lowest-centrality community, because those terms enter the corpus through the strategic management half of the query and are free to occupy any position in the co-occurrence structure.

The finding does not stand alone, and the closest precedent comes from outside management. Ioannidis (2016) traced the growth of systematic reviews and meta-analyses in the biomedical literature. They found annual output rising by more than 2,700% between 1991 and 2014, compared with 153% for indexed publications as a whole, to the point where reviews of trials were being published faster than the trials themselves. His diagnosis was that the review had become an easily produced publishable unit whose prestige had outrun its evidential contribution. The present findings suggest a possible structural parallel in another discipline: methodological vocabulary occupies prominent positions in the co-word network of the forward-looking strategic management literature. This pattern raises the possibility that review production shapes the literature's thematic organisation, although co-word analysis alone cannot establish the publication incentives or evidential limitations identified by Ioannidis (2016).

Management shows the same accumulation. Calderón-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano (2023) reviewed digitalisation in business by synthesising 119 review articles rather than primary studies, which is the reviewing of reviews that Ioannidis identified as the terminal stage of the pattern. Domain-specific reviews also provide context for the substantive fragmentation observed in the present analysis. Plekhanov et al. (2023) found that research on digital transformation was loosely coupled with established organisational theory. Guandalini (2022) described the intersection of digital and sustainability as delayed and fragmented. Feroz et al. (2021) found that research on digital transformation for environmental sustainability clusters around applications rather than around organisational capability.

This study extends these accounts by locating fragmentation at a different analytical level. Whereas Plekhanov et al. (2023) locate the weakness inside a research stream, as a failure of individual studies to connect to theory, the present analysis reveals a broader pattern. The reviews connect strongly, but the constructs they discuss fail to connect them, because each review draws its substantive

vocabulary from a different corner of the field. The forward-looking literature has become organised around the practice of reviewing rather than around the theory being reviewed. A scholar reading it as a map of the field would be reading a map of the mapping.

Three qualifications constrain this interpretation. First, the low centrality of recently introduced terms may partly reflect their shorter period of representation in the corpus and fewer opportunities for co-occurrence. This explanation is more plausible for artificial intelligence than for dynamic capabilities, which was among the most frequent terms in the earliest phase but subsequently became peripheral. Second, the findings are sensitive to threshold selection. The methodological community occupies the motor quadrant at three of the four tested thresholds, whereas the positions associated with individual substantive terms are less stable. Dynamic capabilities, for example, shift to the basic-themes quadrant at a threshold of four. Third, morphological variants were not consolidated. The singular form, dynamic capability, appears in three documents within C3, the community with the highest centrality. The peripheral position of the plural form therefore cannot be interpreted as definitive evidence that the underlying construct is marginal to the network.

By contrast, the plural form, dynamic capabilities, appears in ten documents within C7, the least central community. Consolidating these variants could alter the network structure, although the direction and magnitude of any change would require re-estimation rather than inference from their relative frequencies.

Two robustness checks further qualify this interpretation. An independent analysis of the same export using bibliometrix under its default settings groups dynamic capabilities with strategic management, demonstrating the sensitivity of term-level interpretations to analytical specifications. Conversely, removing query-derived terms leaves the methodological community as the most central in the network and dynamic capabilities in a peripheral position, indicating that methodological prominence is not simply a consequence of retaining search terminology. These results support an aggregate interpretation: methodological vocabulary occupies a more central position than theoretical vocabulary in the analysed network. Claims concerning the precise position of any individual construct remain conditional on the analytical choices employed.

The twin transition, examined

The framing that motivated this study held that digital and sustainability imperatives are converging into a single strategic problem. The findings provide less conclusive evidence for this proposition than initially anticipated, while clarifying the extent to which such convergence is reflected in the forward-looking literature.

Digital transformation occurs in 8 documents and sits in C3 with strategic management, strategy, climate change, and knowledge management. Sustainability

occurs in 12 and sits in C2 with artificial intelligence and the resource-based view. Circular economy occurs in 6 and sits in C1 with sector labels. These terms are present, growing, and distributed across three communities rather than concentrated in one. In this corpus, there is no single digital–sustainability community, and asserting that there is would misrepresent the network.

The absence of thematic integration is compatible with empirical and conceptual studies that qualify the twin-transition proposition. Bianchini et al. (2022) find environmental technologies reducing emissions while digital technologies increase them, with interaction conditional on regional endowments in both. Montresor & Vezzani (2023) find that the digital contribution to eco-innovation is driven mainly by artificial intelligence rather than digitalisation more generally. Tabares et al. (2025) define twin transition as two mutually reinforcing transitions and report that the concept is under-specified and that its implementation framework is untested.

Two studies published in 2026 sharpen the disagreement rather than settle it. Corrocher & Mancusi (2026) found digitalisation associated with turnover growth among European small and medium-sized firms, whereas sustainability efforts were not. They also found no complementarity between the two, interpreting this pattern as evidence that firms approach digitalisation and sustainability as distinct strategic domains. Marrocu et al. (2026) read Italian project-level investment data the other way, reporting that initiatives combining green and digital components produced larger and more durable gains in value added than either component alone. Differences in units of analysis, geographical coverage, and research design preclude treating these findings as directly comparable tests of a single relationship. Instead, they suggest that the benefits of combining digitalisation and sustainability may depend on contextual conditions and complementary capabilities, although the sources of this variation remain unresolved. The separation of digital and sustainability vocabularies into distinct thematic communities is compatible with this unsettled empirical picture. However, thematic separation alone cannot establish whether the field is progressing towards a shared explanation.

Whether firms pursuing both objectives achieve superior performance lies beyond the scope of this bibliometric design and is therefore left to firm-level research rather than formulated as a proposition here. The conditional findings of Bianchini et al. (2022) and the absence of complementarity in Corrocher & Mancusi (2026) suggest that any answer will depend on prior capability endowment.

The contribution is consequently narrower than the twin-transition framing might imply. The analysis documents the growth of both streams in the forward-looking literature, identifies their respective thematic communities, and raises a question for future theoretical integration: why do digital and sustainability vocabularies remain distinguishable within a corpus explicitly concerned with the field's future? Developing an integrative framework to explain this separation remains beyond the present study's scope.

Propositions

Five propositions follow from specific positions in the map. Each is offered as a claim to be tested, not a finding.

P1. Research literatures in which methodological vocabulary occupies the motor quadrant will show slower growth in novel construct introduction than literatures in which substantive constructs occupy it. *(Follows from C4 and C1 occupying the motor quadrant while C6 and C7 are peripheral.)*

P2. In fields where reviews accumulate faster than primary studies on a topic, the topic's network centrality will decline even as its publication frequency rises. *(Follows from the trajectory of dynamic capabilities from most-frequent in 2015–2018 to lowest-centrality community in the full network.)*

P3. Research streams addressing digital transformation and sustainability will remain structurally separable for as long as they develop through distinct application communities rather than through a shared strategic-management construct.

P4. Research systems with international co-authorship rates below the field median will show lower median citation counts even after controlling for publication year and document type. (Follows from the Indonesian, Spanish, and Indian patterns reported in the Results; note that Spain combines the highest MCP rate with a low median so that the proposition may fail, which is the point of stating it.)

P5. Open-access-only corpora will locate a field's canonical constructs further from the network core than mixed-access corpora of the same field and period. (Follows from the open-access design of this study and testable by replication without the filter.)

Conclusion, limitation, and future research

The study makes a diagnostic contribution by identifying the prominence of methodological vocabulary in the thematic organisation of forward-looking strategic management literature. The findings suggest that this literature is structured more strongly around the practice of reviewing than around shared substantive constructs. The accompanying analytical parameters and code provide a reproducible basis for testing whether this pattern persists across alternative corpora and analytical specifications.

The peripheral position of dynamic capabilities and competitive advantage in this network is an opportunity rather than a verdict. Work that connects an emerging topic to an established construct would fill the structural gap left by the current literature. Scholars in under-represented systems face a specific version of this. The term "emerging markets" sits in C4 alongside bibliometric analysis and VOSviewer, while "emerging economies" sits in C5 with operations and performance terms. Contextual work is therefore being published, but neither of its

two entry points connects it to the communities holding the field's theoretical constructs.

The findings concern the structure of a research literature, so their managerial implications are indirect. Managers consulting forward-looking strategic management reviews for guidance on combining digital and environmental objectives may encounter these topics in largely separate thematic conversations. The empirical studies discussed above suggest that their complementarity depends on existing capabilities and contextual conditions. Guidance drawn from either stream alone may therefore offer an incomplete basis for assessing how the two objectives can be pursued jointly.

Two of the seven communities are held together by method rather than subject. Editors commissioning reviews might weight submissions that connect an emerging topic to an established construct over submissions that map a topic in isolation.

The analysis draws on publication metadata and therefore provides no basis for evaluating regulation, firm behaviour, or policy effectiveness. What the corpus does show is that research capacity in the forward-looking literature is distributed unevenly across 85 countries, and that low international co-authorship coincides with low citation medians. George et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of sustained cross-boundary collaboration in management research addressing societal challenges. Viewed in this context, the reported collaboration rates indicate the distribution of international research connections within the indexed forward-looking literature, without establishing their causal effects on citation impact or societal outcomes.

This study has several important limitations: the use of Scopus and the English-language filter excludes works in other languages and books, so bibliometric results may differ if other databases are used. The open-access filter systematically narrows the scope due to its association with discipline and resources. The search string allows review-related terms, which risks affecting the main findings, and a small proportion of records were included without clear search phrases. Citation indicators disadvantage recent works; keyword variants were not merged, dispersing frequencies; and author disambiguation based on name matching may lead to under-counting productivity. The analysis of intellectual structure is based solely on keyword co-occurrence because citation data are unavailable. In contrast, the metadata-level analysis does not distinguish between studies that test a theory and those that merely apply it.

Future research should extend this study by replicating the analysis beyond open-access publications and across the Web of Science database to distinguish the effects of access status and database selection. Incorporating cited-reference data would enable co-citation and bibliographic coupling analyses to compare intellectual structures with keyword-based patterns. Further studies should also examine whether the observed asymmetry in review methodologies extends to other

management sub-fields and investigate the factors shaping international collaboration among scholars in under-represented research systems through interviews with authors, editors, and reviewers. Finally, content analysis of documents addressing digitalisation and sustainability could clarify whether these topics constitute distinct research conversations or shared arguments expressed in different vocabularies.

Author contributions

Dimas Aditya Nugraha: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Software, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Visualisation. **Ratih Hurriyati**: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – Review and Editing, Validation, Supervision. **Ade Sobandi**: Writing – Review and Editing, Validation, Supervision. **Mokhamad Adib Sultan**: Writing – Review and Editing, Validation.

Declaration of interest

The authors report no financial or professional interest that could have influenced the conduct or reporting of this study.

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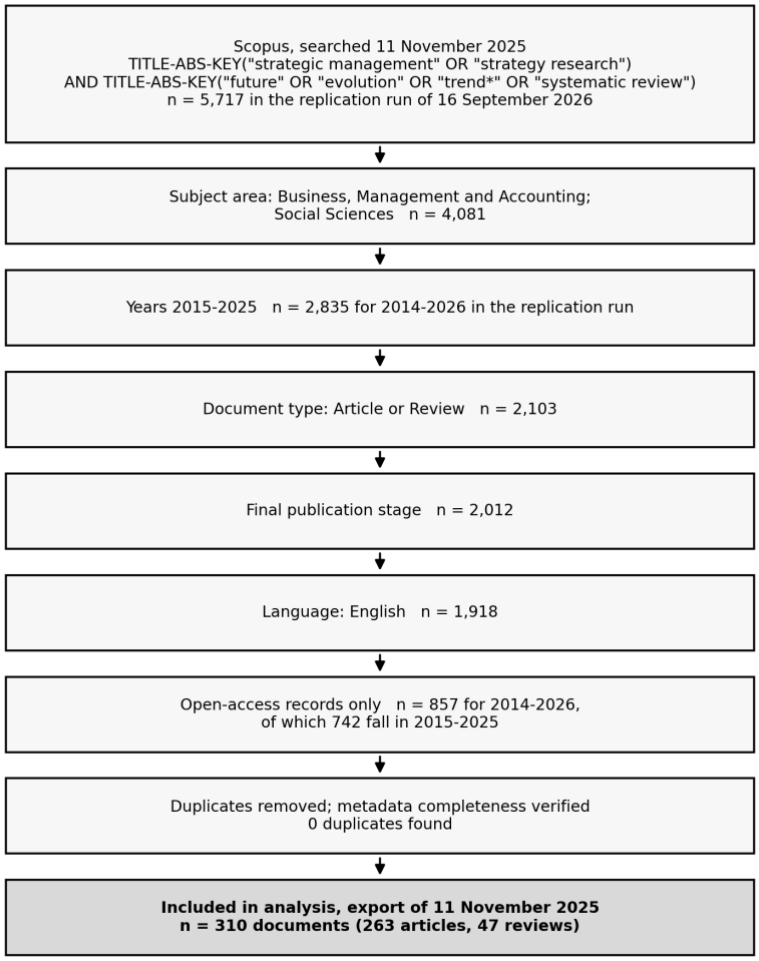
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Appendix 1.



Note: Corpus selection workflow from database query to final 310 documents. 2025 is a partial observation year
Source: Authors' work (2026)