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Mapping Global Research on Trade Potential: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

This study provides a systematic bibliometric review of the global literature on trade potential, with the aim of mapping its knowledge structure and evolutionary patterns. Based on 1,794 English-language journal articles indexed in the Scopus database from 1968 to the first half of 2025, we employ bibliometric methods to examine publication trends, international collaboration networks, core research themes, and emerging research fronts in this field. The results indicate a pronounced growth in trade potential research over the past decade. The United States, China, and the United Kingdom occupy central positions in terms of both publication output and international co-authorship networks. Existing studies are predominantly grounded in gravity-based frameworks and panel data analysis, with empirical attention largely focused on China, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries, and agricultural trade. At the same time, several themes—including geopolitical risk, economic corridors, European countries, network analysis, and energy efficiency—have recently emerged as prominent research fronts. These trends suggest a gradual shift in trade potential research from conventional measurements of trade capacity toward broader analytical perspectives that emphasize regional connectivity, uncertainty and external shocks, network structures, and sustainability-oriented considerations. By synthesizing the thematic structure and methodological evolution of the literature, this study enhances the overall understanding of global trade potential research and offers a systematic reference framework for future theoretical and empirical investigations.

Keywords: Trade Potential, Bibliometric Analysis, Vosviewer, Co-Authorship, Author Keywords Co-Occurrences

Introduction

In the context of an increasingly complex global trade environment characterized by both regional integration and geopolitical fragmentation, accurately assessing a country's trade potential has become a critical issue for both academic research and policy decision-making. Trade potential, commonly defined as the maximum level of trade that could be achieved under given economic and institutional conditions, provides an essential benchmark for evaluating whether current trade flows are underperforming relative to their achievable levels (Proença et al., 2014; Waugh & Ravikumar, 2016). Identifying this gap between actual

and potential trade is particularly important in today's uncertain global environment, where trade disruptions, supply chain restructuring, and policy shifts have significantly reshaped international trade patterns.

The importance of studying trade potential lies in its direct relevance to economic growth, export strategy design, and international competitiveness. For policymakers, understanding trade potential helps identify untapped markets, optimize trade agreements, and design more effective export promotion policies. For firms, especially export-oriented enterprises, insights into trade potential can guide market entry decisions and resource allocation. For researchers, the concept serves as a bridge between theoretical models—such as gravity frameworks—and real-world trade performance, allowing for a more comprehensive evaluation of trade efficiency and structural constraints. Empirical evidence suggests that narrowing the gap between actual and potential trade can significantly enhance trade flows, improve welfare outcomes, and strengthen economic resilience (Moharreri & Khosravi, 2014; Mazhar et al., 2023).

Despite its importance, the existing literature on trade potential remains fragmented and lacks a comprehensive synthesis of its knowledge structure and development trajectory. Previous studies have primarily focused on specific methodological approaches, such as gravity models or stochastic frontier techniques, or have examined particular regions or sectors (Armstrong, 2007; Proença et al., 2017; Nuraisyah, 2017). While these studies provide valuable insights, they do not systematically address how the research field has evolved over time, what the dominant themes are, and which emerging topics are shaping future research directions. As the volume of publications continues to grow rapidly, the absence of an integrated overview makes it difficult for scholars and policymakers to fully understand the evolution and frontier of trade potential research.

This gap highlights the necessity of conducting a systematic bibliometric analysis. By mapping the structure, collaboration patterns, and thematic evolution of the literature, bibliometric methods provide an effective way to uncover the intellectual foundations and emerging trends of a research field. Such an analysis is particularly valuable for identifying research hotspots, guiding future empirical studies, and supporting evidence-based policymaking.
Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of global research on trade potential. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the publication trends and evolution characteristics of international research on trade potential?
RQ2. Which countries have made major academic contributions to trade potential research, and what are the patterns of international collaboration?
RQ3. What are the core research themes and commonly used analytical methods in trade potential studies?
RQ4. What frontier topics and emerging directions are currently appearing in trade potential research?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it enhances the understanding of the overall knowledge structure of trade potential research. Second, it provides a systematic reference framework for future empirical and

theoretical studies. Third, it offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve trade performance and better realize potential trade capacity in a rapidly changing global economy.

Methodology

Bibliometric Method

This study employs bibliometric methods to systematically identify, describe, and analyze the global scholarly output and evolution of research on trade potential. Bibliometric analysis is a quantitative approach based on information extracted from literature databases, which can reveal the research scale, knowledge structure, distribution of research actors, and collaboration networks within a specific field from a macro perspective (Kumar, 2025; Lyu et al., 2023; Paglia, 2022; Dulla et al., 2021). By analyzing collaborations at the author, institution, and country levels, bibliometric methods help identify key contributors to knowledge development in a given domain (Zhao et al, 2017). Additionally, visualization of author keyword co-occurrences and document co-citation networks can further reveal the distribution of research themes, structural characteristics of the field, and potential emerging directions (Nageye et al, 2024).

Overall, bibliometric methods provide objective and quantifiable tools for understanding the knowledge structure and evolution of a research field from a comprehensive perspective. Given their advantages in trend identification and structural analysis, this study adopts bibliometric analysis as the primary research method to systematically map the development trajectory of trade potential research.

Data Source and Bibliometric Software

Scopus was selected as the source of bibliographic data, and VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) was used as the primary visualization tool. Scopus is one of the largest multidisciplinary bibliographic databases worldwide, offering extensive coverage and a rigorous journal selection process. It is widely used in studies related to international trade and economics (Tolossa et al., 2023). Its standardized data structure is well-suited for bibliometric analyses based on VOSviewer and Excel (Vengadesh et al., 2025).

VOSviewer is a mature tool commonly applied in bibliometric research, supporting author keyword co-occurrence analysis, construction of country and institution collaboration networks, and visualization of temporal evolution of research themes (Ananda et al., 2025; Winoto & Rohanda, 2023). Using semantic clustering and network mapping techniques, VOSviewer facilitates the identification of relationships among research topics, collaboration patterns, and research hotspots (Putri et al, 2023). Furthermore, the software can incorporate time-related information from keywords and publications to identify growth trends and emerging directions (Ananda et al., 2025). Based on these capabilities, Scopus and VOSviewer were chosen as the core platforms for data acquisition and bibliometric analysis in this study.

Search Strategy and Screening Procedure

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database between 1 and 4 July 2025. The search focused on research-oriented journal articles in the field of economics that address the concept of trade potential. Given that this concept has been expressed in various

ways in the existing literature—such as export potential, import potential, and potential trade—and may appear in plural or gerund forms, the following complete and final search query was developed after repeated testing and comparison:

("trade potential" OR "trading potential" OR "export potential" OR "exports potential" OR "exporting potential" OR "import potential" OR "imports potential" OR "importing potential" OR "potential trade" OR "potential trading" OR "potential export" OR "potential import" OR "potential exporting" OR "potential importing")
This query was executed uniformly via the Scopus Advanced Search interface and represents the only and final query string used in the data collection process. The initial search returned 13,918 records.

To ensure reproducibility and consistency in sample selection, additional filtering criteria were applied. First, the subject area was restricted to "Economics, Econometrics and Finance". Second, the document type was limited to "Article" as defined by the Scopus document classification system, thereby excluding review papers at the database level. Third, the source type was restricted to journals, excluding conference proceedings, books, and other non-journal publications. Finally, only English-language documents were retained. After applying these filters, a final sample of 1,794 research articles was obtained for subsequent analysis.

Findings and Discussions

Descriptive Analysis of Publications

This section presents a descriptive analysis of publication patterns in trade potential research from both overall scale and temporal evolution perspectives. Table 1 summarizes the basic publication information of 1,794 journal articles on trade potential. Between 1968 and 2024, the average annual number of publications was 29.5. Over the past decade (2015–2024), the annual publication rate increased substantially to 111.2, indicating that research on trade potential has entered a rapid growth phase. The year 2024 was the most productive in history, with 218 publications. In terms of academic impact, the average number of citations per publication was 16.6, with studies published in 2020 receiving the highest total citations (1,935), reflecting strong influence in subsequent research.

Table 1
Basic information of publications on Trade Potential (source: author's work from Scopus)

description	results
Total number of publications	1794
Timespan	1968-2025.7.1
Average number of publications per year from 1968-2024	29.5
Average number of publications per year from 2015-2024	111.2
Average citations per publication from 1968-2025.7.1	16.6
The year in which had highest total publications	2024(218 publications)
The year in which had highest total citations	2020(1935 citations)

Figure 1 further illustrates the annual publication trend since 1968. Overall, the development of the field can be divided into distinct stages. From 1968 to 1997, trade potential research remained at a nascent stage, with fewer than 10 publications per year. In 1998, the number of publications exceeded ten for the first time (13 publications), representing a 62.5% increase from the previous year and signaling growing scholarly

attention. Subsequent key growth points occurred in 2005, 2010, and 2014, with annual publications rising to 24, 40, and 64, respectively. After 2014, the number of publications accelerated, nearly breaking previous records each year, and peaked at 218 in 2024. By the first half of 2025, 115 related publications had already been recorded, indicating the continuation of this upward trend.

In summary, the temporal evolution of trade potential research aligns closely with global trade patterns, the deepening of regional economic cooperation, and advancements in econometric methods. The field has evolved from long-term low-frequency exploration into an important branch of international trade studies.

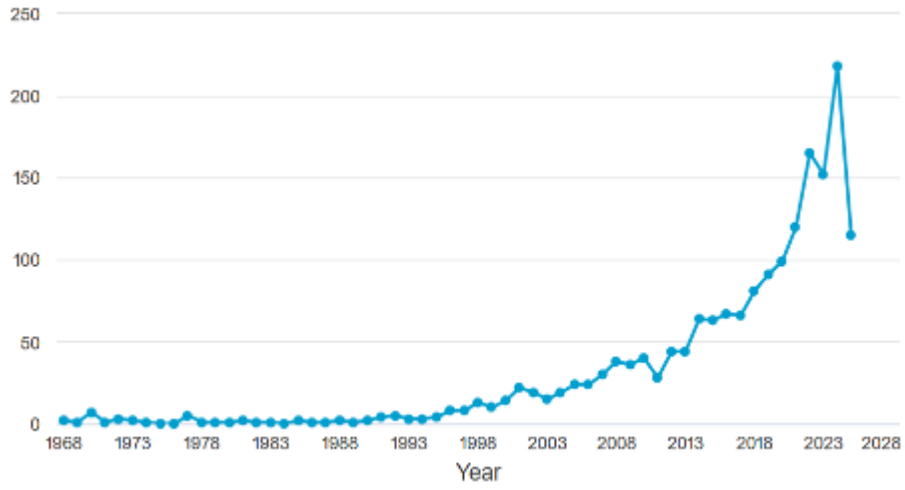

Figure 1 Publication output from 1968 to 2025.7.1 (data source: Scopus)

Collaboration Among Countries

This section examines global participation and international collaboration in trade potential research at the country level. The sample includes 121 countries and regions. Table 2 lists the ten most productive countries, which together account for approximately 50% of all publications, indicating a relatively concentrated knowledge production pattern.

To characterize national collaboration patterns, two indicators are introduced: Total Publications of a given Country (TPC) and Single-Country Publications (SCP). TPC represents the total number of publications involving authors from a country, while SCP counts publications authored solely by researchers from that country. The ratio SCP/TPC measures the extent to which a country relies on domestic versus international collaboration (Khudzari et al., 2018).

The results show that the United States had the highest TPC (278), followed by China (183). Among the top ten high-output countries, seven had SCP/TPC ratios above 0.5, suggesting that their research largely relies on domestic scholars. Russia exhibited the highest ratio (0.81), followed by India (0.71). In contrast, Germany (0.45) and Australia (0.46) had lower ratios, indicating a stronger tendency toward international collaboration.

Table 2Publications of top 10 leading countries on Trade Potential (source: author's work from Scopus)

Rank	Country	TPC	SCP	SCP/TPC
1	United States	278	165	0.59
2	China	183	105	0.57
3	India	156	110	0.71
4	United Kingdom	121	48	0.40
5	Germany	101	45	0.45
6	Russian Federation	89	72	0.81
7	Canada	64	39	0.61
8	Spain	61	32	0.52
9	Ukraine	60	38	0.63
10	Australia	57	26	0.46

note：TPC=total publications of a given country SCP=single-country publications

The openness of a research field can also be illustrated through Co-authorship networks, which represent academic connections between countries (regions) and serve as an indicator of collaborative intensity (Putri et al, 2023). In the co-authorship network constructed in VOSviewer, each Link represents collaboration between two countries, and Total Link Strength (TLS) quantifies the frequency of cooperation, i.e., the total number of co-authored publications (VOSviewer Manual, 1.6.20).

As shown in Figure 2 and Table 3, the United States occupies a central position in international collaboration, cooperating with 47 countries and producing 165 co-authored publications. The United Kingdom and China maintain stable collaborative networks with 39 and 33 countries, respectively. Notably, although India and Russia rank high in publication output, their international collaboration breadth and intensity are relatively limited. Conversely, France and Italy have moderate overall publication counts but exhibit high co-authorship ratios, reflecting a more open collaborative model.

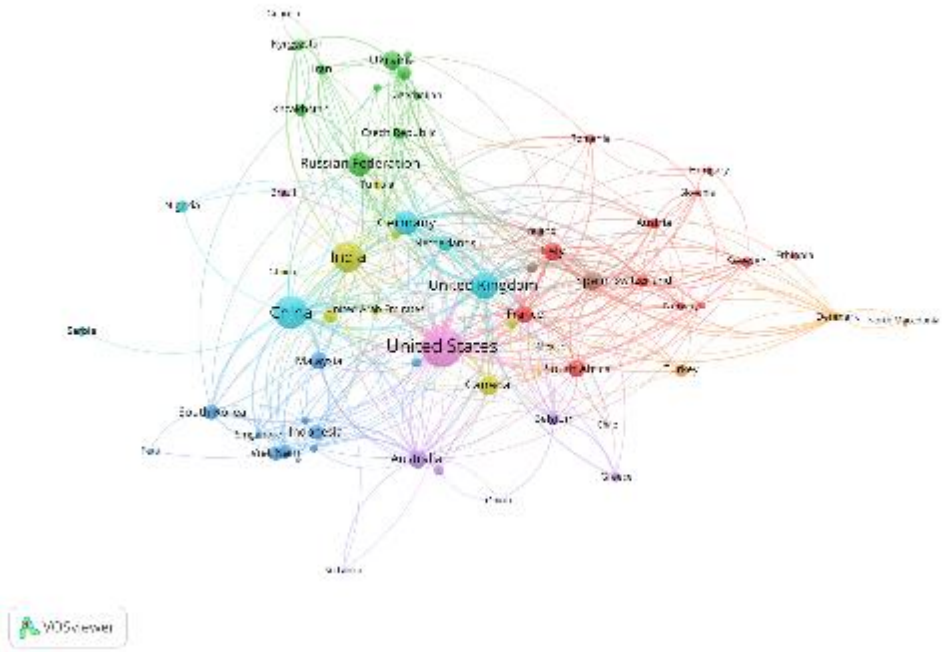

Figure 2 Countries and regions based on co-authorships with network visualization mode in VOSviewer (source: author's work from VOSviewer)

Table 3
Top 10 countries with the most international collaboration (source: author's work from VOSviewer)

Rank	Countries	Links	Total Link Strength
1	United States	47	165
2	United Kingdom	39	130
3	China	33	81
5	Germany	30	73
5	France	27	65
6	India	26	44
7	Italy	24	59
8	Spain	24	53
9	Australia	24	47
10	Russia Federation	20	26

In summary, the global collaboration pattern in trade potential research exhibits a clear "core-periphery" structure. A few developed economies act as hubs in knowledge production and international collaboration, whereas some emerging economies rely more on domestic research capacity. These differences may affect the generalizability of research findings across regional contexts.

Author Keywords Co-Occurrences Analysis
This section identifies the thematic structure of trade potential research through an author keyword co-occurrence analysis. A total of 4,321 author keywords were extracted from the 1,794 publications. After preprocessing steps—including the removal of JEL classification codes, unification of singular and plural forms, correction of spelling variations, and merging of synonymous expressions—4,201 valid keywords were retained for analysis.

Author keywords are widely regarded in bibliometric research as concise representations of researchers' intended thematic focus, and their co-occurrence patterns provide a relatively stable basis for identifying the structure of research themes (Li, 2008). It should be noted that approximately 17% of the sampled publications did not report author keywords. However, given that the overall coverage of author keywords in the dataset remains at an acceptable level and that the thematic analysis primarily focuses on high-frequency keywords and their relational structures, this degree of missingness does not materially affect the overall thematic mapping results.

In VOSviewer, the minimum occurrence threshold for a keyword was set to 4. As a result, 243 keywords met the threshold and were included in the co-occurrence analysis. Figure 3 presents the visualized co-occurrence network constructed from these 243 keywords. Figure 3 presents the network visualization map constructed on the basis of these keywords. Each keyword node is characterized by three core indicators: Occurrences, Links, and TLS. Occurrences indicate the number of publications in which a keyword appears, with larger node sizes representing higher frequencies. Links refer to the number of distinct keywords with which a given keyword co-occurs, while TLS measures the cumulative frequency of co-occurrence between a keyword and all other keywords. Higher TLS values indicate stronger overall thematic connectivity within the research field (VOSviewer Manual, version 1.6.20).

Together, these indicators capture the relative importance and structural embeddedness of keywords within the thematic network.

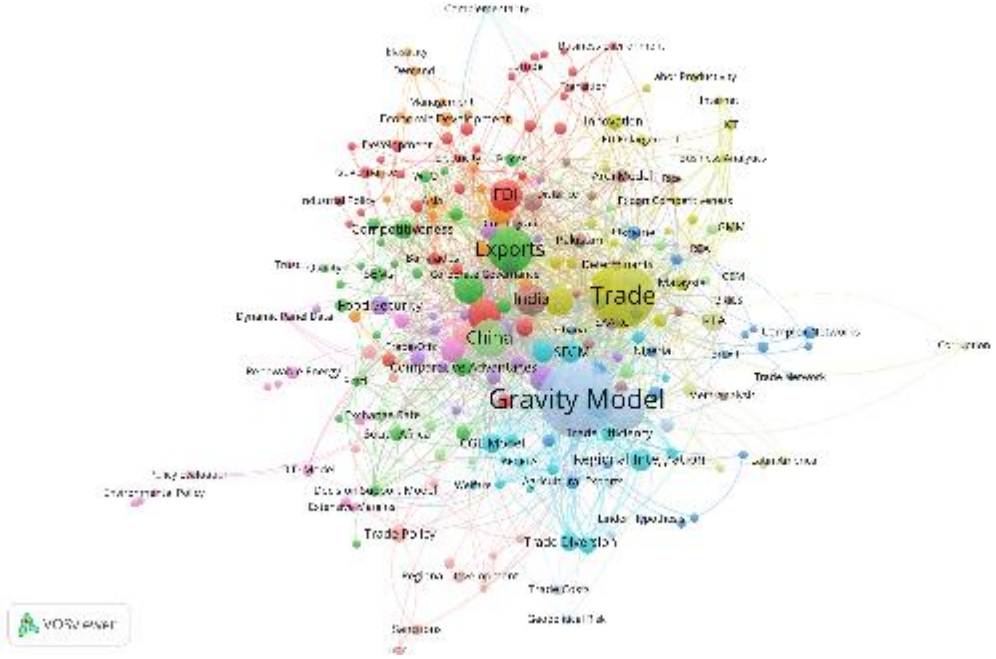

Figure 3 Network visualization map of keywords occurrence in VOSViewer (source: author's work from VOSviewer)

The co-occurrence results indicate that "Gravity Model" is the most frequently occurring keyword in the trade potential literature (282 occurrences; 140 links; 647 TLS), highlighting its central methodological role in trade potential estimation. Together with its extensions and complementary techniques—such as the Stochastic Frontier Gravity Model (SFGM) (26 occurrences; 35 links; 70 TLS), Panel Data Analysis (82 occurrences; 72 links; 194 TLS), and Poisson Pseudo Maximum Likelihood (PPML) (26 occurrences; 44 links; 70 TLS)—the gravity-based framework constitutes a relatively stable and dominant technical pathway in this research field.

With respect to research objects, China emerges as the most frequently examined country (78 occurrences; 71 links; 182 TLS), followed by Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries (55 occurrences), India (53 occurrences), and the European Union (EU) (44 occurrences). Other regions such as ASEAN (23 occurrences) and Africa (18 occurrences) also appear with notable frequency, reflecting sustained scholarly attention to regional trade frameworks, particularly those associated with the Belt and Road Initiative. In terms of product coverage, agriculture is the most commonly studied sector (25 occurrences), whereas services appear far less frequently (7 occurrences), indicating a degree of sectoral concentration in the existing literature.

Regarding explanatory variables, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (55 occurrences) and Free Trade Agreements (FTA) (45 occurrences) are the most frequently incorporated determinants of trade potential, followed by Regional Trade Agreements (RTA) and Trade Policy. Notably, FTA exhibits a substantially higher total link strength (132 TLS) than FDI (91 TLS) and RTA (63 TLS), suggesting that free trade agreements function as a key institutional variable with strong semantic connections across multiple research themes.

Overall, the thematic structure of trade potential research is characterized by a gravity-centered methodological core and a growing emphasis on institutional factors and regional contexts. The analytical focus has gradually shifted from purely estimating potential trade volumes toward a more policy-oriented and structural interpretation of how institutional arrangements and regional integration mechanisms shape the realization of trade potential.

Emerging Fields

Building on the analysis of the existing thematic structure, this section further identifies emerging research directions in the field of trade potential. Unlike high-frequency keyword analysis, which primarily captures the overall knowledge structure of a research field, the identification of emerging topics places greater emphasis on the temporal novelty of research themes and the academic influence and diffusion potential they exhibit within a relatively short period. In line with the approaches adopted by Sasaki et al. (2020), Pan et al. (2021), Yao et al. (2023), and Chuan et al. (2024), this study combines Average Publication Year and Average Normalized Citations of authors keywords to systematically identify rapidly emerging and increasingly influential research frontiers in trade potential studies.

The Average Publication Year of a keyword reflects the timing of its entry into the research agenda. As shown in Figure 4, VOSviewer maps authors' keywords according to their Average Publication Year using a color gradient ranging from blue (earlier) to yellow (more recent). Keywords displayed in yellow can therefore be regarded as newly emerging research topics in recent years. Meanwhile, Average Normalized Citations adjust citation counts by publication year, thereby eliminating systematic biases arising from differences in citation accumulation between older and newer publications and allowing for meaningful comparisons across time. As illustrated in Figure 5, keywords with higher normalized citation values (yellow) indicate topics that have attracted above-average academic attention within a relatively short time span. Based on the intersection of keywords that appear in yellow in both Figure 4 and Figure 5, this study identifies a set of representative emerging research areas in the trade potential literature (see Table 4). These keywords are not only temporally recent but have also demonstrated strong academic diffusion potential and expansion momentum within a limited research period.

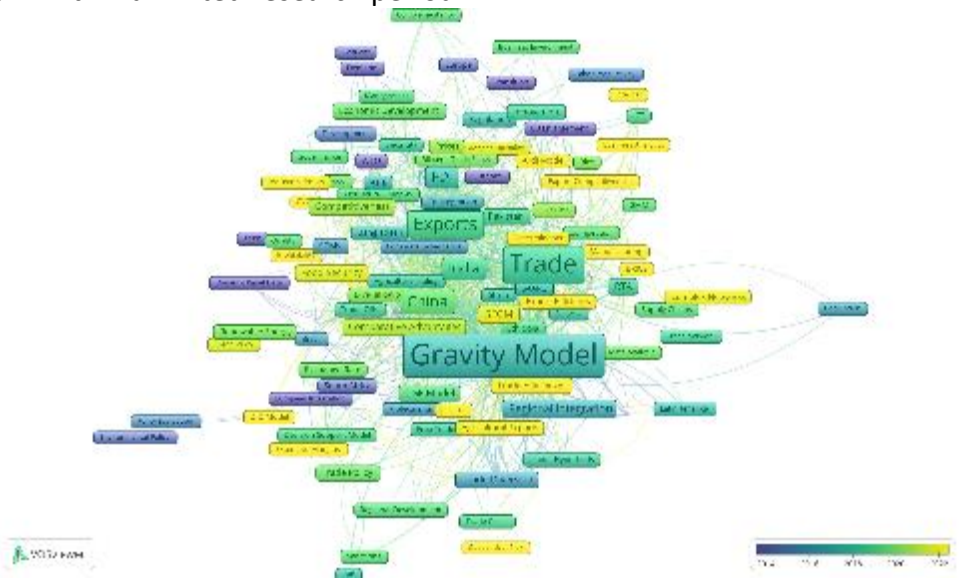

Figure 4 Overlay visualization map of average publication year of keywords in VOSViewer (source: author's work from VOSviewer)

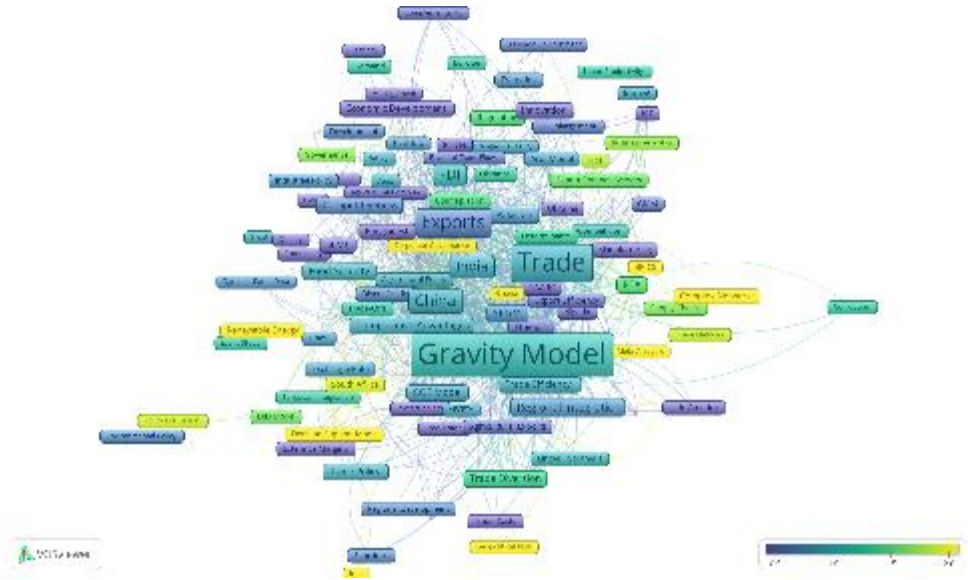

Figure 5 Overlay visualization of average normalized citations of keywords in VOSViewer (source: author's work from VOSviewer)

Table 4
Emerging keywords in Trade Potential research identified via multi-dimensional visualization indicators (source: author's work from VOSviewer)

Keywords	Average publication year	Average normalization citations
Geopolitical Risk	2024.2	2.2094
Economic Corridors	2024	6.5177
INSTC(International North South Transport Corridor)	2023.8	2.0418
European Countries	2023.25	4.2992
Financial Development	2023	1.6085
Covid-19	2022.8462	1.7597
Network Analysis	2022.6	6.8391
BRI	2022.3818	1.7502
Institutional Quality	2022.1429	1.6516
Circular Economy	2022	1.7433
Energy Efficiency	2022	5.228

The results indicate that the concentrated appearance of keywords such as Economic Corridors, INSTC, BRI, and European Countries reflects a gradual shift in trade potential research from traditional bilateral country-based analyses toward regional, corridor-oriented, and multilateral cooperation frameworks. Recent studies no longer focus solely on trade flows themselves, but increasingly incorporate cross-border infrastructure connectivity, logistics network integration, and geo-economic structures into the analytical framework. This transition suggests a growing alignment between trade potential research and real-world regional integration strategies, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, international transport corridors, and European regional coordination mechanisms.

The emergence of Geopolitical Risk, Covid-19, Financial Development, and Institutional Quality highlights an increasing scholarly interest in the role of non-traditional factors in shaping trade potential. Compared with earlier frameworks that primarily emphasized

economic size and distance variables, recent literature places greater weight on geopolitical uncertainty, institutional environments, and economic resilience as key forces constraining and reshaping potential trade space. This shift indicates that trade potential research is moving away from static measurement toward a more systematic consideration of uncertainty and structural constraints.

Network Analysis has become one of the rapidly rising keywords in recent years, reflecting a clear methodological expansion in trade potential studies. Unlike conventional linear approaches based on gravity models and panel regressions, network analysis emphasizes the structural characteristics of trade relationships, node centrality, and overall connectivity among countries.

The appearance of Circular Economy and Energy Efficiency suggests that "green trade potential" is gradually emerging as an important research frontier in this field. By linking trade potential with resource circulation, energy-use efficiency, and environmental constraints, this strand of research extends the traditional trade-growth perspective toward a broader framework of sustainable development and green transition.

Overall, the distribution of emerging topics indicates that trade potential research is undergoing a transition from a stage of methodological consolidation toward one characterized by thematic diversification and stronger policy orientation. Regionalization, networkization, greening, and resilience are increasingly forming the core features of the current research frontier, offering new analytical frameworks for understanding potential trade space under a complex and evolving international environment.

Conclusions

Based on 1,794 English-language journal publications indexed in the Scopus database from 1968 to the first half of 2025, this study provides a systematic bibliometric overview of global trade potential research, examining its publication volume, collaboration structures, and thematic paradigms. Through keyword co-occurrence analysis and visualization mapping, the study addresses core questions regarding the development stage of trade potential research, its leading contributors, research topics, and emerging directions, thereby offering an integrative framework for understanding the field's knowledge structure and frontiers.

Regarding RQ1, the results indicate a sustained increase in publications on trade potential since 1968, with particularly pronounced growth over the past decade (2015–2024), during which the annual publication rate exceeded 100 articles and peaked at 218 in 2024. This trend suggests that trade potential has evolved from a relatively marginal research topic into a consistently attractive area within international trade and development economics, with increasing academic attention and policy relevance.

Regarding RQ2, country-level analysis reveals that the United States, China, and the United Kingdom occupy central positions in both publication output and international co-authorship networks, serving as key knowledge hubs in this research domain. Although France, Italy, and Australia have comparatively lower publication volumes, they exhibit high levels of international collaboration. In contrast, India and Russia show strong output but relatively

limited cross-national cooperation. These patterns highlight the diverse participation models and regional characteristics present in global trade potential research.

Regarding RQ3, author keyword co-occurrence analysis identifies the core research themes and methodological pathways within the field. The findings indicate that the Gravity Model and its extensions, along with Panel Data Analysis, remain the most widely used empirical tools. Research subjects primarily focus on China, BRI countries, and European nations, with studies often emphasizing agricultural trade. Moreover, FTA and FDI emerge as frequently examined institutional determinants of trade potential, reflecting a shift in focus from merely estimating potential trade volumes toward investigating institutional arrangements and structural conditions.

Regarding RQ4, a combined analysis of the average publication year and normalized citation impact of author keywords highlights Geopolitical Risk, Economic Corridors, European Countries, Network Analysis, and Energy Efficiency as particularly prominent in terms of both temporal novelty and scholarly influence. This finding suggests that trade potential research is gradually expanding into areas such as green transformation, network structures, and regional integration, indicating a methodological evolution from traditional bilateral trade analysis toward more complex, multidimensional frameworks.

Overall, the study provides three key implications for research in trade and development economics. First, from a theoretical perspective, by systematically mapping the thematic structure and evolution of trade potential research, the study demonstrates a shift from early tool-oriented studies focused on potential trade estimation toward analyses emphasizing institutional quality, regional integration, and structural factors, offering a comprehensive view of the field's position within international trade theory. Second, from an empirical perspective, the co-occurrence patterns of keywords and methods indicate that while gravity-based models remain the mainstream analytical approach, research subjects and explanatory variables are increasingly oriented toward regional cooperation, institutional environments, and external shocks, providing guidance for context-sensitive empirical investigations. Third, from a policy perspective, the findings suggest that trade potential research increasingly informs regional economic cooperation, FTA design, and the assessment of green and resilience-oriented trade policies, offering important knowledge for developing economies in formulating export promotion strategies and participating in regional integration initiatives.

Despite providing a systematic bibliometric overview, this study has several limitations. First, the discipline selection was restricted to the "Economics, Econometrics and Finance" category in Scopus, which may exclude some interdisciplinary studies. Second, the thematic analysis relied primarily on author keyword co-occurrence, and results are partially dependent on the availability and wording of keywords. Third, the network visualizations generated by VOSviewer focus on high-frequency keywords and prominent associations, which may simplify the presentation of potential linkages. Finally, the study is based on a single database and analysis tool; its conclusions primarily reflect overall patterns in publication distribution, methodological pathways, and collaboration structures. Future research could extend the analysis by incorporating multiple databases or alternative analytical tools to compare and expand on research themes and collaboration patterns, thereby deepening understanding of emerging frontiers in trade potential research.

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