The Evolution of Human Rights Discourses Based on Bibliometric and Network Analysis 2000–2025

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of human rights discourses between 2000 and 2025 using bibliometric and network analysis to provide a systematic mapping of the field's intellectual structure and thematic development. Bibliographic data were retrieved from the Scopus database and analyzed using VOSviewer to explore publication trends, co-authorship networks, institutional and country collaborations, keyword co-occurrence patterns, and temporal shifts in research focus. The findings reveal that human rights scholarship is anchored in legal and governance-oriented frameworks while increasingly integrating socio-cultural, ethical, and technological perspectives. Emerging themes such as artificial intelligence, ethical technology, and sustainable development indicate a forward-looking expansion of human rights discourse in response to digital transformation and global policy challenges. The analysis also highlights the dominance of Anglo-American research hubs alongside growing contributions from the Global South, reflecting both consolidation and diversification within the field. Overall, this study demonstrates that human rights discourse has evolved into a multidimensional and interconnected knowledge system, offering insights into dominant paradigms, emerging research frontiers, and opportunities for future interdisciplinary inquiry.

Keywords: *Bibliometric Analysis; Human Rights; Network Analysis; Vosviewer*

INTRODUCTION

Human rights discourse represents one of the most enduring and dynamic areas of social science and legal scholarship. Rooted in the normative foundations of human dignity, equality, and justice, human rights have historically functioned as both moral principles and legal instruments guiding state behavior and international governance. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, academic discussions on human rights have continuously expanded beyond legal codification toward broader sociopolitical, cultural, and institutional dimensions [1]. Over time, human rights discourse has evolved from a predominantly legal-normative framework into a multidisciplinary field encompassing law, political science, sociology, international relations, development studies, and communication studies [2].

The period from 2000 onward marks a significant transformation in the global human rights landscape. The early twenty-first century witnessed intensified debates on the balance between security and liberty, particularly following global counterterrorism efforts that reshaped interpretations of due process, privacy, and state accountability [3]. Simultaneously, international development agendas increasingly incorporated human rights language, linking rights fulfillment with governance quality, institutional capacity, and sustainable development outcomes. These developments positioned human rights not only as legal entitlements but also as strategic frameworks for policy design and international cooperation [4].

Another major driver of change in human rights discourse is the rapid expansion of digital technologies and networked communication systems. The rise of digital platforms, big data, and artificial intelligence has introduced new rights-related challenges, including digital surveillance, algorithmic discrimination, online freedom of expression, and data privacy. As societies become

increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures, human rights scholarship has adapted by integrating concepts from information ethics, media studies, and technology governance [5]. These transformations have not replaced traditional rights concerns but rather layered new dimensions onto existing debates, resulting in a more complex and interconnected discursive field.

In parallel, the shrinking of civic space in many regions has become a central concern within contemporary human rights discourse. Restrictions on civil society organizations, limitations on freedom of assembly, and increased risks faced by journalists and human rights defenders have reshaped scholarly attention toward the structural conditions that enable or constrain rights realization [6], [7]. Human rights discourse in this context extends beyond formal legal protections to encompass communicative practices, advocacy networks, and transnational mobilization strategies that sustain rights claims in restrictive environments. The growing volume and thematic diversity of human rights research between 2000 and 2025 present both an opportunity and a challenge for scholars. While the literature offers rich insights across multiple domains, its scale makes it increasingly difficult to capture overarching patterns through traditional narrative reviews alone. Bibliometric and network analysis provide systematic and replicable approaches to examining large bodies of scholarly work, enabling researchers to identify publication trends, intellectual structures, thematic clusters, and collaborative networks within a field [8]. Applying these methods to human rights research allows for a comprehensive mapping of how discourses have evolved, intersected, and diverged over time.

Despite the substantial growth of human rights scholarship over the past twenty-five years, there remains a limited integrated understanding of how human rights discourses have evolved as interconnected knowledge networks. Existing reviews often focus on specific themes such as gender rights, digital privacy, migration, or transitional justice without systematically examining how these topics relate to one another within the broader intellectual structure of the field. Moreover, few studies have combined bibliometric indicators with network analysis to explore citation patterns, keyword co-occurrence, and collaborative dynamics across time. This fragmentation limits the ability of scholars and policymakers to identify dominant paradigms, emerging discourses, and potential gaps that warrant future investigation. The objective of this study is to analyze the evolution of human rights discourses from 2000 to 2025 using bibliometric and network analysis techniques.

METHOD

This study employs a bibliometric and network analysis approach to examine the evolution of human rights discourses from 2000 to 2025. The bibliographic data were retrieved from the Scopus database, selected for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals and its suitability for large-scale bibliometric studies. The search was conducted using relevant keywords related to human rights discourses and limited to articles and reviews published in English within the specified time frame. The retrieved records were then exported in compatible formats and analyzed using VOSviewer software. VOSviewer was utilized to generate and visualize bibliometric networks, including co-authorship networks, co-citation networks, and keyword co-occurrence maps. These analyses enabled the identification of major thematic clusters, influential publications and authors, and collaboration patterns across countries and institutions. Temporal overlay visualizations were further applied to observe shifts in research focus and the emergence of new discourse areas over time, providing a systematic and replicable mapping of the intellectual structure and development of human rights research during the 2000–2025 period.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
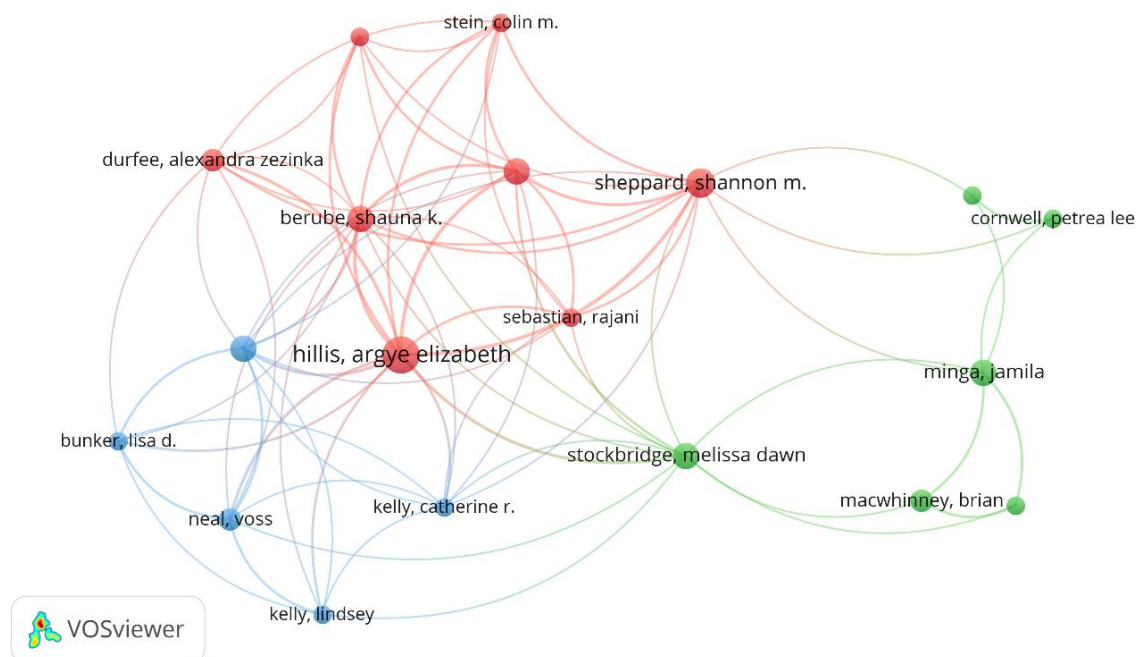
Co-Authorship Analysis

Figure 1. Author Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 1 reveals a clearly structured intellectual landscape within human rights–related scholarship, characterized by three main collaborative clusters. The red cluster represents a dense core of highly interconnected scholars such as Sheppard, Shannon M.; Hillis, Argyre Elizabeth; Berube, Shauna K.; Stein, Colin M.; and Durfee, Alexandra Zenkina, indicating an established and productive research community with strong internal collaboration. This cluster likely functions as a central hub of theoretical development and empirical contribution, given the high number of interlinkages and node prominence. The blue cluster, including authors such as Kelly, Lindsey; Neal, Voss; Bunker, Lisa D.; and Kelly, Catherine R., shows a more compact but cohesive collaboration pattern, suggesting a specialized subfield or methodological niche that maintains regular interaction both internally and with the core red cluster. Meanwhile, the green cluster, featuring Minga, Jamila; MacWhinney, Brian; Cornwell, Petrea Lee; and Stockbridge, Melissa Dawn, appears more peripheral yet strategically connected through bridging authors particularly Stockbridge, indicating an emerging or interdisciplinary stream that connects human rights discourse with adjacent domains.
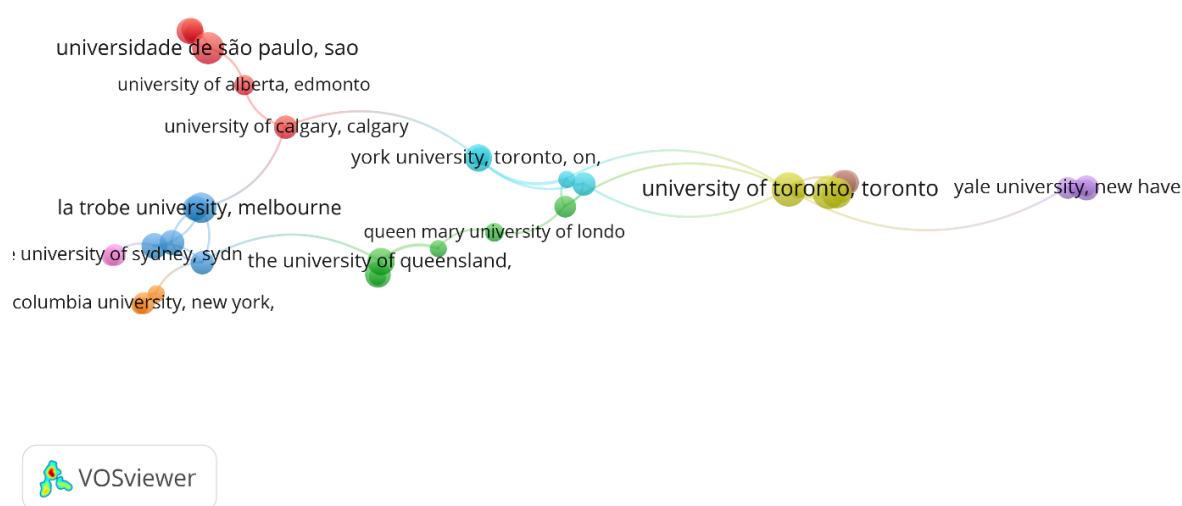
Figure 2. Affiliation Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 2 illustrates a geographically diverse yet interconnected structure of human rights research, highlighting the central role of major universities as collaboration hubs. The University of Toronto emerges as the most prominent and strategically positioned institution, serving as a key bridge linking multiple clusters across regions, which indicates its strong international research collaborations and influence within the field. Closely connected institutions such as York University and Queen Mary University of London reinforce a transnational academic corridor between North America and Europe, suggesting sustained collaborative exchanges in human rights scholarship. Australian universities—including La Trobe University, the University of Sydney, and the University of Queensland—form a cohesive cluster, reflecting regional collaboration within the Asia–Pacific context while maintaining selective links to global partners. Meanwhile, institutions such as the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the Universidade de São Paulo contribute to a secondary network that extends collaboration toward Latin America and Canada. The presence of Yale University as a peripheral but connected node further indicates engagement from elite U.S. institutions without dominating the network.
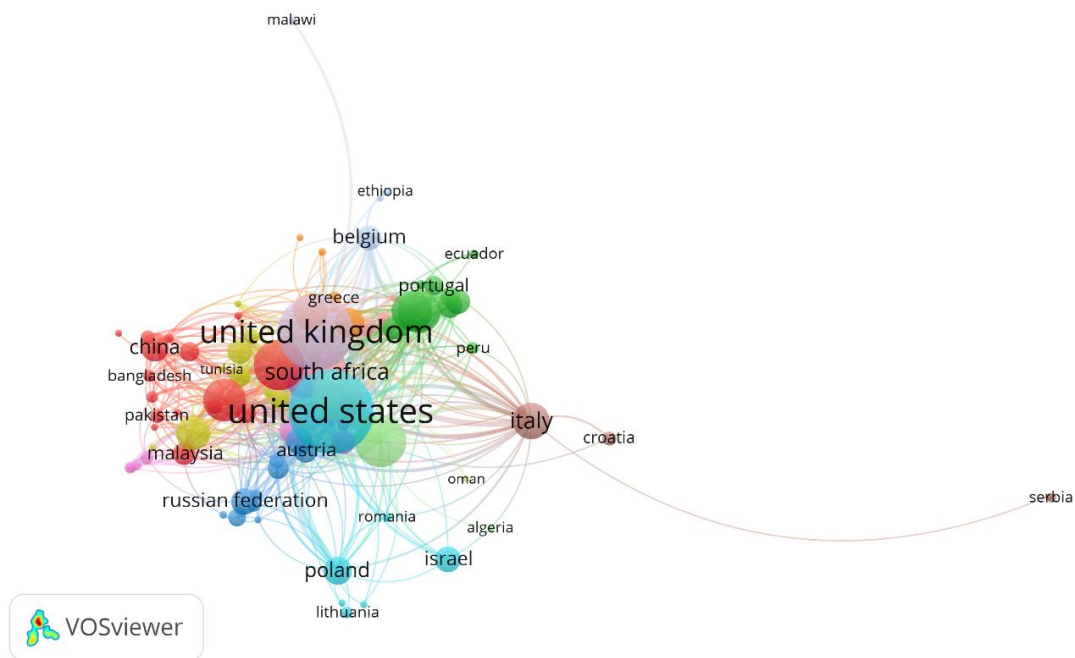
Figure 3. Country Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 3 highlights a highly centralized structure in global human rights research, with the United States and the United Kingdom occupying dominant positions as the primary hubs of international collaboration. These two countries exhibit the largest node sizes and the densest interconnections, indicating their leading roles in knowledge production and cross-border research partnerships. Surrounding these core hubs are strongly connected countries such as South Africa, Italy, Portugal, and Belgium, which function as important regional connectors linking research communities across Europe, Africa, and parts of the Global South. The network also reflects meaningful participation from emerging and developing countries, including China, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Peru, and Ecuador, suggesting an increasing diversification of geographic perspectives within human rights scholarship. However, several countries such as Serbia and Malawi appear on the periphery with limited connections, indicating underrepresentation or weaker integration into global research networks.

Citation Analysis

Table 1. Most Cited Article

Citations	Author and Year	Title
343	[9]	Blue growth and blue justice: Ten risks and solutions for the ocean economy
229	[10]	Evidence from internet search data shows information-seeking responses to news of local COVID-19 cases
218	[11]	Role Theory Perspectives: Past, Present, and Future Applications of Role Theories in Management Research
184	[12]	What is "Toxic Masculinity" and Why Does it Matter?
175	[13]	Ethical Challenges and Solutions of Generative AI: An Interdisciplinary Perspective
164	[14]	Digesting the Red Pill: Masculinity and Neoliberalism in the Manosphere
151	[15]	Metaverse through the prism of power and addiction: what will happen when the virtual world becomes more attractive than reality?

Citations	Author and Year	Title
139	[16]	Beyond ecosystem services and nature's contributions: Is it time to leave utilitarian environmentalism behind?
131	[17]	Artificial intelligence for human flourishing â€" Beyond principles for machine learning
127	[18]	The ethics of people analytics: risks, opportunities and recommendations

Source: Scopus, 2025

Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis

Figure 4. Network Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 4 network reveals "human rights" as the dominant and most central concept, functioning as the primary intellectual anchor that connects multiple thematic clusters. Its central position and dense linkages indicate that human rights scholarship between 2000 and 2025 is highly integrative, drawing from legal, political, ethical, and social perspectives simultaneously. Rather than existing as a narrowly defined legal doctrine, human rights emerge as a broad analytical framework that mediates discussions across governance, morality, public policy, and emerging technological concerns. The green cluster reflects a strong institutional–normative orientation, emphasizing themes such as international law, public policy, sustainable development, ethics, artificial intelligence, and ethical technology. This cluster suggests a growing convergence between human rights and global governance frameworks, particularly in relation to sustainability agendas and technological governance. The presence of artificial intelligence and ethical technology indicates that contemporary human rights discourse increasingly addresses future-oriented challenges, positioning human rights as a guiding normative lens for regulating technological innovation and decision-making processes.

The blue cluster centers on political and civic dimensions, including democracy, citizenship, migration, disability, law, and government. This cluster highlights the role of human rights in structuring relationships between states and individuals, particularly in contexts of mobility, inclusion, and political participation. The strong interconnections among these keywords suggest that issues of migration and citizenship are not treated in isolation but are embedded within broader

debates on democratic governance, legal frameworks, and social justice. In contrast, the red cluster foregrounds identity, power, and lived experience, with keywords such as gender, feminism, sexuality, racism, violence, psychology, and social media. This cluster reflects a critical and socio-cultural strand of human rights scholarship that examines how rights are experienced, contested, and communicated at individual and group levels. The prominence of social media within this cluster underscores the role of digital platforms in shaping rights narratives, mobilization, and public discourse, particularly around gender-based and racialized forms of inequality. The yellow cluster, which includes ethics, morality, religion, and decision making, functions as a conceptual bridge between normative theory and applied policy debates. Its connections to both the legal–institutional and socio-cultural clusters indicate that moral and ethical reasoning remains central to human rights scholarship, informing debates across law, technology, and social justice.
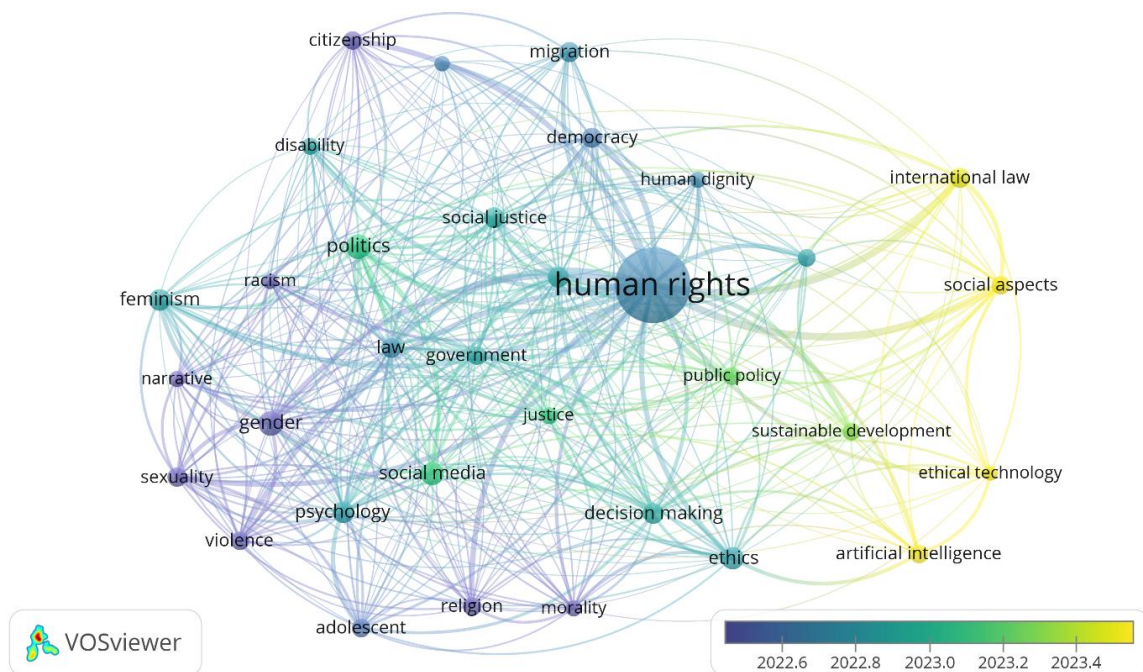

Figure 5. Overlay Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 5 illustrates the temporal evolution of human rights research themes, with color gradients indicating the average publication year of keywords. The central positioning of human rights in a mid-to-late color range suggests its sustained relevance across the entire 2000–2025 period, functioning as a stable conceptual anchor while surrounding themes evolve. Core governance-related terms such as law, government, justice, and public policy appear in relatively earlier shades, indicating that institutional and legal dimensions have long formed the foundation of human rights scholarship. More recent thematic shifts are visible through the emergence of keywords in lighter, yellow-toned hues, particularly artificial intelligence, ethical technology, sustainable development, and international law. These terms reflect a forward-looking orientation in contemporary human rights research, where scholars increasingly engage with technological governance, sustainability agendas, and transnational regulatory frameworks. The prominence of these newer themes suggests that human rights discourse is expanding to address systemic and future-oriented challenges that extend beyond traditional state-centric rights concerns. In contrast, identity- and experience-based themes such as gender, feminism, sexuality, racism, social media, psychology, and violence display a broad temporal spread, indicating sustained scholarly attention with renewed intensity in recent years. Their strong connections to newer ethical and policy-oriented themes highlight a growing integration between critical social perspectives and emerging governance challenges.
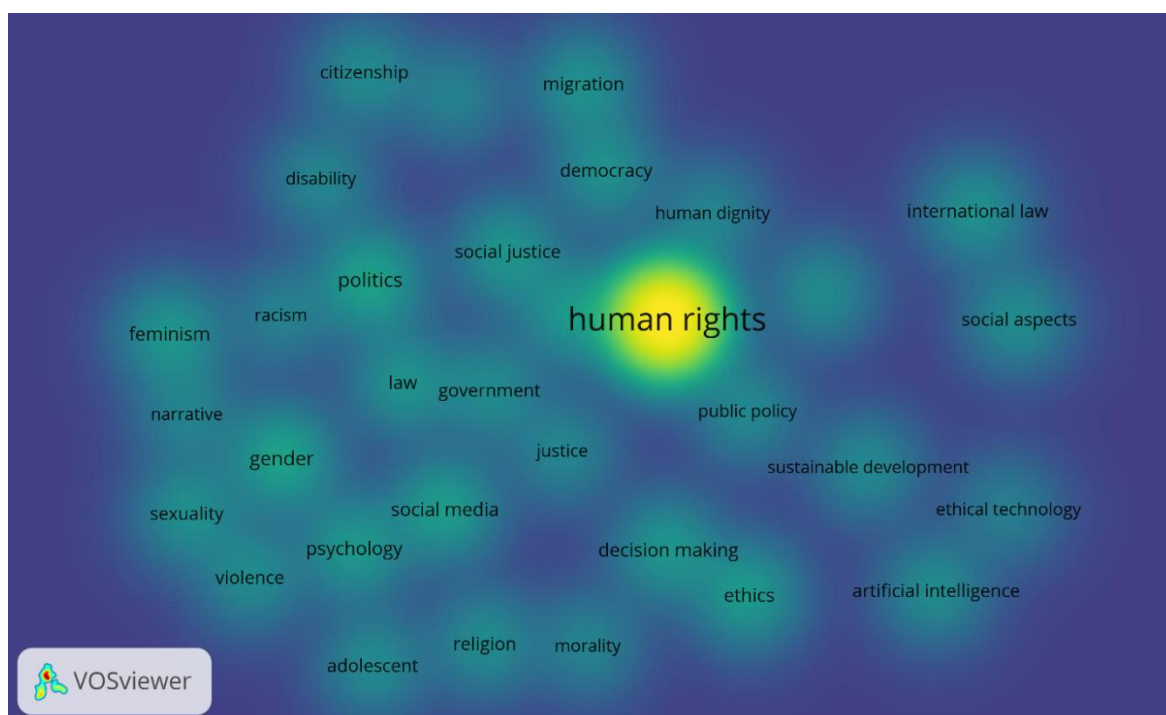
Figure 6. Density Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

highlights "human rights" as the most concentrated and influential concept in the literature, shown by the brightest and most intense area at the center of the map. This indicates that human rights function as the core integrative framework around which diverse research themes are organized. Surrounding high-density areas such as law, government, justice, public policy, and social justice suggest that institutional and governance-oriented perspectives remain foundational to human rights scholarship, consistently attracting significant academic attention across the period analyzed. Lower but still notable density regions reveal the breadth of thematic diversification within the field. Concepts related to gender, feminism, sexuality, racism, violence, and psychology indicate sustained engagement with identity, inequality, and lived experiences, while emerging clusters around artificial intelligence, ethical technology, and sustainable development point to the expanding scope of human rights into technological and future-oriented domains.

Discussion
Practical Implication

The findings of this bibliometric and network analysis offer several practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and human rights organizations. First, the strong centrality of legal and governance-related themes (such as law, public policy, justice, and international law) indicates that human rights discourse continues to serve as a critical normative foundation for policy formulation and institutional design. For governments and international organizations, this suggests that rights-based approaches remain highly relevant for addressing complex societal challenges, particularly in areas related to democratic governance, migration management, and social inclusion. The growing visibility of sustainable development and ethical technology further implies that policymakers should increasingly integrate human rights considerations into sustainability strategies and technology regulation frameworks, ensuring that innovation aligns with principles of dignity, equity, and accountability.

Second, the emergence of technology-related themes, including artificial intelligence and ethical technology, highlights the need for practitioners to anticipate and manage rights-related risks in digital environments. Human rights institutions, civil society organizations, and regulatory bodies

can use these insights to strengthen advocacy and monitoring efforts in areas such as data protection, algorithmic transparency, and digital inclusion. The presence of strong collaboration networks centered in the United States, the United Kingdom, and key global universities also suggests opportunities for cross-national knowledge exchange. Strengthening partnerships between established research hubs and underrepresented regions (particularly in the Global South) can enhance capacity building and ensure that human rights solutions are informed by diverse contextual experiences.

Theoretical Contribution

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the human rights literature by providing a systematic, data-driven mapping of how human rights discourses have evolved over a twenty-five-year period. The identification of multiple interconnected thematic clusters demonstrates that human rights should be understood not as a singular or static concept, but as a multidimensional knowledge system that integrates legal norms, political structures, social identities, ethical reasoning, and technological governance. This integrative perspective extends existing human rights theories by empirically demonstrating the coexistence and interaction of normative, institutional, and socio-cultural strands within the field. Furthermore, the temporal analysis reveals a cumulative rather than substitutive pattern of theoretical development. Traditional legal and political foundations continue to underpin human rights scholarship, while newer discourses (such as digital rights and sustainability-oriented rights) are layered onto existing frameworks. This finding supports theoretical arguments that view human rights as an adaptive and evolving normative regime, capable of responding to structural changes without abandoning its core principles. By applying bibliometric and network analysis, the study also advances methodological approaches in human rights research, illustrating how large-scale mapping techniques can complement qualitative and doctrinal analyses to generate macro-level theoretical insights.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based solely on data retrieved from the Scopus database, which, while comprehensive, does not capture all human rights scholarship, particularly publications in non-indexed journals, regional outlets, books, and policy reports that are influential in practice. As a result, certain perspectives, especially from the Global South or non-English-speaking contexts, may be underrepresented. Second, bibliometric indicators primarily reflect patterns of publication, citation, and keyword usage, which do not necessarily capture the substantive quality, normative depth, or real-world impact of individual studies. The reliance on keyword-based network analysis may oversimplify complex conceptual debates by grouping diverse interpretations under shared terms. Human rights concepts often carry different meanings across disciplines and contexts, which cannot be fully disentangled through quantitative mapping alone. Future research could address these limitations by integrating multiple databases, incorporating qualitative content analysis, or conducting comparative case studies to deepen understanding of how human rights discourses are articulated and applied in specific social, political, and cultural settings.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of human rights discourses from 2000 to 2025 through bibliometric and network analysis, revealing a dynamic and increasingly interconnected scholarly landscape. The findings demonstrate that human rights research remains anchored in legal and governance frameworks while simultaneously expanding into social, ethical, and technological domains, reflecting the adaptive nature of human rights as a normative and analytical framework. The emergence of themes such as digital ethics, artificial intelligence, and sustainable development illustrates how contemporary challenges are reshaping rights-based debates without displacing their foundational principles. By mapping thematic clusters, collaboration networks, and temporal trends, this study contributes a systematic, data-driven

understanding of the intellectual structure of human rights scholarship and offers a valuable reference point for future research, policy formulation, and interdisciplinary engagement in the field.

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