



Research Trends on Social Sustainability and Sustainable Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intellectual and thematic structure of research on social sustainability and sustainable consumption through a bibliometric analysis of publications indexed in Scopus from 2000 to 2024. Using VOSviewer, the study analyzes co-authorship networks, country collaborations, and keyword co-occurrences to uncover dominant themes, influential contributors, and emerging trends in the field. Results indicate that core concepts such as sustainable development, social sustainability, and sustainable consumption form the foundation of the literature, while newer topics like circular economy, purchase intention, and economic sustainability reflect an evolving focus toward practical and behavioral dimensions of sustainability. The collaborative network is largely centered in Europe, though growing international connections suggest an increasingly global research community. The findings reveal a maturing field that integrates behavioral, systemic, and policy-oriented perspectives, yet also highlight the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches. This study offers valuable insights for academics, policymakers, and practitioners aiming to understand and advance the integration of social values in sustainable consumption systems.

Keywords: *Social Sustainability; Sustainable Consumption; Bibliometric Analysis; VOSviewer*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the discourse on sustainability has expanded beyond environmental and economic dimensions to encompass social aspects that are equally critical to achieving holistic development. Social sustainability refers to the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy, inclusive, and equitable societies [1]. It emphasizes human well-being, social justice, cultural preservation, and the ability of communities to adapt to social challenges. This dimension of sustainability plays a vital role in ensuring that developmental progress does not occur at the expense of social cohesion or equity [2], [3]. Despite its importance, social sustainability remains less explored in comparison to its environmental and economic counterparts, warranting a deeper investigation into its research evolution and thematic priorities.

Parallel to this is the emerging field of sustainable consumption, which focuses on the consumption patterns of individuals and societies that minimize environmental impact while promoting social well-being. Sustainable consumption involves changes in lifestyle, values, and behaviors that support sustainability, often framed by policy, cultural context, and market dynamics [4]. While environmental sustainability is frequently the dominant concern in this field, increasing attention is being given to how consumption practices intersect with issues of equity, fairness, and social responsibility—core tenets of social sustainability. For example, ethical consumerism, fair trade, and local purchasing are often celebrated not only for their environmental benefits but also for their contributions to social justice and community resilience [5].

The interconnection between social sustainability and sustainable consumption is especially relevant in the context of global challenges such as climate change, income inequality, and cultural

erosion. These phenomena expose the limitations of traditional growth models and necessitate a shift toward more inclusive and socially responsive sustainability frameworks. Research increasingly acknowledges that sustainability transitions require changes not only in technologies and infrastructures but also in social norms, cultural values, and institutional arrangements [6]. Consequently, understanding how academic research has evolved to address these interconnected themes is essential for shaping more effective sustainability policies and interventions.

Bibliometric analysis offers a valuable tool for mapping the intellectual landscape of this intersectional domain. By analyzing large datasets of scientific publications, bibliometrics reveals the growth patterns, influential authors, institutions, journals, and emerging themes that shape a field. Past bibliometric studies in sustainability have focused heavily on environmental or technological dimensions, with fewer analyses dedicated to the social aspects and their interaction with consumption behaviors [7]. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive mapping of the literature that specifically explores how the academic community has investigated the synergies and tensions between social sustainability and sustainable consumption.

Furthermore, a nuanced understanding of this research domain is important for aligning academic inquiry with global sustainability agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Particularly, SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) are directly linked to sustainable consumption and social sustainability respectively. Academic research has a key role in informing how these goals can be operationalized through evidence-based strategies, cross-sectoral collaborations, and community-led solutions. However, without a clear picture of how research is trending, evolving, and coalescing around these issues, policymakers and practitioners may find it difficult to translate academic insights into action.

Despite the growing significance of social sustainability and sustainable consumption in the context of global sustainable development, there is a lack of comprehensive bibliometric analysis that traces how these themes have evolved within academic literature. Existing studies tend to focus either on environmental sustainability or narrowly defined aspects of consumption, leaving the intersection with social dimensions underexplored. This fragmentation hinders our understanding of the main scholarly contributions, thematic trends, and collaborative networks that shape this research area. As a result, there is limited clarity on which aspects of social sustainability are prioritized in consumption studies, which regions and sectors are most represented, and how research aligns with global policy frameworks like the SDGs. The objective of this study is to conduct a bibliometric analysis to map the research trends, thematic structures, and knowledge networks at the intersection of social sustainability and sustainable consumption.

METHOD

Design of Study

This study employed a bibliometric analysis approach to examine the intellectual structure, research trends, and knowledge development surrounding the themes of social sustainability and sustainable consumption. Bibliometric analysis is a quantitative method used to evaluate the development of scientific literature and measure patterns of publication, authorship, citation, and collaboration within a specific research domain [8]. This method allows for a systematic investigation of publication outputs over time and supports the identification of influential contributions, thematic clusters, and emerging research fronts.

Data Source and Search Strategy

The data for this bibliometric analysis were extracted from the Scopus database, one of the largest and most comprehensive repositories of peer-reviewed scientific publications. Scopus was chosen for its extensive coverage of multidisciplinary research and robust citation indexing. To retrieve relevant literature, a structured search query was formulated using a combination of

keywords related to “social sustainability” and “sustainable consumption.” The search string was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure comprehensive coverage. The search strategy was as follows: (TITLE-ABS-KEY(“social sustainability”) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(“sustainable consumption”). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) articles, reviews, and conference papers, (2) publications from 2000 to 2024, and (3) written in English. After applying the search query, the initial dataset was downloaded in CSV and RIS formats, which included metadata such as title, authors, affiliations, abstract, keywords, journal name, year of publication, citation count, and references.

Data Cleaning and Preprocessing

The raw data were cleaned and preprocessed to ensure accuracy and consistency. Duplicate entries, non-English documents, and publications unrelated to the core themes were manually excluded after reviewing titles and abstracts. Author names and institutional affiliations were normalized to account for spelling variations and inconsistencies. Keywords were also standardized using a thesaurus approach to merge semantically equivalent terms (e.g., “sustainable consumption behavior” and “sustainable consumer behavior”).

Bibliometric Tools and Analysis Techniques

The cleaned dataset was analyzed using VOSviewer (version 1.6.x), a specialized software for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks [9]. VOSviewer was employed to perform the following types of analyses like co-authorship analysis to identify collaboration networks among authors, and countries, co-occurrence of keywords analysis to explore the thematic structure of the field by mapping frequently co-occurring keywords and their clusters, citation analysis to detect the most cited documents, authors, and journals, thereby identifying intellectual influences, and temporal analysis to trace the evolution of research topics over time.

RESULT

Co-Authorship Analysis

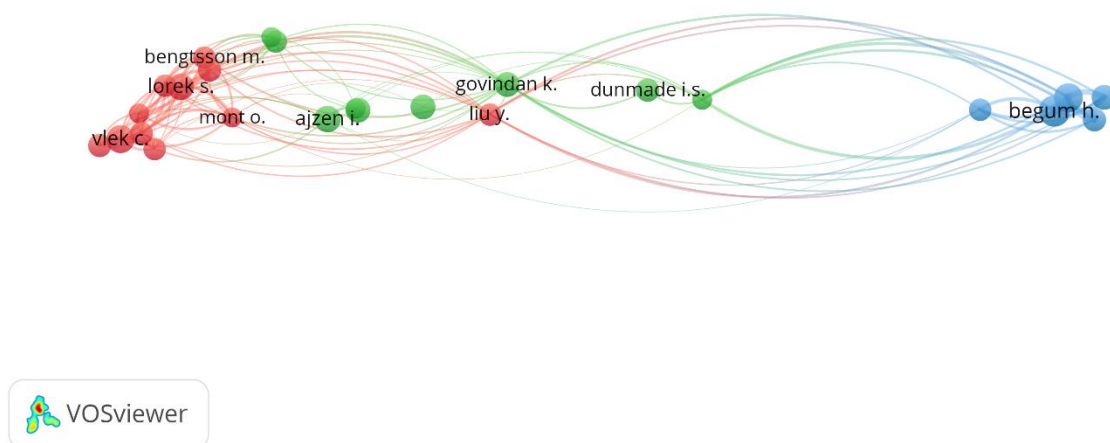


Figure 1. Author Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

The visualization illustrates the co-authorship network in the field of social sustainability and sustainable consumption, revealing three distinct clusters of researchers. The red cluster on the left includes scholars like Vlek C., Lorek S., and Mont O., who appear closely connected and likely focus on behavioral and environmental dimensions of consumption. The green cluster in the center, with authors such as Ajzen I. and Govindan K., acts as a bridge between conceptual and applied research areas. Meanwhile, the blue cluster on the right, centered around Begum H., indicates a separate research group, possibly oriented toward regional or policy-specific studies.

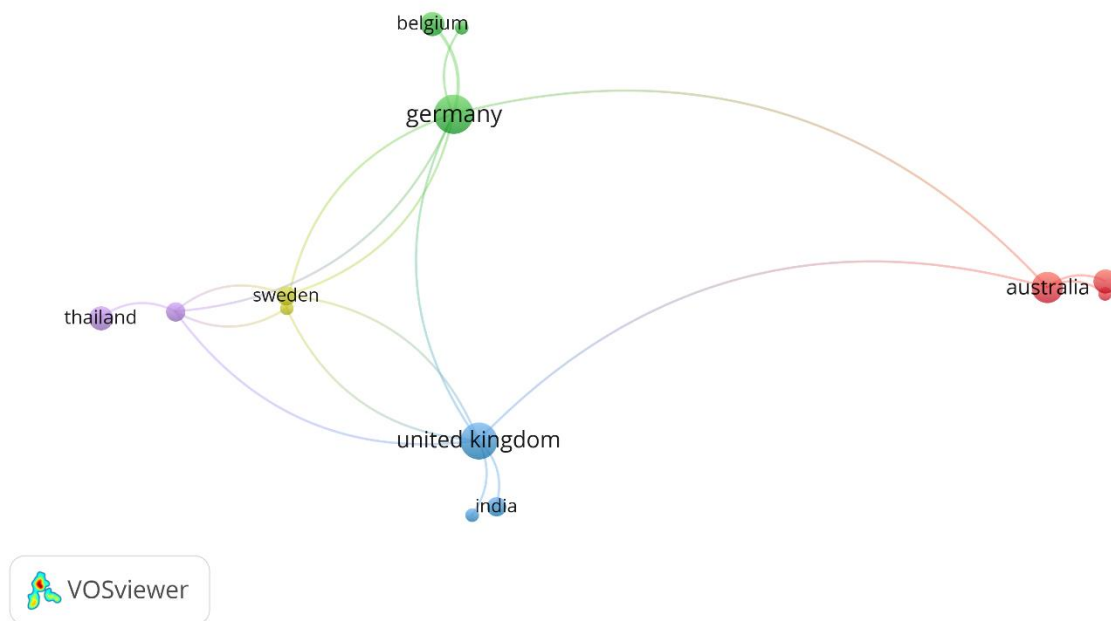


Figure 2. Country Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

The visualization depicts the international co-authorship network in the field of social sustainability and sustainable consumption. The nodes represent countries, with node size indicating the volume of publications and the connecting lines representing collaborative links. The United Kingdom emerges as a central hub, showing strong collaborative ties with Germany, Sweden, India, and Australia. Germany also plays a prominent role, with active links to Belgium, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, suggesting a dense European collaboration network. Australia appears more isolated but maintains bilateral ties with key contributors like the UK and Germany. The presence of countries such as Thailand and India reflects growing global interest, though their collaborative reach remains more limited.

Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis

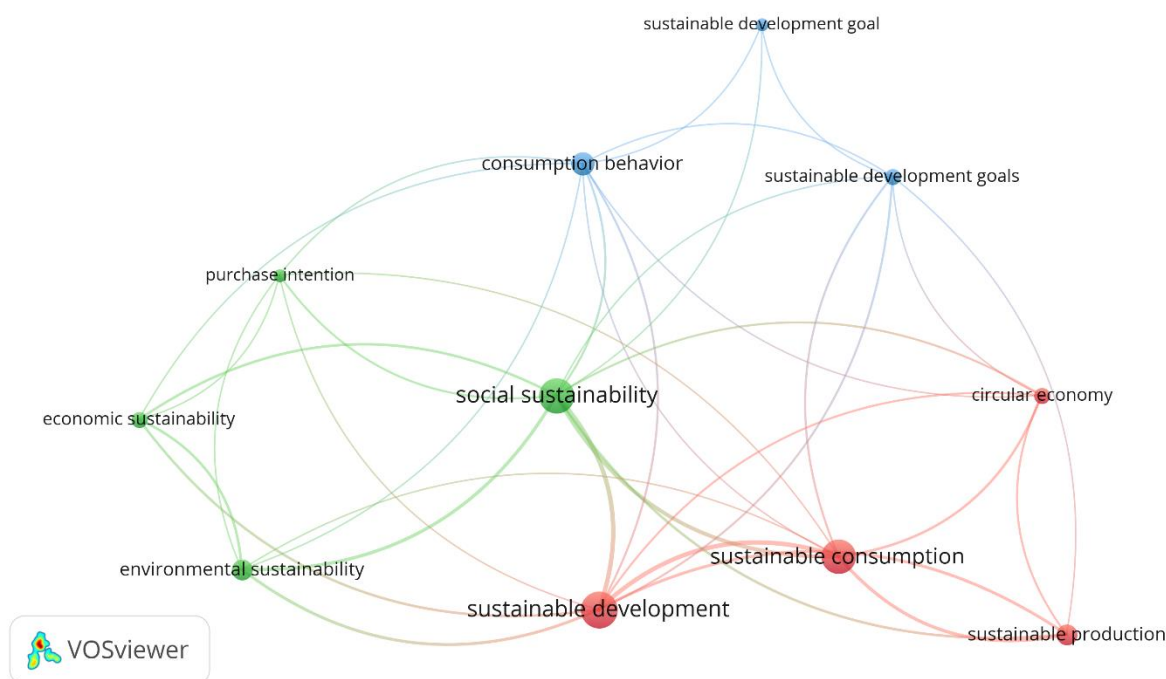


Figure 3. Network Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

The visualization presents a network highlighting the conceptual structure of the literature on social sustainability and sustainable consumption. At the center of the network lies the keyword “sustainable development”, which serves as a foundational hub connecting all major themes, indicating that it is the central framework through which other related concepts are explored. Closely linked to it are “social sustainability” and “sustainable consumption”, forming a triangular core that encapsulates the study’s focal themes. The proximity and density of links among these three terms underscore their interconnectedness and the frequency with which they co-occur in scholarly discourse.

The green cluster, revolving around “social sustainability,” includes related concepts such as “economic sustainability,” “environmental sustainability,” and “purchase intention.” This indicates that social sustainability is frequently discussed in conjunction with the broader dimensions of the triple bottom line, economic, environmental, and social aspects, while also connecting to behavioral insights like purchasing decisions. The link to “purchase intention” suggests an increasing research focus on how social values influence individual consumer choices, tying sustainability ethics to consumption behavior. The red cluster is organized around “sustainable consumption” and connects with terms like “circular economy,” “sustainable production,” and again with “sustainable development.” This reflects the literature’s emphasis on production-consumption systems and circularity as essential strategies for achieving sustainable consumption. These connections reveal that sustainable consumption is not only about behavioral change but also about systemic transformations in production models and resource use, aligning with global trends toward circular economy practices.

The blue cluster highlights “consumption behavior,” “sustainable development goals,” and “sustainable development goal” as key terms. This cluster represents a policy- and behavior-driven dimension, suggesting that research in this area also engages with global governance frameworks like the SDGs. The positioning of “consumption behavior” as a bridge to policy goals underscores

the need for individual and societal behavior change as critical to achieving international sustainability targets.

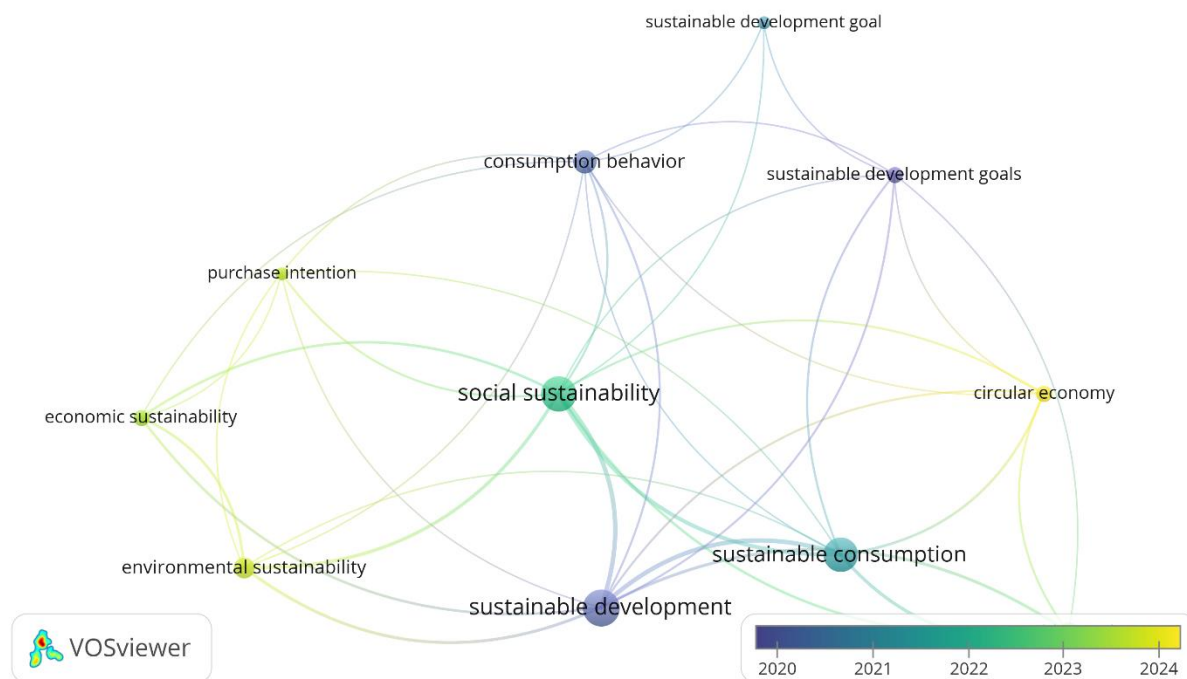


Figure 4. Overlay Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

The overlay visualization maps the temporal evolution of key research themes in the domain of social sustainability and sustainable consumption, with color gradients representing the average publication year—from dark blue (earlier) to yellow (more recent). Core concepts like “sustainable development” and “consumption behavior” appear in darker shades, indicating their prominence in earlier research (around 2020–2021). These terms form the foundational basis for subsequent studies, suggesting that the discourse initially focused on broad sustainability frameworks and behavioral dimensions of consumption.

In contrast, newer research trends are represented by keywords shaded in yellow and light green, such as “circular economy,” “purchase intention,” and “economic sustainability.” These emerging keywords indicate a recent shift in scholarly attention toward operationalizing sustainable practices through economic models and consumer behavior insights. The presence of “purchase intention” as a newer term suggests growing interest in how individual decision-making can drive social sustainability outcomes. Likewise, the rise of “circular economy” shows increasing alignment between sustainable consumption and systemic innovation in production and resource use.

The concept of “social sustainability” lies centrally within the map, with a transitional color gradient from blue to green, signifying its consistent and evolving role across the time spectrum. It acts as a conceptual bridge between earlier discussions rooted in development theory and newer explorations into behavior and policy applications. The color transition across keywords suggests a research trajectory moving from theoretical grounding toward applied, policy-relevant, and actionable dimensions of sustainability, reflecting how the academic landscape has matured and diversified in recent years.

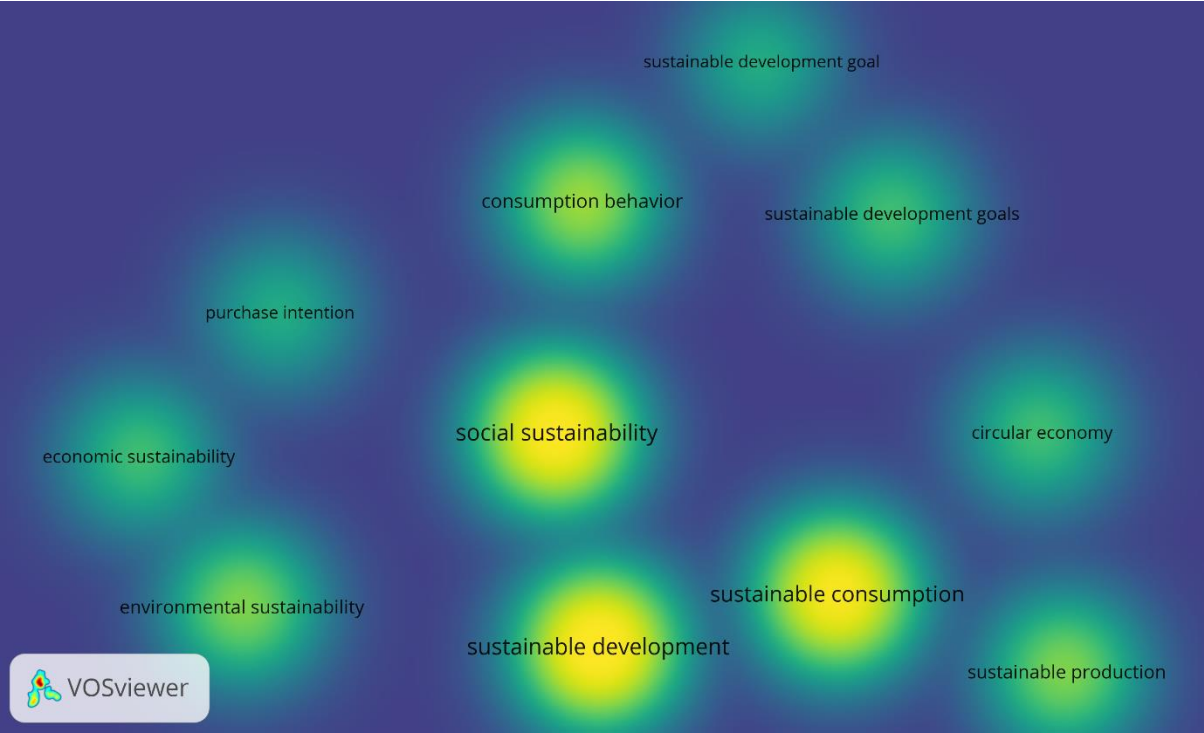


Figure 5. Density Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

The heatmap visualization illustrates the density of keyword occurrences within the literature on social sustainability and sustainable consumption. Brighter yellow areas indicate higher frequency and centrality of terms, whereas cooler blue regions reflect lower intensity. Notably, “social sustainability,” “sustainable consumption,” and “sustainable development” appear as the most prominent hotspots, highlighting their dominance in scholarly discussions and their foundational role in the field’s conceptual structure. These three terms form the core of academic inquiry, signaling that much of the literature converges around the intersection of social equity, consumption patterns, and long-term development goals. Surrounding this core are moderately dense clusters such as “consumption behavior,” “environmental sustainability,” “economic sustainability,” and “circular economy,” which, while still active, represent slightly more specialized or emerging subtopics. Terms like “purchase intention” and “sustainable production” also register visible heat signatures, indicating their growing relevance, especially as research expands toward behavioral and systemic approaches to sustainability.

Citation Analysis

Table 1. Most Cited Article

Citations	Author and Year	Title
4122	[10]	A review on circular economy: The expected transition to a balanced interplay of environmental and economic systems
2675	[11]	A literature and practice review to develop sustainable business model archetypes
1869	[12]	Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: Report of the Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on planetary health
1762	[13]	Sustainable food consumption: Exploring the consumer "attitude - Behavioral intention" gap
1400	[14]	Urbanization in developing countries: Current trends, future projections, and key challenges for sustainability

1391	[15]	The un Decade of Nutrition, the NOVA food classification and the trouble with ultra-processing
1160	[16]	The food waste hierarchy as a framework for the management of food surplus and food waste
1132	[17]	Toward a sustainable environment: Nexus between CO2 emissions, resource rent, renewable and nonrenewable energy in 16-EU countries
976	[18]	Circular economy - From review of theories and practices to development of implementation tools
928	[19]	How do scholars approach the circular economy? A systematic literature review

Source: Scopus, 2025

DISCUSSION

Central Themes and Conceptual Integration

The keyword analysis reveals that “sustainable development”, “social sustainability”, and “sustainable consumption” consistently emerge as core themes within the literature. These terms frequently co-occur and form the structural backbone of the research domain. The centrality of these keywords reflects the growing recognition that sustainability cannot be fully achieved without addressing both the environmental and social dimensions of human well-being. While environmental sustainability has long dominated the discourse, social sustainability has increasingly gained attention as scholars emphasize the importance of equity, inclusivity, and community resilience in sustainable development efforts [20]. Importantly, the linkages between “social sustainability” and terms such as “economic sustainability,” “purchase intention,” and “consumption behavior” indicate a shift toward understanding how individual and collective consumer actions are shaped by social values and economic conditions. For instance, the integration of behavioral concepts—especially through recurring references to “purchase intention” and “consumption behavior”—demonstrates how psychological and sociological insights are being embedded into sustainability research. This aligns with previous findings by [6], [21], who argued that behavior change is critical to achieving sustainable lifestyles, and that this process is influenced by a variety of cultural, social, and institutional factors.

Evolving Research Trajectory

The overlay visualization illustrates a clear temporal trajectory in keyword evolution. Earlier research in this field concentrated on conceptual foundations, with dominant themes such as “sustainable development” and “consumption behavior” appearing more frequently in earlier years (2020–2021). As the field has matured, newer themes have gained prominence, particularly “circular economy,” “purchase intention,” and “economic sustainability.” This trend indicates a growing interest in translating theoretical concepts into practical models that address systemic consumption and production challenges. The increasing appearance of the “circular economy” keyword suggests that scholars are now placing greater emphasis on closed-loop systems, resource efficiency, and the integration of sustainability into industrial processes. Simultaneously, the surge in studies focusing on “purchase intention” reflects a behavioral turn in sustainability research, whereby individual agency, consumer preferences, and market-based mechanisms are explored as levers for social transformation. This dual focus on systemic and behavioral dimensions demonstrates the complexity of achieving sustainability, where both macro-level policy frameworks and micro-level behavior must be addressed.

Knowledge Networks and Collaborative Structures

The co-authorship network analysis highlights key researchers and collaboration patterns that underpin the academic structure of this field. Authors such as Vlek C., Mont O., Govindan K., and Begum H. are central nodes within the collaborative landscape, each contributing to distinct thematic

clusters. These clusters reflect different research traditions—ranging from environmental psychology and behavioral science to supply chain management and sustainability governance. The presence of bridging figures like Ajzen I., known for his Theory of Planned Behavior, underscores the interdisciplinary nature of the field, where psychological models are employed to explain sustainable consumer behavior and inform social sustainability policies. From a geographical perspective, country-level collaboration networks reveal a Europe-centric research ecosystem, with Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Belgium occupying central positions. The United Kingdom, in particular, functions as a collaborative hub, maintaining strong ties with both European and non-European countries such as India and Australia. This suggests a high level of international cooperation and knowledge exchange, which is essential for addressing the global nature of sustainability challenges. However, the limited representation of Global South countries in the collaborative core points to the need for more inclusive and diverse research networks that capture local knowledge and context-specific sustainability practices.

Policy and Practical Implications

The alignment of frequently occurring keywords with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), reflects the policy relevance of this research domain. The strong co-occurrence of “sustainable development goals” with “consumption behavior” and “social sustainability” demonstrates that academic research is increasingly engaging with global policy frameworks. This trend is promising, as it indicates a move toward research that not only describes sustainability challenges but also informs actionable solutions. The growing attention to “sustainable production” and “economic sustainability” points to the relevance of business and economic systems in enabling sustainable transitions. Scholars are recognizing that achieving social sustainability requires not just individual behavior change but also systemic shifts in production practices, governance structures, and institutional support. This underscores the importance of collaborative governance, cross-sector partnerships, and participatory approaches that empower communities to engage in sustainability initiatives. The emergence of keywords like “purchase intention” also has significant implications for sustainable marketing, product design, and consumer education. Companies and policymakers can leverage these insights to develop strategies that align consumer values with sustainable products and services, thus creating demand-side pressure for more ethical and inclusive business models. By incorporating social dimensions into market mechanisms, stakeholders can enhance the scalability and legitimacy of sustainable consumption initiatives.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the richness of the existing literature, several gaps remain. First, there is a relative underrepresentation of research from developing countries and marginalized communities, which limits the global applicability of current findings. Most studies are situated in Western or high-income contexts, which may not reflect the diverse social realities and consumption behaviors in other regions. Future research should aim to diversify case studies, methodologies, and authorial perspectives to include voices from the Global South and indigenous communities. Second, while the literature increasingly integrates behavioral and systemic approaches, few studies explicitly address the interplay between these levels. There is a need for multi-level frameworks that examine how institutional policies, cultural norms, and individual agency interact to shape sustainability outcomes. Longitudinal studies and mixed-method approaches could provide deeper insights into how changes in social values and economic conditions influence consumption patterns over time. Third, the limited presence of keywords related to digital technologies and platform-based consumption suggests that the field has yet to fully engage with the digital transformation of consumption. Given the rise of e-commerce, the sharing economy, and digital activism, future research should explore how these developments affect sustainable consumption and social inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study has conducted a comprehensive bibliometric analysis to map the evolving research landscape at the intersection of social sustainability and sustainable consumption. The findings highlight the growing academic interest in integrating social dimensions into sustainability discourse, particularly in relation to consumer behavior, economic transitions, and policy frameworks. Central themes such as sustainable development, social sustainability, and sustainable consumption dominate the literature, while emerging topics like circular economy and purchase intention indicate a shift toward operationalizing these concepts in practical contexts. The study also reveals a dense network of collaboration among authors and institutions, with a strong European presence and increasing international cooperation. However, gaps remain in terms of geographic diversity, with limited contributions from developing countries. The analysis underscores the need for future research to adopt more inclusive, multi-level, and interdisciplinary approaches to fully capture the complexity of social sustainability in consumption systems.

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