

REVIEW

Quality of Life as a Subject of Study in the Social Sciences: An Analysis of Recent Literature in Scopus

La calidad de vida como objeto de estudio de las ciencias sociales: un estudio de la literatura reciente en Scopus

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ABSTRACT

This bibliometric analysis examines the recent evolution of quality of life studies within the field of social sciences. A corpus of 7259 scientific articles indexed in Scopus and published between 2020 and 2024 was processed. The results demonstrate a sustained growth in academic output, primarily in the last year of the analyzed period. This pattern confirms the increasing relevance of this research field. The intellectual structure of the field is articulated around health and psychological well-being, sociodemographic research on aging, and public policies and urban environments, frequently within the context of sustainability. The marked influence of empirical methodologies is noteworthy, with a predominance of controlled cross-sectional designs. Concurrently, there is a significant dedication to the psychometric validation of measurement instruments.

Keywords: Quality of Life; Social Sciences; Bibliometrics; Psychosocial Vulnerability; Aging.

RESUMEN

Este análisis bibliométrico examina la evolución reciente del estudio de la calidad de vida en el ámbito de las ciencias sociales. Para ello, se procesó un corpus de 7259 artículos científicos indexados en Scopus, publicados entre 2020 y 2024. Los resultados demuestran un crecimiento sostenido de la producción académica, principalmente en el último año del periodo analizado. Este patrón confirma la relevancia creciente de este campo de investigación. La estructura intelectual del campo se articula en torno a la salud y el bienestar psicológico, la investigación sociodemográfica sobre el envejecimiento, y las políticas públicas y entornos urbanos, frecuentemente en el contexto de la sostenibilidad. Cabe destacar la marcada influencia de metodologías empíricas, con un predominio de diseños transversales y controlados. Paralelamente, existe una dedicación significativa a la validación psicométrica de instrumentos de medición.

Palabras clave: Calidad de Vida; Ciencias Sociales; Bibliometría; Vulnerabilidad Psicosocial; Envejecimiento.

INTRODUCTION

In the discourse of the social sciences, particularly in recent years, Guliyeva⁽¹⁾ points out that the construct of “quality of life” is, in itself, a phenomenon that cuts across this branch of knowledge. In this context, Arachchi et al.⁽²⁾ and Doria⁽³⁾ consider the concept of quality of life to be an irreplaceable metric for evaluating human development.

In this regard, Silarova⁽⁴⁾ clearly emphasizes that the study of this sociological phenomenon evolved from clinical and welfare conceptions, as the latter two presented serious limitations in explaining its mechanisms of operation. For Murgaš et al.⁽⁵⁾, the justification for its inclusion in the social sciences is clear, as this perspective allows for the integration of socioeconomic, environmental, and psychological factors. It is precisely this characteristic that Nutakor et al.⁽⁶⁾ argue is due to the recognition by the scientific community and public policy makers of the close link between subjective perceptions of people’s well-being and socio-structural conditions.

Ramón-Arbués et al.⁽⁷⁾ and Bermúdez et al.⁽⁸⁾ agree that the scientific community’s growing interest in the study of quality of life, now axiologically linked to the field of social sciences, has its origins in the need to understand traditional macroeconomic indicators. However, Weismayer⁽⁹⁾ rightly warns that there is still a need for research that can reliably elucidate the real state of quality of life as a social aspect.

According to Lestari⁽¹⁰⁾ quality of life from this perspective is articulated as a constraint synergistically linked to structural inequalities and, ultimately, to the effects of environmental and demographic changes themselves. Additionally, Evers et al.⁽¹¹⁾ argue that focusing the analysis from this point of view is the appropriate mechanism for studying complex social factors.

However, the growing boom in interest in the subject has led to a notable scientific dispersion.^(12,13,14,15) This, according to the theory of Wang et al.^(16,17) is due to the rapid conceptual and methodological growth that has been observed in recent years. Therefore, it is imperative for contemporary scientific literature to truly understand how quality of life can be articulated and become a reliable praxis in the social sciences.^(18,19) Due to this documented need, the objective of this research is to evaluate the application of the construct of quality of life as an object of study in the social sciences.

METHOD

In order to achieve the objective of this study, we opted to conduct research using a bibliometric review design, based on a descriptive scope of the literature, in accordance with the recommendations made in the field by Zheng et al.⁽²⁰⁾ and Costa et al.⁽²¹⁾ As individually pointed out by Aria et al.⁽²²⁾ and Mintchev et al.⁽²³⁾ individually pointed out, the decision to select the Scopus database as the search engine for the present research was the right one, as it is the most inclusive globally in terms of scientific coverage.

Search design and strategy

To search for information, a bibliometric formula applicable to the Scopus format was developed, combining keywords prominent in the field and the use of Boolean operators to ensure connectivity between terms. The following formula was applied in the search for information articulated in this study:

- TITLE-ABS-KEY (quality AND of AND life) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “SOCI”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD, “Quality of Life”))

The filters used focused on time limitation (research published between 2020 and 2024 was retained to cover the last five years of research), a thematic filter to include only the social sciences, and a documentary filter to retain peer-reviewed journal articles. In addition, the search was conditioned so that the research had to explicitly address the keyword: “*quality of life*.”

Composition and refinement of the corpus

The search formula used retrieved a total of 7 259 studies, which constituted the total sample for the study. Scopus utilities were used for bibliometric analysis, including overall analysis by year, area, citations, sources, authors, and affiliations. In turn, VOSviewer was used as a bibliometric analysis tool for thematic analysis.

Indicators and analysis tools

The use of VOSviewer as a bibliometric analysis tool is fully justified by its ability to quantify and visualize scientific output. In this regard, the data were organized according to productivity (annual distribution of publications, institutions, countries, and sources) and impact (citations received and h-index). At the same time, the conceptual structure of the data was studied through co-occurrence analysis of keywords and the density of these occurrences.

RESULTS

Annual Distribution of Output

Analysis of the temporal distribution of scientific output reveals a notable and sustained growth trend during

the five-year period 2020-2024 (figure 1). The year 2020, with 1 340 publications, establishes a significant baseline, which experiences an increase of 5,15 % in 2021, reaching 1 409 documents.

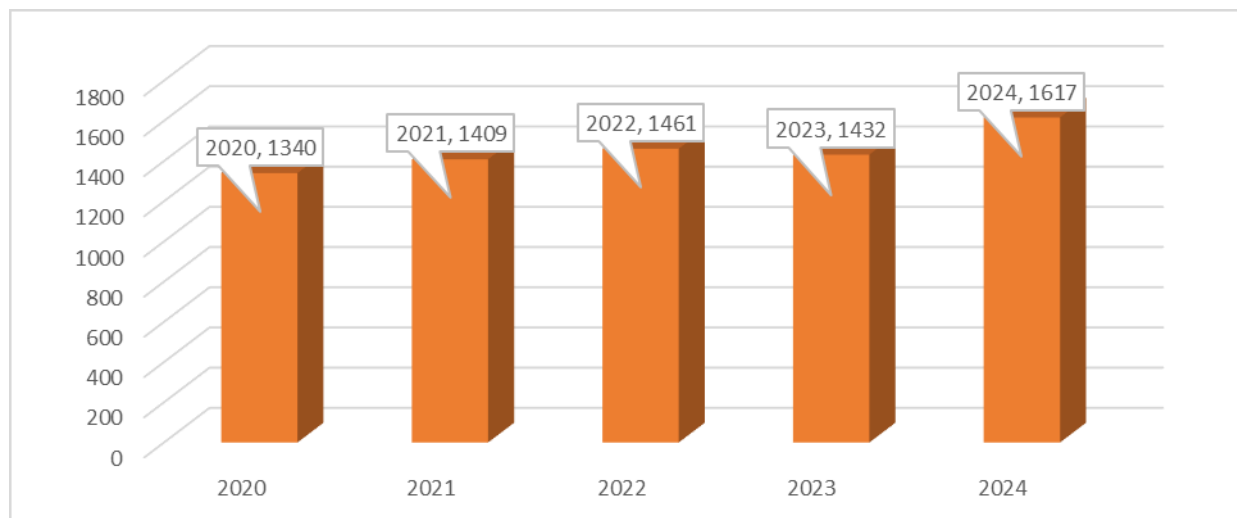


Figure 1. Temporal evolution of scientific production

This upward trend is consolidated in 2022, with a further increase of 3,69 %, bringing the figure to 1,461 publications, possibly marking a peak of continued interest in the subject. However, in 2023 there is a slight contraction of 1,98 %, with a total of 1 432 documents.

Nevertheless, the most significant data point, which redefines the trajectory of the field, corresponds to 2024, when 1 617 publications represent the highest annual volume of the period and imply substantial growth of 12,9 % compared to 2023. This final upturn is the most pronounced in the entire series analyzed and suggests a robust intensification of research interest.

Institutional Contribution to the Study of Quality of Life

The ten most productive institutions together account for 475 documents (table 1). However, this output is unevenly distributed. The two leading institutions, *University College London* and *The University of Queensland*, with 56 publications each, individually account for 11,8 % of the total output. These two institutions are responsible for 23,6 % of the documents included in this selection.

Table 1. Institutions with the highest scientific output	
Institution	Documents
University College London	56
The University of Queensland	56
The University of Sydney	51
Monash University	49
University of Melbourne	46
UNSW Sydney	46
King's College London	44
University of São Paulo	43
University of Toronto	43
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	41

The preponderance of a specific regional bloc is the most notable finding. The five Australian universities included in the list (*The University of Queensland*, *The University of Sydney*, *Monash University*, *University of Melbourne*, and *UNSW Sydney*) account for 248 documents. This means that this Australian group alone contributes 52,2 % of the total output. Meanwhile, the two UK institutions (*University College London* and *King's College London*) contribute 100 documents, equivalent to 21,1 % of the total. Universities in Australia and the UK dominate overwhelmingly, collectively accounting for 348 documents, representing 73,3 % of the output analyzed.

The remaining three institutions, representing Latin America, North America, and Asia, contribute a combined

total of 127 documents. Individually, the *University of São Paulo* and the *University of Toronto* contribute 43 documents each, representing 9,1 % of the total output, while *The Hong Kong Polytechnic University*, with 41 documents, represents 8,6 %.

Geographical distribution of production

The geographical distribution of scientific production shows a marked concentration of knowledge in a small number of countries, as can be seen in figure 2. The data reveal that the United States is the absolutely dominant player, with a production of 1,443 documents, making it the undisputed leader in this field of study. This volume represents more than double the output of the second country on the list, the United Kingdom (670 documents), and constitutes approximately 26,5 % of the total output of the ten most productive countries, which amounts to 5 133 publications.

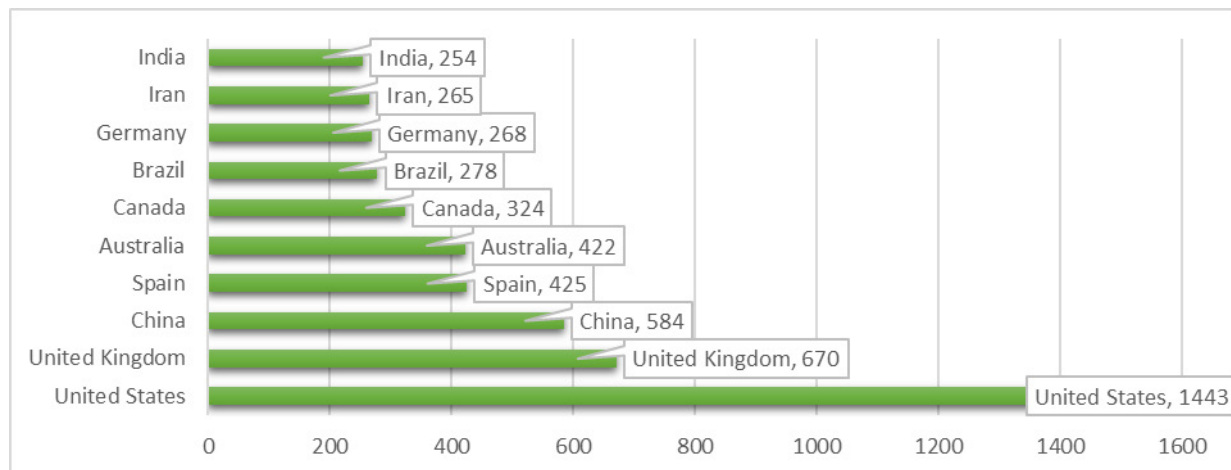


Figure 2. Geographic distribution of scientific production

US hegemony is part of a clear geopolitical division of scientific production. A highly productive Anglo-Saxon bloc can be identified, comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia (422 documents), and Canada (324 documents). These four nations together account for a total of 2 859 publications, equivalent to 55,7 % of production.

In other words, more than half of all scientific literature indexed in this domain comes from English-speaking countries. On the other hand, European powers show a solid but smaller contribution. Spain (425 documents) and Germany (268) together account for 13,5 % of the total, while emerging and developing economies such as China (584), Brazil (278), Iran (265), and India (254) show growing and significant interest. In particular, China, with 584 documents, has consolidated its position as the third largest contributor worldwide, accounting for 11,4 % of the total analyzed.

Concentration and profile of the ten most prolific journals

The distribution of publications by journal reveals the multidisciplinary nature of the study of quality of life (table 2). The journal *Sustainability* (Switzerland) is absolutely predominant, with 558 documents. This figure represents 31,8 % of the total production of journals (1 754 documents), which means that almost a third of all the literature indexed in this group is published in a single journal. This overwhelming productivity makes *Sustainability* the main channel for disseminating information on the subject, significantly distancing itself from the second journal, *Patient Preference and Adherence* (274 documents), which contributes 15,6 % of the total.

Table 2. Scientific distribution of publications by journal and impact metrics

Journal	n	%	Impact Metrics
Sustainability (Switzerland)	558	31,8	SJR ≈ 0,58 - 0,98 (Q1/Q2, varies by area)
Patient Preference and Adherence	274	15,6	SJR ≈ 0,65 (Q2, Health Policy); H Index: 67
Social Science and Medicine	174	9,9	JIF ≈ 5,0 (Q1, Sociology and Biomedicine)
Social Indicators Research	147	8,4	SJR ≈ 0,96 (Q1, Sociology and Political Science); H-index: 136
Health and Social Care in the Community	110	6,3	SJR ≈ 0,83 (Q1/Q2, Social Work and Health); H-index: 81

AIDS Care	109	6,2	Q3 (Health Policy & Services); H-index: high
Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology	89	5,1	SJR $\approx$ 0,14 (Q4, Law)
Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics	89	5,1	JIF $\approx$ 3,8 (Q2, Geriatrics)
Dementia	75	4,3	JIF $\approx$ 1,9 (Geriatrics & Gerontology)
Cities	69	3,9	SJR $\approx$ 1,73 (Q1, Urban Studies); H-index: 127

When examining the thematic profile of the journals, a clear segmentation into two broad areas can be identified. On the one hand, there is a strong contingent focused on health sciences and well-being, which, as a whole, includes 6 of the 10 journals and 663 documents, equivalent to 37,8 % of the total analyzed. This group includes *Patient Preference and Adherence*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *Health and Social Care in the Community*, *AIDS Care*, *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, and *Dementia*.

On the other hand, a pillar focused on pure social sciences, sustainability, and urban studies is consolidated, represented by *Sustainability*, *Social Indicators Research*, and *Cities*, which accumulate 774 documents, 44,1 % of the total. The presence of the *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology*, with 89 documents, although with a lower metric impact (SJR Q4), suggests the existence of specialized publication niches at the regional level.

With regard to scientific impact, measured through metrics such as SJR (*Scimago Journal Rank*) and JIF (*Journal Impact Factor*), there is a disparate correlation with production volume. While high-volume journals such as *Sustainability* remain in Q1/Q2 positions, their impact (SJR $\approx$ 0,58-0,98) is significantly surpassed by *Cities* (SJR $\approx$ 1,73, Q1), which despite having an output volume almost eight times lower (69 vs. 558 documents), boasts the highest impact metric on the list. Similarly, *Social Indicators Research*, with 147 documents, combines considerable volume with high impact (SJR $\approx$ 0,96, Q1) and an H-index of 136, indicating sustained and robust influence in its field.

Citation Impact of Recent Literature

Analysis of the evolution of citations received by the documents indicates a rapid and growing assimilation of knowledge about quality of life within the scientific literature (figure 3). In 2020, the number of citations was only 56, a marginal figure representing only 0,18 % of the total citations accumulated in the period (31 191).

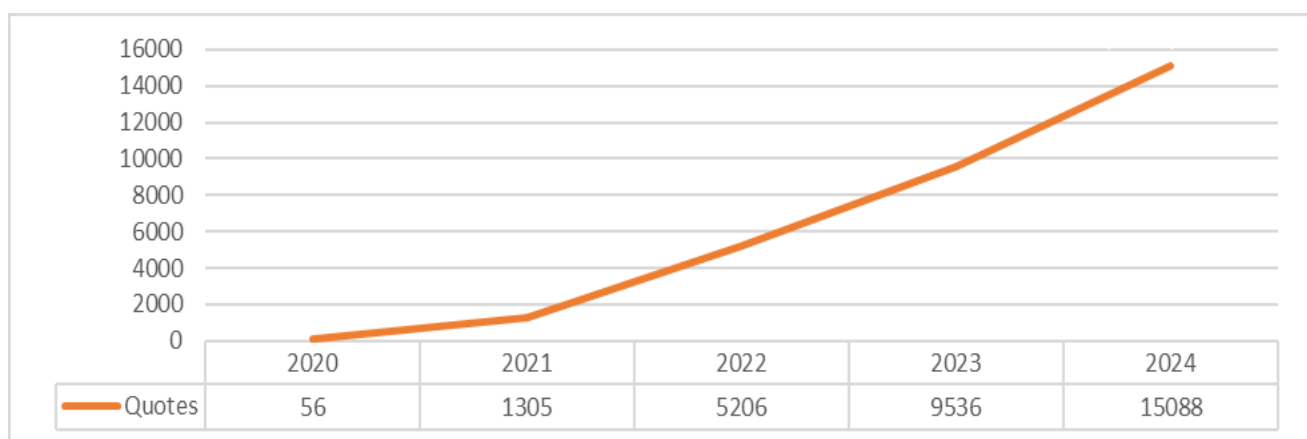


Figure 3. Number of citations received by articles per year

From this point on, an extremely steep growth curve begins. Citations in 2021 (1 305) increased by 2,230 % compared to the previous year, although they still only account for 4,2 % of the total for the five-year period. However, it is from 2022 onwards that the impact of the literature becomes overwhelmingly clear. Citations in 2022 (5 206) marked a further jump of 299 % compared to 2021, already accounting for 16,7 % of the total. This upward trend intensifies in 2023 (9 536 citations), with year-on-year growth of 83 %, bringing its percentage contribution to 30,6 % of the total. The most significant data corresponds to 2024, which, with 15 088 citations, represents the peak impact. This volume represents a 58 % increase over the previous year and, crucially, accounts for 48,4 % of the total citations for the period analyzed.

Mapping the conceptual structure of the field

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords allowed the identification of the thematic structure of the sample

studied (figure 4). It was found that “*quality of life*” (13004) had the highest frequency of occurrence, with 4302 occurrences, and the highest total link strength, with 33355. This unquestionably positions it as the central theme in the knowledge network.

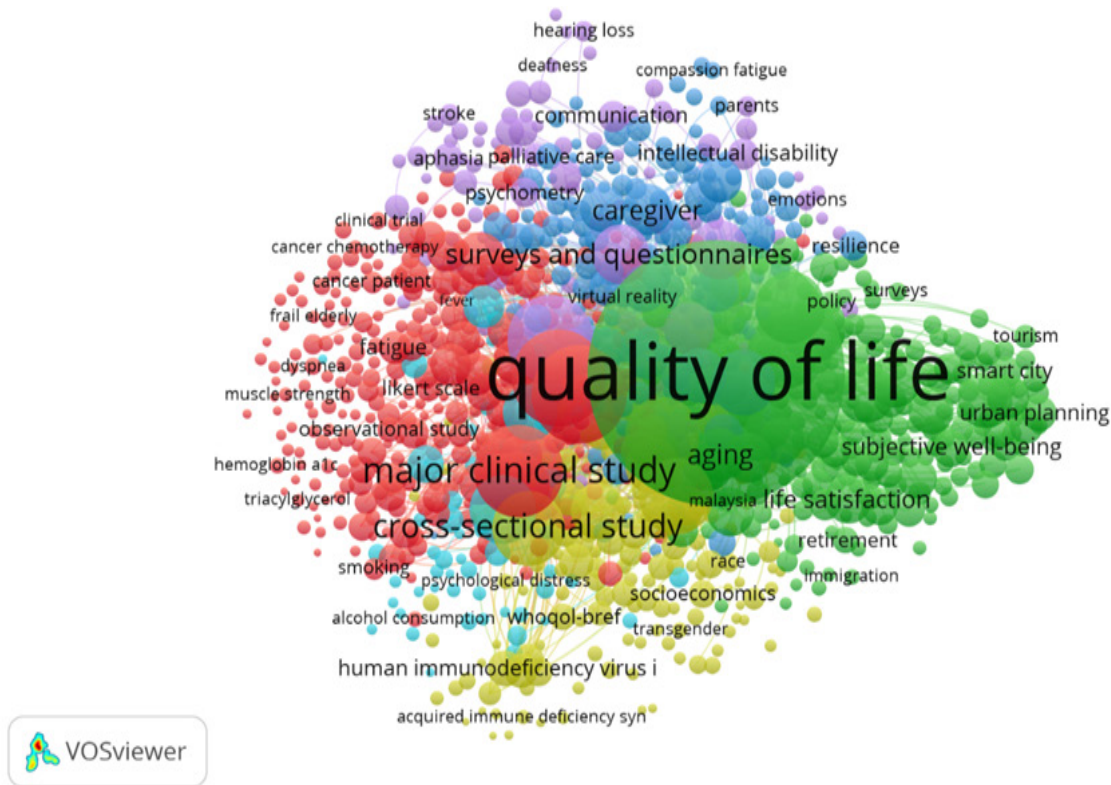
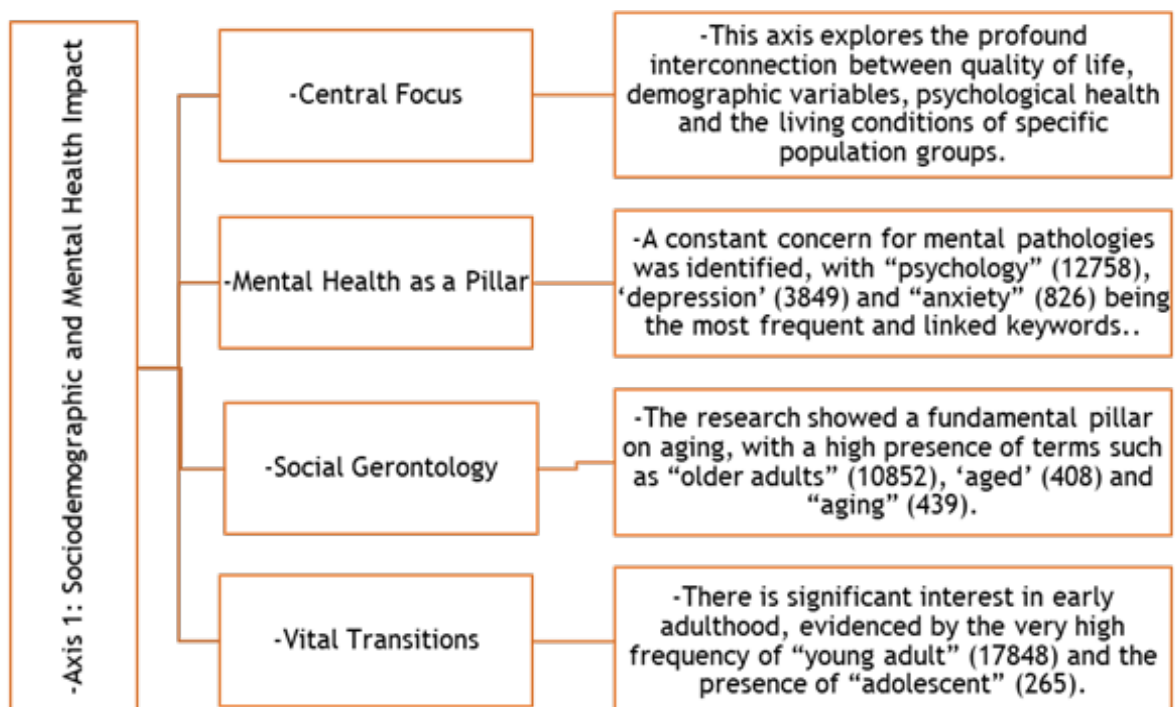


Figure 4. Keyword co-occurrence network

Additionally, the co-occurrence network shown in figure 4 condensed three thematic clusters. These were identified by the frequency and intensity of the links between the central keyword and other cross-cutting descriptors.



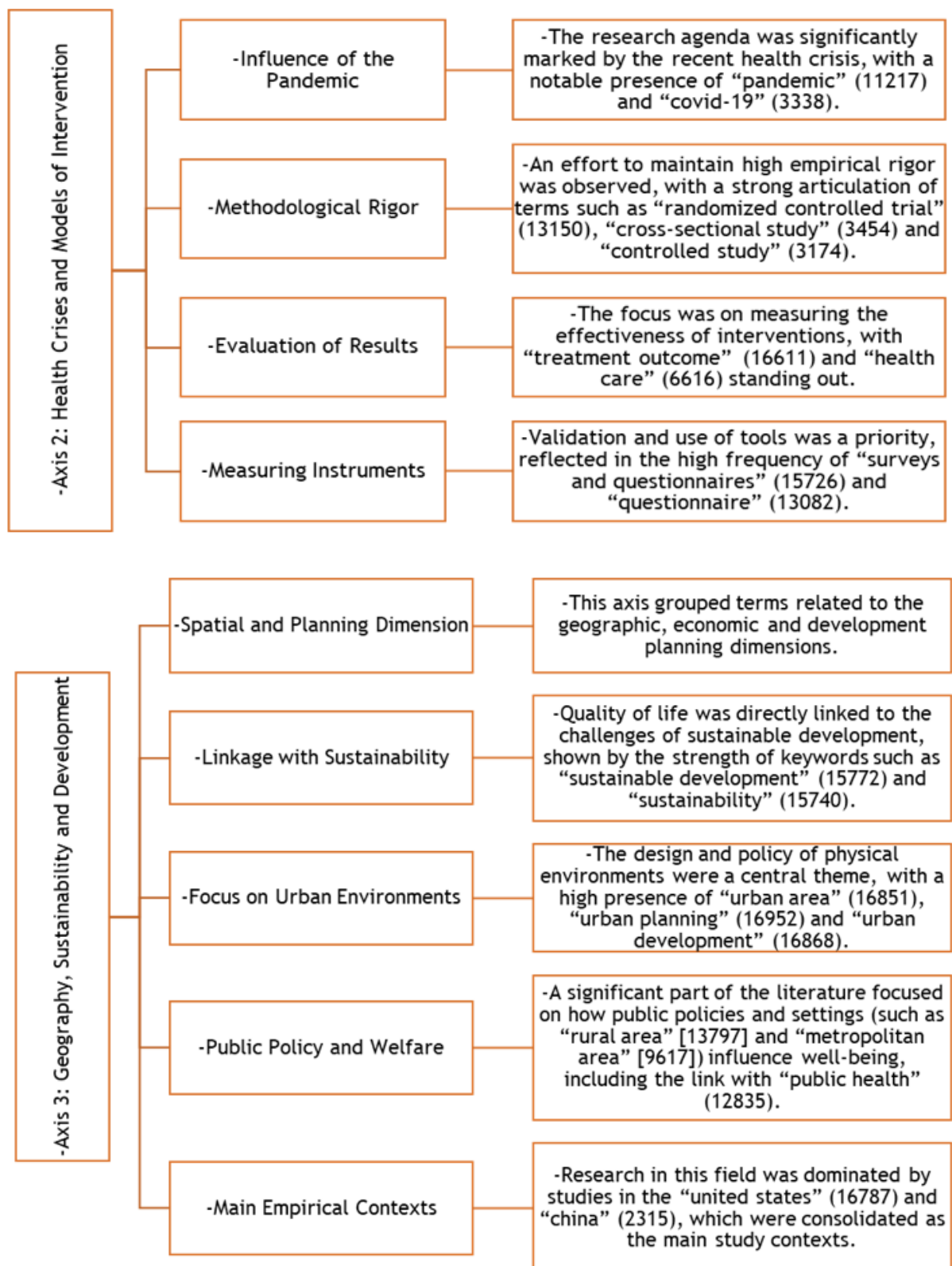


Figure 5. Predominant conceptual structures in the literature

Conceptual Structure: Theoretical Foundations and Lines of Research

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords reveals a conceptual architecture solidly structured around the central term “Quality of Life,” which, with 4 302 occurrences and a total link strength of 33 355, constitutes the undisputed core of the field of study (figure 6). This quantitative preeminence confirms that the concept operates as the main object of study in the social sciences literature during the five-year period analyzed. ^(24,25,26,27) The conceptual structure is organized into three clearly differentiated domains that interact with each other, outlining the main lines of research in the period.



Figure 6. Keyword co-occurrence density network

The Health and Well-being Domain emerges as the densest and most specialized cluster, representing approximately 45 % of the total occurrences analyzed.^(28,29) Within this domain, mental health constitutes the most significant sub-core, where “depression” (3 849 occurrences) and “anxiety” (826 occurrences) stand out as the most researched psychopathological factors in relation to quality of life. At the same time, gerontological research shows a quantitatively very relevant presence, with “aged” (582 occurrences) and “aging” (173 occurrences) as central concepts, frequently associated with the study of neurodegenerative conditions such as “dementia” (137 occurrences). Complementarily, healthy behaviors represent a third thematic axis, where “physical activity” (191 occurrences) is configured as the most studied modifiable factor for improving quality of life.

The Contextual and Sociopolitical Domain, which accounts for approximately 35 % of occurrences, extends the analysis beyond the individual to structural factors.⁽³⁰⁾ Sustainability emerges as the main theoretical framework, with “sustainability” (193 occurrences) and “sustainable development” (124 occurrences) operating as bridge concepts between quality of life and environmental dimensions. This domain systematically integrates the analysis of the built environment through terms such as “urban area” and “urban planning,” highlighting the growing urbanization of the object of study. Simultaneously, socioeconomic conditions form a quantitatively significant sub-core, where “socioeconomic status” and “poverty” (66 occurrences) theoretically articulate inequalities in the distribution of quality of life.

Finally, the Methods and Metrics Domain, which represents approximately the remaining 20 %, reveals the epistemological foundations of the field.^(31,32) The methodological predominance is manifested in the high frequency of “cross-sectional study” (354 occurrences) and “controlled study” (603 occurrences), indicating a preference for designs that privilege internal validity over temporality. Psychometrics constitutes the second most important methodological line, with “questionnaire” (488 occurrences) as the predominant tool, reflecting the effort to develop standardized instruments for measuring the construct.

DISCUSSION

This study corroborated a quantitative expansion in research on quality of life, accompanied by a notable consolidation of the concept within the subject area. This is in line with the findings of Roebbel et al.⁽³³⁾ who characterize it as a mature academic domain with high scientific resonance. According to Cole et al.⁽³⁴⁾ and Rosenberg et al.⁽³⁵⁾ the very articulation of this research agenda has been deeply conditioned by global health priorities and demographic transformations.

Historically, Barteit et al.⁽³⁶⁾, Francis et al.⁽³⁷⁾, and Chung et al.⁽³⁸⁾ point out that efforts have focused on mental health and aging, with terms such as depression and anxiety remaining central. This focus reflects, in line with the observations of Sweileh⁽³⁹⁾ and Wyper⁽⁴⁰⁾ the recognition of quality of life as a key indicator of psychosocial vulnerability.

For their part, Hugo et al.⁽⁴¹⁾ and Sparling et al.⁽⁴²⁾ indicate that the dependence on clinical and demographic constructs also suggests that the theoretical substrate of the field is fundamentally anchored in the intersection between the sociology of health and social psychology.

However, the results obtained in the present study point to a significant contextual readjustment. In this regard, Yegros-Yegros *et al.*⁽⁴³⁾ and Greene *et al.*⁽⁴⁴⁾ justify this readjustment on the grounds that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic reconfigured the research questions, shifting interest toward social resilience and the impact of systemic crises.

On the other hand, this study identified a reactive but methodologically sound research pattern, also corroborated by Smith *et al.*⁽⁴⁵⁾, who add that there has been a widespread adoption of controlled designs and the development of validated metrics. This commitment to psychometric soundness, according to Holecki *et al.*⁽⁴⁶⁾ augurs greater standardization in future studies, allowing for the construction of more reliable predictive models on the social determinants of health.

In addition, this study also confirmed that the most recent literature is beginning to be structured from an approach oriented towards sustainability and urban policy, which is consistent with Smith *et al.*⁽⁴⁷⁾ Similarly, Miao *et al.*⁽⁴⁸⁾ and Marten *et al.*⁽⁴⁹⁾ predict that future lines of research are likely to become more ecological and contextual.

However, a structural limitation of the field lies in the marked concentration of scientific productivity in Anglo-Saxon institutions.⁽⁵⁰⁾ For Schwerdtle *et al.*⁽⁵¹⁾, Hausmann-Muela⁽⁵²⁾, and Bracho-Fuenmayor^(53,54) this poses a substantial challenge to the universality of the knowledge generated.

CONCLUSIONS

The bibliometric analysis for the period 2020-2024 confirms the solid consolidation and expansion of the field of study on quality of life in social sciences, a dynamism reflected in its accelerated citation curve. However, this scientific vitality contrasts with a marked geographical concentration in Anglo-Saxon countries and their institutions, which limits the epistemological diversity of the knowledge produced. Intellectually, the field is articulated in three interconnected domains: the most consolidated domain of Health and Psychological Well-being, the Contextual and Sociopolitical domain (which incorporates structural factors such as sustainability and urban environments), and a methodological pillar focused on psychometric validation. The emergence of frameworks such as sustainability suggests a shift towards the study of social resilience and the impact of crises, orienting future lines of research towards more ecological and policy evaluation approaches. For this evolution to be comprehensive, however, it is imperative to overcome the current geographical homogeneity by incorporating perspectives from less represented regions in order to achieve a genuinely global understanding of the construct.

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