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Mapping the Knowledge Structure of Sustained Competitive Advantage: Core Theories, Clusters, and Research Agenda

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Abstract

This study consolidates sustained competitive advantage (SCA) as a distinct knowledge domain and addresses fragmentation in how SCA is conceptualized, explained, and operationalized across research streams. Using a bibliometric–systematic literature review design, we retrieved 657 peer-reviewed journal articles from the Web of Science Core Collection (1991–2026) through an exact-phrase search for “sustained competitive advantage” in titles, abstracts, and author keywords. We integrate performance indicators with science-mapping techniques, including co-citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence clustering, timeline mapping, and citation-burst detection, and then develop a cluster-based synthesis through structured reading. The findings indicate a highly concentrated intellectual backbone anchored in the resource-based view, complemented by a dynamic capabilities pillar. The thematic structure comprises five interrelated streams: (i) IT/IS strategy and resource orchestration, (ii) RBV-based value creation and value capture with capability renewal pathways, (iii) IT capability configurations and data-enabled value creation and capture, (iv) high-performance work systems and HRM fit linked to innovation and productivity, and (v) entrepreneurial and analytics-enabled dynamic capabilities for innovation-driven advantage. Recent work increasingly emphasizes mechanism testing, mediation, CSR, sustainability, and supply chain management. Overall, the review provides a reproducible map of SCA’s foundations and evolution and advances a cluster-informed agenda to support more cumulative, mechanism-based theory development.

1. Introduction and Research Aim

Sustained competitive advantage (SCA) remains a central construct in strategic management because it addresses the core question of why some firms are able to outperform rivals not only temporarily but persistently (Ali, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). In foundational work, SCA is defined as a firm’s ability to maintain superior performance relative to competitors over an extended period (Barney, 1991). This performance persistence is commonly attributed to the development and deployment of distinctive resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable, thereby protecting rents from erosion and imitation (Barney, 1991).

More recently, the SCA conversation has expanded beyond a static resource-possession logic to emphasize value creation and value capture mechanisms. Consistent with your synthesis, competitive advantage can be treated as a firm’s ability to create more economic value than rivals and to sustain that value-creation differential over time, which aligns advantage with both value generation and value appropriation (Barney et al., 2021). This reframing is important because it clarifies why superior outcomes may be observed even when firms have comparable factor inputs. The differentiator is often how firms configure complementarities, govern appropriation, and maintain renewal processes, rather than simply accumulating assets.

Consistent with this mechanism-oriented perspective, the SCA literature has become increasingly cross-disciplinary and application-rich, spanning information systems, entrepreneurship, and strategic human

resource management. Across your cluster narratives, SCA is frequently explained through resource-conversion processes in which complementary resources are bundled and orchestrated into performance outcomes. This logic is especially salient in IT/IS contexts, where advantage depends on coordinating IT and non-IT resources in combination, rather than treating IT as a standalone asset (Taher, 2011; Mithas et al., 2012; Devece et al., 2017). Relatedly, capability-renewal arguments emphasize strategic agility and dynamic capabilities as mechanisms that enable firms to sense and respond to environmental change, thereby sustaining advantage under turbulence (Rocha et al., 2025). In parallel, SCA is examined through people-system explanations, in which internally consistent HRM bundles and fit-based high-performance work systems shape innovation and productivity pathways that ultimately influence firm performance (Delery & Gupta, 2016; Chowhan, 2016).

Despite its importance and widespread uptake, the literature shows fragmentation and conceptual sprawl, with SCA sometimes serving as a broad umbrella rather than a consistently operationalized construct. Prior literatures notes that resource possession is rarely sufficient, and that recurring explanatory mechanisms center on orchestration, complementarities, capability renewal, and system-level fit across research streams. This dispersion creates two challenges for cumulative knowledge development. First, it complicates efforts to trace how the field's intellectual foundations and underlying mechanisms have evolved over time. Second, it hinders reconciliation of how SCA is conceptualized and measured across domains that emphasize different drivers, such as IT capability configurations, HR systems, and entrepreneurial capability portfolios.

A preliminary scoping effort in your manuscript suggests that research explicitly examining SCA as a distinct corpus remains limited, which motivates a structured domain-level mapping and synthesis. Accordingly, this study aims to consolidate and clarify the SCA knowledge domain by systematically mapping its growth trajectory, intellectual foundations, and thematic structure, and by translating these patterns into a cluster-based synthesis of dominant mechanisms and emerging research fronts.

To achieve this goal, we adopt a bibliometric–systematic literature review (B-SLR) design (Marzi et al., 2025) and implement a focused Web of Science search strategy using the exact query "sustained competitive advantage" across titles, abstracts, and author keywords. Following screening and eligibility checks, the final dataset comprises 657 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1991 and 2026, providing a longitudinal basis for performance analysis and science mapping. We then apply complementary bibliometric techniques, including descriptive performance indicators, co-citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence clustering, and citation-burst detection, to reconstruct the field's structure and evolution and to inform a cluster-based qualitative synthesis (Suranto et al., 2025; Hossain et al., 2025; Herzallah et al., 2025; Widaryanti et al., 2025; Khakbazan et al., 2025; Lendvai, 2025; Porkodi & Pundhir, 2025; Świsłowski & Rajfur, 2025).

Guided by this design, the study addresses the following research aims and questions:

RQ1 (Domain growth and structure): How has SCA research evolved over time in terms of publication trends, key outlets, leading contributors, and geographic distribution?

RQ2 (Intellectual foundations): What dominant knowledge bases and canonical theoretical anchors structure SCA scholarship, as reflected in co-citation patterns?

RQ3 (Thematic architecture): What major thematic clusters organize SCA research, and what mechanisms and boundary conditions characterize each cluster?

RQ4 (Evolution and research fronts): Which topics and mechanisms have emerged or intensified over time, as indicated by timeline structures and citation bursts, and what do these patterns imply for future SCA research?

By answering these questions, the study aims to (i) reduce fragmentation by providing a reproducible map of SCA's intellectual and thematic structure, (ii) clarify how competing explanations of sustained advantage converge on a smaller set of conversion mechanisms, such as orchestration, renewal, and fit, and (iii) propose a cluster-informed agenda that supports more cumulative and mechanism-complete theory development in future SCA research.

2. Methodology

We implemented a Bibliometric–Systematic Literature Review (B-SLR; Marzi et al., 2025) to strengthen methodological rigor and transparency (Fig. 1).

2.1. Step 1 - Research question and scope

A preliminary scoping search (Cronin & George, 2020) indicated that research explicitly examining sustained competitive advantage (SCA) as a distinct corpus remains limited. Accordingly, we scoped the review to this domain and applied two inclusion criteria: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles and (ii) English-language publications.

2.2. Step 2 - Query design

Consistent with B-SLR guidance, we conducted a focused search in the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. To maximize conceptual precision while limiting irrelevant retrieval, we applied the exact phrase query "sustained competitive advantage" to titles, abstracts, and author keywords.

2.3. Step 3 - Database selection

We used the WoS Core Collection as the sole data source due to its citation accuracy, selective journal coverage, and historical depth, which are advantageous for longitudinal bibliometric analyses (Falagas et al., 2007). Scopus provides broader coverage in more recent years, but its more limited backfile can constrain retrospective analyses. PubMed is primarily biomedical in scope, and Google Scholar's nontransparent indexing and duplication issues reduce reproducibility. In contrast, WoS offers structured metadata (for example, cited references and author affiliations) that integrates effectively with VOSviewer, CiteSpace, and Bibliometrix, thereby supporting co-citation, bibliographic coupling, and

keyword co-occurrence analyses (Zupic & Čater, 2014). This database choice aligns with the B-SLR protocol and strengthens reliability and replicability.

2.4. Step 4 - Screening and cross-checks

The initial WoS retrieval (n = 891) underwent quality screening using predefined exclusion criteria. We removed 234 records, including book chapters, conference proceedings, early-access items, editorials, and non-English publications, because these sources fall outside the scope of peer-reviewed journal articles and may introduce heterogeneity in methodological standards (Falagas et al., 2007; Page et al., 2021). The remaining 657 articles proceeded to eligibility assessment.

2.5. Step 5 - Eligibility, cleaning, and export

We screened abstracts to confirm explicit engagement with sustained competitive advantage (SCA). Studies that were tangential or unrelated were flagged for exclusion; however, no records met the exclusion criteria at this stage. The final dataset comprises 657 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1991 and 2026. Records were exported in WoS plain-text format and imported into VOSviewer and CiteSpace for subsequent bibliometric mapping and visualization.

2.6. Step 6 - Bibliometric approach

We applied a complementary set of bibliometric techniques to generate performance indicators and to map the intellectual and thematic structure of SCA research. First, we produced descriptive statistics on annual publication trends, leading journals, prolific authors, and geographic distribution to characterize the field's growth and outlet dispersion. Second, we conducted science-mapping analyses to examine the knowledge base and thematic organization. These analyses included keyword co-occurrence networks to identify topical concentrations, co-citation analysis to reveal shared intellectual foundations, and citation-burst detection to capture temporal surges in scholarly attention. To improve interpretability and reduce noise, we harmonized author keywords using basic cleaning procedures and triangulated results across tools to assess the robustness of the observed patterns. The outputs of Step 6 provide the descriptive foundation for subsequent clustering and thematic synthesis.

2.7. Step 7 - Clusters' topic identification

To identify core topics, we constructed a keyword co-occurrence network in CiteSpace using one-year time slices (1991–2026) and threshold selection criteria (c = 3; cc = 3; ccv = 20). Clusters were generated from the co-occurrence network and evaluated using standard quality diagnostics. The resulting solution indicates acceptable cluster separability and internal consistency, supporting the validity of the extracted thematic structure. Cluster labels were initially derived algorithmically from salient terms and then refined through close reading of cluster-defining keywords and the most representative documents within each cluster. This procedure yielded thematically coherent clusters that can be interpreted as major research streams and used as the organizing backbone for the subsequent systematic review.

2.8. Step 8 - Sample ordering and selection

Following cluster identification, we constructed a structured reading set by ordering documents within each cluster according to representativeness. Representativeness was operationalized using a combination of (i) local influence within the dataset (for example, citation prominence within the network), (ii) structural importance (for example, bridging roles inferred from network position), and (iii) temporal relevance (for example, burst activity indicating emerging scholarly attention). For each cluster, we prioritized highly representative documents to ensure that the qualitative synthesis captures both foundational contributions that shape each stream and recent studies that indicate its current trajectory. This ordered sample provides an auditable link between quantitative clustering and qualitative thematic interpretation.

2.9. Step 9 - Systematic literature review

We then conducted a systematic, cluster-based thematic analysis of the selected documents. For each article, we extracted a structured set of elements, including research context, study setting and sample, conceptualization of sustained competitive advantage (SCA), focal constructs and outcomes, theoretical framing, methodological approach, and key findings. Within each cluster, we used iterative coding to distill recurring mechanisms, boundary conditions, and points of theoretical tension. We also compared clusters to identify convergences and divergences across streams. The output of Step 9 comprises cluster narratives that summarize what each stream explains well, where evidence remains limited or methodologically constrained, and which relationships appear most promising for future theory testing.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics (publication counts, leading journals, authors, countries, etc.) are provided in Appendix S.1; below we focus on the thematic and evolution of Sustained Competitive Advantage research.

3.1. Thematic Hotspots: Cluster Analysis

Based on the keyword co-occurrence analysis, Citespace enabled further interpretation of the information into clusters. This process produced Fig. 2.

3.1.1. Cluster 1 - IT/IS strategy and resource-rchestration mechanisms for sustained competitive advantage.

Cluster 1 reflects a resource-based view (RBV) oriented knowledge base that explains sustained competitive advantage (SCA) as an outcome of bundling and orchestrating technology- and knowledge-related resources into superior performance. A central theoretical anchor is the RBV in the information systems domain, which emphasizes that competitive advantage depends not only on possessing valuable resources, but also on how firms orchestrate complementary resources and deploy capabilities to realize value (Taher, 2011). Building on this logic, IS strategy is conceptualized as a strategic posture that shapes innovation differentiation and organizational performance, implying that IT becomes a

source of advantage when it is integrated into broader strategic and capability configurations rather than treated as a standalone asset (Devece et al., 2017). Mechanism-oriented evidence further reinforces this interpretation by showing that IT's contribution to profitability is primarily realized through value-creation pathways, including revenue-side effects and related mechanisms, rather than through cost reductions e, thereby clarifying how IT-enabled capabilities translate into financial returns (Mithas et al., 2012). A complementary substream extends this resource–capability logic to entrepreneurial contexts, where entrepreneurial innovation enhances competitive advantage through higher-order cognitive mechanisms, including entrepreneurial thinking as a mediating process (Alsafadi & Aljuhmani, 2024).

Table 1
Overview of influential articles and high-frequency keywords in the IT/IS Strategy and Resource-Orchestration Mechanisms for Sustained Competitive Advantage cluster

The major citing articles	Coverage	Global Citation Score	The most cited keywords	Freq.
Devece et al. (2017)	8	23	sustained competitive advantage	302
Mithas et al. (2012)	8	336	performance	143
Taher (2012)	7	28	knowledge	50
Alsafadi and Aljuhmani (2024)	7	35	model	26
			technology	16

3.1.2. Cluster 2 - Resource-based value creation and dynamic capability pathways to sustainable competitive advantage

Cluster 2 captures a capability-oriented strategic management stream that explains competitive advantage through resource-based theory and extensions that emphasize value creation, value appropriation, and dynamic capability mechanisms. Foundational work argues that competitive advantage is best conceptualized as a firm's ability to create more economic value than rivals and to sustain that value-creation differential over time, which reduces ambiguity around performance and links advantage to both value creation and value capture (Barney et al., 2021). Complementing this view, RBV applications in information systems emphasize that advantage depends on resource complementarities and orchestration, particularly the interaction of IT and non-IT resources, rather than on isolated resource ownership (Taher, 2011). A prominent mechanism in this cluster is strategic agility, which translates an entrepreneurial posture into sustained advantage by enabling firms to sense and respond to environmental change, especially in SME contexts (Rocha et al., 2025). Practice-oriented contributions

extend the capability logic to sustainability and operations by showing that quality management and green supply chain practices strengthen sustainability performance, partly through competitive advantage as an intervening pathway (Masudin et al., 2025). Finally, a boundary-spanning strand highlights that strategic choices, such as offshore outsourcing, are shaped by the co-evolution of institutional and organizational drivers, reinforcing the importance of context for capability development and competitive outcomes (Lahiri & Kedia, 2011).

Table 2
Overview of influential articles and high-frequency keywords in the Resource-Based Value Creation and Dynamic Capability Pathways to Sustainable Competitive Advantage cluster

The major citing articles	Coverage	Global Citation Score	The most cited keywords	Freq.
Lahiri and Kedia (2011)	7	52	competitive advantage	118
Barney et al. (2021)	6	278	management	85
Rocha et al. (2025)	5	2	firm	82
Masudin et al. (2025)	5	6	strategy	64
Taher (2011)	5	28	dynamic capabilities	19

3.1.3. Cluster 3 - IT/IS capability configurations and data-enabled value creation for sustained competitive advantage

Cluster 3 adopts an information-systems-focused perspective on sustained competitive advantage (SCA) that conceptualizes IT/IS as a capability system rather than a standalone asset. The studies in this cluster emphasize that the strategic value is realized through capability formation, the bundling of resources, and identifiable value-creation mechanisms, rather than through IT spending levels or hardware availability alone (Fink, 2011; Mithas et al., 2012).

A major substream shifts the notion of strategic resources toward data and analytics in emergent and turbulent settings. It argues that data resources may be necessary for market entry yet difficult to monetize without appropriate interorganizational arrangements. In this view, strategic partnerships and governance structures become central to value capture, and a temporal decoupling between value creation and value capture can weaken competitive advantage (Mamonov & Triantoro, 2018). A second substream extends IT capability arguments into sustainability-oriented strategy, proposing that firms develop sustainability capabilities by integrating IT resources with human and supply-chain resources to deliver triple-bottom-line value and, ultimately, sustained competitive advantage (Dao et al., 2011).

Complementing these mechanism-based accounts, IS strategy research within the cluster distinguishes alternative strategic postures (for example, innovative versus conservative IS strategy) and links them to innovation differentiation and performance outcomes. This reinforces the idea that advantage depends on managerial choices regarding how IS is positioned and mobilized within the firm (Devece et al., 2017). Overall, Cluster 3 can be interpreted as an IT strategic value stream that connects RBV, capability configurations, and data-enabled value creation and capture to explain when and how IT contributes to sustained competitive advantage.

Table 3
Overview of influential articles and high-frequency keywords in the IT/IS capability configurations and data-enabled value creation for sustained competitive advantage cluster

The major citing articles	Coverage	Global Citation Score	The most cited keywords	Freq.
Mamonov and Triantoro (2018)	7	43	systems	50
Devece et al. (2017)	6	23	capability	44
Dao et al. (2011)	6	419	perspective	38
Mithas et al. (2012)	6	336	resource-based view	35
Fink (2011)	5	68	information technology	26

3.1.4. Cluster 4 - High-Performance work systems, HRM fit, and innovation pathways to firm performance

Cluster 4 represents a strategic HRM knowledge base that links sustained competitive advantage to firm performance through high-performance work systems (HPWS) and related bundles of HRM practices. A core premise is that HRM practices operate as an internally coherent system in which complementarities and internal fit strengthen the ability–motivation–opportunity conditions that underpin productivity and organizational effectiveness (Delery & Gupta, 2016). Moving beyond associative claims, this cluster emphasizes mechanism-based explanations that unpack the black box by showing how skill-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing HRM bundles shape innovation trajectories that subsequently improve organizational performance. Strategic alignment is treated as an important contingency that conditions the strength of these pathways (Chowhan, 2016).

The cluster also includes comparative evidence indicating that the HPWS–performance relationship is generally positive across countries, while highlighting that cross-national differences can moderate effect magnitudes through cultural and discretion-based boundary conditions (Rabl et al., 2014). More recent contributions extend the performance logic toward sustainability-oriented advantage by examining how responsible investment and CSR-related initiatives develop complementary capabilities

that enhance innovation returns and environmental performance, including indirect effects via green capabilities and green innovation (Dhaigude et al., 2024; Al-Ali & O'Mahony, 2025).

Table 4
Overview of influential articles and high-frequency keywords in the High-Performance Work Systems, HRM Fit, and Innovation Pathways to Firm Performance cluster

The major citing articles	Coverage	Global Citation Score	The most cited keywords	Freq.
Rabl et al. (2014)	6	151	firm performance	132
Chowhan (2016)	6	151	impact	80
Al-Ali and O'Mahony (2025)	5	3	human resource management	33
Dhaigude et al. (2024)	5	4	organizational performance	20
Delery and Gupta (2016)	5	61	productivity	13

3.1.5. Cluster 5 - Entrepreneurial and data-enabled dynamic capabilities for innovation-driven sustainable competitive advantage

Cluster 5 reflects a dynamic capabilities stream that explains sustained competitive advantage (SCA) through innovation-oriented capability reconfiguration under resource constraints, with a growing emphasis on data, AI, and sustainability contexts. A central mechanism in this cluster is the conversion of entrepreneurial postures into SCA via intermediate strategic pathways, such as differentiation and risk management. In this view, entrepreneurial bricolage and entrepreneurial orientation operate as dynamic capabilities that enable firms to recombine existing resources and remain resilient in turbulent environments (Tajeddini et al., 2023a; Tajeddini et al., 2023b).

Complementing this microfoundational logic, the cluster highlights marketing capability as a critical converting mechanism that mediates the entrepreneurial orientation–performance relationship, particularly for resource-constrained SMEs pursuing internationalization. This reinforces the RBV proposition that advantage depends on deployable market-facing routines rather than on entrepreneurial orientation alone (Jin et al., 2017). A parallel technology-oriented strand extends the dynamic capability perspective by positioning marketing analytics capability as capability infrastructure that supports sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring. Within this strand, AI adoption strengthens these capability effects and contributes to sustained competitive advantage in data-rich competitive environments (Hossain et al., 2022). Finally, the cluster signals a sustainability-oriented extension in which circular economy adoption is framed as both a capability-building challenge and an opportunity to develop new core

competencies along the value chain that can underpin long-run competitive advantage, despite persistent managerial perceptions of high cost and risk (Cristoni & Tonelli, 2018).

Table 5
Overview of influential articles and high-frequency keywords in the Entrepreneurial and data-enabled dynamic capabilities for innovation-driven sustainable competitive advantage cluster

The major citing articles	Coverage	Global Citation Score	The most cited keywords	Freq.
Tajeddini et al. (2023a)	4	25	resource based view	88
Cristoni and Tonelli (2018)	3	30	dynamic capability	71
Jin et al. (2017)	3	55	innovation	42
Hossain et al. (2022)	3	85	antecedents	7
Tajeddini et al. (2023b)	3	43	strategic management	7

3.2. Evolution trend analysis

Figure 3 presents the longitudinal intellectual structure of sustained competitive advantage (SCA) research using a CiteSpace keyword timeline network (1991–2026). The visualization indicates a five-cluster structure with moderate coherence, suggesting distinct yet interconnected thematic streams rather than fully separated subfields. Early work concentrates on foundational outcome and positioning terms, including sustained competitive advantage, performance, strategy, firm, and competitive advantage, reflecting an initial emphasis on defining SCA and linking it to firm-level performance and strategic positioning. From the mid-2000s onward, the network shifted toward resource- and capability-based explanations, with resource-based view and capability emerging as central connectors alongside an IS-oriented strand emphasizing information technology, systems, and business value. During the 2010s, the field differentiated into more mechanism-specific pathways, including knowledge-based and organizational resource mechanisms (for example, knowledge, human capital, and quality), IT capability and integration mechanisms (for example, business value and integration), and HRM system mechanisms tied to productivity and performance. In 2020, the network expands toward digitally enabled and sustainability-oriented mechanisms, with growing salience of big data analytics, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability-linked innovation terms (for example, green innovation). These patterns suggest that contemporary SCA research increasingly frames advantage as contingent on data-enabled capabilities and responsible, innovation-driven strategic renewal.

Across clusters, Cluster 1 (IS strategy and knowledge assets) foregrounds knowledge-oriented and organizational resource mechanisms and becomes increasingly connected to analytics-related topics, such as big data analytics and organizational culture, as well as mediation-oriented modeling terms. Cluster 2 (dynamic capabilities and CSR) centers on dynamic capabilities and corporate social

responsibility, with links to market-facing routines (for example, marketing capability), indicating a sustainability-compatible capability renewal pathway to SCA. Cluster 3 (IT capabilities and business value) reflects the classic IS value stream, in which information technology, resource-based view, capability, business value, and integration form a core explanatory chain for advantage. Cluster 4 (strategic HRM and productivity) concentrates on human resource management, work systems, and labor productivity, with later connections to operational domains such as supply chain management and governance-related moderators. Cluster 5 (entrepreneurial capabilities and green innovation) emphasizes antecedents and renewal mechanisms (for example, dynamic capability and entrepreneurial orientation) and culminates in sustainability-linked innovation outcomes (green innovation), positioning entrepreneurship-driven capability building as a late-emerging route to innovation-based SCA.

Table 8 reveals four phases in the evolution of SCA research based on citation-burst keywords (1991–2026). The first phase is dominated by foundational, firm-level framing, led by “sustained competitive advantage” (strength = 18.94; 1995–2006) and “firm” (9.16; 1996–2006). This period also features bursts in “competence” (7.35; 1999–2008) and “industry” (5.99; 1999–2005), indicating early efforts to theorize SCA through internal competences alongside industry-level considerations.

A second phase reflects a resource–capability and technology turn, with a concentrated burst in “resource based view” (3.87; 2006–2007) and sustained attention to “information-technology” (6.31; 2007–2013) and “technology” (6.10; 2007–2013). Together, these bursts signal a shift toward IT-enabled value creation mechanisms. The third phase introduces a short burst in “view” (4.32; 2011–2012) and “framework” (3.89; 2011–2012), followed by a clearer emphasis on outcome pathways, highlighted by “organizational performance” (6.46; 2013–2017) and “human capital” (4.23; 2014–2017).

The contemporary frontier is characterized by persistent bursts in “model” (6.14; 2017–2026) and “dynamic capabilities” (6.00; 2017–2026), alongside “mediating role” (5.24; 2021–2024) and sustainability and operations extensions such as “corporate social responsibility” (4.15; 2021–2026) and “supply chain management” (3.94; 2024–2026). These patterns suggest that recent SCA research increasingly emphasizes dynamic capability renewal, mechanism testing, and responsible as well as operational contexts.

Table 6. Top 25 Keywords with the strongest citation bursts in sustained competitive advantage

Keywords	Year	Strength	Begin	End	1991 - 2026
sustained competitive advantage	1995	18.94	1995	2006	
firm	1996	9.16	1996	2006	
competence	1999	7.35	1999	2008	
industry	1999	5.99	1999	2005	
perspective	2003	6.56	2003	2010	
productivity	2004	3.7	2004	2005	
resource based view	2000	3.87	2006	2007	
information-technology	2007	6.31	2007	2013	
technology	2007	6.1	2007	2013	
business	2007	4.56	2007	2011	
view	2011	4.32	2011	2012	
framework	2011	3.89	2011	2012	
organizational performance	2005	6.46	2013	2017	
human capital	2014	4.23	2014	2017	
model	2010	6.14	2017	2026	
dynamic capabilities	2017	6	2017	2026	
information technology	1999	4.79	2017	2018	
knowledge	2010	4.07	2019	2021	
capability	2007	4.07	2020	2023	
mediating role	2021	5.24	2021	2024	
corporate social responsibility	2021	4.15	2021	2026	
financial performance	2003	3.67	2021	2024	
dynamic capability	2010	5.67	2022	2026	
impact	1999	4.06	2023	2026	
supply chain management	2024	3.94	2024	2026	

4. Discussion

4.1. Academic contribution

This study advances the sustained competitive advantage (SCA) literature by consolidating SCA as a distinct and analyzable knowledge domain and by providing a transparent, reproducible map of its intellectual foundations, thematic structure, and temporal evolution. Specifically, we employ a bibliometric–systematic literature review (B-SLR) design on 657 Web of Science (WoS) indexed journal articles published between 1991 and 2026.

First, the study establishes a comprehensive domain-level baseline for the period covered, clarifying how SCA scholarship has grown and where it is institutionally anchored. Descriptive indicators point to long-run expansion, with marked acceleration after 2011 and renewed growth in recent years. Output peaks in 2025, while the lower count in 2026 likely reflects partial-year coverage. The outlet profile indicates that SCA remains anchored in leading strategy journals while diffusing into HRM, IS, and applied business venues. Geographic and affiliation patterns show concentration in Anglophone research systems, alongside widening participation from Europe and Asia, albeit with uneven citation intensity across

countries. Collectively, these results provide an empirical baseline for future theory building and for positioning subsequent SCA contributions relative to the field's major production centers.

Second, the study strengthens theoretical consolidation by empirically documenting SCA's canonical backbone and its cross-disciplinary extensions. The co-citation structure is highly concentrated, with the resource-based view (RBV) as the dominant pillar, evidenced by Barney's prominence and Barney (1991) as the most cited reference, reinforced by related RBV cornerstones (for example, Wernerfelt; Peteraf; Amit and Schoemaker) and sustainability-of-advantage mechanisms (Dierickx and Cool). A second pillar is dynamic capability theory (for example, Teece et al.; Eisenhardt and Martin), which foregrounds renewal and reconfiguration as central explanations for sustaining advantage. Importantly, the knowledge base also shows systematic diffusion into applied domains, notably information systems (IT capability and business value mechanisms) and strategic HRM (human resource systems as advantage-generating bundles). This pattern indicates that SCA functions not only as a strategy-core construct but also as a portable explanatory lens for mechanism testing in adjacent disciplines.

Third, the study offers a cluster-based, mechanism-oriented synthesis that reframes SCA research as five interlinked streams rather than a single linear conversation. Keyword co-occurrence clustering identifies coherent thematic streams spanning (i) IT/IS strategy and resource orchestration mechanisms, (ii) RBV value creation and dynamic capability pathways, (iii) IT/IS capability configurations and data-enabled value creation and capture, (iv) high-performance work systems and HRM fit linked to innovation and productivity pathways, and (v) entrepreneurial and data-enabled dynamic capabilities tied to innovation-driven and sustainability-compatible advantage. This structure reduces conceptual sprawl in a literature where SCA is often used as a broad umbrella term and makes the field's implicit logic explicit. Across clusters, resource possession is rarely sufficient. Conversion mechanisms such as orchestration, complementarities, capability renewal, and system-level fit recur as the dominant explanatory workhorses.

Fourth, the study clarifies how SCA scholarship has shifted over time by integrating timeline and burst-based evidence. Temporal patterns show an early phase dominated by foundational outcome framing (firm, competence, industry, and sustained competitive advantage), followed by a technology and RBV turn (information technology and RBV), and then a mechanism-testing phase in which models, mediation logic, and dynamic capabilities receive sustained attention. The recent frontier extends SCA theorizing into digitally enabled and sustainability-relevant contexts (for example, CSR and supply chain management), suggesting that contemporary research increasingly treats sustained advantage as contingent on capability renewal under turbulence and on responsible and operational value creation, rather than on static resource positions.

Fifth, the study provides a field-level diagnosis of fragmentation and integration opportunities with implications for cumulative theory development. The co-authorship network is relatively sparse and decentralized, implying that SCA operates more as shared theoretical language adopted across parallel communities than as a tightly integrated research program. This helps explain why SCA

conceptualizations and measures vary substantially across domains. By identifying where the field is cohesive (shared canonical foundations) and where it is dispersed (collaboration patterns and domain-specific applications), the study motivates future research that harmonizes SCA conceptualization and measurement across streams and that tests boundary conditions that generalize across IS, HRM, entrepreneurship, and sustainability-oriented strategy contexts.

Taken together, these contributions advance SCA scholarship by delivering (1) a robust empirical baseline of the domain, (2) a validated account of its foundational knowledge base, (3) a cluster-based synthesis that foregrounds mechanisms, (4) a temporally grounded evolution narrative, and (5) an integration diagnosis that supports more cumulative and mechanism-complete theory development.

4.2. Managerial implications

Our synthesis suggests that managers should treat sustained competitive advantage (SCA) less as an outcome of owning “strategic assets” and more as a repeatable conversion process that orchestrates complementary resources, builds capability systems, and renews those systems as environments change. Across clusters, a consistent managerial implication is that advantage is sustained when firms can (i) create value through distinctive configurations and (ii) capture value through governance, alignment, and disciplined execution (Barney et al., 2021; Taher, 2011).

4.2.1. Orchestrate resource complementarities rather than investing in isolated resources

The IS- and RBV-oriented clusters indicate that IT rarely generates durable advantages as a standalone investment. Managers should therefore conduct periodic resource-complementarity audits to identify which combinations of IT assets, human skills, routines, and partner resources must be bundled to deliver customer value. This also implies that capital allocation should prioritize initiatives that generate cross-resource synergies, such as analytics tools combined with process redesign and capability development, rather than technology acquisition in isolation (Fink, 2011; Mithas et al., 2012; Taher, 2011).

4.2.2. Manage IT/IS strategy as a capability system with explicit value-creation mechanisms

Evidence in the IT/IS strategy and IT capability clusters suggests that the strategic payoff from IT typically materializes through identifiable pathways, including revenue growth, productivity gains, and integration-enabled differentiation, rather than through cost reduction alone (Mithas et al., 2012; Devece et al., 2017). In practice, managers should: (1) articulate an IS strategic posture (innovative versus conservative) and ensure that it aligns with competitive positioning, (2) treat data, architecture, and integration as capability infrastructure, and (3) measure value creation at the process and customer levels (for example, cycle time, conversion, and retention) and then link these indicators to financial outcomes. In emergent and data-intensive markets, value capture may lag value creation, so governance

design and commercialization planning should be established early to reduce the risk that competitors appropriate the returns (Mamonov & Triantoro, 2018).

4.2.3. Build dynamic capabilities and strategic agility as the sustainability mechanism for advantage

The dynamic capability stream highlights that advantage persists when firms can sense change, seize opportunities, and reconfigure resources faster than rivals (Rocha et al., 2025). For managers, this implies institutionalizing market-sensing routines (for example, customer intelligence, competitor monitoring, and technology scouting), accelerating decision cycles through structured experimentation and stage-gate governance, and maintaining reconfiguration capacity via modular processes, redeployable talent, and flexible partner contracts. This implication is particularly salient for SMEs, where agility can partially substitute for scale when supported by disciplined routines rather than ad hoc responses (Rocha et al., 2025; Tajeddini et al., 2023b).

4.2.4. Treat people systems as strategic architecture: HPWS, internal fit, and innovation pathways

The HRM cluster suggests that performance advantages are stronger when HR practices operate as coherent bundles with internal consistency and alignment to strategy (Delery & Gupta, 2016; Chowhan, 2016). Managers seeking SCA should therefore avoid fragmented HR initiatives and instead design integrated systems that build skills, motivation, and opportunity (AMO), while explicitly connecting these systems to innovation goals (for example, idea generation, cross-functional collaboration, and continuous improvement). In multinational settings, managers should anticipate variation in how discretion, norms, and institutions condition HPWS effectiveness and adapt practices accordingly (Rabl et al., 2014).

4.2.5. Use entrepreneurial and analytics capabilities to convert orientation into measurable advantage

The entrepreneurship and data-enabled dynamic capability cluster indicates that entrepreneurial orientation alone does not guarantee SCA. Advantage is realized through conversion mechanisms such as differentiation, risk management, marketing capability, and analytics capability (Jin et al., 2017; Tajeddini et al., 2023a; Tajeddini et al., 2023b; Hossain et al., 2022). Managerially, this supports targeted investment in market-facing routines (for example, segmentation discipline, pricing capabilities, and channel management) and analytics-enabled decision tools that strengthen sensing and seizing. AI adoption can amplify these effects, but only when paired with robust data governance, talent readiness, and process redesign (Hossain et al., 2022). Where circular economy initiatives are pursued, managers should frame them as capability-building programs across the value chain rather than as compliance projects, and they should actively manage perceived cost and risk barriers through phased pilots and partner ecosystems (Cristoni & Tonelli, 2018).

4.2.6. Integrate sustainability, CSR, and supply chain choices into the advantage logic

Recent SCA research increasingly links advantage to responsible value creation and operational ecosystems, including CSR, green capabilities, and supply chain management. The managerial implication is to embed sustainability within capability systems by integrating IT resources with supply chain and human resources to deliver triple-bottom-line outcomes, while tracking whether sustainability initiatives generate defensible differentiation, efficiency, and legitimacy benefits (Dao et al., 2011; Al-Ali & O'Mahony, 2025). Managers should also recognize that operational excellence programs (for example, TQM and green supply chain management) can strengthen sustainability performance partly through competitive advantage as an intermediate mechanism. Accordingly, execution and capability development should be managed as a strategic pathway rather than treated primarily as a reporting exercise (Masudin et al., 2025; Dhaigude et al., 2024).

4.3. Limitation and future research

This study has several limitations that also motivate a clear agenda for future research. First, database and query choices constrain coverage. We relied on the WoS Core Collection and an exact, domain-precise query ("sustained competitive advantage"), which supports replicability but may under-represent adjacent work that theorizes the same phenomenon using alternative labels (for example, durable competitive advantage, sustained superior performance, isolating mechanisms, value appropriation, or rent generation) or that appears in outlets not fully indexed by WoS (Falagas et al., 2007; Zupic & Čater, 2014). In addition, restricting the corpus to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles reduces heterogeneity in quality but excludes potentially influential books, conference proceedings, and non-English contributions (Page et al., 2021). Second, bibliometric indicators are imperfect proxies for intellectual influence. Citation counts are subject to time-lag effects, field-normalization issues, and strategic citation behavior, which can amplify older canonical works and underweight emerging contributions. The final years of the dataset may also be affected by partial-year indexing and shorter citation windows. Third, science-mapping outputs depend on modeling decisions. Keyword harmonization, threshold settings, and algorithmic clustering can affect cluster boundaries and labels. Although triangulation across tools improves robustness, interpretive judgment remains necessary when translating network structures into theoretical narratives (Zupic & Čater, 2014; Marzi et al., 2025). Finally, as with any bibliometric mapping, the results describe structure and evolution but do not establish causal mechanisms or validate the effectiveness of specific strategic prescriptions.

Building on these limitations, future research can strengthen cumulative knowledge on SCA in four directions.

Broaden and validate coverage. Replications should combine WoS with Scopus, Dimensions, or curated Google Scholar approaches, and then compare overlap and the sensitivity of cluster solutions. Future searches can adopt a layered query strategy that retains the exact phrase for precision while adding

controlled synonyms and mechanism terms (for example, isolating mechanisms, value appropriation, rent, and sustained superior performance) to test the stability of the intellectual backbone.

Improve conceptual and measurement convergence. Because SCA is operationalized heterogeneously across domains, scholars should pursue cross-stream construct harmonization, including shared measurement templates, explicit distinctions between value creation and value capture, and clearly specified boundary conditions. These templates should then be tested for generalizability across IS, HRM, entrepreneurship, and sustainability-oriented strategy contexts.

Move from mapping to explanation using stronger designs. The persistence of “model” and “mediating role” signals suggests that the field is ready for longitudinal and multi-level causal inference, configurational approaches (for example, fsQCA), and mixed-method programs that directly test orchestration, complementarity, and renewal mechanisms under turbulence, rather than relying primarily on cross-sectional associations.

Pursue cross-cluster integration around contemporary frontiers. Promising integration questions include how AI and data governance shape the timing gap between value creation and value capture, how HR system fit enables dynamic capability renewal, and how sustainability and supply chain configurations become defensible sources of advantage in institutional and stakeholder-intensive environments.

Together, these directions can help shift SCA research from parallel, domain-specific applications toward a more cumulative and mechanism-complete theory of sustained advantage.

4.4. Cluster-informed future research agenda

Building on the five thematic clusters, we propose a cluster-informed agenda that prioritizes mechanism clarity, boundary conditions, and cross-stream integration. The burst patterns in our dataset indicate that recent SCA research is increasingly shaped by model-centered, mechanism-testing work (for example, mediating role) and by dynamic capabilities, with growing extensions into CSR and supply chain management. Accordingly, future research should move beyond established resource and performance associations and instead develop cumulative explanations of how value is created, protected, and renewed over time, particularly in digital and sustainability-intensive settings.

4.4.1. Cluster 1: IT/IS strategy and resource orchestration

Future research should sharpen the orchestration mechanism by specifying what is orchestrated (for example, IT, knowledge, human capital, and partner resources), how orchestration occurs (for example, governance, routines, and sequencing), and when orchestration produces durable rather than transient returns (Taher, 2011; Mithas et al., 2012; Devece et al., 2017). Promising directions include: (i) unpacking the microfoundations of orchestration decisions (for example, managerial cognition and entrepreneurial thinking) and linking them to the quality and speed of resource bundling (Alsafadi & Aljuhmani, 2024); (ii) conceptualizing orchestration as a dynamic capability that reconfigures complementarities under

shocks; and (iii) using longitudinal and event-based designs to test whether orchestration reduces imitation risk or primarily accelerates short-run performance.

4.4.2. Cluster 2: RBV value creation, value capture, and dynamic capability pathways

Cluster 2 suggests that SCA research benefits from treating advantage as a value-creation and value appropriation differential, rather than as superior performance alone (Barney et al., 2021). Future research should therefore: (i) operationalize both value creation and value capture and test the conditions under which they decouple; (ii) examine strategic agility as a mediating mechanism that translates entrepreneurial-orientation into sustained advantage across different turbulence regimes, especially in SMEs (Rocha et al., 2025); and (iii) build upon Masudin et al. (2025) by further expanding on models that position competitive advantage as an intervening pathway linking TQM and green SCM to sustainable performance. Comparative studies can also extend institutional co-evolution logic to examine how regulatory intensity and legitimacy pressures shape the durability of capability-based advantages, particularly in offshore outsourcing and global value chain contexts (Lahiri & Kedia, 2011).

4.4.3. Cluster 3: IT/IS capability configurations and data-enabled value creation/capture

A central frontier in Cluster 3 is the shift from conceptualizing IT as an asset to treating data and analytics as strategic resources. In these settings, value creation can precede, and potentially undermine, value capture when governance is weak (Mamonov & Triantoro, 2018). Future research should prioritize: (i) governance and interorganizational arrangements that protect appropriation and limit spillovers in platform- and partnership-based ecosystems; (ii) analysis of the temporal gap between value creation and value capture, including how rivals imitate, regulators intervene, and partners renegotiate rents over time (Mamonov & Triantoro, 2018); and (iii) configurational approaches that identify equifinal bundles of IT capabilities (Fink, 2011); Mithas et al., 2012). A second opportunity is to connect data capability with sustainability capability building by examining how data and broad IT resources integrate with human and supply chain resources to generate triple-bottom-line outcomes and durable advantage (Dao et al., 2011).

4.4.4. Cluster 4: HPWS, HRM fit, and innovation pathways

The HRM stream indicates that internal fit and coherent bundles matter. The next step is to explain when HR systems generate innovation-based durability rather than short-lived productivity gains (Chowhan, 2016). Future research should: (i) model multi-stage pathways linnking HPWS, innovation, and performance while clarifying moderators such as strategic alignment; (ii) develop stronger cross-national contingencies that distinguish cultural effects from institutional constraints (Rabl et al., 2014); and (iii) extend the emerging sustainability strand by testing how CSR and responsible investments build green capabilities and green innovation that translate into sustained advantage, including boundary conditions across manufacturing and service ecosystems (Dhaigude et al., 2024; Al-Ali & O'Mahony,

2025). Methodologically, multi-level designs that link individual skill formation, team-level innovation processes, and firm-level outcomes would provide stronger evidence on the underlying mechanisms.

4.4.5. Cluster 5: Entrepreneurial and data-enabled dynamic capabilities for innovation-driven SCA

Cluster 5 indicates that entrepreneurial orientation and bricolage require conversion capabilities, including differentiation, risk management, marketing capability to translate entrepreneurial posture into sustained competitive advantage (Tajeddini et al., 2023a; Tajeddini et al., 2023b; Jin et al., 2017). Moving forward, future research should: (i) test capability portfolios that jointly enable sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring under resource constraints; (ii) evaluate whether AI adoption strengthens the durability of marketing analytics capability effects or instead accelerates imitation and erodes rents (Hossain et al., 2022); and (iii) examine circular economy adoption as a capability-building journey by identifying which value-chain competencies are most defensible and how perceived cost and risk barriers can be reduced through ecosystem strategies (Cristoni & Tonelli, 2018). This stream is well suited to mixed-method designs that combine case-based process tracing with panel-based tests of capability renewal.

4.4.6. Cross-cluster integration priorities

Across clusters, the strongest integration opportunity is to develop a cumulative, mechanism-complete explanation of SCA that links digital capability systems, people systems, and sustainability-oriented operations. Three integrative research programs appear particularly promising:

Value creation and value capture decoupling. Connect data and IT governance (Cluster 3) with RBV value logic (Cluster 2) to explain when firms create value but fail to appropriate it, and identify which orchestration routines limit leakage and strengthen appropriation (Barney et al., 2021; Mamonov & Triantoro, 2018).

Human and digital complementarity. Examine how HPWS and HRM fit (Cluster 4) enable dynamic capability renewal and analytics-driven sensing and seizing (Clusters 3 and 5), with particular attention to skill formation, decision rights, and learning routines (Delery & Gupta, 2016; Hossain et al., 2022).

Sustainability-compatible advantage. Integrate CSR, green innovation, and supply chain management with capability renewal models to clarify when responsible value creation becomes defensible differentiation rather than compliance parity (Dao et al., 2011; Masudin et al., 2025; Al-Ali & O'Mahony, 2025).

Taken together, this cluster-informed agenda encourages future SCA research to (i) specify mechanisms and temporal dynamics, (ii) test boundary conditions across industries and institutional contexts, and (iii) develop integrative models that explain how advantage is renewed at the intersection of digital transformation, human systems, and sustainability.

Declarations

Author Contribution

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS: Khanh Huy Nguyen: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Software, Resources, Data Curation. An Khang Trinh: Methodology, Software, Resources, Data Curation, Writing—Original Draft, Visualisation. Thi Ngoc Tram Tran: Investigation, Project administration. Thi Phuong-Quang: Formal analysis, Writing—Original Draft. Mai Dong Tran: Validation, Writing—Review and Editing, Supervision.

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Figures

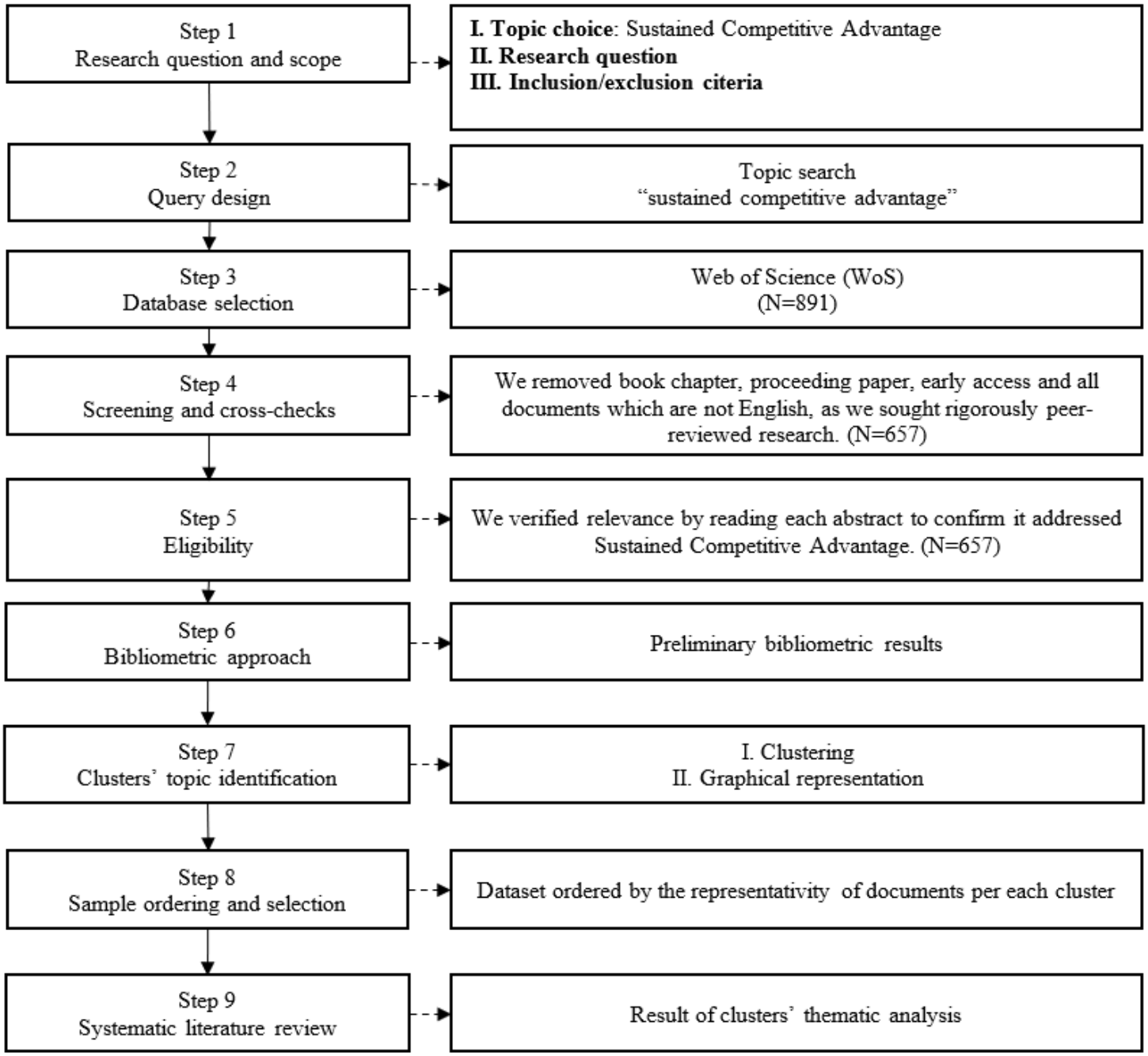


Figure 1

Workflow of the bibliometric analysis

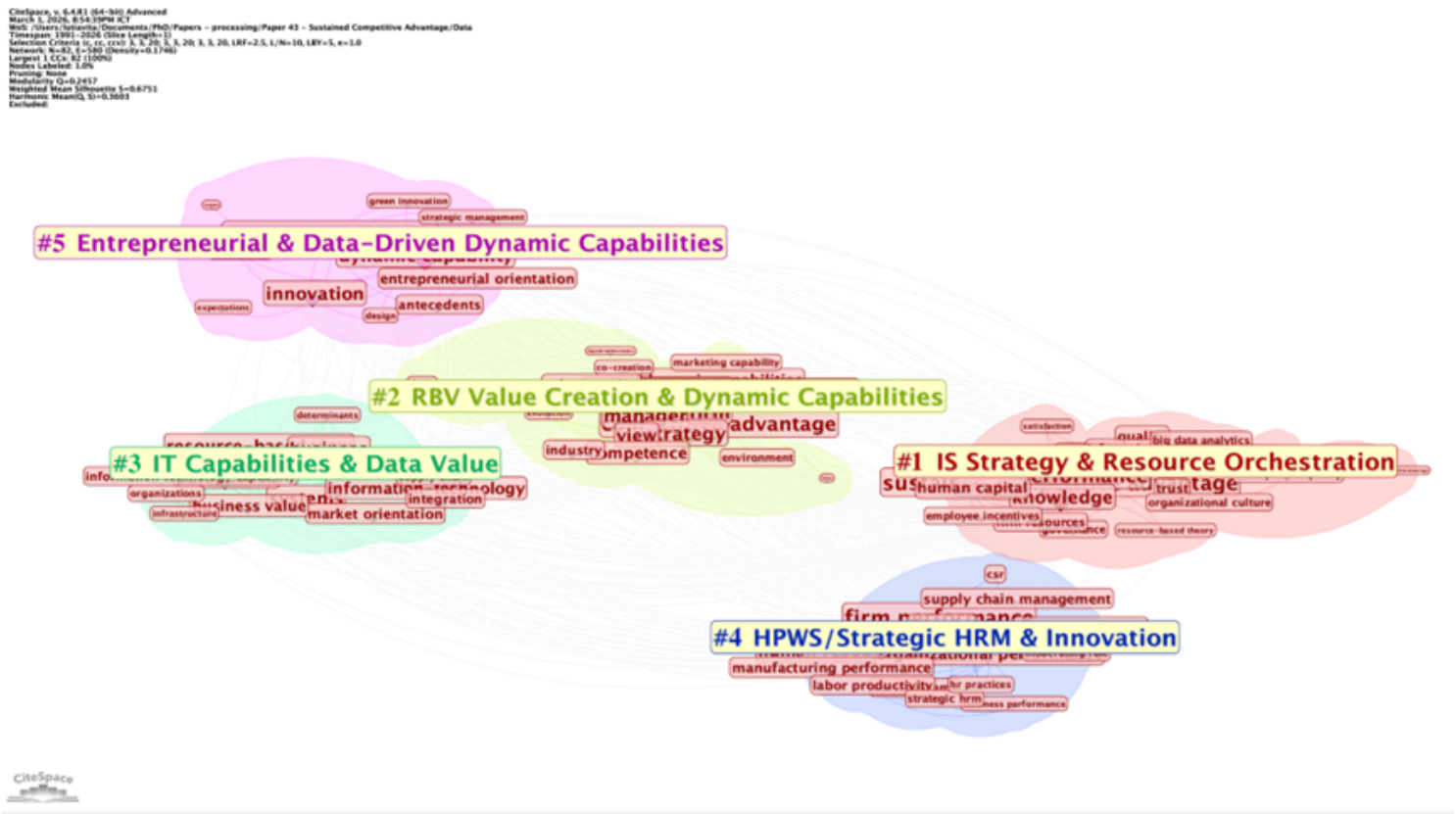


Figure 2

Keyword cluster network map of Sustained Competitive Advantage

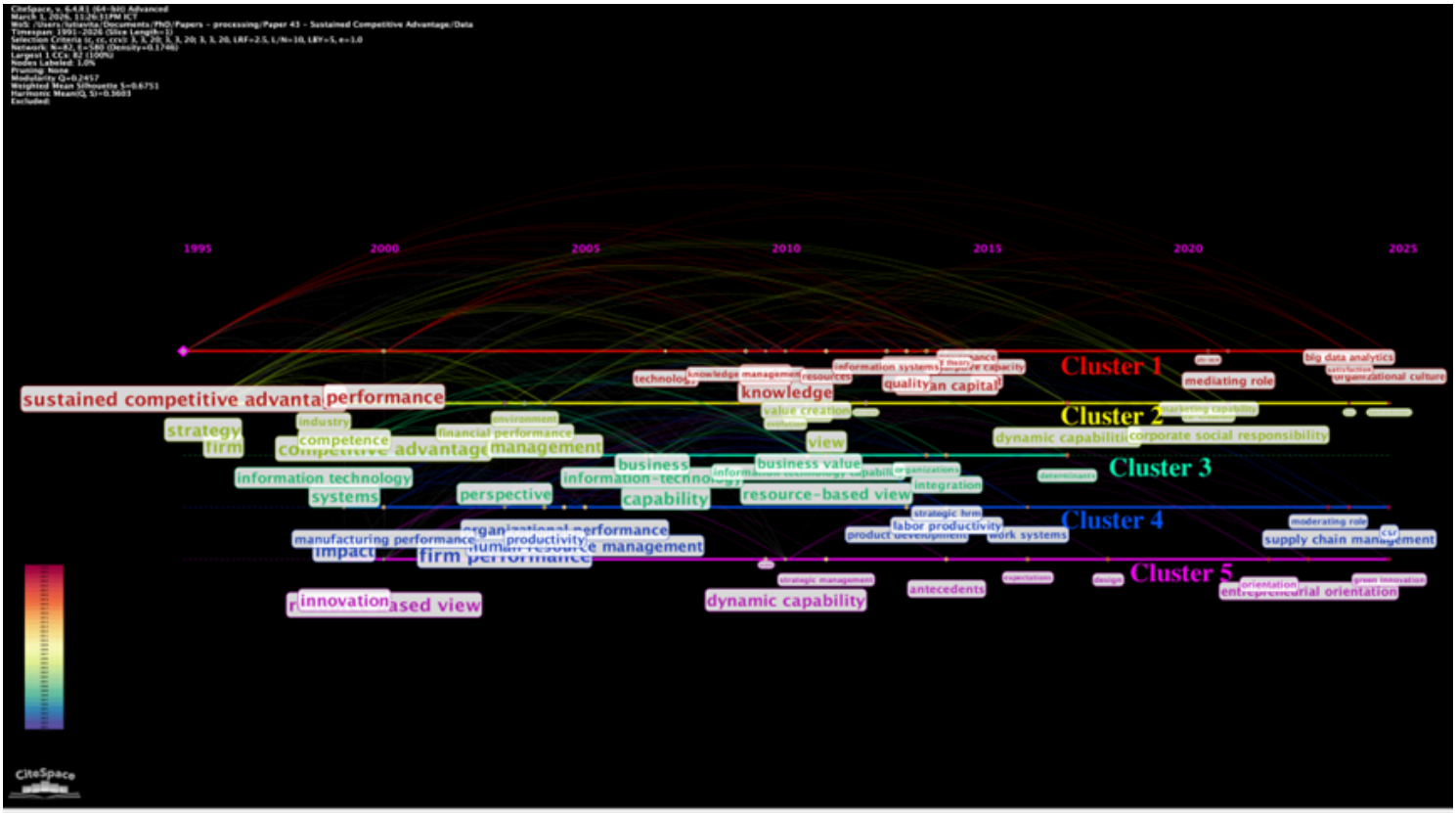


Figure 3

Evolution of Sustained Competitive Advantage: A Timeline Network of Five Keyword Clusters

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