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Mapping the intellectual landscape of social commerce research in the SME context: a bibliometric analysis (2016-2025)

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A b s t r a c t

Does social commerce research tell small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) how to sell, or only why consumers buy? We argue that SME research is peripheral to the field's thematic and intellectual core because the field has built its theories, methods, and canonical works around the individual consumer. We test this argument on 1,399 Scopus-indexed journal articles and reviews (2016–2025) with social commerce terms in their titles or author keywords, within which we identify 43 SME-related documents. Output grew at a compound annual rate of 25.9%, yet the SME share never exceeded 4.0% in any year after 2016. In the author-keyword network (73 keywords, eight clusters), the 'sme' node ranks 55th of 73 in total link strength and has no link to live streaming, impulse buying, or social presence. The co-citation network (332 references, four clusters) contains one organization-level adoption study, and SME documents draw fewer references from the field's 100 most-cited works than other documents (median 6.1% vs. 8.7%; $p = 0.003$). The difference persists when peripheral SME documents are removed, although not for the narrowest core definition. The result is an evidence base that explains buyer behavior but not seller action. We derive five research gaps, including organization-level theory for emerging-market SMEs such as local food businesses, and recommend multi-database designs, seller-side search vocabularies, Biblioshiny and bibliographic coupling, and empirical tests of SME-level frameworks.

Introduction

Social commerce platforms promise small firms direct access to buyers through content, conversation, and live video. Does the research on social commerce tell these firms how to use them? Social commerce integrates social interaction, user-generated content, and community engagement into the purchasing process (Leong et al., 2024), and platforms such as TikTok Shop, Instagram Shopping, and WhatsApp Business have lowered the cost of reaching customers for businesses of all sizes, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating with limited resources. Whether scholarship has followed these firms onto the platforms is a separate matter, and it is the matter this article examines.

The literature has certainly grown. In Scopus, journal publications with social commerce terms in their titles or author keywords increased from 42 in 2016 to 333 in 2025, a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 25.9% (Section 3.1). The COVID-19 pandemic pushed SMEs toward social media as a sales channel (Widiastini et al., 2023), and live streaming commerce has since become a research stream of its own (Sun et al., 2019; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Growth, however, says little about whom the research serves. A field can expand rapidly while one of its constituencies remains at the margin, and the number of SME studies alone cannot show whether those studies are connected to the field's main theories and debates.

Bibliometric analysis can address this problem because it observes structure rather than volume. Co-word analysis reveals how themes are grouped, and co-citation analysis reveals which works researchers jointly treat as foundational (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Existing reviews have synthesized consumer behavior in social commerce (K. Z. K. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016), its research themes (Busalim & Hussin, 2016), and its evolution up to 2022 (Herzallah et al., 2025), and (Leong et al., 2024) proposed an integrative research framework. These reviews treat SMEs as one theme among many; none asks whether SME research is integrated into the field's core or sits outside it. The distinction matters

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in emerging economies such as Indonesia, where SMEs are adopting social commerce (Arista et al., 2023). If the field's knowledge is organized around consumers, SMEs inherit explanations of why people buy but little guidance on how a resource-constrained seller should act.

This article advances one central argument. The problem of SME research in social commerce is its position rather than its size: SME studies sit at the periphery of the field because the field has built its theories, methods, and canonical works around the individual consumer, and this orientation leaves SMEs with an evidence base about buyers rather than sellers. We test the argument with a two-level bibliometric design. A field corpus of 1,399 Scopus-indexed articles and reviews published between 2016 and 2025 maps the thematic structure (keyword co-occurrence) and intellectual base (co-citation) of social commerce research, and an SME-related subset of 43 documents is located within these structures. Three research questions guide the analysis. RQ1: How did social commerce research develop between 2016 and 2025, and what share of it addresses SMEs? RQ2: What thematic and intellectual structures characterize the field? RQ3: Where is SME research positioned within these structures, why, and what research agenda follows? The study contributes a ten-year map of the field that includes its intellectual base, document-level indicators of the position of SME research, and an evidence-based agenda for SME-oriented research in emerging markets.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the data and bibliometric procedures. Section 3 presents and discusses the results. The final section concludes and outlines recommendations for future research.

Research Methods

Bibliometric Approach and Justification

This study combines performance analysis with science mapping (Donthu et al., 2021). Performance indicators describe publication output, contributing countries, sources, and citation impact. Science mapping uses two complementary techniques: author-keyword co-occurrence analysis, which represents the thematic structure of the field, and co-citation analysis of cited references, which represents its intellectual base (Zupic & Čater, 2015). Networks were constructed and clustered in VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010); descriptive indicators and the core-anchoring index were computed in Python (pandas and SciPy).

The design operates at two levels. The field corpus represents social commerce research as a whole; the SME-related subset is not analyzed as a separate network but is located within the field's structures. This design answers where SME research sits in the field, a question that a corpus consisting only of SME documents cannot answer, because every document in such a corpus mentions SMEs by construction.

Data Source and Search Strategy

Data were retrieved from Scopus, which covers business, management, and information systems journals broadly and exports the cited references required for co-citation analysis. To increase specificity, the search required social commerce terms to appear in the document title or author keywords rather than anywhere in the abstract, and it contained no generic outcome terms (e.g., strategy or performance). The field corpus was retrieved with the following query:

> (TITLE ("social commerce" OR "social media commerce" OR "s-commerce" OR "f-commerce" OR "live commerce" OR "live streaming commerce" OR "live streaming e-commerce" OR "livestream* commerce" OR "livestream* e-commerce" OR "tiktok shop*") OR AUTHKEY ("social commerce" OR "social media commerce" OR "s-commerce" OR "f-commerce" OR "live commerce" OR "live streaming commerce" OR "live streaming e-commerce" OR "livestream* commerce" OR "livestream* e-commerce" OR "tiktok shop*")) AND PUBYEAR > 2015 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND DOCTYPE (ar OR re) AND SRCTYPE (j) AND LANGUAGE (english)

The search was conducted on 11 October 2026 and returned 1,399 documents (1,363 articles and 36 reviews); cited references were available for 1,396 of them. The SME-related subset was identified by adding the following block to the field query: AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (sme OR smes OR msme* OR umkm OR "small and medium* enterprise*" OR "small and medium-sized enterprise*" OR "micro, small and medium" OR "small business*" OR "small firm*" OR "micro enterprise*" OR microenterprise* OR "micro business*"), which returned 43 documents. The ten-year window (2016–2025) contains complete publication years only; 2026 was excluded because indexing of the current year is incomplete. Without a

lower year limit, the field query returned 1,920 documents: 135 published before 2016, 1,399 in 2016-2025, and 386 in the incomplete year 2026. The ten-year window therefore retains 91.2% of the documents published in complete years and excludes the early, low-volume phase of the field. Influential pre-2016 works are not lost, because they enter the analysis as cited references in the co-citation network (Section 3.5).

Selection Process

Figure 1 summarizes the identification and analysis flow. Because all restrictions (title or author keywords, document type, source type, language, and years) were applied within the query, no post-hoc relevance filter was needed for the field corpus, and the corpus can be reproduced from the query alone. The 43 SME-related documents were screened on title and abstract. Thirty-two treat SMEs or small sellers as the primary unit of analysis, and 11 mention SMEs only peripherally or concern adjacent phenomena such as group buying, crowdfunding, or general web sales. The main analyses retain all 43 documents so that the subset remains reproducible from the query; sensitivity analyses exclude the 11 peripheral documents.

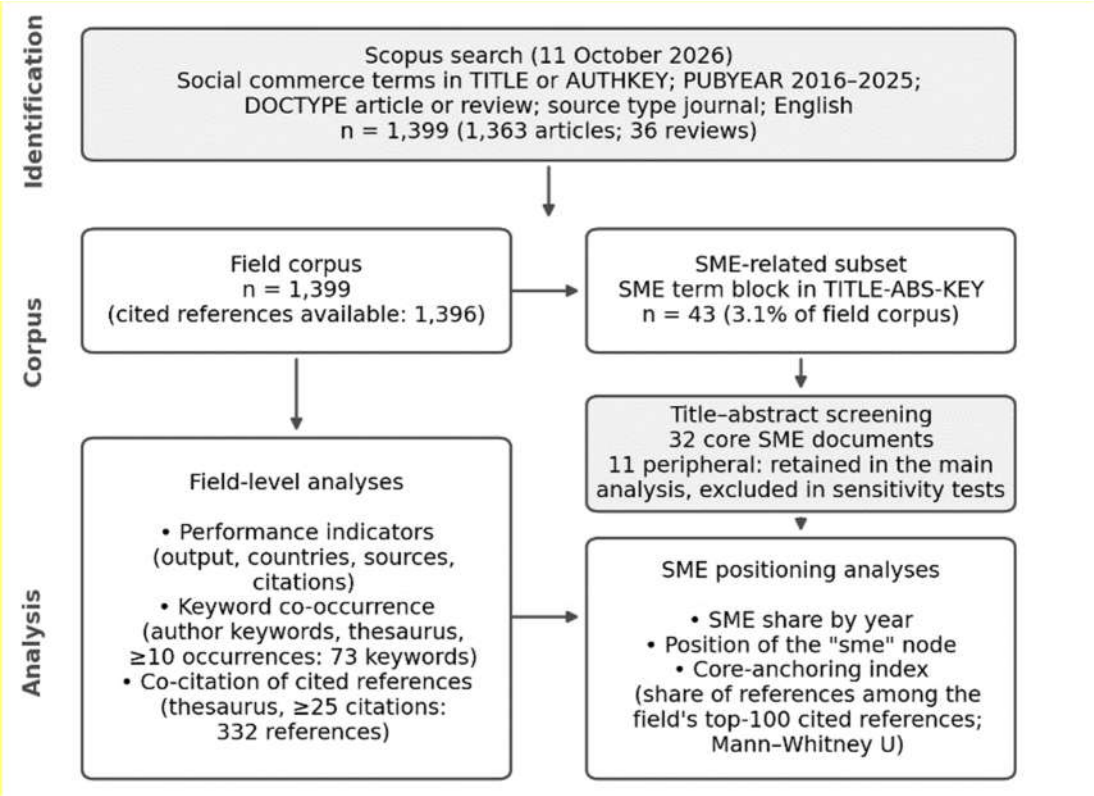

Figure 1. Flow of corpus identification and analysis

Analytical Procedure

Performance analysis covered annual output, the CAGR, the annual share of SME-related documents, contributing countries (full counting of distinct countries per document), source journals, and citation counts. The keyword co-occurrence analysis used author keywords; index keywords were excluded because database-assigned terms such as 'commerce' or 'sales' add noise to small clusters. A thesaurus file with 260 mappings merged spelling variants and synonyms (e.g., 'live-streaming e-commerce', 'livestreaming commerce', and 'live commerce' into 'live streaming commerce'; 's-commerce' into 'social commerce'). Keywords occurring at least 10 times were retained (full counting), which yielded 73 keywords. The co-citation analysis used cited references as the unit of analysis; a second thesaurus merged variant spellings of the same reference (e.g., abbreviated and full journal titles), and references cited at least 25 times were retained, which yielded 332 references. Both networks were normalized and clustered with the default settings of VOSviewer. Because the study maps the intellectual base of the field, a substantial share of the references cited in this article predates 2021; these are either documents that the analysis itself identifies as most cited or most co-cited, or methodological sources, while recent studies (2016-2025) are cited to illustrate the content of each cluster.

To quantify how closely SME research draws on the intellectual core of the field, a core-anchoring index was computed for each document as the share of its cited references that belong to the 100 most frequently cited references in the field corpus. References were matched on first author, publication year, and the first six words of the title. The index operationalizes the central argument at the level of individual documents: if SME research drew on the same foundations as the rest of the field, its share of core references would be similar to that of other documents, whereas a lower share would indicate that it builds on a partly separate literature. Differences between SME-related and other documents were tested with the two-sided Mann–Whitney U test. Robustness was assessed with alternative cores (the top 50 and top 200 references) and by excluding the 11 peripheral SME documents.

Table 1. Summary of Bibliometric Analysis Parameters

Parameter	Value
Database	Scopus
Search date	11 October 2026
Publication years	2016-2025
Document and source type	Articles and reviews in journals; English
Field corpus	1,399 (1,363 articles; 36 reviews)
SME-related subset	43 (3.1%); 32 core after screening
Keyword co-occurrence	Author keywords; full counting; thesaurus (260 mappings); ≥10 occurrences: 73 keywords, 8 clusters
Co-citation	Cited references; full counting; thesaurus; ≥25 citations: 332 references, 4 clusters
Software	VOSviewer; Python (pandas, SciPy)

Results and Discussion

Publication Trends (2016-2025)

Social commerce research expanded rapidly, but SME research did not expand with it. Annual output rose from 42 documents in 2016 to 333 in 2025, a CAGR of 25.9%, and three-quarters of the corpus (1,050 documents, 75.1%) appeared in 2021–2025 (Table 2, Figure 2). Over the same period, the SME subset grew from 11 documents in 2016–2020 to 32 in 2021–2025, yet its share of annual output stayed between 1.0% and 4.0% in every year after 2016, with a slightly negative linear trend (0.27 percentage points per year). The 9.5% share in 2016 rests on four documents and should not be read as a peak. The pattern is telling because the pandemic years, when small firms moved onto social platforms (Widiastini et al., 2023), did not raise the SME share. More SME studies were written, but the field's growth came from elsewhere, which raises the questions addressed in the following sections: where did the growth go, and why did SME research not follow it? Output for 2025 may be slightly underestimated because 31 documents were still articles in press.

Table 2. Annual Publication Output and SME Share (2016–2025)

Year	Field corpus (n)	Growth (%)	SME-related (n)	SME share (%)
2016	42	—	4	9.5
2017	43	+2.4	1	2.3
2018	63	+46.5	1	1.6
2019	99	+57.1	4	4.0
2020	102	+3.0	1	1.0
2021	112	+9.8	2	1.8
2022	153	+36.6	6	3.9
2023	206	+34.6	8	3.9
2024	246	+19.4	9	3.7
2025	333	+35.4	7	2.1
Total	1,399	CAGR 25.9%	43	3.1

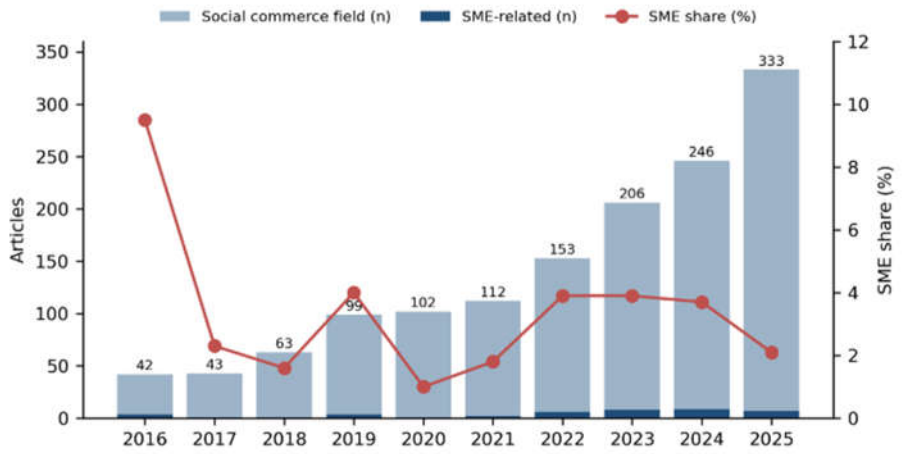

Figure 2. Annual output of the field corpus and share of SME-related documents

Geographic Distribution

The geography of the field differs from the geography of its SME research. China leads the field corpus (570 documents, 40.7%), followed by the United States (167; 11.9%) and Malaysia (160; 11.4%), and Indonesia ranks sixth with 86 documents (6.1%) (Table 3, Figure 3). The SME subset is led instead by Malaysia (10 documents) and Indonesia (7), with China contributing five. One plausible reading is that the field's frontier has been shaped largely by research on Chinese platforms and consumers, whereas SME research originates mainly in Southeast Asian adoption studies with different theoretical starting points; the country counts are consistent with this reading but do not test it directly. Because the SME subset is small, the counts indicate where SME-oriented work originates rather than the existence of national research programs. They nevertheless suggest that the separation between SME research and the field's core is partly a separation between research communities.

Table 3. Top 10 Contributing Countries in the Field Corpus and the SME Subset (Full Counting)

Rank	Field corpus: country	n (%)	SME subset: country	n (%)
1	China	570 (40.7)	Malaysia	10 (23.3)
2	United States	167 (11.9)	Indonesia	7 (16.3)
3	Malaysia	160 (11.4)	China	5 (11.6)
4	United Kingdom	107 (7.6)	United States	5 (11.6)
5	South Korea	87 (6.2)	India	3 (7.0)
6	Indonesia	86 (6.1)	Saudi Arabia	3 (7.0)
7	Taiwan	84 (6.0)	Thailand	2 (4.7)
8	India	68 (4.9)	Other countries	1 each
9	Thailand	49 (3.5)		
10	Australia	47 (3.4)		

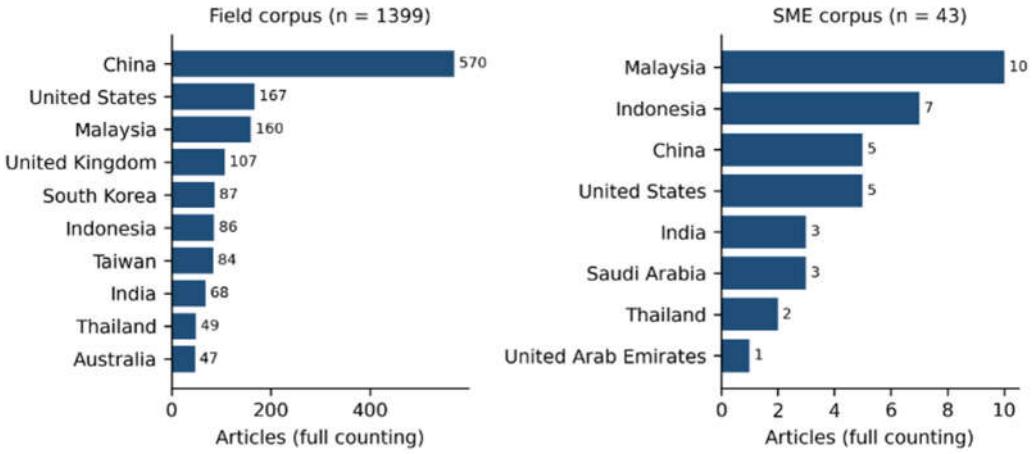

Figure 3. Leading countries in the field corpus and the SME subset

Most Influential Sources and Documents

Where research is published shapes what research is rewarded. The leading outlets are retailing, electronic commerce, and information management journals, led by the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services (55 documents, 3.9%), Electronic Commerce Research and Applications, and the Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research (40 documents each) (Table 4). These journals are oriented largely toward consumer and platform research, so the field's main channels give consumer studies a natural home. The 43 SME-related documents, by contrast, are spread across 38 journals, and none publishes more than 3 of them. SME research thus has no core outlet, which makes it harder for SME studies to find, cite, and build on one another.

Table 4. Top 10 Source Journals in the Field Corpus

Rank	Journal	n
1	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	55
2	Electronic Commerce Research and Applications	40
3	Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research	40
4	Sustainability (Switzerland)	38
5	Frontiers in Psychology	29
6	Information and Management	28
7	Internet Research	27
8	Electronic Commerce Research	25
9	International Journal of Information Management	25
10	Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics	23

Citation impact follows the same pattern. All ten most cited documents in the field corpus examine consumer-side phenomena: trust and engagement in live streaming (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020), purchase intention and shopping behavior in live streaming commerce (Lu & Chen, 2021; Sun et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2020), customer engagement (Kang et al., 2021), social presence and trust (Hajli et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2016), consumer decision-making (Lăzăroiu et al., 2020), impulse buying (Xiang et al., 2016), and consumer behavior more broadly (K. Z. K. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016) (Table 5). None addresses SMEs. The most cited SME-related document, (Abed, 2020) study of social commerce adoption by Saudi Arabian SMEs using the technology–organization–environment (TOE) framework, has 435 citations and ranks 12th. SME research can therefore achieve visibility; it has rarely done so.

SME-related documents are cited less often, with a mean of 23.4 citations against 43.6 for the field corpus as a whole (median 10 vs. 15). Apart from (Abed, 2020), only (Wang et al., 2022), a mixed-methods study of atmospheric cues in live-streaming e-commerce that considers small- and medium-sized enterprises, exceeds 100 citations. Lower citation counts partly reflect timing, because citations favor older documents, but they also mean that SME findings are less likely to enter the reference lists from which the field's intellectual base is formed (Section 3.5).

Table 5. Ten Most Cited Documents in the Field Corpus

Rank	Authors	Year	Journal	Citations
1	Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut	2020	Journal of Business Research	1,297
2	Lu et al.	2016	Computers in Human Behavior	959
3	Sun et al.	2019	Electronic Commerce Research and Applications	957
4	Kang et al.	2021	International Journal of Information Management	663
5	Lu & Chen	2021	Information and Management	629
6	Hajli et al.	2017	Journal of Business Research	566
7	Zhang & Benyoucef	2016	Decision Support Systems	556
8	Xiang et al.	2016	International Journal of Information Management	549
9	Xu et al.	2020	Journal of Electronic Commerce Research	534
10	Lăzăroiu et al.	2020	Frontiers in Psychology	445

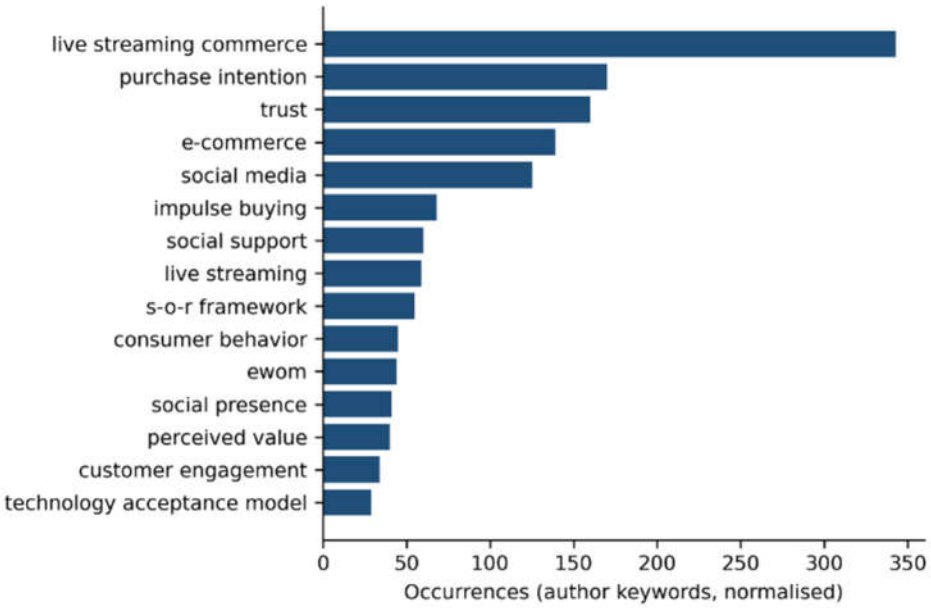

Figure 4. Fifteen most frequent author keywords after thesaurus normalization (excluding 'social commerce')

Keyword Co-occurrence Network and Thematic Clusters

The keyword network shows that the field's themes are organized around the consumer. It contains 73 author keywords connected by 751 links (total link strength 2,845) and grouped into eight clusters (Table 6). Figures 5–7 present this network in three views that answer different questions. In the network visualization (Figure 5), node size reflects keyword occurrences, colors denote clusters, and distances approximate relatedness, so the figure shows how themes are grouped. The density visualization (Figure 6) carries no cluster information. Its color intensity reflects how densely keyword occurrences are packed in each region of the map, which marks where research activity concentrates. The overlay visualization (Figure 7) keeps the layout of Figure 5 but colors each node by the average publication year of the documents in which the keyword occurs, which separates emerging from maturing themes.

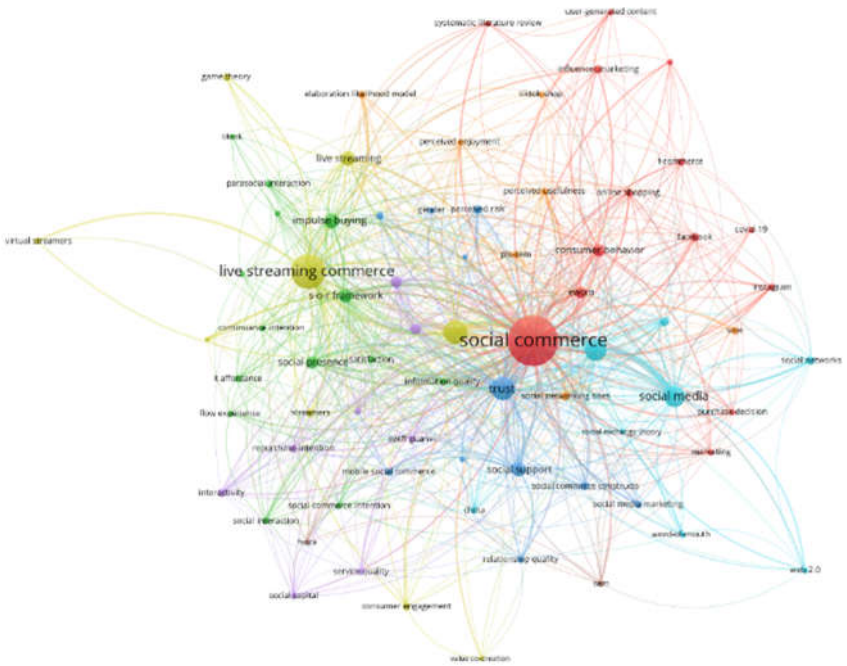

Figure 5. Network visualization of author-keyword co-occurrence (73 keywords, eight clusters)

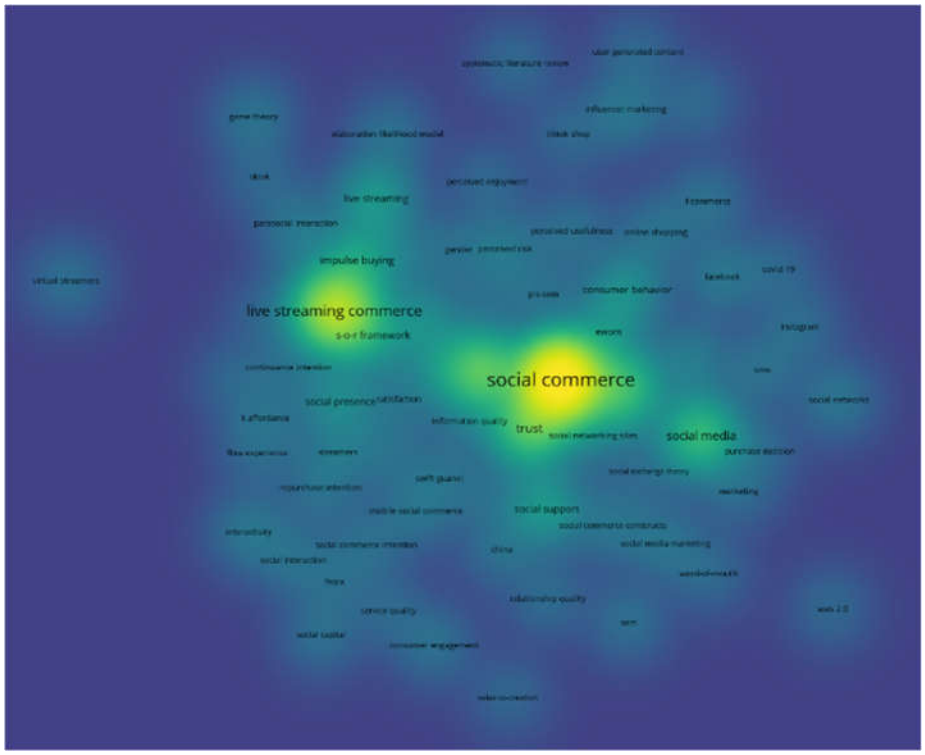

Figure 6. Density visualization of author-keyword co-occurrence

Note. Color intensity indicates the density of keyword occurrences (yellow = high; blue = low). Source: VOSviewer; Scopus field corpus (n = 1,399; 2016–2025).

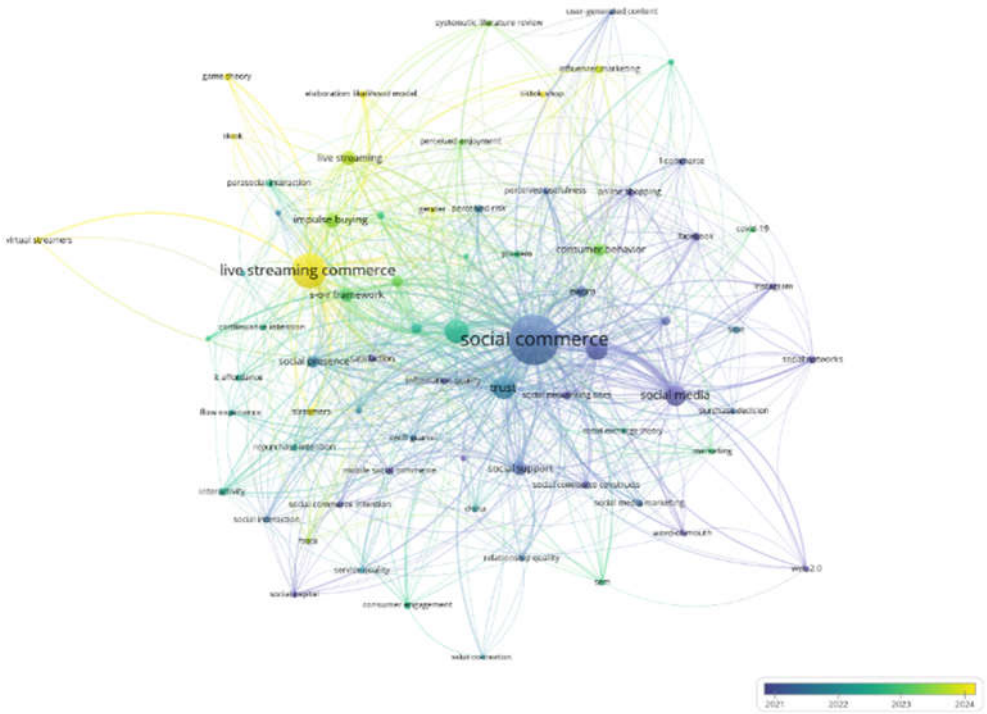

Figure 7. Overlay visualization of author-keyword co-occurrence by average publication year

Note. Node color indicates the average publication year of documents containing the keyword (blue = earlier; yellow = more recent). Node size and position are identical to Figure 5, so Figures 5 and 7 differ only in what color encodes: cluster membership in Figure 5 and average publication year in Figure 7. Source: VOSviewer; Scopus field corpus (n = 1,399; 2016–2025).

Table 6. Thematic Clusters of the Author-Keyword Co-occurrence Network

Cluster (keywords; average year)	Core keywords	Interpretation
1 (14; 2021.9)	social commerce, consumer behavior, eWOM, Facebook, influencer marketing, online shopping, f-commerce, Instagram	Platform-based social commerce and consumer behavior
2 (14; 2022.2)	impulse buying, S-O-R framework, social presence, parasocial interaction, IT affordance, flow experience, TikTok	Affective and impulsive consumer responses
3 (11; 2021.8)	trust, social support, perceived risk, social commerce constructs, social influence, relationship quality, privacy concern	Trust and social support
4 (9; 2023.4)	live streaming commerce, purchase intention, live streaming, game theory, consumer engagement, streamers, virtual streamers	Live streaming commerce (most recent cluster)
5 (8; 2022.0)	perceived value, customer engagement, interactivity, repurchase intention, customer satisfaction, swift guanxi, service quality	Value, engagement, and retention
6 (8; 2020.8)	e-commerce, social media, technology acceptance model, social networks, word-of-mouth, Web 2.0, social exchange theory	Technology-acceptance foundations (oldest cluster)
7 (7; 2022.5)	social networking sites, elaboration likelihood model, perceived usefulness, sme, PLS-SEM, perceived enjoyment, TikTok Shop	Loosely connected peripheral keywords, including the SME node
8 (2; 2023.2)	SEM, fsQCA	Analytical methods

Recent studies show what the clusters contain. Cluster 4 is represented by work on trust and customer retention in live streaming commerce (M. Zhang et al., 2022) and on virtual streamers (Guo et al., 2022), Cluster 2 by research on impulsive buying during live streams (Lo et al., 2022), and Cluster 3 by studies of how social support and information credibility shape trust (Tseng, 2023). Cluster 5 includes work on perceived value and continuous purchase intention in live-streaming e-commerce (Wu & Huang, 2023), Cluster 1 includes research on influencer trust (T. Chen et al., 2021), and Cluster 6 includes technology-acceptance studies of consumers' social commerce adoption (Cutshall et al., 2022). Every example takes the consumer as its unit of analysis, which is the pattern that the next paragraph quantifies.

Three observations locate SME research within this structure, and they point to the same conclusion. The network is organized around consumer constructs: the four keywords with the highest total link strength are social commerce, trust, purchase intention, and live streaming commerce, and six of the eight clusters are defined by consumer perceptions, attitudes, or behaviors. Within this structure, the 'sme' node is peripheral. It occurs 16 times (median across keywords: 15), so its marginal position is not a matter of frequency, yet it has only nine links (median: 17) and ranks 55th of 73 in total link strength. Thirteen of its 25 link-strength units connect to 'social commerce' and a further six to 'e-commerce' and 'social media'; it has no direct link to 'live streaming commerce', 'impulse buying', 'social presence', or the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) framework. SME studies, in other words, use the field's labels but not its explanatory constructs. The node also lags behind the field's frontier. Its average publication year is 2021.7, whereas live streaming commerce (2024.0), TikTok (2024.0), and TikTok Shop (2024.4) mark the most recent themes (Figure 7). A likely reason is that the frontier has advanced through consumer-response models of live streaming, which require no firm-level data, while SME studies have continued to ask whether firms adopt social commerce at all. The platforms on which small sellers now compete are consequently studied almost entirely from the buyer's side.

Co-citation Analysis of the Intellectual Base

The co-citation network comprises 332 references cited at least 25 times, grouped into four clusters (Table 7, Figure 8). Cluster 1 (128 references) is the foundational social commerce cluster, anchored by studies of social commerce characteristics and trust (Kim & Park, 2013), design features (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013), and social commerce constructs (Hajli, 2015). Cluster 2 (90 references) is the live streaming commerce cluster, led by (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020) and (Sun et al., 2019) and built on the S-O-R paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Cluster 3 (79 references) consolidates the field

through reviews and conceptual work (Busalim & Hussin, 2016; Hajli et al., 2017; K. Z. K. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). Cluster 4 (35 references) concerns impulse buying (Xiang et al., 2016). Measurement references such as (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and (Podsakoff et al., 2003) are among the most co-cited works; they are methodological rather than substantive and indicate how strongly the field relies on survey-based structural equation modeling.

No cluster represents firm-level or SME research. Only one organization-level adoption study, (Abed, 2020) application of the TOE framework to Saudi Arabian SMEs, passed the citation threshold; with 31 co-citations and a total link strength of 590 (median across references: 882.5), it ranks 274th of 332 and sits in Cluster 3. This result carries more weight than the keyword pattern because co-citation records what authors treat as foundational, not merely what they write about. A field whose foundations contain one firm-level study has, in effect, no shared theory of the seller. New SME studies consequently have few common references to build on, which helps explain why they remain dispersed across journals and weakly linked in the keyword network.

Table 7. Clusters of the Co-citation Network

Cluster (references)	Most co-cited references (examples)	Interpretation
1 (128)	Kim & Park (2013); Huang & Benyoucef (2013); Hajli (2015); Fornell & Larcker (1981); Podsakoff et al. (2003)	Foundations of social commerce (characteristics, design features, constructs, trust) and measurement references
2 (90)	Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut (2020); Sun et al. (2019); Kang et al. (2021); Lu & Chen (2021); Mehrabian & Russell (1974)	Live streaming commerce and the S-O-R paradigm
3 (79)	Hajli et al. (2017); Busalim & Hussin (2016); Zhang & Benyoucef (2016); Abed (2020)	Reviews and conceptual consolidation; contains the only SME adoption study
4 (35)	Xiang et al. (2016)	Impulse buying

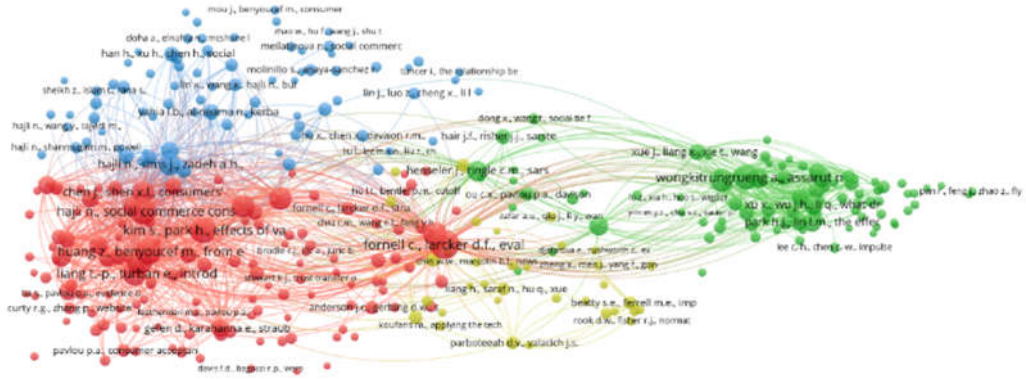

Figure 8. Co-citation network of cited references (332 references cited at least 25 times; four clusters)

Note. Node size reflects the number of co-citations; colors denote clusters. Variant spellings of the same reference were merged with a thesaurus before mapping. Source: VOSviewer; Scopus field corpus (n = 1,399; 2016–2025).

Core Anchoring and Sector Coverage of SME Research

The core-anchoring index tests the argument at the level of individual documents, and the result supports it. SME-related documents drew a median of 6.1% of their references from the field's 100 most-cited works, compared with 8.7% for other documents (Mann–Whitney U = 21,331.5, p = 0.003, rank-biserial r = 0.27; n = 43 and 1,353). The difference holds with a top-50 core (4.0% vs. 5.8%, p = 0.016) and a top-200 core (6.9% vs. 12.3%, p < 0.001). Of the 22 corpus documents that cite (Abed, 2020), 8 are SME-related, although SME documents make up only 3.1% of the corpus; the main organization-level reference circulates largely within the SME subset. The effect is moderate rather than large, and it weakens when the 11 peripheral SME documents are excluded. The difference then remains significant for the top-100 (p = 0.048) and top-200 cores (p = 0.015) but not for the top-50 core (p = 0.101). SME

research is therefore better described as weakly anchored than as cut off from the field's canon: it cites the canon, but less, and supplements it with a separate adoption literature.

Sector evidence shows what this position costs. Only 51 documents (3.6%) contain food or agriculture terms in their titles or author keywords. A title-level inspection indicates that most examine consumer purchasing of food or agricultural products, for example local food in Indonesia (Lita et al., 2024), or model agricultural live streaming supply chains in China. Producer-side adoption studies are few (e.g., (X. Chen et al., 2024), a consumer orientation that (Lucila & Ching, 2025) also report in their systematic review of social commerce in agriculture. Within the SME subset, only one document addresses a food business, a TOE-based study of restaurants' social media adoption (Sari et al., 2025). Local food businesses thus face the general gap in sharper form. Research tells them a good deal about the people who buy food online and very little about how a small food business should sell it.

Research Gaps

The results converge on one diagnosis, an evidence base about buyers rather than sellers, and five research gaps follow from it. Each gap rests on a specific result and corresponds to a question that SMEs face but the literature does not yet answer.

G1 SME–consumer interface. The 'sme' node is linked mainly to generic terms and has no direct link to the consumer constructs that structure the field (Section 3.4). Research has not examined how SMEs translate consumer-side mechanisms such as trust, social presence, or impulse buying into seller practices and business outcomes. Without that translation, consumer findings remain descriptions of demand rather than guidance for action.

G2 Platform-specific dynamics. TikTok and TikTok Shop are the newest keywords in the network (average publication year 2024.0 and 2024.4) but among the least connected (ranked 71st and 72nd of 73 in total link strength), and neither is linked to the SME node. How algorithmic, content-led discovery on such platforms affects SME visibility and sales remains open.

G3 Multi-platform integration. No author keyword denoting multi-platform, cross-platform, or omnichannel strategy occurs in the corpus, and only 21 documents (1.5%) mention these terms in their titles, abstracts, or keywords; none of them is SME-related. Research examines platforms one at a time and therefore cannot capture how resource-constrained firms allocate effort across several channels.

G4 Generational differentiation. 'Generation Z' (8 occurrences) and 'millennials' (2) fall below the mapping threshold, and only one SME-related document addresses a generational cohort. How SMEs should adapt social commerce strategies to younger consumer segments has not been studied.

G5 Organization-level theory for emerging-market SMEs. The intellectual base contains a single organization-level adoption study (Abed, 2020), and the TOE framework occurs only twice as an author keyword. Malaysia and Indonesia lead the SME subset, but local food businesses are almost absent from it (one document; Sari et al., 2025). Organization-level frameworks that specify how SMEs, including local food SMEs, design and manage social commerce remain to be developed and tested.

Existing SME studies concentrate on adoption antecedents, using the TOE framework, the extended unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT2), or perceived value (Abed, 2020; Ahmad Trawnih et al., 2023; Arista et al., 2023; Gupta et al., 2024), and fewer studies link social commerce use to business performance (Marolt et al., 2022; Schaupp & Bélanger, 2016). The emphasis on adoption is understandable, since adoption was the first question when social commerce was new. It has since become a ceiling: the literature explains why SMEs adopt social commerce and says little about what they should do afterward, such as how to design content, choose platforms, or build the capabilities that social selling requires.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

Why has SME research remained peripheral while the field has grown? The results point to three mutually reinforcing reasons. The first is theoretical inheritance. The field's foundations, visible in the oldest keyword cluster (technology acceptance, Web 2.0, and social exchange) and in co-citation Cluster 1, were built to explain individual responses to technology and social cues. Frameworks such as S-O-R,

technology acceptance, social support, and trust explain why a consumer buys, but they contain no constructs for resources, capabilities, or competitive position, which are what distinguish one seller from another. The second reason is methodological. The prominence of (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and (Podsakoff et al., 2003) among the most co-cited works reflects a reliance on cross-sectional surveys analyzed with structural equation modeling. Consumer samples suit this design; small firms, which are heterogeneous and difficult to sample in large numbers, suit it less well. The third reason is institutional. The leading outlets are consumer and retailing journals, and SME research has no core outlet of its own (Section 3.3).

The consequence is a theoretical gap rather than a shortage of studies. More SME adoption surveys will not close it, because the TOE framework used in those studies (Abed, 2020; Sari et al., 2025) explains why firms adopt social commerce but not how they should operate once they have. What is needed is a bridge that links consumer-side mechanisms, such as trust formation and social presence in live streaming, to seller-side decisions and outcomes. Such a bridge would make the field's strongest knowledge, its understanding of buyers, usable by the firms that need it most.

Two objections deserve consideration. The first is that consumer research is SME research in disguise: if many sellers on social commerce platforms are small, studies of how consumers come to trust live streaming sellers (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020) or respond to the atmosphere of a stream (Wang et al., 2022) already speak to small firms. The objection has force, because what consumers value constrains what any seller can do, and these studies are among the few highly cited works that consider sellers at all. Its weakness is that such studies observe buyers, not sellers. They do not measure a seller's resources, decisions, or results, so they cannot tell a small firm which practice yields which outcome under its constraints. A small but growing stream does model seller decisions, for example how firms combine large and small influencers to maximize livestream sales under a budget constraint (Gu et al., 2024) or which influencer business model sustains profit (Liu & Wang, 2023). These studies show that seller-side questions can be answered with platform data and analytical models, yet neither is framed around SMEs or the capability constraints that distinguish small sellers. The second objection is that SME research appears mainly in national journals outside Scopus. This is plausible (Section 3.11), but it explains low volume rather than weak connection, because the core-anchoring index compares documents within the same database and shows that indexed SME studies still draw less on the field's canon. Both objections qualify the argument without overturning it.

Practical Implications

What should SME practitioners take from these results? The field offers consistent evidence on what drives consumer responses, including trust, social presence, perceived value, and the interactivity of live streaming, but little evidence on how small firms with limited resources can act on it. The implication is not to ignore consumer research but to treat its findings as hypotheses to be tested in one's own platform setting rather than as ready-made strategies, since none of the most cited studies observed what happened to the seller.

For policymakers in Indonesia, the results qualify a simple reading of publication counts. Indonesia ranks sixth in the field corpus (86 documents) and second in the SME subset, but the SME subset contains only seven Indonesian documents. Programs that promote the digitalization of UMKM (micro, small, and medium enterprises) would benefit from research funding that targets firm-level evidence, for example on multi-platform selling and on sectors such as local food, rather than additional consumer-intention surveys.

Positioning Relative to Prior Reviews

(Herzallah et al., 2025) mapped social commerce research from 2008 to 2022 in the Web of Science across two periods and identified SMEs, UTAUT, perceived risk, live streaming, and S-O-R among the prominent themes of 2019–2022. The present study extends the period to 2025, adds a co-citation analysis of the intellectual base, and measures the position of SME research directly. Its results qualify the earlier finding: SMEs can be a visible theme and still remain peripheral to the field's structure and foundations. Comparisons are indicative because the two studies differ in database, period, and search strategy.

Limitations

Limitation 1

Single database. Scopus does not fully cover Indonesian and Malaysian national journals, in which much SME social commerce research may appear. The SME share is therefore a lower bound for the international journal literature rather than for all research.

Limitation 2

Identification of SME research. SME documents were identified by term matching. Eleven of the 43 documents were peripheral, and studies of small sellers that do not use SME terminology (e.g., 'sellers' or 'merchants') are missed. If such studies are numerous, the SME share is underestimated; the anchoring comparison would change only if those studies cite the field's canon more heavily than the identified SME documents do, which cannot be assessed here. Sensitivity analyses that excluded peripheral documents did not change the direction of the results.

Limitation 3

Analytical choices. Thresholds (10 keyword occurrences and 25 co-citations), thesaurus decisions, and the use of author keywords influence the number and composition of clusters. The co-citation network also includes methodological references, which reflect shared methods rather than shared topics.

Limitation 4

Citation-based indicators. Citations and co-citations accumulate over time and favor older documents, and 2025 output may be underestimated because of indexing delays. The core-anchoring index relies on approximate reference matching (first author, year, and title words).

Conclusion

Does social commerce research tell SMEs how to sell? Across 1,399 documents published between 2016 and 2025, it rarely does. The field grew at a CAGR of 25.9%, whereas the SME share remained between 1% and 4% per year (RQ1). Both the thematic structure (eight keyword clusters) and the intellectual base (four co-citation clusters) are organized around consumer behavior, with live streaming commerce as the most recent frontier (RQ2). SME research sits at the periphery of both networks, contributes a single study to the intellectual base, and draws less on the field's most-cited works than other research does (RQ3). The reason lies less in neglect than in design, because theories, methods, and outlets built for the consumer have left little room for the seller. The five-point agenda that follows, covering the SME–consumer interface, platform-specific dynamics, multi-platform integration, generational differentiation, and organization-level theory for emerging-market SMEs, including local food businesses, is in effect an agenda for building a theory of the seller.

The findings should be read in light of four limitations: the single database, the term-based identification of SME documents, analytical thresholds and thesaurus decisions, and the time dependence of citation indicators. The co-citation analysis maps the intellectual base directly, but only for references that pass the citation threshold.

Future research should proceed on three fronts. Methodologically, bibliometric studies should combine Scopus with Web of Science and national databases such as SINTA and Garuda; use more specific search vocabularies that capture seller-side research (e.g., 'seller', 'merchant', and sector terms such as 'local food'); and complement VOSviewer with Biblioshiny (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) for thematic maps, thematic evolution, and three-field plots, and with bibliographic coupling to map the current research front. A full-text content analysis of the SME subset would show which constructs and outcomes SME studies measure. Empirically, studies should test how consumer-side mechanisms, such as trust and social presence in live streaming, translate into SME sales and performance, compare SME strategies across platforms, and examine generational segments as SME target markets. Theoretically, organization-level frameworks are needed that move beyond adoption to the design and management of social commerce in resource-constrained SMEs; design science and quasi-experimental studies with local food SMEs in emerging markets offer one way to develop and test such frameworks.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The bibliographic records were exported from Scopus (Elsevier) and are subject to the database's licence terms, so they cannot be redistributed. The search queries are reported in Section 2.2. The thesaurus files, the list of SME-related documents with screening decisions, and the analysis scripts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of the revised manuscript, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with writing data-processing scripts, drafting and editing text, and checking the consistency of numbers and references. The authors reviewed, verified, and edited all output and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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