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Mapping digital marketing research in social networks: A short-term bibliometric analysis (2018-2023)

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Abstract

This study delved into the world of Digital Marketing in social networks, exploring its evolution from 2018 to April 2023 through the prism of the Scopus database. Using a quantitative methodology with a bibliometric approach, 368 documents were examined using statistical tools such as VOSviewer, RStudio and Microsoft Excel. The results paint a picture where the annual document production shows a steady decline of -3.34%, attributed to saturation, changing algorithms and mutable preferences. With the participation of 81 countries, Spain, USA, UK, India, and Indonesia emerge as prominent players, while 26 subject areas, led by Business, Computer Science and Social Sciences, top the subject matter. Documentary diversity is reflected in articles (76.36%), papers (15.22%) and reviews (3.80%). In this scenario, nine authors, including Civelek et al. (2020), Dwivedi et al. (2020), and Saura (2021), stand out. The exploration of trends took the form of a Thematic Map with specific sections, while future inquiries are oriented towards resource theory, destination marketing, social network platforms, diet advertising and social network analysis. Overall, this study not only provides insight into contemporary scientific production, but also points to fruitful directions for future research.

Keywords: Digital marketing; business transformation; e-commerce; social networks; artificial intelligence.

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Mapeo de la investigación en marketing digital en redes sociales: Análisis bibliométrico a corto plazo (2018-2023)

Resumen

Este estudio se adentró en el mundo del Marketing Digital en redes sociales, explorando su evolución desde 2018 hasta abril de 2023 a través del prisma de la base de datos Scopus. Utilizando una metodología cuantitativa con enfoque bibliométrico, se examinaron 368 documentos mediante herramientas estadísticas como VOSviewer, RStudio y Microsoft Excel. Los resultados señalan un panorama donde la producción anual de documentos muestra un declive constante de -3,34%, atribuido a la saturación, algoritmos cambiantes y preferencias mutables. Con la participación de 81 países, España, EE. UU., Reino Unido, India e Indonesia emergen como actores prominentes, mientras que 26 áreas temáticas, lideradas por Empresa, Informática y Ciencias Sociales, encabezan la temática. La diversidad documental se refleja en artículos (76,36%), ponencias (15,22%) y revisiones (3,80%). En este escenario, nueve autores, entre ellos Civelek et al. (2020), Dwivedi et al. (2020) y Saura (2021), se destacan. La exploración de tendencias se plasmó en un Mapa Temático con secciones específicas, mientras que futuras indagaciones se orientan hacia teoría de recursos, marketing de destinos, plataformas de redes sociales, publicidad de dietas y análisis de redes sociales. En conjunto, este estudio no solo brinda perspicacia sobre la producción científica contemporánea, sino que también señala direcciones fructíferas para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: Marketing digital; transformación empresarial; comercio electrónico; redes sociales; inteligencia artificial.

Introduction

In the modern era, digital marketing has completely transformed the way businesses connect with consumers. This radical shift has been driven by the growing influence of tools such as e-commerce, mobile devices, the internet, and artificial intelligence. These highly effective means enable cost-effective and personalized dissemination of corporate information to increasingly informed consumers (Low et al., 2020; Serra, Morais & Cunha, 2020; Tarazona-Montoya, Peris-Ortiz & Devece, 2020). This transformation has not only impacted individuals and organizations but has also redefined the dynamics between individuals, companies, and the market.

The shift from traditional marketing to digital has been fueled by the growth of e-commerce, the presence of smart devices, and the increasing influence of social networks and artificial intelligence on consumer choices

(Saura, Palos-Sánchez & Cerdá, 2017; López et al., 2019; Herhausen et al., 2020; Khan, 2021; Daud et al., 2022; Faria et al., 2022; Espina-Romero et al., 2023).

A central factor in this transformation has been the proliferation of social media platforms (Durán, Páez & García, 2021). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube have acquired a fundamental role in the interaction between companies and consumers. These platforms facilitate a constant flow of information and feedback, not only through bidirectional communication but also by influencing innovation and corporate marketing strategies (Ananda, Hernández-García & Lamberti, 2016; Scuotto, Del Giudice & Carayannis, 2017; Appel et al., 2020; Pǎvǎloaia, Anastasiei & Fotache, 2020; Palaniswamy & Raj, 2022).

Despite the continuously growing knowledge about digital marketing, bibliometric research has revealed limitations

in its scope. Surprisingly, there is still a lack of a bibliometric review analyzing research trends in digital marketing on social media over the past five years. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the scientific production in the subject area between 2018 and 2023 using the Scopus database. The objective is to provide a comprehensive overview of emerging research areas and current trends in this field.

The research questions posed by this study are:

RQ1. How has the production of documents related to digital marketing on social media evolved between 2018 and April 3, 2023, in terms of annual growth, geographical distribution, thematic areas, document types, and the contribution of the most relevant authors?

RQ2. How can key themes in the field of digital marketing and social media be identified and categorized through the analysis of a thematic map, and how are these themes distributed across categories?

RQ3. What are the main emerging research lines in the field of digital marketing and social media?

Therefore, to achieve the objective of this study, a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of scientific production related to digital marketing on social media during the mentioned period was conducted. This analysis aims to identify research trends, key bibliometric indicators, and areas with potential for future research in the studied domain.

This study provides an overview of trends in scientific production related to digital marketing on social media over the past five years. By analyzing bibliometric indicators and visualizing areas with potential for future research, this research offers valuable guidance for researchers, academics, and professionals interested in digital marketing. Additionally, it contributes to an updated understanding of the state of the field and potential directions for future research.

The structure of the document consists of a theoretical foundation, followed by a description of the methodology used. Subsequently, the results and corresponding discussions will be presented, concluding with implications and possible areas for future research.

1. Theoretical foundations

1.1. Digital marketing in the social age: Trends and strategies

Digital marketing on social media has emerged as a powerful tool for promoting and marketing brands and products in the contemporary era. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram have played a crucial role in this environment, allowing companies to connect with consumers and gather their insights (Klepek & Starzycná, 2018; Dearlove et al., 2021; Balogh & Mizik, 2022). The relevance of these platforms in the marketing landscape is evident in the evolution of recent B2B marketing trends. Marketing professionals are increasingly focusing on content marketing as a means of interacting with customers (Herhausen et al., 2020), capitalizing on the multiple benefits and opportunities that this approach generates (Erokhina, Mitko & Troilin, 2018).

Within this dynamic context, companies are allocating a growing portion of their marketing budget to digital advertising on social media, recognizing the resonance these platforms have among consumers. Digital marketing specialists employ various strategies to provide a differentiated consumer experience (Shankar et al., 2016; Prasad & Verma, 2020).

The evolution of digital marketing strategies has transformed the conception, characteristics, and implementation of marketing in the business environment (Sultoni et al., 2022). One of the key approaches involves using social media to disseminate relevant content that aligns with the current context (Habibi et al., 2015; Mazerant et al., 2021). Another crucial strategy is the development of mobile applications, giving companies the ability to establish and maintain a strong position in the digital buyer market

(Shankar et al., 2016; Khan, 2021).

In this context, wearable devices have emerged as an essential facet. Through the information collected by these devices, companies can create highly personalized content for end consumers. The purpose of this content lies in generating traffic, building empathy, and creating positive experiences during the purchasing process (Sridhar & Fang, 2019). Mobile acquisition goes beyond mere transactions, encompassing all stages from pre-purchase to post-purchase (Saldaña et al., 2023). In this context, the creation of value becomes crucial to ensure the sustainability of the relationship (Shankar et al., 2016).

The use of mobile marketing strategies enables the instant delivery of offers and ads to B2C consumers through mediums like emails, text messages, and videos in mobile apps (Shankar et al., 2016). This approach significantly contributes to increased competitiveness, particularly considering the contribution of digital marketing as a strategy for customer growth and retention. In the current era, the internet and marketing have become essential means of attracting and retaining online users (López et al., 2019). In this global landscape, social media has emerged as crucial platforms for the creation, access, and dissemination of information (Appel et al., 2020).

The literature review reveals a broad focus on the evolution, importance, and strategies of digital marketing. However, there is a lack of bibliometric review articles examining scientific production in this field. Among these, Hsu & Hung's (2022) study stand out, aiming to understand how digital technology has reshaped processes, marketing strategies, and implications of this change in digital marketing research.

Meanwhile, Li et al. (2023) examines scientific production related to brand orientation between 1990 and 2021. Kumar et al. (2020), focusses their research on the evolution of literature on digital mediation in B2B markets. Cadavid & Valencia-Arias (2022), conduct an analysis of publications centered on digital marketing in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises. Finally, Krishen et al. (2021) delve into the research and development dynamics in the field of digital marketing from a multidisciplinary perspective.

In summary, digital marketing in the social era is not just a set of tools and platforms; it is a customer-centric business philosophy that requires a deep understanding of consumer needs and behaviors, as well as the ability to adapt to market changes. Successful digital marketing strategies are built on the premise of creating genuine value for consumers, which in turn generates value for the company. In this dynamic landscape, continuous innovation, adaptability, and a customer-centric approach are essential for long-term success.

2. Methodology

This study is characterized by a bibliometric design, focused on analyzing and synthesizing academic literature on digital marketing in social media through the use of specialized tools and software for data analysis. It aims to identify trends, assess the current state of knowledge, and reveal research gaps through the visualization of thematic maps and keyword co-occurrence analysis, which provides a quantitative perspective on the evolution and future directions of this field (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The process was developed following these stages: formulation of research questions, selection of the data source, use of bibliometric software for analysis, methods for visualizing findings, and explanation and interpretation of results (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

2.1. Formulation of research questions

After conducting a literature review, three research questions were formulated as indicated in the introduction. Below is a description of how each question will be addressed:

RQ1. To address this query, visual representations in the form of column charts

were created using Microsoft Excel. These charts illustrate the distribution of publications categorized by their year of publication, country of origin, theme, document type, and authors' responsibilities.

RQ2. The Thematic Map, a bibliometric method that employs a conceptual structure to highlight thematic orientations, was used to analyze the research.

RQ3. The question was addressed through the bibliometric technique known as "keyword co-occurrence analysis." This approach highlights keywords with lower co-occurrence, facilitating the deduction of less-researched areas in the field of digital marketing on social media platforms.

2.2. Selection of the database

Research was conducted in the Scopus database (Burnham, 2006), focusing on publication titles, and applying filters to minimize incorrect results. Search terms such as "digital marketing", "marketing 2.0", "online marketing", "social networks", "social media", and "social networking site" were used, utilizing logical operators AND and OR to ensure the appearance of these keywords in titles. This resulted in the identification of 1,515 relevant documents. Additionally, the search was restricted to documents published between 2018 and 2023, reducing the set to 1,119 documents. Furthermore, only open-access publications were selected, resulting in a total of 368 documents obtained (see Figure I).
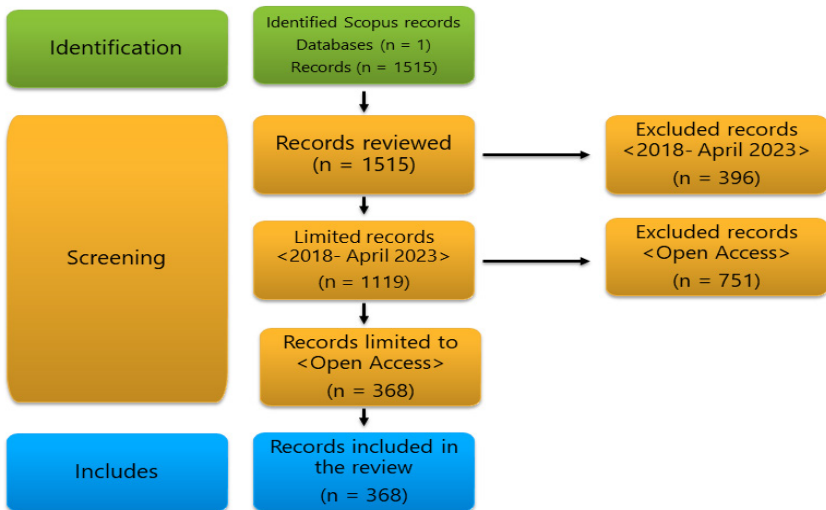
Source: Own elaboration, 2023 from Scopus.

Figure I: **Sample selection process - PRISMA method**

2.3. Bibliometric software

The data obtained from Scopus in BibTex, RIS, and CSV formats were imported and analyzed using Microsoft Excel 365, RStudio version R 4.1.1, Bibliometrix, and VOSviewer version 1.6.19.

2.4. Visualization of results

In this bibliometric study, Microsoft Excel 365 was used to create graphical representations that display important information about the documents, considering various categories such as the publication year, country of origin, thematic field, document format, and authors. Additionally, a thematic map was generated using RStudio software version 4.1.3. Using Bibliometrix, it was possible to identify the most relevant research areas related to digital marketing on social media platforms. To gain a deeper understanding of possible directions for future research, the VOSviewer program was used to conduct a keyword co-occurrence analysis.

2.5. Description and interpretation

The findings presented in the key data were examined and explanations were provided in line with the formulated research questions. Various aspects of digital marketing were also investigated, highlighting fields that have not been extensively researched. These fields were suggested as possible areas for future research.

3. Results and discussion

The main information reveals that the chosen timeframe for conducting this bibliometric analysis spanned from 2018 to April 3, 2023 (see Table 1). A total of 368 articles were selected, encompassing 17741 citations from 1312 involved authors. Collectively, these documents indexed a total of 1198 keywords.

Table 1
Main information

Description	Results
Period analyzed	2018- April 2023
Documents	368
Annual Growth Rate%	-3.34
References	17,741
Author's Keywords (DE)	1,198
Authors	1,312

Source: Own elaboration, 2023 from Scopus.

3.1. Analysis of document production on digital marketing in social media (2018-2023)

During the period from 2018 to April 3, 2023, an average annual decrease of -3.34% in document generation was observed (see Graphic I). In 2018, 32 documents addressing topics related to "digital marketing", "marketing 2.0", "online marketing", "social media", "social networks", and "social networking sites" were recorded.
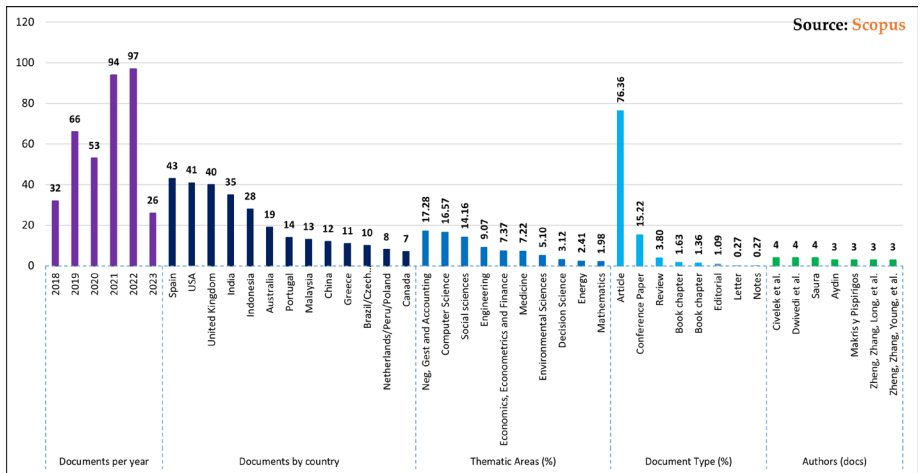
Source: Own elaboration, 2023 from Scopus.

Graphic I: **Documents by country, year, thematic areas, type, and authors**

In 2019, a total of 66 indexations were recorded. The following year, in 2020, this number decreased to 53. However, in the course of 2021, 94 documents were indexed, and in the subsequent year, 2022, the number of indexed documents increased to 97. Since the beginning of this year, 2023, a total of 26 documents have been indexed to date. This reduction in document production addressing digital marketing and social media topics could be attributed to various factors. One possibility is that the market may already be saturated with a significant amount of available content, while search preferences may have undergone noticeable changes.

The alteration in algorithms used on social media platforms, along with the emergence of new forms of communication such as videos, may have influenced the evolution of demand. It is also essential to consider that technological trends could be playing a crucial role in how information is presented and consumed online.

The studies by Makris & Pispirigos (2021); and Gao & Zhao (2022), complement this result by providing examples and methodological approaches illustrating how technological advances are changing the way information is presented, consumed, and analyzed online. Makris & Pispirigos (2021), offer a perspective on social network analysis, both relevant aspects for understanding the observed trend mentioned initially, while Gao & Zhao (2022) demonstrate the practical application of technologies in marketing.

Regarding the global distribution of document production, this bibliometric research identified the participation of 81 nations in the creation of the 368 documents included in the analysis. It is worth noting that a single document could have the contribution of two or more countries, as illustrated in Graphic I. Due to this circumstance, it is important to note that the total count of involved countries does not coincide with the total number of selected documents.

The countries leading the list in terms of the quantity of generated documents are as follows: Spain holds the top position with a total of 43 produced documents, followed by the United States with 41 in second place. The third position is held by the United Kingdom with 40 documents, while India is in fourth place with 35, and Indonesia ranks fifth with

28 documents.

Subsequently, Australia is present with 19 documents, Portugal with 14, Malaysia with 13, China with 12, and Greece with 11. Brazil, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, and Romania share the tenth position, each with 10 produced documents. Likewise, Russia, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, and Canada complete the list with 10, 8, 8, 8, and 7 documents, respectively. This information highlights the diverse participation of countries in the creation of the analyzed documents and emphasizes the outstanding production of some of them in the corresponding field.

A comprehensive approach was devised to address various topics related to digital marketing on social media platforms. As a result, a publication may cover more than one interconnected field in this research. As illustrated in Graphic I, a set of 368 documents linked to a combination of 26 different application areas was identified. The top ten categories, organized by the percentage of articles, are as follows: Business, Management, and Accounting, representing 17.28%; Computer Science, with 16.57%; Social Sciences, with 14.16%; Engineering, with 9.07%; Economics, Econometrics, and Finance, with 7.37%; Medicine, with 7.22%; Environmental Sciences, with 5.10%; Decision Sciences, with 3.12%; Energy, with 2.41%; and Mathematics, with 1.98%.

Regarding document types, Graphic I displays the top three in terms of frequency. The document genre called "Article" represents 76.36%, while the type labeled "Conference Paper" covers 15.22%. Finally, the "Review" group comprises 3.80%. In relation to the relevance for the present bibliometric study, it is important to highlight that the first two document genres contain valuable information.

Graphic I, also shows the nine most relevant authors with the highest number of published works. There are three authors with four articles each: Civelek et al. (2020); Dwivedi et al. (2020); and Saura (2021). Six authors have three articles each: Aydin (2021); Makris & Pispirigos (2021); Zheng, Zhang, Long, et al. (2020), and Zheng, Zhang, Young & Wang (2020). Other authors have two or fewer published works.

3.2. Thematic mapping of trends in digital marketing and social media

The Thematic Map displayed in Figure II, which has been produced through the collaboration between RStudio and Bibliometrix, is structured into four well-defined sections, each encompassing specific categories: There are "Niche Themes", which are focused and specialized; "Motor Themes", which generate significant dynamics; "Emerging or Declining Themes", which may be gaining or losing relevance; and finally, "Basic Themes". This map visualizes clusters of diverse themes that have been organized considering two crucial aspects: Their level of development measured in terms of density and their importance in the network measured through centrality.
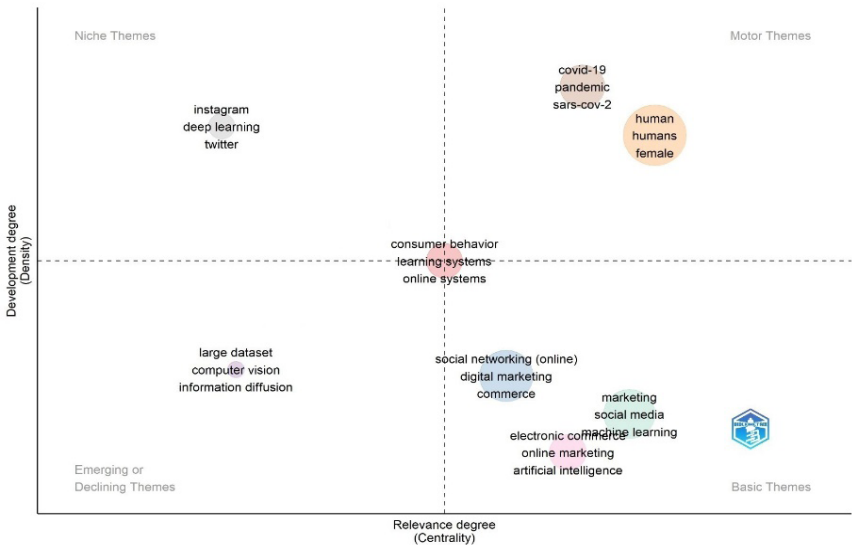
Source: Own elaboration, 2023 from Scopus.
Figure II: **Thematic map**

To develop the map, the "walktrap" clustering method was employed, following default parameters. These included author keywords (a total of 1,198), and a minimum frequency of 5 clusters per thousand documents. The result of the Thematic Map revealed the presence of eight distinct clusters, serving as areas of exploration. These groups are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2
Themes identified in the thematic map

Thematic	Thematic description	Thematic Category	Category Definition
1	Human	Motor Themes	Main research topics.
2	COVID-19	Motor Themes	
3	Consumer Behavior	Basic Themes	Critical issues in our society.
4	Social networking (online)	Basic Themes	
5	E-commerce	Basic Themes	
6	Marketing	Basic Themes	
7	Instagram	Niche Themes	Topics that need to be explored in greater depth.
8	Information diffusion	Emerging Themes	New topics that are being studied more and more.

Source: Own elaboration, 2023 from Scopus.

a. Within the motor themes is:

1. Human: On the web and digital platforms, you can find analyses about the promotion of food products designed for children, along with tactics used in the virtual environment to market them (Mota-Castillo et al., 2023). Likewise, in the human domain, social media is used as spaces to exchange opinions, emotions, data, personal experiences, and even rumors (Govindankutty & Gopalan, 2023).

2. Covid-19: During the development of the health crisis caused by Covid-19, online communication platforms enabled government entities to generate and disseminate informative messages to residents of the localities (Erkkilä and Luoma-Aho, 2023), while companies took advantage of the space to promote their products and build a favorable perception of their brands (Botelho et al., 2023; Hidayana et al., 2023).

b. As basic study themes are found:

1. Consumer behavior: Gathers writings that explore the effect of different factors on consumer decisions (Calanchez et al., 2023; Rodrigues & Silva, 2023). It also addresses how conventional and digital marketing strategies impact customer buying patterns (Mehmeti-Bajrami, Qerimi & Qerimi, 2022).

2. Social networking (online): Publications that discuss the importance of social networks (Benito-Colio et al., 2022; Einsle & Izquierdo, 2022).

3. E-commerce: Manuscripts aimed at explaining how digital marketing and social media are related to the growth of e-commerce (Gao & Zhao, 2022; Sathish et al., 2022).

4. Marketing: Contains studies on digital marketing related to social media (Gaol & Ichsan, 2022; Botelho et al., 2023; Khoa & Huynh, 2023).

c. As niche themes is:

1. Instagram: Studies related to the use of Instagram for marketing due to its growing popularity as a social network (Nixon, 2023; Silaban et al., 2023). As well as brand communication through this social network (Rodrigues & Silva, 2023).

d. As emerging study themes are:

1. Information diffusion: Referring to the spread of information on social media, widely used in digital marketing (Nguyen et al., 2018; Son et al., 2021).

This thematic mapping provides an overview of the current state of digital marketing and social media, highlighting both established research areas and those in development or change. The ability to identify and categorize these areas not only facilitates an understanding of the discipline but also provides a foundation for future research. These results make it clear that the field of digital marketing is dynamic, requiring ongoing commitment to research to understand its impact and potential.

3.3. Exploring trends in digital marketing and social media research

The "association strength" technique was employed using the VOSviewer software to examine 368 documents. This led to the identification of five thematic areas for potential future research (see Figure III). The selection of these topics was based on the extraction of keywords from authors, focused on the field of "Digital marketing and social media", with an emphasis on those with minimal co-occurrence (n = 1).
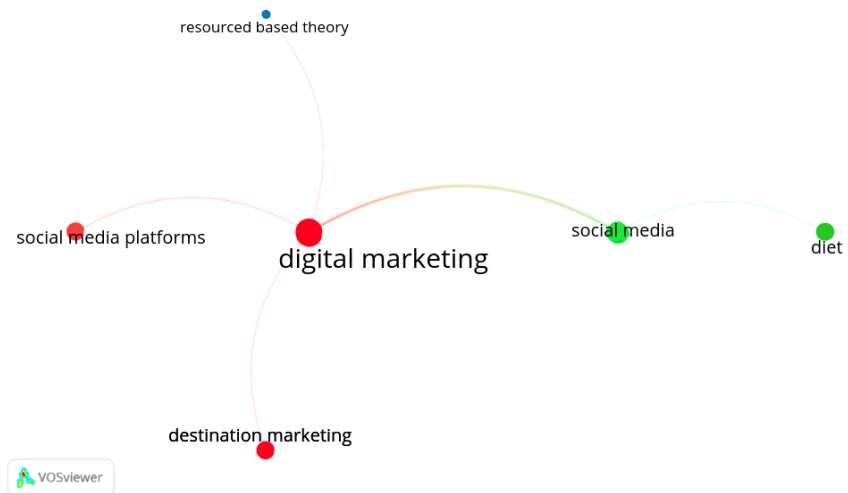
Source: Own elaboration, 2023 from Scopus.
Figure III: **Author Keywords**

a. Resource-based theory: Various factors influence the field of digital marketing. These include elements such as tangible resources, internal organization structure, financial capacity, and human capital (Hagen et al., 2022). It is evident that the resources available to a company play a crucial role in determining performance on social media platforms (Marchand, Hennig-Thurau & Flemming, 2021).

b. Destination marketing: The promotion of destinations through social media platforms such as Instagram, where visual elements are shared instead of text (Khan et al., 2022; Nixon, 2023).

c. Social media platforms: Evaluating how organizations employ digital marketing strategies on social media platforms and analyzing their effectiveness in that context (Da Silva et al., 2023).

d. Diet: Using social media for advertising and gaining followers for popular diets (Karlsen et al., 2018).

e. Social network analysis: Studies aimed at analyzing how organizations operate on social networks (Pérez-Bonaventura, Fortó-Areny & Mariño-Mesías, 2023).

The diversity of topics identified in this analysis reflects the infinite and complex nature of the field of digital marketing and social media. Each thematic area not only provides a path for future research but also underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches to comprehend and harness the potential of digital platforms. The integration of marketing theories, information technology, consumer psychology, and data analysis will be crucial for advancing in this field.

Conclusions

This study has provided an insight into the evolution of document production in Digital marketing on social media between 2018 and April 2023. Through an analysis based

on Scopus data, not only have growth, and decline patterns in document production been identified, but also key geographical areas, predominant themes, and the most common types of documents. Despite observing an overall decrease of -3.34% in production, the significant increase in 2022 suggests fluctuating interest that could be influenced by external factors such as changes in social media algorithms and research preferences.

This work contributes to the scientific community by uncovering findings about the current state and evolution of digital marketing on social media, emphasizing the importance of international collaboration and the multidisciplinary of the field. By identifying the main areas of contribution and influential authors, a foundation is provided for future research endeavors. Furthermore, the geographic and thematic diversity found highlights the global relevance of digital marketing and opens doors to international collaborative research.

It is important to acknowledge that this study relies on the Scopus database, which could limit the breadth of analyzed documents due to possible selection biases. Additionally, thematic classification and document categorization were conducted with criteria that may have subjective interpretations. These limitations underscore the need to interpret the results with caution and consider the inclusion of other databases and classification methodologies in future studies to obtain a more comprehensive approach.

The findings suggest several directions for future research. First, it is essential to explore the influence of Resource Theory on digital marketing strategies, which could offer new insights into the efficient allocation of resources in social media campaigns. Furthermore, investigating the role of social media in tourism marketing may reveal how digital strategies can adapt to different sectors. Evaluating digital marketing strategies on various platforms will allow for a better understanding of the specific dynamics of each one, while an analysis of diet advertising on social media could yield new insights into

consumption trends and advertising ethics. Finally, the study of digital operations in organizational networks could reveal how digital interactions influence organizational effectiveness.

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