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LEAN ON ME: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF SOCIAL CAPITAL RESEARCH IN THE PAST DECADE

ABSTRACT

Social capital has gained renewed scholarly attention over the past decade, particularly in relation to mental health, organisational outcomes, digital networks, and urban resilience. However, the literature remains conceptually and methodologically fragmented. This study presents a systematic review of 62 peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2024, aimed at identifying dominant research themes, methodological patterns, and geographic distribution. Five thematic areas emerged from the review: digital and online social capital, performance-related outcomes, clinical and mental health, measurement innovations, and urban resilience. A peak in publications between 2019 and 2021 reflects heightened interest during global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The review also reveals that China, India, and Brazil dominate scholarly output, while contributions from Western contexts remain limited. Although empirical studies outnumber conceptual ones, measurement inconsistency persists, particularly in operationalising bonding and bridging forms of social capital. The findings suggest that social capital remains a concept of enduring relevance, but future research would benefit from stronger theoretical clarity, standardised measurement tools, and greater geographical diversity. The review contributes to an integrated understanding of social capital's evolving role across disciplines and contexts.

Keyword: Social capital; Systematic review; Digital networks; Organisational performance

1 Introduction

Social capital has re-emerged as a central theme in the social sciences, offering an interpretive lens through which trust, reciprocity, shared norms, and relational networks are understood to shape individual and collective outcomes. Its relevance spans multiple domains including health (Almedom, 2021), education, political participation (Teney and Hanquinet, 2020), economic development (Yani et al. 2020), and institutional performance (Andrews and Brewer, 2019). From Putnam's (1994) early emphasis on civic engagement to Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation of capital as a resource embedded in social relations, the concept has evolved into a flexible analytical tool for understanding how social connections operate as forms of capital that yield both tangible and symbolic returns.

In the aftermath of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, rising political polarisation, and digital transformation, there has been renewed scholarly interest in the capacity of social capital to foster social resilience, psychological well-being, and collective action in increasingly fragmented societies.

Over the past decade, studies have sought to refine both the theoretical underpinnings and empirical applications of social capital across varied disciplines and contexts. Researchers have explored its impact on outcomes ranging from organisational performance and mental health to educational attainment and community resilience (Sandefur and Laumann, 2019). At the same time, debates have intensified around its definitional ambiguity, measurement inconsistency, and the tension between its bonding and bridging forms. In particular, emerging interest in digital platforms and networked publics has introduced new questions about the formation, maintenance, and erosion of social capital in online environments (Purwati et al., 2021). The shifting landscape of social relations mediated by technology, mobility, and demographic change, has necessitated a reassessment of the concept's analytical utility and policy relevance.

Despite this growing body of work, there remains a lack of synthesis that captures the thematic breadth, methodological developments, and geographic distribution of social capital research in the post-2014 period. Much of the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary lines, with limited attention to how recurring themes such as mental health, digital trust, or performance outcomes intersect or diverge across contexts. Furthermore, conceptual and empirical contributions from the Global South remain underrepresented in dominant reviews. This systematic review addresses these gaps by mapping the evolution of social capital research between 2014 and 2024. Specifically, the study aims to (i) identify key thematic clusters in the literature, (ii) assess temporal and regional trends, and (iii) evaluate methodological patterns and emerging directions. Unlike prior syntheses that focus narrowly on civic or economic aspects, this review offers a broader perspective that links social capital to contemporary social challenges and highlights its evolving significance in an increasingly interconnected yet divided world.

2.0 Methodology

This study employed the Systematic Quantitative Assessment Technique (SQAT), a framework developed by Pickering and Byrne (2014) to ensure a rigorous and transparent review process. SQAT systematically screens, assesses, and synthesizes peer-reviewed journal articles, emphasizing methodological clarity, replicability, and high academic standards. The technique focuses exclusively on original, peer-reviewed research, thereby maintaining the quality and credibility of the evidence base

(Pickering & Byrne, 2014). A distinctive strength of the SQAT framework lies in its ability to reveal important geographic, scalar, theoretical, and methodological gaps in the existing body of literature. In doing so, it goes beyond traditional narrative reviews that often lack transparency in article selection and synthesis. Rather than relying on subjective criteria, SQAT follows a structured and logical sequence that can be easily replicated in future studies (Umar, 2025). This repeatability is crucial for producing systematic reviews that are both robust and defensible.

Table 1: SQAT Methodology

S/N	Step	Application in current study
1	Define topic	Social Capital (SC) articles published between 2014 - 2024
2	Formulate research questions	Five research questions: 1. What is the time distribution of SC articles? 2. In which countries were these articles written? 3. What kinds of SC articles were published (conceptual vs. Empirical) 4. What are the specific themes these articles examined, and what were the major findings?
3	Identify key words	“Plastic Recycling”
4	Identify and search databases	1. Five databases utilised: Taylor and Francis, Wiley, Elsevier, Springer, Sage. 2. “All in title search” using the phrase “Social Capital”
5	Read and assess publications	1. Abstracts of articles found were read to ensure that they were dealing with SC. 2. Literature reviews, book chapters

Source: Pickering and Byrne (2014).

Table 2: PR journal publication (2014 - 2024)

S/NO	PUBLISHER	NUMBER OF ARTICLES
1.	Taylor and Francis	21
2.	Wiley	9
3.	Elsevier	12
4.	Springer	12
5.	Sage	8
	TOTAL	62

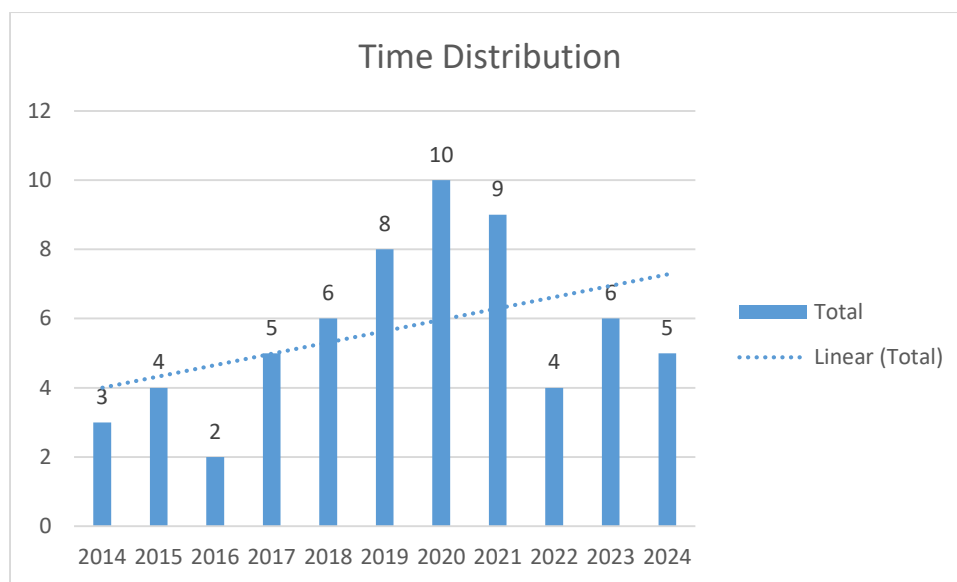
Source: Authors’ Review, 2025

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The temporal distribution of social capital research between 2014 and 2024 indicates a fluctuating yet discernible growth in scholarly attention over the past decade. As shown in Table 1, the earliest years 2014 to 2016, recorded relatively modest outputs, with article counts ranging from 2 to 4. This limited

activity may reflect a period during which the concept was still gaining definitional clarity and methodological traction across disciplinary boundaries.

3.1 Time Distribution of SC Articles



Source: Authors, 2025

A steady increase begins from 2017, culminating in a sharp rise between 2019 and 2021. The year 2020 marks the peak of research activity, with 10 articles, followed closely by 9 articles in 2021. This concentration of output is likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought renewed scholarly focus to themes such as social trust, resilience, community networks, and mutual aid core dimensions of social capital. The heightened interest during this period may also be linked to the broader social science response to crisis governance, public health, and societal cohesion under strain.

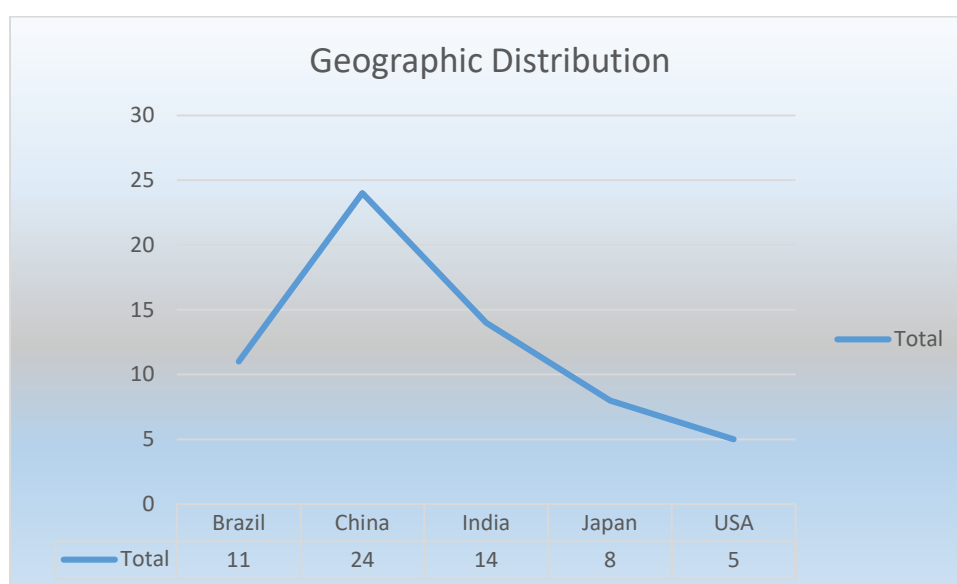
However, a notable decline is observed in 2022, where output dropped to just 4 articles. This contraction could signal a temporary saturation or a redirection of research priorities. The recovery in 2023 and 2024, with 6 and 5 articles respectively, suggests a return to equilibrium rather than a re-escalation. Taken together, the time distribution implies that while social capital remains a relevant concept, its prominence in scholarly discourse may be shaped by wider socio-political events and shifting disciplinary interests.

3.1.2 Geographic distribution

The distribution of research by country reflects an evident regional concentration, with China leading the field at 24 articles, followed by India (14), Brazil (11), Japan (8), and the United States (5). This dominance by emerging economies, particularly in Asia and Latin America, may be explained by the rising significance of social capital in contexts marked by rapid urbanization, institutional transitions, and collective action challenges.

China's high output likely corresponds to government interest in rural-urban integration, trust-building mechanisms, and social cohesion policies, all of which are aligned with its developmental and social governance agendas. India's substantial contribution may be tied to its long-standing engagement with community-based development, informal networks, and caste- and class-mediated access to resources. In Brazil and other Latin American settings, the focus on social capital often intersects with themes of participatory governance, informal economies, and post-colonial social structures.

Figure 2: Geographic Distribution



Source: Authors, 2025

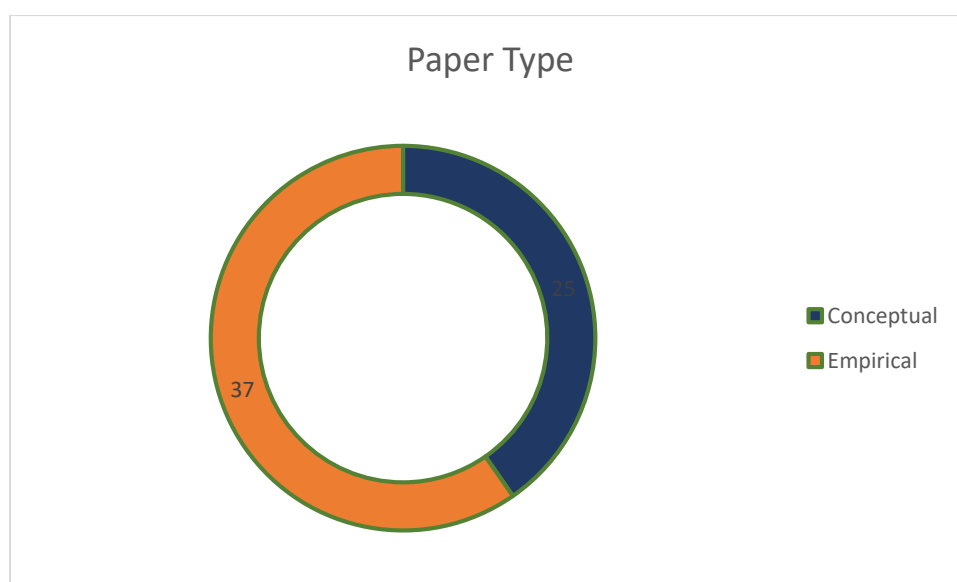
The comparatively lower contribution from the United States may suggest either a disciplinary divergence, favoring related but distinct concepts such as social networks or civic engagement, or a declining centrality of the social capital construct in mainstream sociological and political science discourse, possibly reflecting the increasing prevalence of individualism and the fragmentation of traditional community structures in many Western societies.

3.1.3 Article type

Out of the 62 articles reviewed, 37 adopted empirical approaches while 25 were conceptual. This distribution reveals a strong empirical orientation in the literature which suggest that social capital is increasingly being operationalized through measurable variables, field-based data collection, and statistical modeling. Empirical studies have focused on contexts ranging from health and education to urban resilience and digital trust, often utilizing survey instruments, network analysis, and regression-based techniques to evaluate the impact of social capital on various social outcomes.

Meanwhile, the substantial number of conceptual articles indicates that theoretical debates remain vibrant. These studies have engaged critically with definitional boundaries, measurement challenges, and the ontological status of social capital, whether as a property of individuals or communities. Conceptual contributions have also sought to reconcile divergent traditions, such as those of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam to provide integrative frameworks that bridge micro, meso, and macro-level interpretations (Siisiainen, 2018; Poder, 2020).

Figure 3: Paper Type



Source: Authors, 2025

3.1.4 Research theme

One of the core objectives of this systematic review was to examine the prevailing themes in the social capital literature over the past decade. A total of 62 peer-reviewed journal articles were analysed,

covering a variety of contexts, methods, and conceptual framings. From this review, four dominant thematic areas emerged. To qualify as a distinct theme, a topic had to feature in at least four separate articles across different years which demonstrate consistency and analytical relevance. The identified themes are summarised in the table 3 below and discussed in detail thereafter.

Table 3: Social Capital Research Trend (2014 - 2024)

Author	Theme	Key Contributions
Bouchillon (2022); Hwang and Kim (2020) Smith et al. (2017); Tseng et al. (2015); De-Zúñiga et al. (2018)	Digital and Online Social Capital	Examines how digital platforms mediate trust, visibility, and bonding/bridging capital
Bandiera et al. 2018; Manev et al. 2015; Cooke and Wills, 2019; Piracha et al. (2016)	Social Capital and Performance Outcomes	Focuses on individual, organizational, and system-level outcomes linked to social capital.
Pasha et al. (2021); Chen et al. (2021); De-Silva et al., (2018); Sader et al. (2021)	Clinical and Mental Health	Explores the impact of social capital on mental health, physical health, and well-being.
Poecze and Strauss (2020); Lee, C. J., & Sohn (2016); Carradore, 2022; Ravenda et al., 2022; Abbasi et al., (2020)	Methodological Innovations	Concerns with measurement techniques, including STM and SNA, and efforts to standardise the construct

Source: Authors, 2025

3.1.4.1 Social Capital and Performance Outcomes

This theme captures the application of social capital theory to individual and organisational performance. Empirical articles within this category span diverse areas such as workplace productivity (Bandiera et al. 2018), financial and non-financial performance (Akintimehin et al., 2019); entrepreneurial orientation (Manev et al. 2015); marketing performance (Piracha et al. 2016), market share acquisition (Cooke and Wills, 2019), and public service delivery efficiency (Brunetto and Farr-Wharton, 2017). For instance, some studies examine how bonding and bridging capital reduce stress among students by providing support networks, while others explore the link between workplace trust and employee engagement or the role of social capital in post-crisis institutional recovery. The strength of this theme lies in its translational value, researchers attempt to show how abstract social relationships tangibly influence performance across micro, meso, and macro levels. The emerging insight is that social capital is not merely a cultural or communal asset but also a strategic resource with direct consequences for well-being and operational effectiveness.

3.1.4.2 Digital and online social capital

A growing subset of literature has focused on how digital technologies are reshaping the nature and structure of social capital. These studies explore the role of social media, messaging platforms, and virtual communities in producing new forms of connectivity (Bouchillon, 2022); trust (Hwang and Kim, 2020), and symbolic capital (De-Zúñiga et al. 2018) especially among younger demographics. In contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic, digital networks served as critical substitutes for offline interactions, offering emotional support, information-sharing, and solidarity in isolation. However, several studies also raise concerns about the erosion of cognitive social capital, as online spaces may foster superficial ties or polarisation. The tension between visibility, credibility, and genuine trust indicates a significant shift in how social capital is being generated and perceived in digital environments.

3.1.4.3 Methodological Innovations in Measurement

This theme highlights methodological advancements in the operationalisation and measurement of social capital. Increasingly, scholars are moving beyond conventional survey-based indices to adopt techniques such as Structural Topic Modelling (Ravenda et al., 2022), Social Network Analysis (Abbasi et al., 2020), and bibliometric mapping (Lee and Sohn, 2016; Carradore, 2022). These tools offer a more nuanced understanding of relational structures and thematic patterns in large datasets. Nevertheless, measurement inconsistency remains a persistent issue. The literature reveals ongoing debates about whether social capital should be measured at the individual or community level, how to separate bonding from bridging capital, and how to standardise indicators across cultural settings. This trend reflects both the maturation of the field and its theoretical heterogeneity.

3.1.4.4 Clinical and Mental Health

Social capital has gained increasing traction within the clinical and mental health literature, particularly in the past five years. Studies in this theme primarily investigate the relationship between social capital and mental health outcomes, with attention to variables such as depression (De-Silva et al., 2018); anxiety (Chen et al. 2021); psychological distress (Novak and Kawachi, 2020), stress management (Gächter et al., 2021), and the availability of emotional and cognitive support systems (Pasha et al., 2021). Both structural and cognitive dimensions of social capital such as interpersonal trust, sense of belonging, frequency of supportive interactions, and community engagement, are recurrently examined as protective factors against mental health challenges.

The empirical evidence reviewed suggests a generally positive association: individuals embedded in cohesive social environments tend to report lower incidences of depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as greater emotional resilience. These findings are particularly strong among vulnerable populations, including adolescents, university students, and older adults. In such cases, bonding social capital characterised by strong intra-group ties and close-knit relationships, often provides psychological buffers through emotional reassurance, companionship, and shared problem-solving mechanisms.

However, the literature also draws attention to contextual limitations and potential contradictions. In some instances, dense networks and tightly bonded communities may inadvertently reinforce social pressure, stigma, or conformism, thereby exacerbating mental health burdens especially where mental illness remains culturally taboo or inadequately understood. For example, in certain collectivist societies, individuals experiencing psychological distress may find it difficult to seek help within networks that prioritise group image over individual disclosure. Such dynamics reflect the dual-edged nature of social capital, where relational closeness may simultaneously enable and constrain emotional openness.

4 Conclusion and Recommendations

This review set out to systematically analyse the evolution of social capital research over the past decade, with particular attention to thematic patterns, geographic concentration, methodological tendencies, and temporal trends. Drawing from 62 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024, the study uncovered four dominant thematic trajectories including digital and online social capital, social capital and performance outcomes, clinical and mental health, and methodological innovations.

The analysis reveals that social capital has become a multidimensional and policy-relevant construct, increasingly applied to explain phenomena across various domains of life. The upward trend in publications particularly between 2019 and 2021, suggests that global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic served as catalysts for renewed interest in the role of social relationships, trust, and cohesion in shaping individual and collective resilience. The evidence from clinical and mental health research consistently points to the beneficial role of cognitive and structural social capital in alleviating psychological distress, even as some studies caution against overly romanticising its effects, especially in settings where dense networks may reproduce social exclusion or stigma.

Despite this expansion, the field continues to grapple with persistent conceptual and methodological tensions. Variability in how social capital is defined and measured across studies limits the

comparability of findings and hinders theoretical refinement. Moreover, regional disparities in research output point to an overrepresentation of studies from Asia and Latin America, with fewer contributions from Western contexts where notions of community are increasingly fluid or contested.

In view of the above, the following recommendations are proposed to guide future research and deepen the analytical relevance of social capital scholarship. First, there is a pressing need to improve conceptual clarity and definitional consistency. The literature frequently references bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, yet the application of these categories remains uneven. Researchers should adopt clearly articulated frameworks that distinguish not only between forms of social capital but also the levels individual, community, institutional, at which they operate. This would enhance theoretical coherence and support meaningful comparison across studies and contexts.

Secondly, methodological refinement should be prioritised. While the past decade has seen increased interest in advanced techniques such as social network analysis and structural topic modelling, measurement inconsistencies persist. Future studies should commit to the development and application of culturally sensitive, validated instruments that can capture both structural and cognitive dimensions of social capital. Particularly in clinical and mental health research, there is scope for more longitudinal and intervention-based designs that move beyond correlation to examine causality, effectiveness, and sustainability of social capital-based interventions.

Lastly, future research should aim to address geographic and thematic imbalances in the current literature. Although contributions from Asia and Latin America have been prominent, there is limited engagement with contexts where social fragmentation, digital mediation, and weak community ties may complicate traditional understandings of social capital. More empirical work is needed in underrepresented regions, including sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the Global North. In addition, the growing influence of digital platforms on relational life demands greater scholarly attention. Understanding how online networks shape trust, reciprocity, and emotional support will be essential in extending the relevance of social capital research in an increasingly digitized world.

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