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A Bibliometric Analysis of four Constructs Interconnections: Innovation, Competitive Advantage, Agility and Performance

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Abstract. *In a globalized economy, innovation is a priority of ensuring the competitive advantage and organizational performance of agile companies, competitiveness being the core of the development in any economic activity. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to provide an overview regarding the connections between four main constructs, respectively innovation, competitive advantage, agility and (firm) performance, through performing a bibliometric analysis by using the VOSviewer visualization tool. The information has been selected from the Web of Science Core Collection database (WoS) during February 2023. This preliminary study aims to grant relevance to the potential research areas prone to be exploited when discussing the matter of innovation in relation to performance, competitive advantage achievement and agility. The main premise is that every company has its particularities and acts accordingly to stay competitive through innovating its business model and through an articulate innovation management, also encompassing agility, with a view to reach organizational performance and strong competitive advantage. In terms of findings, the bibliometric analysis conducted confirms the existence of compelling relationships between constructs, thus supporting further scrutiny in this direction.*

Keywords: innovation, innovation management, competitive advantage, agility, performance, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Introduction

In the context of the knowledge economy, as the global business environment becomes more competitive, innovation becomes critical, with a dominant role in the market (Ratten et al., 2017; Alexandru et al., 2020). "Innovation is the core of development and productivity in any economic activity" (Kogabayev & Maziliauskas, 2017, p. 59). Innovation can be treated as a tool used by entrepreneurs to turn change into opportunities and these into new ideas to translate them into widespread practice (Tidd & Bessant, 2013). It is emphasized, however, the need for the innovation process to be sustainable and responsible, in order to take into account the consequences of innovation decisions and to anticipate the possible negative impact (Bessant & Tidd, 2015).

The innovation process is a complex one, which involves efficient management of several different activities; it is, therefore, a management process, the approach of which is decisive for the results obtained (Trott, 2017). Although the process seems random and uncertain, models can be found that tip the chances of innovation to success: not by developing and implementing a predictable mechanism, but by creating conditions within the organization that increase the likelihood of success of a resolution of several challenges with a high level of uncertainty (Tidd & Bessant, 2013).

Considering the globalization process, the companies must prove competitiveness, being in a competition not only with the conational entities, but with all the companies from the respective field, regardless the origin country. We discuss, therefore, about a tight competitiveness at a global

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level, within which are successful only the ones that manage to keep the track with the technological evolutions and not only (Vătămănescu et al., 2016a, 2017). This aspect is even more actual at regional level, within the European Union, where the companies have free access in all the state members and the companies from the countries with less developed economies are competing directly with the ones from the more developed countries. An answer would be through continuous innovation, in order to manage to offer to the consumers experiences that are not offered by others yet or cannot be offered due to a certain cause, together with a relevant marketing campaign (Dinu et al., 2023; Vătămănescu et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

However, precisely because of the multitude of options existing on the market, thereof the vast majority confront the same question, innovation can be considered a competition itself. Anybody can have innovative ideas as this resource is unlimited. Therefore, it becomes important how the respective ideas are implemented: as fast as possible, as efficient as possible, with as few resources as possible, with as few costs as possible, with a better and more successful perspective before the consumers. This way, it becomes important the management of innovation (Dinu et al., 2023; Vătămănescu & Alexandru, 2018). Innovation management allows organizations to focus on competitiveness and performance and, nationally and internationally. Hereby it is acknowledged the importance pursuing systemic innovation and to increase competitiveness and value creation (Caetano, 2017; Vătămănescu et al., 2015, 2016b, 2016c).

Given these arguments, the subject matter is relevant and topical, because it covers the theoretical grounds and the methods according to which companies, especially the European small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), can tackle innovation management in order to be more competitive both at the European Union level and globally. Investigating the business models used in order to drive competitive advantage and organizational performance by employing innovation and agility management in European SMEs comes forward as a major prerequisite for further developments (Mitan & Vătămănescu et al., 2019; Vătămănescu et al., 2015, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to provide an overview regarding the connections between four main constructs, respectively innovation, competitive advantage, agility and (firm) performance, through performing a bibliometric analysis by using the VOSviewer visualization tool. The examination offers hence a preliminary outlook of the relationships among the concepts without delving into the intricate theoretical links which would be the subject of the second research report.

Theoretical foundations

To start with, innovation is responsible for creating and maintaining the competitive advantage of companies and ensures their sustainability and continuity (Santos et al., 2019; Vătămănescu et al., 2019, 2020a, 2020b; 2022a). The success of a business is related to the process of innovation management, as it allows the creation of value for stakeholders by implementing a new product or process or a significantly improved version, a new marketing method, a new organizational approach aimed for business practices (Santos et al., 2019; Vătămănescu et al., 2022a).

In terms of the extent of implementation, innovation can be classified into four types: incremental innovation (improvements using existing technologies), modular innovation (similar to radical innovation in terms of necessary concepts), architectural innovation (similar to incremental innovation in terms of necessary concepts) and radical innovation (introduction of a new technology) (Viveiros Lopes et al., 2016). Incremental strategy starts from the philosophy of a limited ability to understand the present and predict the future and requires the company's ability to adapt its strategy at any time, based on new information and understanding, which it is constantly looking for (Tidd & Bessant, 2013). In contrast, the rationalist strategy is based on military

experience, where the strategy consists, in principle, in a linear model: it evaluates, determines and acts (Tidd & Bessant, 2013).

From the point of view of the source of innovation, it can be recombinant or obtained by design (Tidd & Bessant, 2013). Recombinant innovation involves the transposition of an old idea, already used in a completely new context, where it has the potential to bring an element of novelty (Bessant & Tidd, 2015; Tidd & Bessant, 2013). Design innovation involves changing the meaning of a product or service in the mind of the consumer, with a new purpose; this can range from incremental innovation to radical innovation (Bessant & Tidd, 2015; Tidd & Bessant, 2013).

Within companies, there are several elements that are important for the smooth running of the innovation management: leadership (different stages and types of innovation have different leadership needs and each leadership style has its own particularities and its own methods of contributing to different types and stages of innovation) (Łukowski, 2017), team diversity (which can, on one hand, increase creativity and innovation, and on the other hand create barriers to collaboration) (Weiss et al., 2018), team creativity (which can have both positive and negative results) (Brem et al., 2016) and team preparation (knowledge management: generating new knowledge, identifying, storing, distribution and exploitation of existing knowledge) (Bessant & Tidd, 2015).

In small and medium-sized enterprises, innovation management can be influenced by digitalization and agility (Niewohner et al., 2019). Agility refers to the ability of the team to react quickly and be flexible to unexpected changes, and various studies confirm a positive correlation between agile methods and the innovative ability of companies or the probability of success of innovations (Niewohner et al., 2019; Pînzaru et al., 2016). Thus, developing a detailed plan for each task will increase the innovative efficiency of SMEs (Niewohner et al., 2019; Vătămănescu & Alexandru, 2014, 2018).

Nowadays, in order to overcome the market competition, it becomes extremely important for a player to gain, develop or expand its agility capability and translate it through future innovation, given the dynamics of the market and the accelerated rhythm that management has to face. However, depending on each company's capabilities and resources, there may be a different business model suitable to be applied when envisaging suitable innovation management. This refers actually to a cluster of organizational capabilities, which is defined as "the firm's ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments" (Teece et al., 1997, p. 516). The efficiency growth will include key performance indicators based on cost reduction, productivity and reduce time to market, while the revenue growth would regard new customers, new market, new value proposition, service bundling. As far as the organizational capabilities are concerned, they have an orientation towards innovativeness, entrepreneurship, organizational learning, opportunity recognition and organizational culture (Latifi et al., 2021).

Performance is defined as an organization's ability to achieve the determined goals for preserving profit, having a competitive advantage, increasing market share and preserving long term survival, which depends on using appropriate organizational strategies and practical plans (Oyemomi et al., 2019; Soto-Acosta et al., 2016; Vătămănescu et al., 2022d). Therefore, the creation of new or adjusted business models needs special attention as this triggers effects on medium to long term, through the supporting strategy. It might also be the case of not only one single business model, but different business models to be applied, therefore it is required a strategic approach depending on the company's needs and objectives. In the same time, the company can opt for a suitable innovation management type, depending on the available internal

and external resources and also in conformity to the company's agility and openness towards change. Therefore, innovation management comprises a formula specific to the firm, that refers to searching and finding new ways of creating value and transferring value to the customers, suppliers and partners through its products / services.

Methodology

The connection between the discussed concepts and their occurrence within the literature have been studied through unfolding a bibliometric analysis, with the aim of providing a more comprehensive overview of the different approaches adopted in these regards. It represents a multi-contextual quantitative method that brings diverse benefits in the academic community, being able to handle large volumes of data, through various lenses: publication analysis, citation analysis, keywords analysis and it does not resume only to the simple listing of scientific production or citation indexing, showing a great variety throughout the professional disciplines (Ellegaard, 2018, p. 2).

The benefit of the bibliometric analysis to academic research is that it provides an incipient wide overview, interconnections and trends that can help identifying the research gaps and, therefore, in guiding the study towards filling them in. For the start of the bibliometric analysis with respect to the four main constructs – innovation, competitive advantage, agility and performance, the information has been selected from the Web of Science Core Collection database (WoS) during February 2023 and their publication years varied from 1975 to 2023. The results were generated by applying a query through the Advanced Search function, that was focused on showing only the items that included any of the constructs in the Title section. In addition, the document types contained only articles and the English language has been the only one selected, being the basic language for the research paper.

Taking into consideration that the constructs are widely present in various activity fields and that at this stage the total number of generated results was of 11,864, in order to restrain the view towards a management perspective, a last filter has been applied for the Web of Science Categories section, which will include for analysis purposes only Management research papers. This selection has been performed also in accordance with the criteria included in WoS Meso-topics schema applicable starting 2022 (Citation Topics WoS, n.d.), obtaining a total number of 3,795 results.

The following step regarded the search of each of the constructs in the Title field, in order to understand the individual weight in the total number of 3,795 indexed articles. The concluded results for this query were 51. The results emphasize that the first article was published in WoS in 1975, referring to "organizational performance" and from the all-time articles in this matter, 42.76% have been published in the past five years (2018 – 2023). Another significant weight is allocated to the articles published during the same past period of 5 years, 2018 - 2023, respectively: for "innovation management" – 51.6% of the entire number of 1,097 articles published within the year 1979 - 2023 and for "competitive advantage" – 33.25% of the total number of 803 articles.

"Agility" appeared firstly in an article published in 1994 and 65.72% of all articles including this construct in their title have been published in the past five years period, gaining an astonishing weight, given also the difficult times every organization had to face due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the companies' need to adapt to changing conditions.

Taking as a basis the above-mentioned information, it can be noted that in the past five years, these constructs have become incrementally more present in the management research papers, guiding the upcoming studies through new approaches in these perspectives (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the published articles indexed in WoS

Construct	No. of articles indexed in WoS	Year of first indexation in WoS	No. of articles published in journals indexed in WoS during 2018-2023	Percent of the latest articles out of the total
Innovation (Management)	1,097	1979	566	51.6%
Competitive advantage	803	2018	267	33.25%
Agility	388	1994	255	65.72%
Organizational performance	1,527	1975	653	42.76%

For a more thorough analysis, the final selection of concepts for VOSviewer regarded *innovation, competitive advantage, agility and firm performance*, by taking into account only articles in English language and part of the Management category and by applying the following revised query: (ALL=(innovation) AND ALL=(competitive advantage) AND ALL=(agility) AND ALL=(firm performance)) AND (LA==("ENGLISH") AND DT==("ARTICLE") AND TASCA==("MANAGEMENT")).

All the results filtered as described have been exported as a plain text file from the WoS database including full record information, such as: authors, titles, abstracts, sources, topics, publication years and references, details that are going to represent the root in the further analysis process.

Given the large volume of bibliometric data that is used in the academic researches, it has been noted by (Donthu et al., 2021, p. 286) that scientific databases such as Scopus and WoS have simplified the access to large volumes of data and bibliometric software, such as VOSviewer (Visualization of Similarities), and it enabled the data analysis in a very pragmatic way and with applicability for diverse fields, ranging from studying publications to collaboration patterns and keywords network.

Findings and discussion

Based on the premise that the bibliometric analysis has been performed with a view over the development of the available academic resources existing for the four main constructs, Donthu states that if the objective of the analysis is to review the past, present and future of a research field, "then a combination of co-citation analysis (past), bibliographic coupling (present) and co-word analysis […] (future) can be selected." (Donthu et al., 2021, p. 292).

An excerpt of the most co-cited sources is presented in Figure 1, given the chosen threshold of 50 minimum number of citations of a source, resulting into a number of 527 sources that met the threshold, from the total number of 38,615 sources. 'A co-citation link is a link between two items that are both cited by the same document' (Van Eck & Waltman, 2023 p. 27).

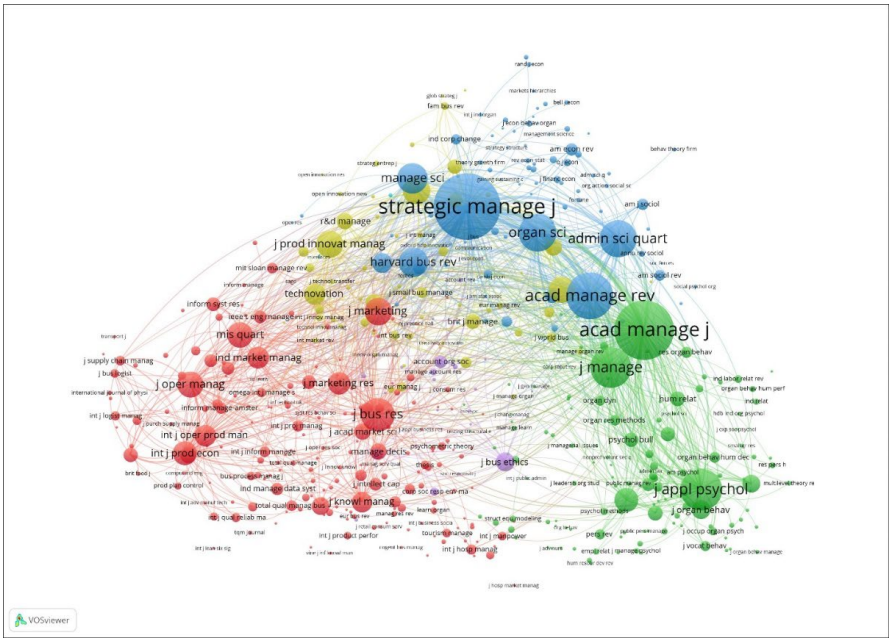


Figure 1. Prominent co-cited sources and their clusters

Source: author's own research.

An overview including the most co-cited authors in the selected articles has been achieved by selecting *cited authors* as a unit of analysis. In this case, the chosen threshold of 100 minimum number of citations of an author, resulting into a number of 199 authors that met the threshold, from the total number of 71,917 authors (Figure 2).

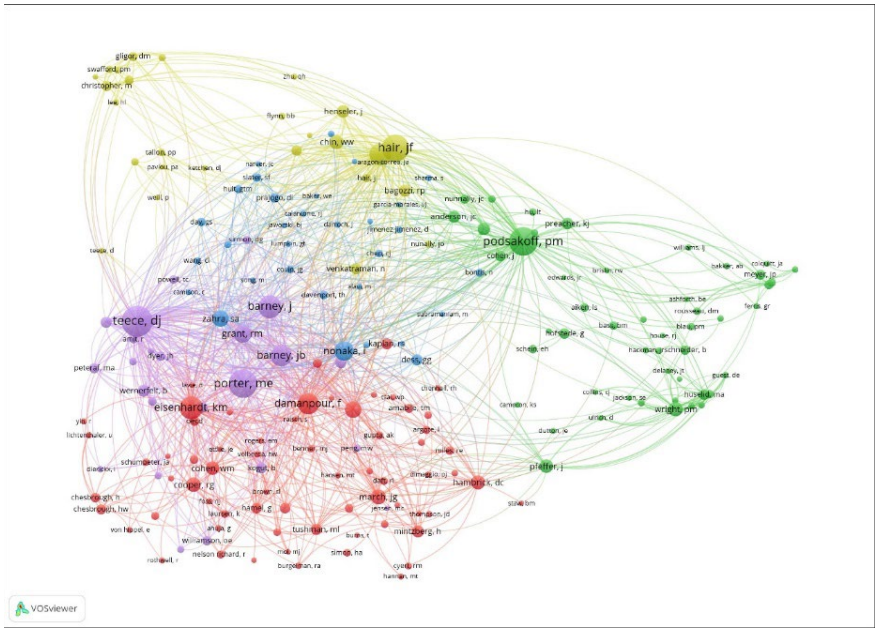


Figure 2. Prominent co-cited authors and their clusters

Source: author's own research.

From the bibliographic coupling view, considering the minimum number of documents of a country, a minimum threshold of 10 documents/country has been selected, together with a minimum threshold of 10 citations of a country, resulting into a filtered list of 60 countries that have met the threshold, out of the 110 countries in total. Figure 3 provides a summarized view in the matter.

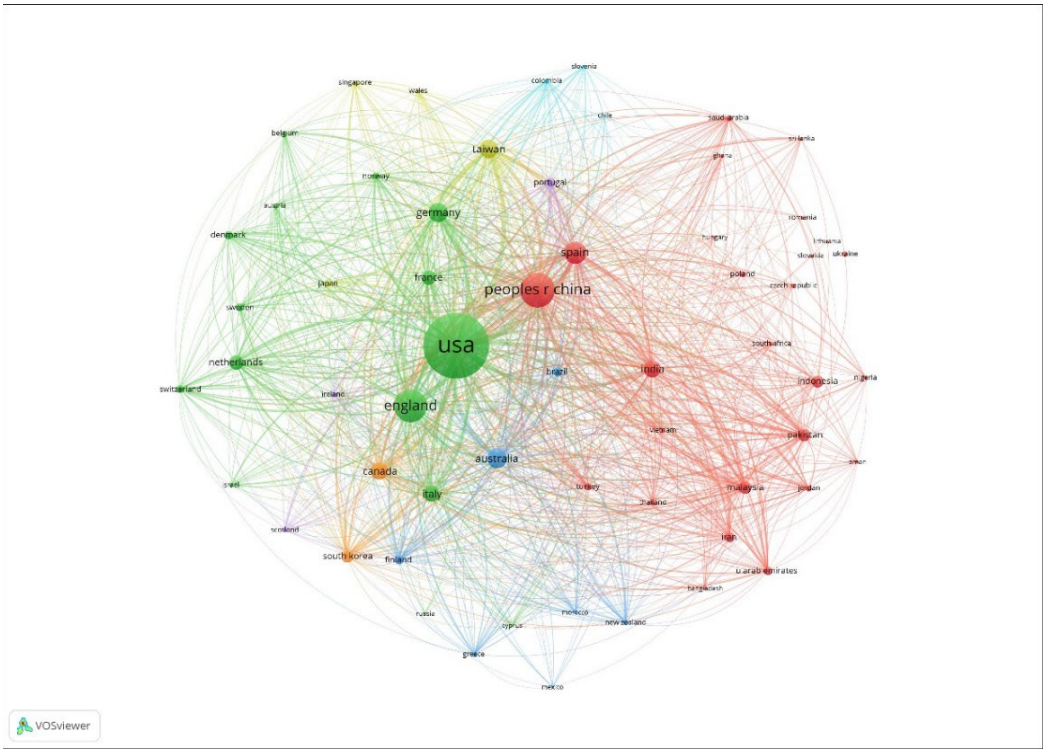


Figure 3. Countries of the co-cited authors and their clusters

Source: author's own research.

With respect to the citation analysis (i.e., 'A citation link is a link between two items where one item cites the other', as posited by Van Eck & Waltman, 2023 p. 27), the most prominent authors cited are displayed in Figure 4. There has been selected a minimum number of citations of a document of 500, resulting into a number of 78 documents that met the threshold, out of the total number of 3,795 documents.

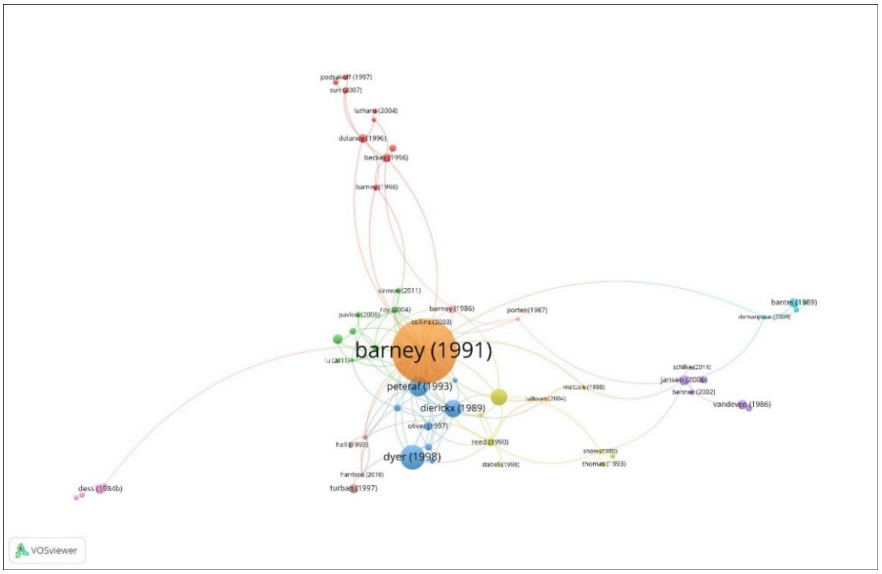


Figure 4. Prominent cited authors

Source: author's own research.

Continuing with the bibliographic coupling analysis, the most recurring cited authors are presented in Table 2. The selected threshold has been of minimum 5 documents of a single author and there have been selected 37 authors from the entire number of 8,680 authors. 'A bibliographic coupling link is a link between two items that both cite the same document', as stated by Van Eck & Waltman, 2023 p. 27).

Table 2. Most recurrent cited authors based on bibliographic coupling

Document	Citations	Total link strength
Porter, Me	5	7240
Barney, JB	7	5366
Dess, GG	5	3186
Volberda, Henk W.	7	2273
Van den Bosch, Frans A. J.	5	2200
Birkinshaw, Julian	5	1372
Song, Michael	5	1008
Alegre, Joaquin	6	829
Chiva, Ricardo	5	654
Gunasekaran, Angappa	5	554
Gligor, David M.	8	540
Bruch, Heike	6	505
Brem, Alexander	7	415
Choi, Jin Nam	5	395
Del Giudice, Manlio	5	286
De Massis, Alfredo	5	286
Li, Yuan	8	264
Goldsby, Thomas J.	5	250
Su, Zhongfeng	5	240
Baird, Kevin	7	218
Abdallah, Ayman Bahjat	6	178
Mehralian, Gholamhossein	6	148
Wang, Mo	5	146

Document	Citations	Total link strength
Jimenez-Jimenez, Daniel	5	135
Kraus, Sascha	5	125
Wu, Jie	5	116

VOSviewer supports the bibliometric analysis of all keywords' co-occurrence, facilitating from a visualization perspective the identification of a particular research gap, that would be available for further academic research. Out of the 367 keywords, only 27 met the threshold of fulfilling minimum number of 5 occurrences of a keyword. Figure 5 offers visibility with regards to the keywords' co-occurrence network and their link strengths and their interpretation has to start from the fact that each node and word highlight the importance of the respective item within the network and subsequently and their weight is based on each item's frequency. The line between the nodes shows the link between these and the longer the link is, the weakest their connection, corroborated with the density of the line: if the line is thicker, this reflects that the respective constructs have been often used together.

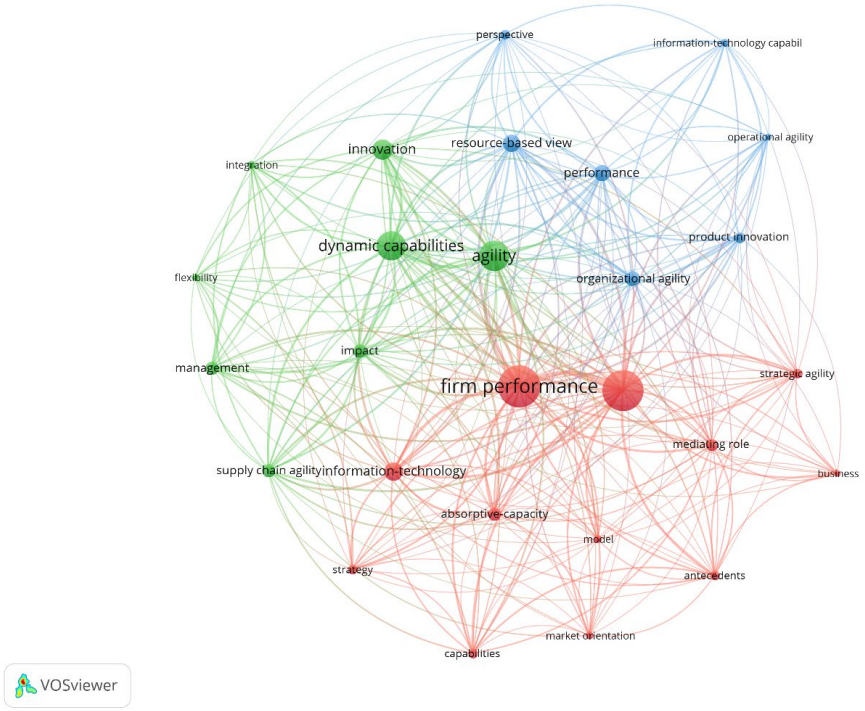


Figure 5. Keywords' co-occurrence network of WoS publications - by VOSviewer

Source: author's own research.

Each color represents a particular cluster and it includes connected keywords, as organized by VOSviewer, according Figure 6.

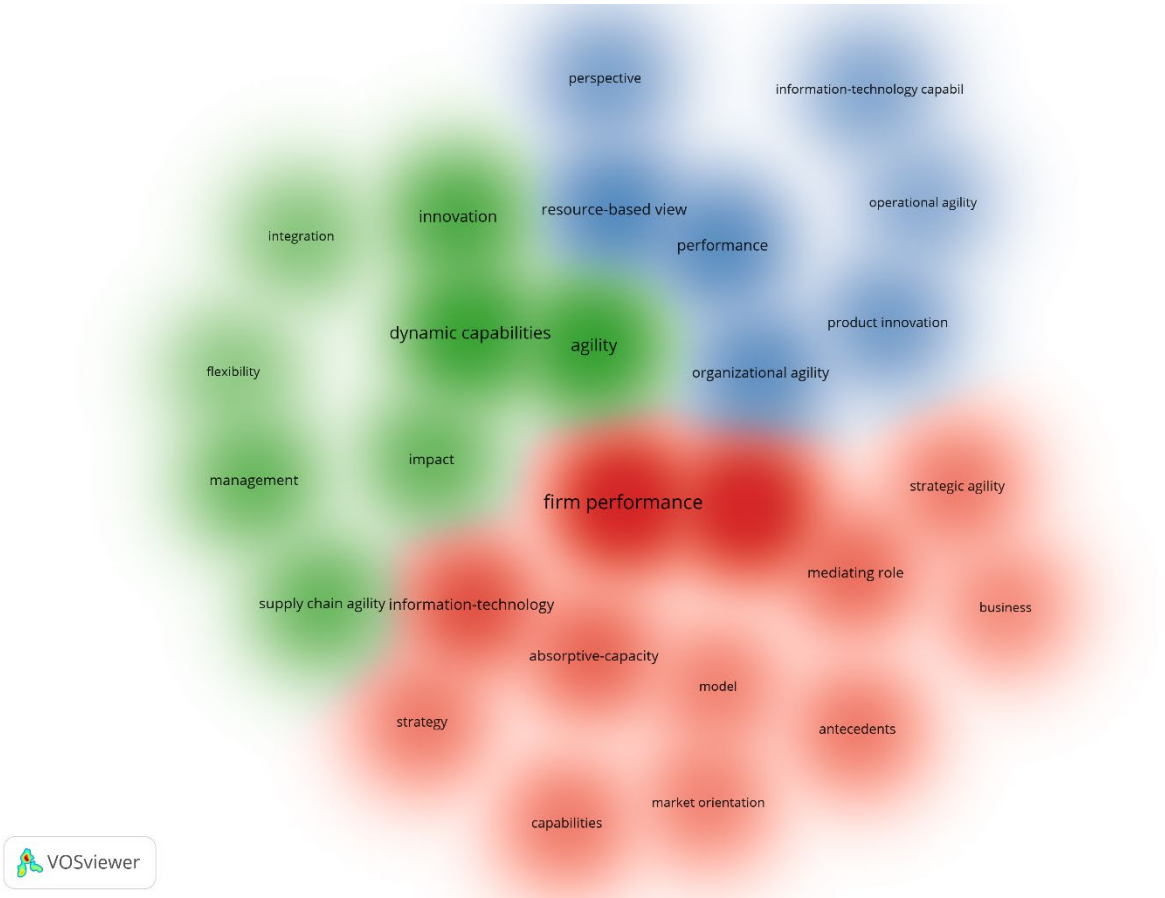


Figure 6. Density visualization and keyword clusters of WoS publications - by VOSviewer

Source: author's own research.

According to the above Figure 6, the first cluster is highlighted in red and it focuses on the co-working between the main constructs: firm performance – competitive advantage – absorptive capacity. It is the most representative one, given the total links strengths and it guides us towards researching on the existing dependencies between these constructs.

The second cluster pictured under green color concentrates on the connection between innovation (management) – dynamic capabilities – agility. Dynamic capability seems to be the trigger of innovation, supported by the co-occurrences of management, agility, flexibility, view that finds its applicability in the business environment nowadays, given that innovation requires a certain adaptable dynamic to keep in line with the market evolution and continuous concern of gaining competitive advantage.

The third cluster marked in blue color provides visibility over the triad resource-based view – performance – organizational agility, with highlighting that the perspective can be further analyzed, through the existing term included in the cluster. Consequently, based on the above analysis, the interconnections between the main four constructs initially considered – measured via the direct total link strength (Table 3).

Table 3. Dyads and total link strength

Dyads	Total link strength
Innovation – Agility	7
Agility – Firm performance	13
Competitive advantage – firm performance (performance)	31
Innovation – Competitive advantage	8
Innovation – Firm performance	8
Competitive advantage - Agility	15

Table 3 grants a good perspective regarding the potential areas of research, taking into consideration that the most interconnected constructs are competitive advantage – agility – firm performance. It can be observed that the innovation component has not been exposed in a representative manner within the existing research field and it provides a suitable research area for further study, through its combination with aspects of managing the innovation within organizations.

Conclusion

The daily focus of the European SMEs is significantly rooted within the competitiveness approach, trying to identify the company's needs, resources and opportunities to gain competitive advantage on the market and keep the current performance or aiming to increase it, by leveraging agility and innovation (management). Despite the fact that the companies may be located in European countries that are more or less developed than others, they thrive to stay competitive on the global market, therefore the pressure to adapt, to stay flexible and be agile may become a burden on the management's shoulders.

The performed bibliometric analysis facilitates the understanding of the connection between innovation management, competitive advantage, agility and organizational performance and, furthermore, provides future direction towards analyzing the influence of innovation management over these variables and connects the innovation management process, through its multidisciplinary character with the need of the company to develop its agility, so that it may encourage the company's future competitive advantage and improve its organizational performance.

The final goal is therefore oriented towards the organizational performance, through a proper approach of innovation management within the company, by highlighting its importance, in order to be aware of any negative impact and mitigate any potential risks. Subsequently, future analysis should be focused on the theoretical and empirical perspective of the topic, rooted in the bibliometric reports.

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