EXAMINING BIBLIOMETRIC PATTERNS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS: HIGHLIGHTING ALIGNMENT WITH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative presents a distinctive opportunity not only to bolster economic relations with partner nations but also to serve as a catalyst for regional economic growth. This study aims to delineate the advancement in research articles authored by various contributors, originating from diverse journals and countries, all of which are indexed in the SCOPUS database over the past two decades. The data is scrutinized employing VOS viewer software, enabling the visualization of co-occurrence maps among authors and countries. Additionally, the publications are also categorized based on the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals. The findings elucidate that while the official inception of the concept was in 2013, the literature on One Belt One Road predates this period. However, a noticeable surge in publications occurred from 2014 onwards. Among the 6520 publications identified on the topic, 1613 are relevant to the domains of business, management, accounting, economics, econometrics, and finance. After refining the publication type to "article," the final tally stands at 1038 research articles published thus far. The study also discerns that a significant portion of these publications emanated from countries such as China, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Notably, there exists a scarcity of literature from Belt and Road partner countries especially from Central Asia and South-South regions. Given their pivotal role as direct stakeholders, their insights could be invaluable in generating research with tangible real-world implications.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Belt & Road Initiative; BRI; Sustainable Development Goals; SDGs

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1. Introduction

Since its announcement in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has gained significant attention in the academic literature. The reason for its significance can be attributed to its potential economic opportunities to enhance cooperation and connectivity between China and the other countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and beyond. For instance, in the decade, the volume of trade between China and other partner countries has rapidly expanded. Since the past decade when in 2013, the Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI), the scale of trade between China and the Belt and Road countries (BRCs) has steadily expanded. The average annual growth of China with the BRCs is estimated to be expanded to $2.07 trillion in 2022 as compared to $1.04 trillion a decade ago which was at the time of the announcement of BRI by China (Xiong et al., 2023). The official website of the Embassy of People's Republic of China in Grenada reveals that till the end of June 2023, more than 200 documents are signed between China and BRCs. It also reveals that China is the largest trading partner with around 25 countries while 7 free-trade agreements have been between China and 13 countries (Grenada, 2023). Moreover, the Chinese non-financial direct investment along the BRI has reached to $11.00 billion from January to June 2023. Thus showing a 23.3% rise in the volume of investment. The major countries receiving these investments were Cambodia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, Russia, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, Thailand and Vietnam. While small investments were made elsewhere (Devonshire-Ellis, 2023).

So keeping in view the economic significance of BRI, this study aims to identify the research studies conducted on this topic. To accomplish this purpose this study has several objectives. Firstly, this study intends to identify the articles published on BRI in the subject area of business, management, accounting, economics, econometrics, and finance. Secondly it tends to segregate the published articles based on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The rationale behind segregation based on SDGs is due to the enabling force of economic progress to achieve them. It is through the economic activity that provides the opportunities, infrastructure and resources to address challenges mostly needed to achieve the SDGs.

2. The Economic Significance of BRI

BRI holds undeniable significance both regionally and globally. Central to its framework is the pivotal role of infrastructure development, including the construction of roads, ports, and railway facilities (Xiong et al., 2023). This crucial infrastructure not only streamlines trade but also fosters heightened economic activity. Furthermore, improved accessibility opens doors for

new business ventures, drawing the interest of foreign direct investment in regional countries (Liu & Dunford, 2016).

The establishment of these new enterprises not only engenders job creation, both directly in construction and indirectly in associated industries, but also promotes collaboration, particularly in underdeveloped regions. This collaborative spirit facilitates technological transfer and enhances innovation capabilities. As a result, heightened economic activity plays a crucial role in poverty alleviation, subsequently elevating the overall quality of life for citizens in partner countries.

3. Research Design

Bibliometric analysis process uses a statistical procedure to identify the development occurred in a specific subject area. This method helps to describe and analyze the changes in a logical manner which helps to identify the collection of articles published, assists in discovering the existing trends and reveals the potential gaps in literature for further research. This process is also termed as Scientometric analysis which follows steps such as, searching for keywords, identifying an appropriate database, skimming through the literature published on the subject area and finally developing a set of bibliography that indicates a collection of past literature in way through which future research could be suggested. The present study follows a three-stage approach to data collection that aims at identifying the contextual literature available on BRI. This three-stage search for literature focuses on (1) running keywords query into SCOPUS database; (2) refining the domain/subject specific bibliographies; and, (3) defining the parameter of publication type to "article" only. The search query used at each stage is displayed in Table 1 below.

3.1 Bibliometric Search Criteria

Table 1 below shows the different steps to search the publications. Stage 1 comprises of defining all the keywords appropriate for search in the SCOPUS database. SCOPUS database has more spread of indexed journals than Web of Science (Filser, Silva, & Oliveira, 2017), so for this reason the publications were extracted from SCOPUS database. The keywords used for publications search include 'Belt and Road Initiative' OR 'Belt & Road Initiative' OR 'BRI', which provided an initial result of 6520 documents. In Stage 2, the search query was further refined by focusing on the subject area relating to 'Business, Management and Accounting' and 'Economics, Econometrics and Finance'. This search resulted in a total of 1613 publications. Finally, at Stage 3 the publications were restricted to 'journal article' thus excluding other sources published such as case studies, reports etc.

The literature was retrieved from the SCOPUS Database on 29th August. 2023. In order to reduce the bias that may cause due to frequent updates in the database, all the searches were done on the same day and the data was reduced by first extracting the data on the basis of keywords. So the strategy to narrow down the search is as follows:

Keywords = "Belt and Road Initiative" or "Belt & Road Initiative"; "BRI"

Subject Area: "Business, Management and Accounting' and 'Economics, Econometrics and Finance"

Document Type: Article

Table 1   Data Source and the Search Strategy

Refinement Search Stage	Theme	Search For?	Query String Search	Search Output (Documents Number)
Stage 1	Central	Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, Belt & Road Initiative	(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Belt and Road Initiative") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("BRI") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Belt & Road Initiative"))	6520
Stage 2	Central	Business, Management and Accounting; Economics, Econometrics and Finance subject area	(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Belt and Road Initiative") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("BRI") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Belt & Road Initiative")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ECON") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI"))	1613
Stage 3	Central	Document type 'Article'	(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Belt and Road Initiative") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("BRI") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Belt & Road Initiative")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ECON") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar"))	1038

3.2 Selection Criteria and Data Extraction

The literature was retrieved by following selection criteria. The criteria involved to gather and analyze the literature relating to BRI pertaining to: (1) the subject area business, management, accounting, economics, econometrics and finance; (2) focus on the articles pertaining to different industries or sectors; (3) categorize articles that are aligned with the 17 sustainable development goals presented by the United Nations (UN); (4) articles published during 2003-2023. The exclusion criteria for literature included: (1) deletion of duplicate; (2) articles irrelevant due to relating to other subject areas such engineering, environment social sciences etc.; (3) other types of documents such as books, reviews case studies etc.). The papers selected were further scrutinized by the research group to decide whether the article should be included or not. Then finally, the bibliometric records of 1038 articles were downloaded.

3.2 Research Method

This paper reviewed the progress of literature published on BRI over the past 20 years. Bibliometric method was used to analyze the progress of the research area and the emerging studies on BRI in broader domain of business.

The literature was extracted from SCOPUS database and the bibliometric excel file was downloaded to analyze the results. For analyzing the data, three different methods were applied. Firstly, the bibliometric data was analyzed through an extension available in SCOPUS database. The results were extracted on the basis or number of publications per year; the top contributing authors and funding agencies and; countries. In the next step, VOSviewer software was used as a tool for conducting bibliometric analysis through which visualizations were created based on two parameters. The visualizations extracted through the software provided analysis based on co-occurrence of keywords and co authorship based on the collaborating countries. Co-occurrence of keywords means the occurrence of group of words connected to each other. While the co-occurrence of countries refers to the occurrence of different countries, or authors or institutions in a single article. This software was originally developed at the Centre for Science and Technology at Leiden University by Nees Jan Van Eck and Ludo Waltman. Lastly the authors conducted text mining by segregating the articles based on the 17 sustainable development goals presented by the United Nations. So the final objective of this paper was to assess the core knowledge generated overtime in this field. Further this paper can identify avenues for further research in different areas that require further attention and also suggest the dearth of literature in the different sustainable development goals.

4. Bibliometric Data Analyses

Stage 1 The visual graphs generated through the SCOPUS database provides the number of publications on the basis of each year since 2003 till 2023; top contributing authors; top affiliated institutions; top contributing countries and the top funding sources in the area of belt and road literature within the subject area of business and finance. The greater the frequency of publications the wider the breadth of the bars in each figure.

Stage 2 The visual maps generated by VOSviewer provide network diagrams. The nodes on each diagram represents different meaning based upon co-occurrence of keywords and co-occurrence of co-authorship between countries. The difference in colours and size of nodes in network diagrams shows the greater frequency of articles published. In fact, the nodes in the network diagrams can be described mainly on the basis of the frequency of counts of articles published and the centrality of the search area. The centrality of keywords or countries indicate the hub with which different keywords and countries are conjoined together.

Stage 3 Text mining was conducted by gathering the information available within the articles that had connectivity with the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Different keywords were identified related to each SDG and different filters were employed.

4.1 Analyses of Publications Output

4.1.1 Year-Wise Publications

A total of 1038 articles published were taken into consideration. Figure 1 below, presents the trend of publications between 2003- 2023 in the area of BRI. The trend can be split into phases: the stable development phase and the rapid development phase (Sahoo, 2022). The graph shows that there was a slow pace of articles published from 2003 till 2015. However, from the year 2016 it gained momentum while the pace rose dramatically from 2019 to date. These trends reflect a sustained growth in the area of belt and road initiative with specific focus on business, management, accounting, economics, econometrics and finance. The reason for the growing trend can be attributed to the fact that BRI is considered to be an important strategic connection in economic terms that can provide economic benefits to around 65 countries and regions. As the development of the "one belt one road" provide six connected corridors that are: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia, New Asia-Europe Continental Bridge, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor and China-Indochina Pensuila. Which reflects the high economic stakes of the different regions under the umbrella of BRI.
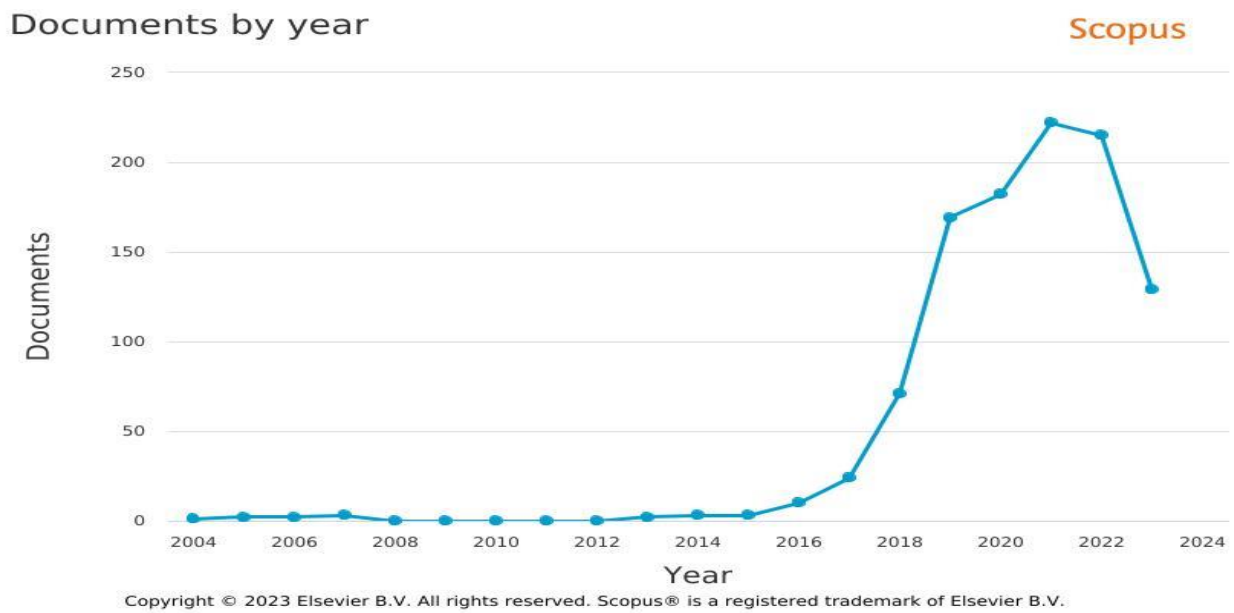
Figure 1 Publications Trend Line Curve from 2003-2023

4.1.2 Top-cited publications

Table 2 below describes the highly cited publications. The table reveals that the most cited article (561 citations) was published in China Economic Review that suggests a framework and assessment for a better understanding of BRI. Similarly, the table indicates the total citations and the cite score of each journal till the year 2022. These highly cited articles mostly pertain to the overall understanding of the mechanism of BRI and also provides insights on aspects such as energy investment, infrastructural development, and the effects on environmental impacts and natural resources consumption (Bashir & Bashir, 2021). Further the articles also suggest the implications of BRI projects in attracting tourism and the possibilities of financial inclusion through digital financial systems within the region.

Table 2 Top Ten Cited Publications

	Journal	Total Citations	Cite Score 2022	The most cited article (reference)	Times cited	Publisher
1	China Economic Review	4601	9	Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, framework and assessment	561	Elsevier
2	Journal of Cleaner Production	351758	18.5	Energy investment risk assessment for nations along China's Belt & Road Initiative	175	Elsevier
3	China Economic Review	4601	9	Three questions on China's "Belt and Road Initiative"	157	Elsevier
4	Journal of Asian Economics	752	2.9	China's belt and road initiative: A preliminary quantitative assessment	148	Elsevier
5	Resources Policy	19194	11.3	Natural resources, tourism development, and energy-growth-CO_2 emission nexus: A simultaneity modeling analysis of BRI countries	140	Elsevier
6	Cities	16738	10.4	Deciphering the spatial structure of China's megacity region: A new bay era---The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area in the making	134	Elsevier
7	China and World Economy	596	3.8	China's Belt and Road Initiative: Can Europe expect trade gains?	108	Wiley-Blackwell
8	Resources, Conservation and Recycling	42404	20.3	Does digital financial inclusion matter for economic growth and environmental sustainability in OBRI economies? An empirical analysis	102	Elsevier
9	Journal of World Business	2824	12.9	The belt and road initiative, cultural friction and ethnicity: Their effects on the export performance of SMEs in China	102	Elsevier
10	Transportation Research Part E: Logistics and Transportation Review	14440	14.7	Hinterland patterns of China Railway (CR) express in China under the Belt and Road Initiative: A preliminary analysis	99	Elsevier

4.1.3 Top Contributing Countries

Figure 2 below indicates that China has contributed the most on the Belt & Road Initiative. However, the next top three countries in terms of contributions are from the developed countries that may not be the first-tier countries in terms of the direct lineage of the Belt & Road Initiative. For instance, the contributions from countries like USA, UK and Australia reflects the growing interests by the developed nations in BRI. While it also indicates that fewer or no contribution of research publications are published by the direct stakeholder except for Indonesia and Malaysia. These results reveal a void in the publications that should have been contributed by Central Asian, South-East Asian and Eurasian countries.
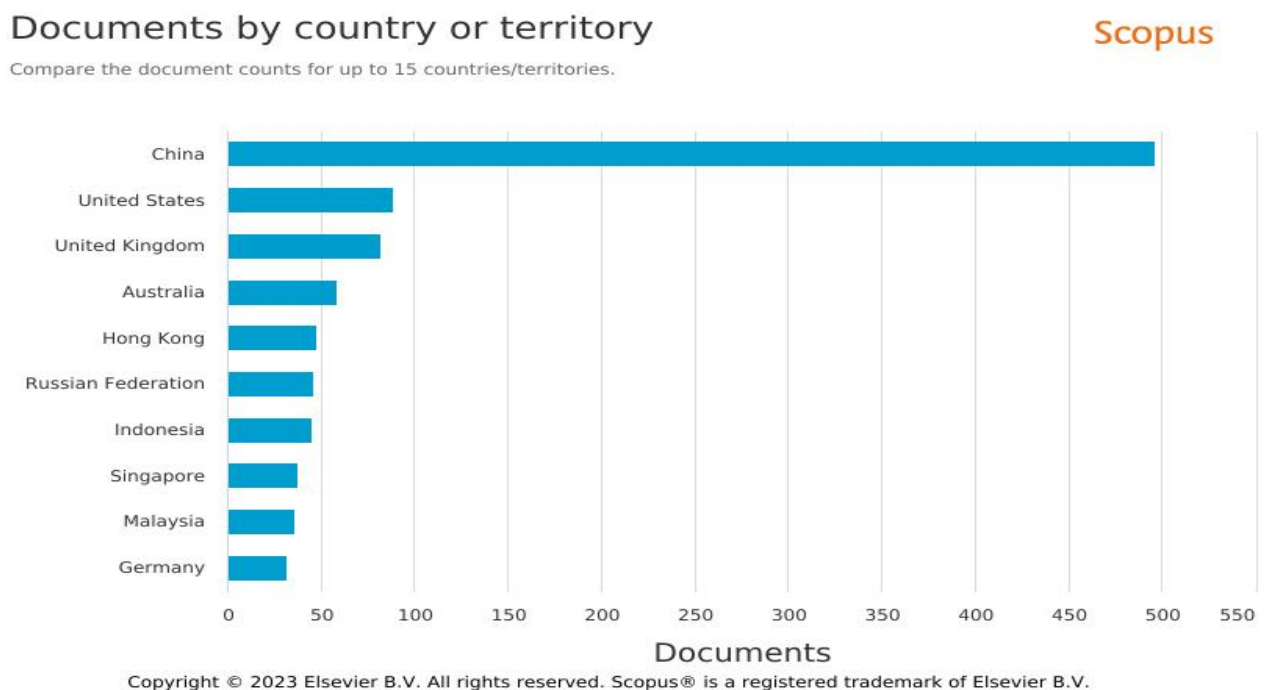
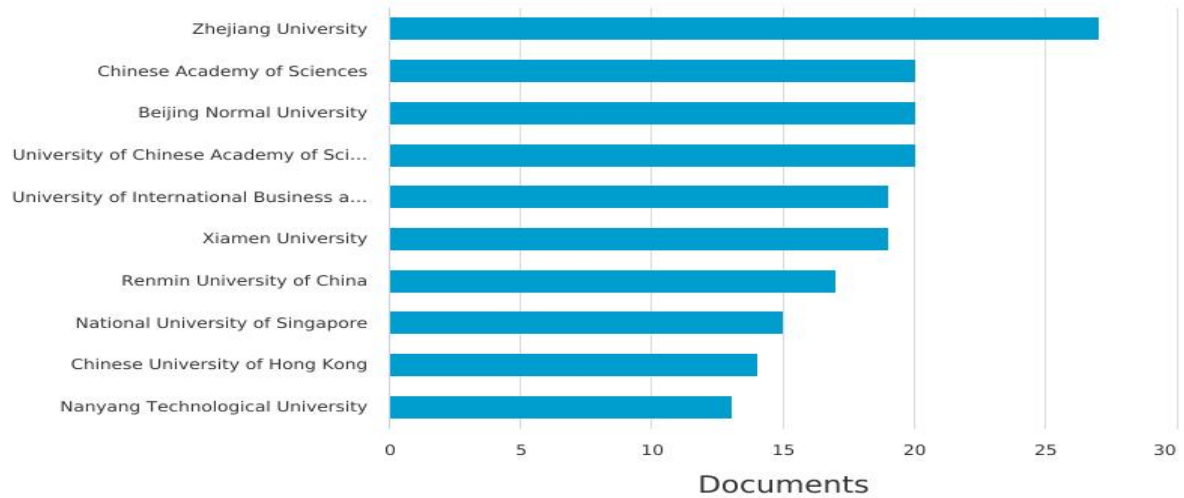***Figure 2 Top Contributing Countries on BRI***

4.1.4 Analysis of the Top Affiliations of Publications

Figure 3 below indicates that Zheijang University is the top-most contributing institution to publish articles on BRI. The figure also reveals that except for the National University of Singapore, most of the research output is primarily being contributed from different universities and research organizations in China.

Documents by affiliation

Compare the document counts for up to 15 affiliations.

Scopus

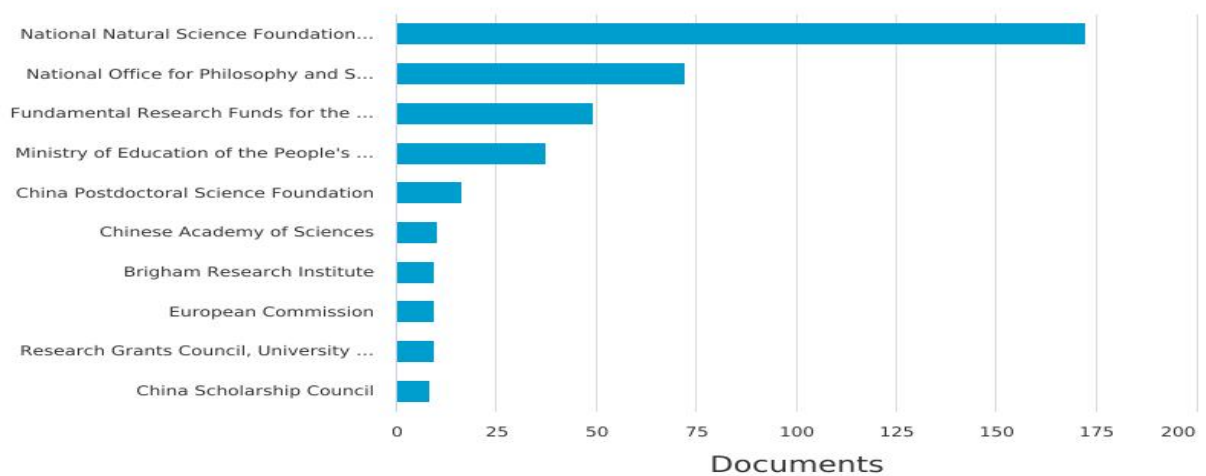*Figure 3 Top 15 Affiliations for BRI-Related Research Output*

4.1.5 *Analysis of the Top Sponsors for BRI Research*

Figure 4 below reveals the top 15 institutions sponsoring for publications on topics relating to BRI in the subject domain of business, management, finance, economic and econometrics etc. The figure shows that the major funding is being provided by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) that provides funding to promote research and develop international cooperation. Similarly, most of the funding comes from Chinese institutions while amongst the Non-Chinese international sponsors, the European Commission is also among the top 15 sponsors.

Documents by funding sponsor

Compare the document counts for up to 15 funding sponsors.

Scopus

Figure 4 Top BRI Research Sponsors

32

5. Keywords Co-Occurrence Results

The analysis in this stage were conducted by using VOSviewer software. The content analysis of the most frequent keywords that co-occurred a minimum of 5 times was conducted to reveal the patterns of research done in the topic area of BRI. Figure 5 below displays each keyword. Each keyword is illustrated by a circle and a label. The size of the circle and label depicts the extent to which keywords are associated with each other. Similarly, the proximity between the keywords reflects the association with one another.

The connecting lines between the circles indicate the linkage between the keywords. The thicker the connecting lines show the greater association with other keywords. The co-occurrence map also reveals three major clusters. For instance, the strongest links are among BRI and energy efficiency, multilateralism, sustainable development and transportation infrastructure possess a significant place in the visual map that are shown in red-coloured cluster lines. Cluster 2 connections are shown in green lines that reveal co-occurrences between BRI and economic policy. Similarly, Cluster 3 reveals co-occurrences in blue colour among BRI, China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Foreign Direct Investment.
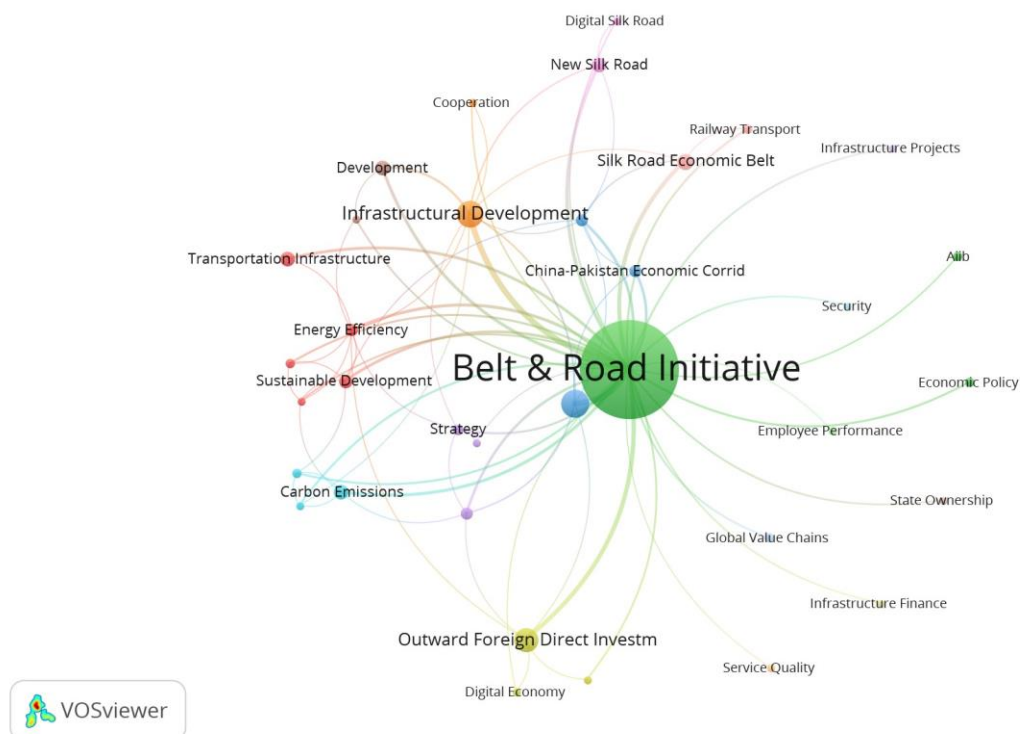

Figure 5 **Keywords Co-occurrence Visualization Network Map**

The descriptive analysis can be further displayed through geographical origin of the articles published. Figure 6 below displays the collaborative research publications between the authors having origins from different countries. Cluster 1 of the countries connected on publishing articles are shown in red colour. The countries with the most publications connected with China are Cyprus, Indonesia, Macao, Oman, Pakistan, Peru, South Korea, United Arab Emirates and Vietnam. Similarly, Cluster 2 displayed with green colour reveal countries such as, Bangladesh, Belgium, Cambodia, France, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Nigeria and Thailand have co-publications with China.
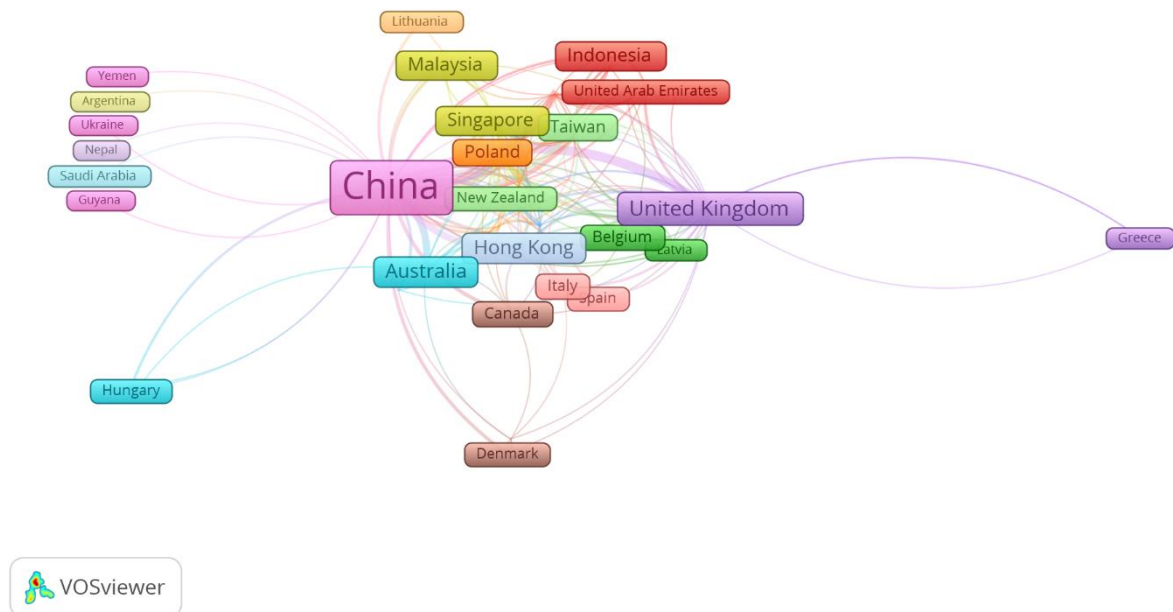

Figure 6 **Geographical Origin Co-occurrence Visualization Network Map**

The descriptive analysis at Stage 3 was conducted by segregating the number of publications linked with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on the topic of BRI within the subject area of Business and related fields. Table 3 below provides the list of SDGs along with the number of publications. The highest number of articles (240) published mostly focus on the Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure relating to SDG 9. The reason behind is the subject-area specific bibliometric results. Moreover, 54 articles published are connected with SDG 7 which is, affordable and clean energy; 45 articles relate to decent work and economic growth (SDG 8); 41 articles published with connection to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16). While the least published articles focus on zero hunger (SDG 2); life below water (SDG 14); and reduced inequalities (SDG 10) etc.

Table 3 Number of Publications Related to 17 SDGs

Sr. No	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals	No. of Publications
1	1	NO POVERTY	11
2	2	ZERO HUNGER	0
3	3	GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	5
4	4	QUALITY EDUCATION	1
5	5	GENDER EQUALITY	5
6	6	CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	4
7	7	AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	54
8	8	DECENT WORK AND ECONMIC GROWTH	45
9	9	INDUSTRY, INNOVATION, AND INFRASTRUCTURE	240
10	10	REDUCED INEQUALITIES	1
11	11	SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	2
12	12	RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	13
13	13	CLIMATE ACTION	13
14	14	LIFE BELOW WATER	0
15	15	LIFE ON LAND	7
16	16	PEACE, JUSTICE, AND STRONG INSTITUITIONS	41
17	17	PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS	37

6. Discussion

The aim of this study was to assess the progress of research on BRI, which aims to bolster regional connectivity and create a global market through infrastructure development. The initiative seeks to cultivate strong cultural, economic, and political ties between China and its regional counterparts. The findings indicate that a majority of studies on this topic originate from China, with the rest of them are mostly contributed from countries like the USA and UK (Xu, Yu, Yang, & Yu, 2021), underscoring a dearth of localized research publications from

regional partners such as Central Asian, African, and other Belt and Road Corridor (BRC) countries.

When considering the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it's worth noting that, despite the potential of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects to stimulate job creation and alleviate poverty, there is a conspicuous lack of research publications on this front. Similarly, while economic development has the capacity to enhance agricultural productivity and combat malnutrition by improving access to nutritious food, this aspect remains largely unexplored in current studies. Furthermore, there is a notable dearth of research focusing directly on vocational training, which has the potential to significantly boost labor placement and mobility.

A significant shared concern among most regional countries is the drive for gender equality, except for China. Considering that a substantial portion of Belt and Road Corridor (BRC) nations have a female population representing roughly half of their total demographic, the scarcity of gender-focused studies within the BRI context is notably apparent in current literature. Furthermore, the vital issue of clean water access, which poses a critical challenge for many BRCs, unfortunately receives inadequate attention in research examining the region's economic growth through the Belt and Road Initiative.

The findings highlight a heightened emphasis on the adoption of renewable energy systems, which have the potential to ameliorate the environmental impacts associated with industries (Tracy, Shvarts, Simonov, & Babenko, 2017). A prominent challenge demanding academic scrutiny lies in the strategic planning of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects aimed at alleviating income disparities and reducing inequalities. There is an urgent need to pinpoint and examine marginalized regions and communities, while offering recommendations to develop projects from a compassionate standpoint. Additionally, the conservation of marine ecosystems and the preservation of biodiversity during port construction warrant further attention.

In future studies, it is imperative to delve into the economic dimensions of the geopolitical challenges linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For instance, the recent unveiling of an economic corridor during the G20 Summit in September 2023, aiming to connect the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, warrants examination in terms of its implications for the BRI.

Furthermore, the proliferation of digital technology necessitates an investigation into the role of digitalization, encompassing artificial intelligence and e-commerce, among BRI partner countries. Given that not all BRI partner countries possess equally robust digital

capabilities, there is an opportunity to glean fresh insights or study cases to discern their implications within the BRI context.

An area that stands out as significantly overlooked pertains to the regulatory and legal frameworks that govern operations within BRI countries. Understanding the prevailing corporate laws in each BRI nation is essential to prevent potential hindrances to economic progress. Likewise, challenges related to cross-border dispute resolution and navigating intellectual property rights in BRI-related trade remain underexplored domains. Of utmost importance is the implementation of Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR), particularly in the case of trade from Pakistan through Afghanistan, which demands careful consideration. Additionally, studies focusing on security risks associated with BRI, including cyber-security threats and language barriers among Belt and Road Corridor (BRC) nations and their potential economic impacts, are warranted.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need for in-depth case study analyses to observe the unique impacts, issues, and challenges that emerge along the BRI corridor. This should be done while keeping a keen eye on the stakeholders involved and the public's perceptions regarding BRI projects.

Conclusion

The exploration of BRI within the realms of business and economics remains an evolving area of study, capturing the interest of numerous researchers. This paper systematically analyzed a dataset comprising 1038 articles indexed in the SCOPUS database, spanning the last two decades. The findings underscore China's significant contribution to the body of research pertaining to BRI within the field of business and economics, with notable contributions also originating from the United States and United Kingdom.

It is noteworthy that, thus far, a comprehensive network of collaborative authorship among the regional Belt and Road Corridor (BRC) nations has yet to be fully established. This gap in cooperation potentially overlooks vital domestic issues, challenges, and untapped opportunities for stakeholders involved in the BRI. Additionally, the predominant focus of research efforts has predominantly centered around environmental protection, potentially neglecting other critical sustainable goals such as zero hunger, gender equality, and reduced inequalities within the domain of business and economics.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this study has certain limitations. Specifically, it concentrates solely on publications within the subject domain of business and

economics, and solely includes articles available in the SCOPUS database. This may entail some level of exclusion of relevant research from other disciplines or alternative sources.

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