

Bibliometrics of Social Mobility Studies in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This bibliometric study explores the evolution and thematic landscapes of social mobility research within the digital age, drawing on an extensive dataset derived from the Scopus database from 2000 to 2025. We conducted a comprehensive analysis to identify significant trends, collaboration patterns, and emerging themes in the literature. Our findings highlight the enduring relevance of traditional factors such as education, income, and occupation in discussions of social mobility, while also pointing to the growing importance of digital literacy and access. The study reveals a dynamic field characterized by robust international collaborations, with a notable increase in contributions from non-Western countries. Additionally, the analysis suggests significant gaps, particularly concerning the long-term effects of digital technologies on social mobility and the integration of mental health factors. These insights are crucial for informing policy and future research directions, ensuring that advancements in digital technology foster rather than hinder social mobility.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the intersection of social mobility and digital technology has become a vibrant field of scholarly inquiry. Social mobility, defined as the movement of individuals, families, or groups through a system of social hierarchy or stratification, is a critical metric of economic health and equality in any society [1]. Traditionally, studies in this area focused on the impacts of education, economic policies, and family background. However, with the onset of the digital age, researchers are increasingly turning to digital footprints as a novel source of data to analyze patterns and causes of social mobility [1]. The digital age has introduced a range of

technologies that significantly impact everyday life and, by extension, social mobility. Digital platforms, big data analytics, and the pervasive reach of the internet have reshaped how individuals access opportunities for education and employment [2]. These technologies have not only democratized access to resources but have also created new barriers and widened existing inequalities, making the study of social mobility more complex and multifaceted [3]. For example, the digital divide can reinforce or even exacerbate social stratification, impacting individuals' ability to climb the social ladder [4].

Furthermore, the methodologies used in social mobility research have evolved due

to the digital transformation. Bibliometric analysis, which involves the quantitative study of written publications, reveals the evolution of research trends and thematic concentrations over time [5]. By applying bibliometric methods to the study of social mobility in the digital age, scholars can uncover the trajectory of research, key themes, and gaps in the literature. This approach also helps in understanding the influence of digital technologies on social mobility from a scholarly perspective [6]. Despite the burgeoning research, there remains a gap in comprehensive bibliometric studies that consolidate the vast array of literature on social mobility in the context of digital advancement. Most existing reviews and analyses focus either on traditional aspects of social mobility or on digital impacts in isolation, without integrating the two spheres [7]. Additionally, the rapid pace of technological change often outstrips the speed at which academic research can adapt, leading to a lag in understanding the current and future implications of digital technologies on social mobility [8].

This research gap underscores the need for a systematic bibliometric analysis that bridges the dual focus on social mobility and digital technologies. Such an analysis is crucial not only for mapping the existing research landscape but also for identifying under-researched areas that could yield valuable insights. By synthesizing diverse research findings, scholars and policymakers can better understand the multifaceted relationships between digital technologies and social mobility, enabling more informed decisions and interventions [9]. The objective of this study is to conduct a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of the literature on social mobility in the digital age. This will involve identifying the most influential studies, authors, and journals, as well as analyzing trends and patterns in the themes and methodologies employed over time. Ultimately, this research aims to provide a thorough overview of the field, highlighting both established findings and emerging trends, thereby offering a foundation for future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *The Concept of Social Mobility and Digital Technology*

Social mobility has long been a central theme in sociological research, reflecting the movement of individuals or groups within or between social strata in a society. It is influenced by various factors including education, income, occupation, and social capital [7]. In the digital age, technology has emerged as a powerful driver of social mobility, providing new avenues for upward movement but also creating potential barriers that could hinder this progress [8]. Digital literacy and access to technology are increasingly recognized as new dimensions of inequality that affect social mobility. Studies by [10] highlight how digital literacy skills are crucial for accessing better educational and employment opportunities, which are key determinants of upward social mobility. Conversely, lack of access to digital tools can entrench existing disparities, a phenomenon often referred to as the 'digital divide' [11]. This divide not only encompasses access to devices and the internet but also the skills needed to effectively use these technologies.

2.2 *Impact of Digital Platforms on Social Mobility*

Digital platforms such as LinkedIn, Coursera, and Udemy have been instrumental in creating pathways for learning and professional development that are independent of traditional socio-economic constraints. Research by [12] indicates that online professional networks can facilitate connections that might otherwise be inaccessible to individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, thereby enhancing career mobility. Moreover, educational technology (EdTech) platforms offer scalable solutions for overcoming geographic and financial barriers to education, as documented by [13]. However, the impact of these platforms is not uniformly positive.

Critiques by [14] argue that while digital platforms can provide opportunities, they also risk reinforcing existing social hierarchies unless access is widely and equitably distributed. Furthermore, the rapid pace of technological change can outstrip the ability of individuals and institutions to adapt, potentially leading to greater, not lesser, inequality.

2.3 Bibliometric Studies on Digital Age and Social Mobility

Bibliometric analysis provides insights into the evolution and focus of research within academic fields. A survey of bibliometric studies related to social mobility and digital technologies reveals a growing interest in how digitalization influences social dynamics. [15] conducted a comprehensive analysis of publications from the last decade and found an increasing emphasis on the role of technology in education and its subsequent effects on social mobility. Their study highlights a trend towards more empirical research that utilizes digital trace data to examine real-world impacts. Another key theme in bibliometric reviews is the methodological innovation brought about by digital technologies. Big data analytics and machine learning are being increasingly employed to analyze large

datasets on social phenomena, offering deeper and more nuanced insights into patterns of social mobility [16]. These techniques enable researchers to handle complex variables and interactions at scale, providing a more detailed understanding of the barriers and enablers of social mobility.

3. METHOD

This study conducts a bibliometric analysis focused solely on literature sourced from the Scopus database to explore the theme of social mobility in the digital age. We selected articles published between 2000 and 2025 using keywords such as "social mobility," "digital age," "digital divide," "digital technology," and "bibliometric analysis." The data collection involved extracting metadata including publication year, citation count, journal impact factor, and geographical distribution of the research. For the analysis, we used VOSviewer software to generate visualization maps for keywords and co-authorship networks, which helped identify predominant themes, key studies, and existing gaps in the literature.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

a. Keyword Co-Occurrence Network

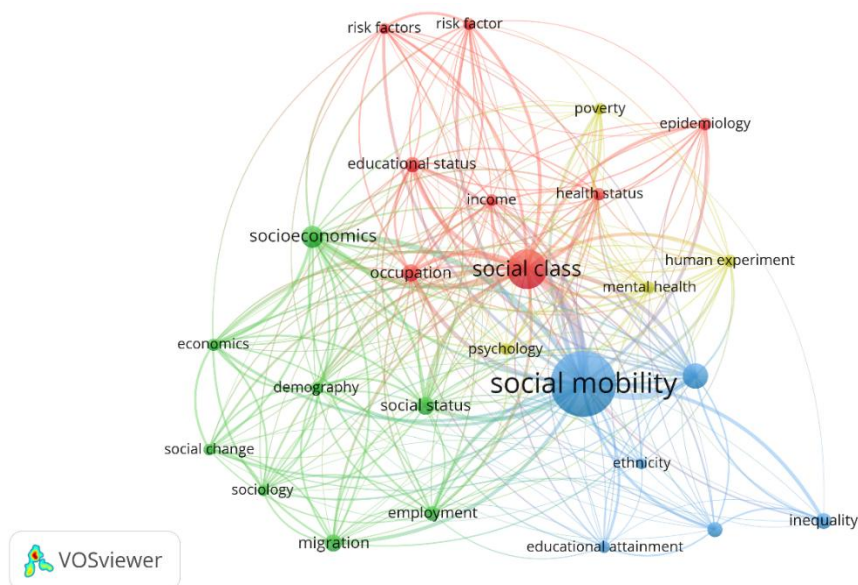


Figure 1. Network Visualization

Source: Data Analysis, 2025

This visualization illustrates the intricate network of keywords associated with social mobility research. Central to this map is the term "social mobility," depicted as a prominent node, suggesting it is a core subject in the literature. Connected closely are the terms "social class," "socioeconomics," and "inequality," indicating these are crucial factors frequently discussed in the context of social mobility. This connection underscores the interplay between an individual's or group's social class and their opportunities for upward mobility, with socioeconomic status being a significant determinant. Surrounding "social mobility," we see clusters of terms related to various social science disciplines and factors impacting mobility. For example, "education," "employment," and "income" form a tightly-knit cluster, reflecting the well-established link between educational attainment, job opportunities, and income levels in facilitating or hindering social mobility. This cluster suggests that higher education and employment opportunities are vital in enabling individuals to move up the social ladder.

Another interesting aspect of this network is the presence of keywords such as "migration," "demography," and "ethnicity." This indicates a robust discourse on how demographic changes, including migration patterns and ethnic diversity, affect social mobility. These factors often introduce complex dynamics into social structures, influencing mobility both positively and negatively, depending on the socio-economic and political context. Lastly, the network highlights emerging themes such as "mental health" and "health status," which are linked to "risk factors" and "poverty." This suggests a growing recognition of the role that individual health and wellness play in social mobility. The connection between mental health and social mobility might be indicative of the broader impacts of socio-economic status on health outcomes, which in turn affect educational and occupational achievements. This emerging focus reflects an interdisciplinary approach in social mobility research, integrating insights from psychology, public health, and social sciences to better understand the complexities of social stratification.

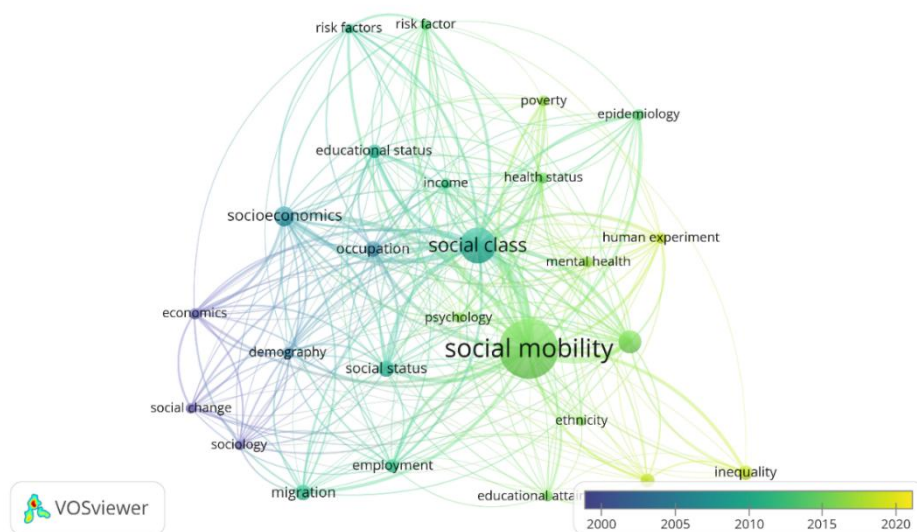


Figure 2. Network Overlay
 Source: Data Analysis, 2025

The second visualization map with a timeline overlay highlights the dynamic nature of research themes related to social mobility from 2000 to 2020. The timeline feature shows how certain topics have gained or diminished in prominence over the years, with the size and color of the nodes indicating the frequency and recency of discussions within the literature. The term "social mobility" remains a central node throughout the two decades, reflecting its sustained relevance in social sciences research. The close connections to "social class," "socioeconomics," and "inequality" maintain their importance, underscoring the persistent focus on economic and class factors in discussions of social mobility.

Notably, the term "inequality" appears to become more prominent towards the later years in the dataset, indicated by the shift in color towards yellow, suggesting an increased focus in recent years. This could reflect a growing academic and societal concern about widening economic disparities and their impact on social mobility. This shift aligns

with global economic trends and increased public discourse on inequality, especially in the wake of financial crises and political shifts. The expanded discussions around "education attainment" and "employment" in recent years further emphasize the role of these factors in addressing or exacerbating social mobility.

Moreover, newer themes such as "mental health" have started to emerge and connect with traditional social mobility discussions, suggesting an interdisciplinary expansion of the field. This inclusion indicates a recognition of the broader impacts of social stratification, not just on economic outcomes but also on individual well-being. The evolving network of terms reflects a broadening of the social mobility discourse to include more comprehensive views of how various factors interconnect, offering deeper insights into how societies can address the complex challenges related to social mobility in the digital age.

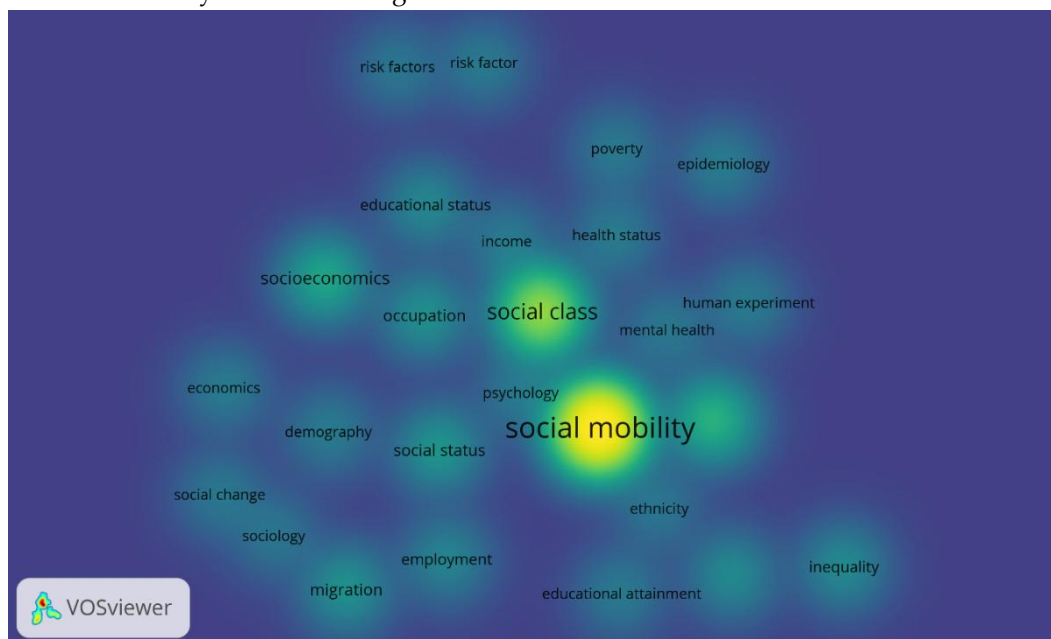


Figure 3. Network Density
Source: Data Analysis, 2025

This visualization presents a density view that highlights the most frequently discussed topics within the research field of social mobility, with the brightness of areas indicating the concentration of activity around specific terms. At the center, "social mobility" shines as the most prominent term, acting as the core around which other related concepts orbit. The close proximity of terms like "social class," "socioeconomics," and "inequality" to the central node of "social mobility" illustrates their strong interconnections and frequent co-occurrence in scholarly discussions. This central cluster suggests that discussions around social mobility

are deeply intertwined with socioeconomic factors and class distinctions. The periphery of the map, less illuminated yet significant, includes terms such as "mental health," "education attainment," and "employment," which connect to the central themes but with somewhat lesser density, indicating these topics are increasingly relevant but perhaps newer in the discourse. The presence of "mental health" near the core concepts of social mobility underscores a growing recognition of psychological factors as both influences on and outcomes of social mobility.

b. Co-Authorship Visualization

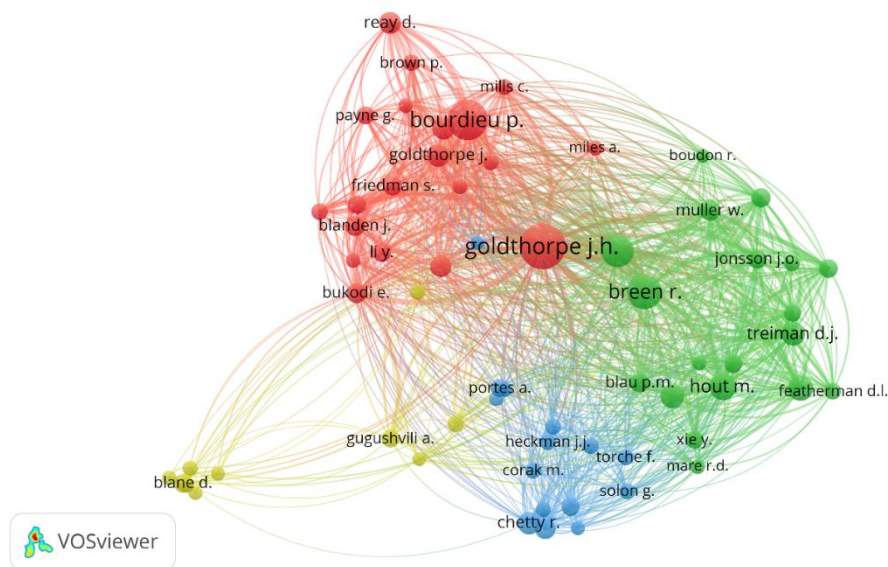


Figure 4. Author Visualization
Source: Data Analysis, 2025

The visualization presented through VOSviewer depicts a co-authorship network of scholars in the field of social mobility, highlighting the relationships and collaborations among key researchers. The prominent nodes, such as "Goldthorpe J.H.," "Bourdieu P.," and "Breen R.," represent highly influential authors whose works have significantly shaped the discourse on social mobility. The density and

variety of connections, indicated by the colors and thickness of the lines, demonstrate the extent of collaborations and intellectual exchanges across different researchers and subfields. The clusters formed around these central figures suggest thematic or methodological similarities, with each color representing a different group or network of researchers who

frequently collaborate or cite each other

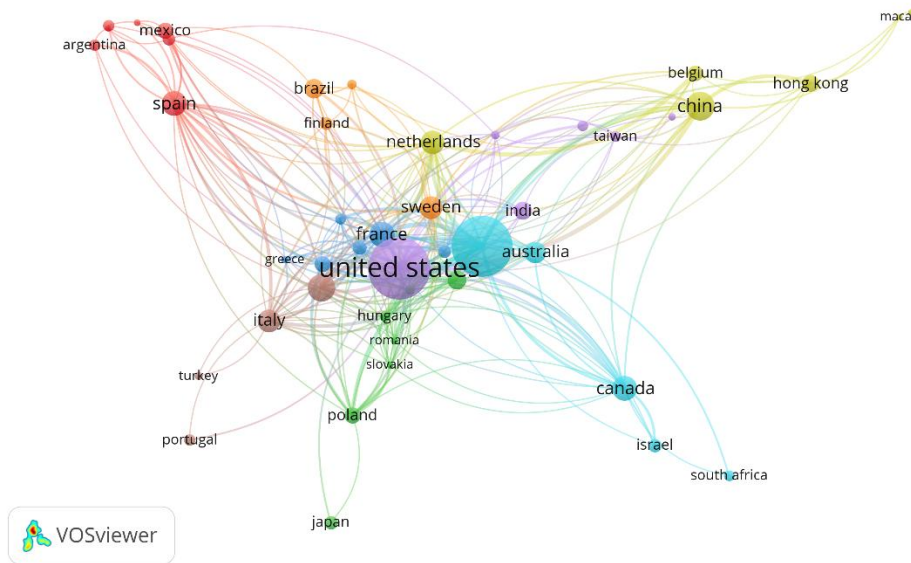


Figure 5. Country Visualization
Source: Data Analysis, 2025

The visualization illustrates the global collaboration network among countries in the field of social mobility research. This map showcases how interconnected research efforts are across the globe, with the United States acting as a central hub, indicating a high volume of collaborations and research output related to social mobility. The size and placement of each node (country) reflect the intensity and centrality of research activity in that region. European countries like France,

Germany, and the United Kingdom, along with Canada and Australia, also appear prominently, suggesting robust exchanges and contributions to the field. The diverse connections spanning continents—from Argentina and Brazil in South America to India and China in Asia—highlight the universal relevance of social mobility issues and the collaborative efforts undertaken internationally to address them.

c. Citation Analysis

Table 1. Most Cited Article

Citations	Author and Year	Title
40336	[17]	The Strength of Weak Ties
19263	[18]	Frailty in older adults: evidence for a phenotype.
6332	[19]	Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy
6328	[20]	Social Network Analysis
4868	[21]	The American Occupational Structure
4187	[22]	The New Mobilities Paradigm
4139	[23]	Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social-Disorganization Theory
3895	[24]	Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers
3381	[25]	Substantial undocumented infection facilitates the rapid dissemination of novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)
3262	[26]	Pandemics, tourism and global change: a rapid assessment of COVID-19

Source: Output Publish or Perish, 2025

4.2 Discussion

The bibliometric analysis conducted in this study reveals a complex and interconnected landscape of research on social mobility within the digital age, emphasizing significant thematic clusters and the evolution of scholarly focus over time. As elucidated by our findings, there has been a discernible shift in the research topics from traditional socioeconomic factors such as income and education to more nuanced discussions of digital access and its implications on social mobility.

a. Evolving Themes in Social Mobility Research

One of the most prominent findings from this study is the persistent centrality of "social mobility" as a research focus, closely linked with "social class" and "socioeconomics." This ties back to the foundational theories of social mobility, which often discuss the roles of education, occupation, and income as key factors influencing upward mobility in society. However, our analysis indicates that alongside these traditional factors, newer dimensions such as "digital divide" and "digital literacy" have emerged as significant themes. This reflects a growing recognition within the academic community that digital resources and capabilities can both facilitate and impede social mobility, depending on the access and educational resources available to different social strata. The increased focus on "inequality" in recent literature, especially post-2010, highlights the intensified concern among researchers about the widening disparities in digital access. Studies increasingly argue that without equitable access to technology, certain populations might be systematically excluded from opportunities for upward mobility. This has implications for policy-making, particularly in the

realms of education and urban development, where ensuring access to digital tools can be seen as a lever for improving social equity.

b. International Collaborations and Research Impact

The analysis of co-authorship and country collaboration networks reveals a robust pattern of international partnerships in social mobility research. The United States, being a central node, signifies its role as a major contributor to the field, likely due to its extensive academic infrastructure and funding capabilities. However, the strong links between countries such as the UK, Canada, Australia, and various European nations underscore the global nature of social mobility issues. These collaborations are crucial as they allow for a diverse range of experiences and perspectives to be integrated into the research, enriching the understanding of how different social policies affect mobility in various cultural contexts. Interestingly, our findings also draw attention to emerging contributors from regions such as Asia and Latin America, represented by countries like China, India, Brazil, and Mexico. The participation of these countries is vital as it provides insights into social mobility within rapidly developing economic contexts, where digital technologies often play a transformative role.

c. Gaps in Current Research and Future Directions

Despite the comprehensive coverage of topics in the field, certain gaps remain evident. For instance, there is a relative paucity of research focusing on the long-term impacts of digital education tools on social mobility. While numerous studies highlight the immediate benefits of digital education platforms, fewer explore how these benefits translate into long-term social mobility,

particularly for disadvantaged groups. Additionally, the role of mental health as a factor in social mobility is not as prominently featured in the literature. As suggested by the emerging links to this topic in recent studies, mental health could significantly impact an individual's ability to improve their social and economic status. Future research could benefit from a more integrated approach that considers psychological well-being as part of the social mobility equation.

4.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this bibliometric analysis have several implications for policymakers. First, there is a clear need for policies that not only provide access to digital technologies but also ensure that individuals have the necessary skills to use these tools effectively. Educational policies should integrate digital literacy as a core component, preparing individuals to participate fully in a digitally driven economy. Moreover, the importance of international collaborations suggests that

policy exchanges and shared initiatives could be beneficial. Learning from the successes and challenges of different countries can help in crafting more effective social mobility strategies, particularly in places undergoing rapid technological and economic changes.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a detailed overview of the state of research on social mobility in the digital age, identifying key themes, trends, and gaps in the literature. It underscores the importance of incorporating digital access into the discourse on social mobility and highlights the value of international research collaborations. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, ongoing research will be crucial in addressing the challenges and opportunities that arise, ensuring that advancements in technology contribute positively to social mobility globally. This comprehensive understanding will ultimately aid in developing targeted interventions that can foster real and sustainable improvements in social mobility.

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