

Spirituality & Social Work: A Bibliometric Analysis of SCOPUS Publications using VOSviewer

Yukta Tomar*

Senior Research Fellow, Department of Social Work, Central University of Himachal Pradesh,

Babita

Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Central University of Jammu.

Shashi Punam

Professor, Department of Social Work, Central University of Himachal Pradesh.

*Corresponding author Email: yukta.tomar.200@gmail.com

Abstract: *Spirituality and social work have traditionally been associated with advancing social justice, moral principles, and human development. To inform research and practice, it is essential to examine the key players, trends, and thematic advances within the social work profession. Therefore, an bibliometric analysis of the Scopus database was conducted to investigate global literature on social work and spirituality between 1992 and 2025. The final analysis, based on 283 documents, utilized co-occurrence of keywords, co-authorship, citation analysis, and bibliographic coupling as indicators. VOSviewer software, version 1.6.20, was employed to analyze the data and visualize research networks and trends.*

Among the 283 documents examined, 83.39% were original research papers, predominantly published in English. The top contributor was the "United States", followed by "Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom." "Spirituality" and "Social Work" were the most recurring keywords, and recent trends center on professional practice and the roles of social workers. The key contributors were David R. Hodge and Edward R. Cand will foster the expansion of the "social work field, encouraging comprehensive and inclusive social work intervention practice globally. Although increased research trends were reported, few collaborations between institutions and nations were seen, which meant a necessity for more robust global research networks. The bibliometric analysis in this study shows the growing importance and relevance of spirituality in social work practice, with major contributions from Western countries. Further, research in the field must aim to explore ideas and topics from different cultural settings, promoting international collaborations, interdisciplinary practice, and addressing emerging issues in the incorporation of spirituality in the social work profession. This will foster the expansion of the social work field, encouraging complete and inclusive social work intervention practice globally.

Keywords: Spirituality, Social Work, Bibliometric Analysis, VOSviewer

INTRODUCTION:

Spirituality and social work have traditionally been interlinked, with both professions sharing a common interest in promoting human well-being, moral values, and social justice. Spirituality is defined as the pursuit of meaning, purpose, and relatedness beyond the self and plays a significant role in most individuals' lives, shaping coping mechanisms, resilience, and overall mental well-being (Canda et al., 2019; Hodge, 2001). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) indicates that the primary goal of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being by assisting individuals in meeting their complex and basic needs, with a particular focus on those who are impoverished, oppressed, vulnerable, and deprived of necessary resources for development (NASW, n.d.). Conversely, spirituality can assist individuals experiencing personal difficulties, crises, or unrest by fostering inner calm and a sense of connectedness to a power greater than oneself (McLean, n.d.). Spirituality's core focus lies in helping individuals discover meaning and purpose in their lives, whether through self-actualization or through connection to a higher force (Hardy, 2021). Over time, the intersection between spirituality and social work practice has been explored in academic literature, leading to increasing research on the impact of these elements not only on clients but also on social workers themselves. As evidenced by the growing number of publications and presentations, courses offered in social work schools, and the establishment of the Society for Spirituality and Social Work, numerous helping professions—including medicine, nursing, psychology, marriage and family therapy, and social work—are currently considering integrating spirituality into their practices (Sheridan, 2001).

This bibliometric study investigates the significance of spirituality within the field of social work. Bibliometric analysis, a quantitative assessment of academic literature, sheds insight on the evolution, trends, and collaborative patterns in this multidisciplinary domain (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Bibliometrics employs statistical methods to quantitatively examine research literature on a specific subject, utilizing mathematical techniques (Chen et al., 2014). Bibliometric evaluation looks at publications to identify their influence and connectivity. It also aids in determining the impact of authors, institutions, and nations within specific research areas. Furthermore, it can examine principal research areas, evaluate study quality, and predict future research directions (Yu et al., 2020). Bibliometric

analysis facilitates the discovery and scrutiny of high volumes of scientific information (Donthu et al., 2021). Scopus is a web-based, extensive, multidisciplinary database and repository holding research publications, citation data and abstracts. Among the fields indexed by Scopus are arts and humanities, science and technology, social science, etc. Data from the Scopus database can be exported and analyzed using tools and software, such as Vosviewer.

The existence of spirituality as a core aspect of human well-being remains valued. Therefore, there is a need to inquire regarding how spirituality is integrated into social work research and practice. Despite the importance of spirituality in social work, a few bibliometric analyses in the area have been published. Therefore, the current study presents a bibliometric analysis of the global literature on spirituality and social work between 1992 and 2025. It also aims to provide an overview and assess the global literature in this area, identify leading contributors and influential papers, and measure collaborative networks. This paper presents a detailed overview of the development of this domain through an analysis of publication trends, co-authorship networks, and thematic clusters, providing insights into the trajectory of this field and highlighting opportunities for further investigation and interdisciplinary collaboration. The bibliometric analysis provides a foundation for further developing how modern social work can integrate concepts of the sacred with individual and collective needs, thereby increasing the profession's ability to facilitate improved outcomes for persons and societies worldwide.

Research Method

Scopus was selected as the exclusive database source due to its comprehensive coverage across all fields, standardized indexing, and robust analytical tools, ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings. Furthermore, Scopus provides detailed citation information, author profiles, and institutional affiliations, facilitating the mapping of research trends, author networks, and citation patterns.

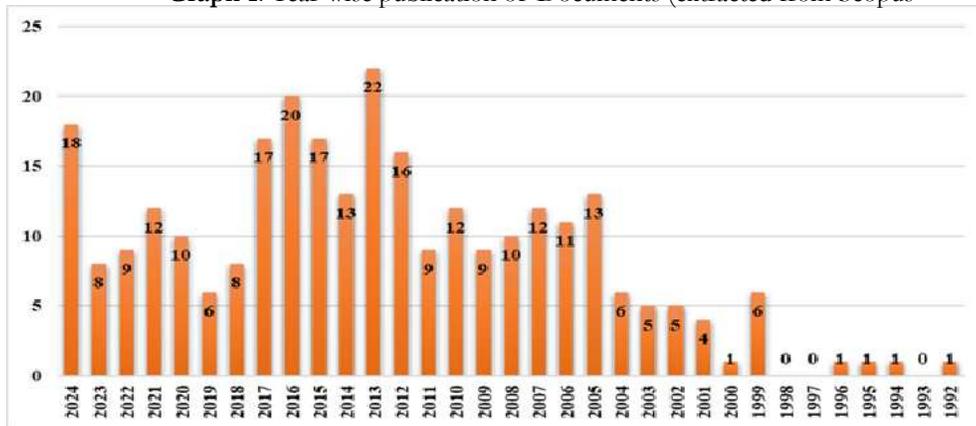
The global literature on spirituality and social work published between 1992 and 2025 was scanned using Scopus. The search utilized the keywords "Spirituality" AND "Social Work" to identify publications. A total of 807 documents were identified, spanning various subject areas. The search area was limited to the social sciences to refine the results. The search was limited to the social sciences to refine the results, and the keyword search was restricted to documents containing both terms." The subject area of social sciences has 445 articles containing the keywords spirituality and social work. Subsequently, the search criteria were again narrowed to documents exclusively containing the primary keywords "spirituality" and "social work." Of these, 243 publications featured "spirituality as the main keyword, while 157 contained social work as the main keyword. Following this refinement, a total of 283 documents—including original research papers, book chapters, and books—were included in the final analysis. The data was extracted in CSV format from Scopus on 24th January 2025. The data contained citation information, bibliographic information, abstract keywords, etc. VOSviewer software (version 1.6.20) was used to analyze co-occurrence, co-authorship, citation, and bibliographic information.

Results:

1. Publication Output: A Bibliometric Analysis

The final study comprised 283 documents retrieved from the Scopus database, focusing on the intersection of spirituality and social work. Of these publications, 236 (83.39%) were original research articles, 20 (7.06%) were review papers, 17 (6.00%) were book chapters, 3 (1.06%) were notes, 3 (1.06%) were books, 3 (1.06%) were editorials, and 1 (0.35%) was a letter. There was just one paper published in German, Czech, Croatian, and Afrikaans, whereas nearly all of the publications 278 (98.23%) were authored in English and 3 (1.06%) in Turkish. Of the sources that published these documents, 263 (92.93%) appeared in journals, while the remaining 20 (7.06%) were published in books. The majority of the documents—22 in total—were published in 2013, followed by 2016 (20 total) and 2024 (18 total) (See Graph 1).

Graph 1: Year-wise publication of Documents (extracted from Scopus)

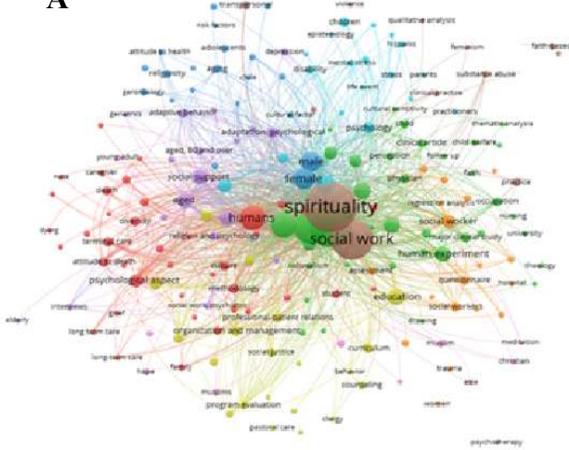


1. Co-occurrence of Keywords: A Bibliometric Analysis

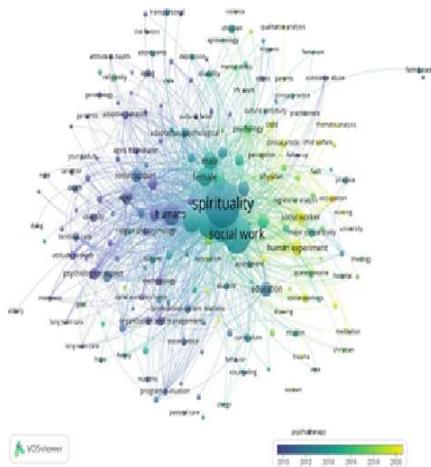
The final analysis included keywords provided by the authors that occurred in the Scopus database more than three times. Of the 1223 total keywords, 196 met the threshold criteria, forming nine clusters with 4507 links and a total link strength of 11402. "Spirituality" was the most frequently occurring keyword (243 times), with a link strength

of 1478. “Social Work” was the second most common keyword (157 times), with a total link strength of 1235. “Religion” was the third most common keyword (149 times), with a link strength of 1380, followed by “Human” (97 occurrences, 1299 link strength) (See Figure 1A). The keyword co-occurrence overlay visualization demonstrates the most commonly used keywords throughout time. The analysis revealed nine clusters, each marked by varying colours. The keywords in the yellow cluster indicate the most recent keywords that have become prominent since 2018. These new key words are profession, social workers, and human experiment, which reflect an increasing emphasis on the professionalisation of social work practice and the practical application of spiritually sensitive social work(See Figure 1B).

A



B



“Figure 1: Bibliometric analysis of keyword co-occurrence, visualized using network and overlay visualizations in publications related to “Spirituality” and “Social Work.” (A) Keyword co-occurrence visualized as a network. (B) Keyword co-occurrence visualized using an overlay. The size of the nodes shows the frequency of the occurrence of a keyword. The shorter the distance between nodes, the larger the number of co-occurrences. However, the curves between the nodes show their co-occurrence in the same publication.”

1. Publications and Citations: A Bibliometric Analysis

A. The final analysis included only authors who published a minimum of three documents with a minimum of three citations. Of the 465 authors considered, only 21 (4.25%) met the threshold criteria, representing a select few researchers whose contributions have been widely recognized academically. Among these, Hodge, David R., was the most cited author, with 710 citations in 16 published documents. His prolific body of work indicates leadership in developing research at the interface of spirituality and social work, and its theoretical and practical applications in this field(See Table 1).

Table 1: Top 12 Most Active Authors and Countries in *Spirituality and Social Work * Publications.

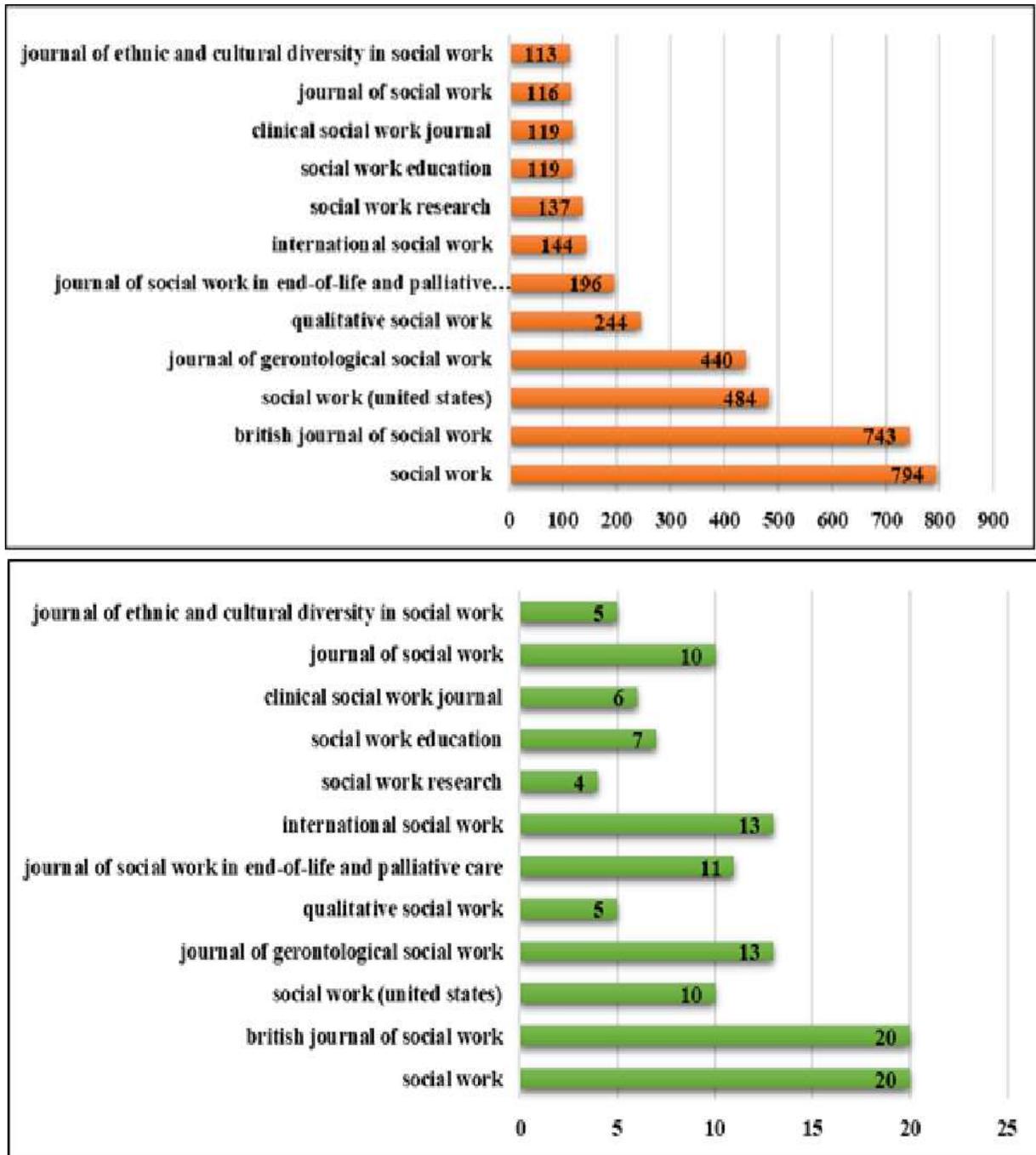
Author	Documents	Citations
Hodge, David R.	16	710
Oxhandler, Holly K.	9	342
Gray, Mel	4	249
Furman, Leola Dyrud	5	213
Benson, Perry W.	4	211
Grimwood, Cordelia	3	192
Reese, Dona J.	5	179
Canda, Edward R.	6	169
Nelson-Becker, Holly	6	144
Pargament, Kenneth I.	3	84
Coholic, Diana	5	72
Crisp, Beth R.	3	71

B. Citation of Countries: The analysis included only those countries with a minimum of three publications and citations. A total of 30 countries demonstrated research activity in these areas, but only 12 (38.57%) met the threshold requirement. Among these nations, the United States (US) ranked highest, at number one, with 148 published papers and a cumulative citation count of 3,475, indicating its prominent position in spirituality and social work. Canada took the second position with 22 publications and 469 citations, and Australia took the third position with 22 published papers and 456 citations. These results highlight the important contributions of Australia and North America to the international discussion of spirituality in social work practice(See Table 2).

Table 2: The Top 12 Most Active Countries in Spirituality and Social Work Publications

Country	Documents	Citations
United States	148	3475
Canada	22	469
Australia	22	456
United Kingdom	22	450
Israel	8	268
Spain	3	232
South Africa	13	64
Hong Kong	4	57
India	8	37
Zimbabwe	4	16
Czech Republic	5	10
Turkey	4	5

C. Citations of Sources: The study included only sources with at least three documents and three citations. Of a total of 97 sources, 31 met this criterion. Among these, the * *Social Work* * journal was the most cited, with 794 citations, followed by the * *British Journal of Social Work* * with 743 citations. “*Social Work (United States)*” ranked third based on citation count. Regarding the number of published papers, “*Social Work*” and the “*British Journal of Social Work*” led, each having 20 published papers, while “*Social Work (United States)*” published 10. These outcomes underscore the primary position of these journals in enhancing research on social work and spirituality (See Graphs 2 & 3).



Graph 3:Top 12 sources by total number of published documents.

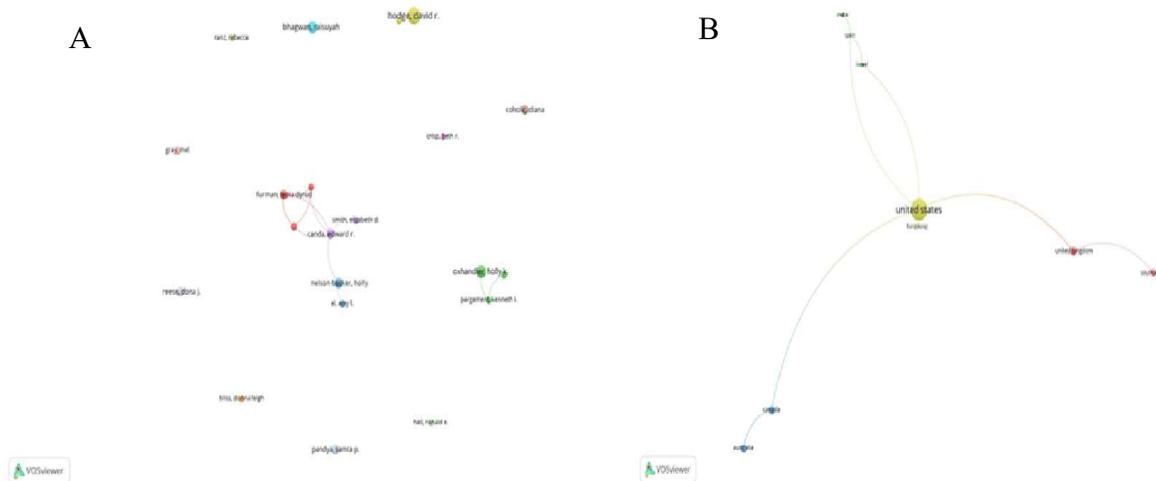
D. Citations of Organizations: Among the organizations supporting research on social work and spirituality, the “*George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University, United States*,” was the most cited, with two published articles totaling 300 citations. “*Arizona State University, United States*,” remained the second most cited organization, with two publications receiving 242 citations. These institutions’ high citation rates indicate their strong influence and impact in the field, contributing significantly to and furthering the integration of spirituality into social work practice (See Table 3).

Table 3: Top 10 Most Cited Organizations and Number of Documents Published

Organisation	Documents	Citations
“George Warren Brown School Social Work, Washington University, United States”	2	300
“Arizona State University, United States”	2	242
“School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, United States”	2	140
“Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, United States”	2	54
“School of Social Work, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Canada”	2	40
“University of Washington, United States”	2	39
“Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, Baylor University, United States”	2	31
“Department of Community Health Studies, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa”	3	15
“University of Newcastle, Australia”	3	12
“Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India”	3	10

4. Co-authorship: A Bibliometric Analysis

Four hundred and sixty-five authors and researchers have contributed to the domain of spirituality and social work. However, only 21 authors, each with a minimum of three publications and three citations, qualified for inclusion. Among them, authors with the maximum number of co-authorship connections were selected automatically based on the strength of their collaborative links. Edward R. Edward R. Globally, 469 organizations have contributed to this field of study; nonetheless, only three of them have published a minimum of three articles with at least three citations. Globally, 469 organisations have contributed to this field of study, although merely three of them have published a minimum of three articles with a least three citations. “*The Department of Community Health Studies at the Durban University of Technology in South Africa*” was leading with 15 citations, with the University of New castle in Australia having 12 citations, and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India, with 10 citations. Yet there were no link strengths in collaborations among these three organisations. Among 38 nations with co-authorship, just 12 qualified based on the requirement of at least three published articles and three citations. Canada ranked second with 22 publications, 469 citations, and a link strength of 7. Canada ranked second with 22 publications, 469 citations, and a link strength of 7. The United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Israel, and Spain are also key co-authorship collaborators of the United States, which demonstrates robust overseas collaborations in this area (See Figure 2A, B).



“Figure 2: Bibliometric analysis of co-authorship. (A) The citation of authors. Edward R. Canda remained one of the top co-cited authors. (B) Citations of countries, different colors indicate different clusters, and the size of circles indicates the count of citations. The USA remained one of the top countries cited in this field.”

5. Bibliographic Coupling and Co-citations: A Bibliometric Analysis

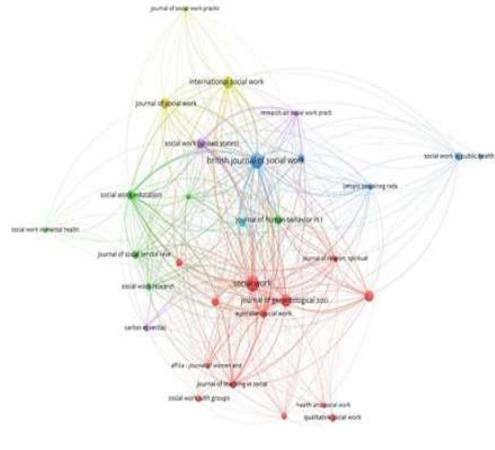
A. Bibliographic Coupling of Documents: Out of the total 283 documents published in the area of social work and spirituality work, 202 passed the threshold criteria of at least three citations per document. A bibliographic map illustrating document and source relationships, demonstrating bibliographic coupling, is shown in Figure 3A. The bibliographic coupling analysis revealed 10 clusters. Cluster 1, indicated in red, comprises thirty-four items primarily addressing the integration of spirituality from diverse disciplines, including gender, gerontological social work, spirituality among children, and caregiving. Conversely, Cluster 10 comprises only two items addressing the role and importance of spirituality and spiritually sensitive practice in clinical social work activities, with a focus on its utilization in clinical social work settings and mental well-being (See Figure 3A).

B. Bibliographic Coupling of Sources: from the total 97sources, only 31 had a minimum of three documents and citations. Six clusters with a link strength of 6,570were identified through the analysis. Cluster 1 had the most items, with 13 sources, and Cluster 6 had just one item. The "Social Work" journal was the highest cited source with 20 published papers, with a citation count of 794, and a total link strength of 1,642. The British Journal of Social Work ranked second, with 20 published papers, 743 citations, and a link strength of 1,631 (See Figure 3B).

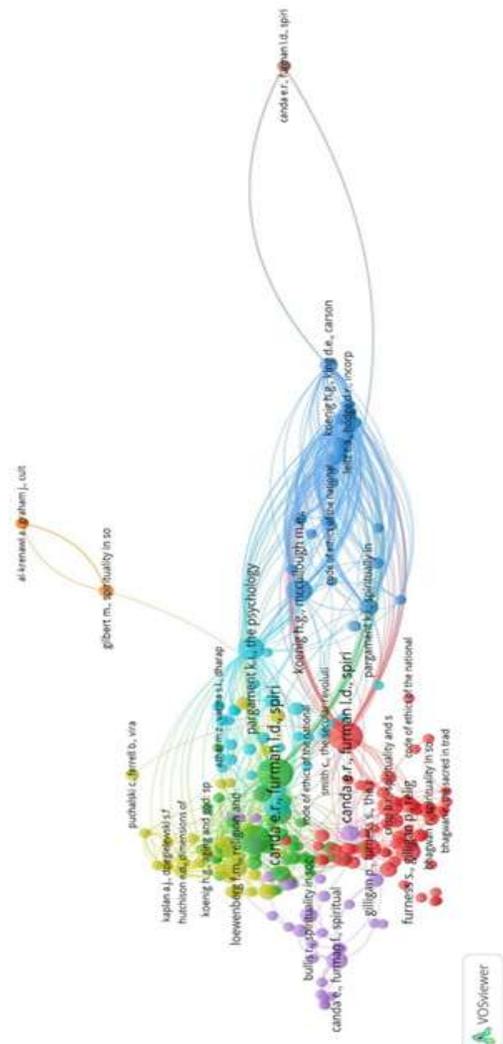
C. Co-citation of References: Of the total 11,584 co-cited references, just 249 passed the threshold of being cited at least three times. Eight clusters in total were identified through the analysis. Cluster 1, in red colour, had 63 items; Cluster 2, in green colour, had44 items; and Cluster 3, in dark blue, had35 items. The most cited source in this category was thebook "Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping" by Canda, E. R. and Furman, L. D., in 1999, which was cited 30 times and had a total link strength of 240 (See Figure 3C).

D. Co-citations of Sources: source co-citation analysis, 670 out of 5,680 total co-citations reached the benchmark of being co-cited three times or more. The study identified three clusters, comprising 140, 71, and 68 items, respectively. Notably, the * Social Work * journal, Notably the "Social Work" journal was highly co-cited journal which has published articles in the field of Spirituality and Social Work (See Figure 3D).

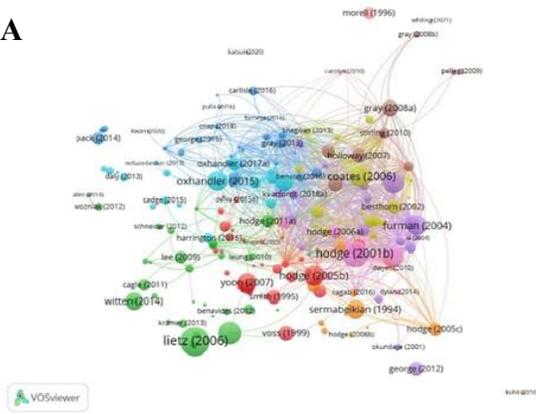
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C



A



ethical implications, and its effect on the well-being of social workers, must be given prominence. Addressing these aspects will enable further development of the integration and incorporation of spirituality into social work practice to ensure holistic, culturally responsive, and inclusive practices that focus on improving the overall well-being of individuals and communities globally.

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