

Trade Openness and Economic Growth in Africa: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Cite this article

El Amri, W., El jouali, A. (2026). Trade Openness and Economic Growth in Africa: A Bibliometric Analysis. International Journal of Economics and Management Sciences, Volume 5, Issue 3 (2026), pp. 66-92

Submitted: 12/05/2026

Accepted: 15/06/2026

Abstract

This study aims to map the intellectual structure and evolution of research on the relationship between trade openness and economic growth in Africa. We employ a systematic bibliometric analysis using Bibliometrix R-package (version R-4.5.1) and its Biblioshiny web-interface to analyze 104 scientific articles from the Scopus database published between 2014 and 2024. Our analysis leverages performance analysis and science mapping to delineate the field's trajectory. The findings reveal a robustly growing field, characterized by a shift from examining direct causal relationships towards investigating critical moderating factors such as institutional quality and financial development. Thematic and factorial analyses identify the central research clusters, while trend analysis highlights the rising prominence of regional integration, especially in relation to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The study further identifies a significant geographical bias in research focus and methodological sophistication evolving towards complex econometric techniques. Our study provides the first bibliometric analysis on the trade openness-economic growth nexus in Africa. It identifies critical research gaps, including the need for geographical diversification and micro-level studies, thereby providing a clear agenda for future scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: Trade openness; Economic growth; Africa; Bibliometric analysis

Introduction

Supported by classical international trade theories, trade openness is considered as a fundamental driver of economic growth. Adam Smith (1776) promoted free trade as a means to increase the wealth of nations. His successor, David Ricardo (1817) argued trade's role in optimizing resource allocation and enhancing national welfare. Building on both their works, Heckscher and Ohlin (1933) further emphasized the welfare gains of trade. Later, the new trade theory addressed gaps in traditional models, highlighting economies of scale as a critical gain of international trade.

Beyond trade theories, growth theories provided a theoretical basis for empirically studying the relationship between trade openness and economic growth. Solow (1956) attributed long-term growth to exogenous factors. Notably, he attributed growth to technological progress, which is often seen as a positive externality of trade. Endogenous growth theories further linked trade openness to growth. Grossman and Helpman (1991) and Aghion and Howitt (1992) identified innovation, technology transfer and productivity gains as key channels through which trade impacts growth.

On the other hand, the case for free trade has long been contested, with particular implications for developing economies. Rodriguez and Rodrik (2000) argued that most cross-national studies purporting to show that openness drives growth are methodologically flawed, with measurement problems and endogeneity that make their conclusions unreliable. Their deeper point was that trade policy outcomes are not universal but depend heavily on the structural and institutional conditions of each country. Rodrik (1992) had earlier shown that openness can generate inflationary pressure, currency instability and balance-of-payments crises, outcomes that hit especially hard in countries with limited monetary policy capacity.

The structural critique runs deeper still. The dependency tradition associated with Prebisch (1950), Cardoso and Faletto (1979), and Wallerstein (1974) holds that the global trading system is not a neutral arena but one that systematically works against commodity-exporting nations. As the relative prices of primary goods decline over time against manufactured imports, countries locked into raw material exports find themselves running faster just to stay in place. This describes the actual structure of trade of many African economies. When a country's comparative advantage lies in unprocessed commodities, specializing along those lines does not build the productive capacity needed for sustained growth, it can entrench it. Hamilton (1791) and List (1841) drew the logical conclusion that some degree of protection for nascent industries is not irrational but may be a necessary phase before a country can compete on open terms. Tahir et al. (2019) provides more recent evidence that trade effects on growth vary considerably by sector, which reinforces the point that trade composition matters as much as whether it trades openly.

On an empirical front, the results remain largely inconclusive. Many empirical studies identify a positive relationship between trade and growth (Frankel and Romer, 1999; Çevik et al., 2019). Within this strand, several authors highlight the important role of export quality and diversity for this positive link (Huchet et al., 2018; Mbate, 2015). Conversely, other studies suggest that trade openness may harm growth under certain conditions. Rodrik (1992) points out that openness can aggravate macroeconomic instability as it can result in increased inflation rates,

weak currency rates and a balance-of-payments crisis. Tahir et al. (2019) highlight the sectoral nature of trade's growth effects.

Given the inconclusiveness of empirical evidence despite decades of research, the debate around the trade-growth nexus remains far from being settled. This research provides a comprehensive overview of prevailing trends and emerging trajectories in the study of the trade-growth nexus in Africa. It addresses a notable gap in the bibliometric literature. To the best of our knowledge, only one other bibliometric study examines the relationship between trade openness and economic growth (Aggarwal and Karwasra, 2023). However, their study has no regional focus. By specifying the African context, this study makes a distinctive contribution. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the current trend in publications on the trade-growth nexus in Africa?
- RQ2: What are the main thematic fields within the study of trade openness and economic growth in Africa?
- RQ3: What are the main research directions and methodological approaches adopted in previous studies on trade openness and economic growth in Africa?
- RQ4: What gaps exist in the literature, and which research directions merit further investigation concerning the relationship between trade openness and economic growth in Africa?

By addressing these research questions, we aim to illuminate the evolving research landscape linking trade to its growth outcomes. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 1 details the methodological approach and protocols adopted in this study. Section 2 presents the findings. We conclude with a summary of the study's findings, limitations and recommendations for future inquiry.

1. Methodology

This study aims to map out the evolution and current trends of research as well as future research trajectories on the trade-growth nexus, with a particular focus on the African context. We rely on bibliometric analysis to explore the intellectual structure of our specific question in the extant literature (Donthu, Kumar, Pandey, & Lim, 2021a; Verma & Gustafsson, 2020; Donthu et al., 2020c). This analytical approach allows the visualization of existing studies and the contextualization of their results. It also consolidates current knowledge while clarifying research frontiers through systematic mapping exercises that effectively highlight gaps in the literature (Tranfield et al., 2003). In this context, we apply the PRISMA methodology (Fig. 1) (Moher et al., 2009) to ensure rigour, quality, replicability and minimize biases (Calderon-Monge and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2023; Perez-Romero et al., 2023; Truong et al., 2023; Velastegui-Montoya et al., 2022).

1.1 Database and search criteria

We source the corpus of our analysis from the Scopus database because of its broader coverage of economics and social science journals, its structured export functionality compatible with the Bibliometrix package, and its established use in comparable bibliometric studies (Cobo et al., 2012; Durán-Sánchez et al., 2022; Kent Baker et al., 2020). Data extraction took place on 18 October 2025 using the following search string: ("trade openness" OR "trade liberaliz*" OR "free trade" OR "commercial openness" OR "commercial liberaliz*" OR "international trade"

OR "openness to trade" OR "economic integrat*" OR "trade integrat*" OR "degree of openness" OR "trade-to-GDP ratio" OR "foreign trade" OR "outward orient*") AND ("economic growth" OR "economic output" OR "economic expansion" OR "productivity growth" OR "gdp growth" OR "growth rate" OR "national income growth" OR "gdp per capita growth" OR "gdp per capita" OR "output growth" OR "gross domestic product" OR "economic performance") AND "Africa".

The initial search yielded 1,074 documents. We then applied filters sequentially to refine the corpus for a focused and contemporary analysis:

- Temporal Scope: limited to publications from 2014 to 2024 to capture the most recent decade of research.
- Document type: restricted to "Article" to ensure the inclusion of primary research.
- Language: limited to English.
- Subject area: "Social Sciences," "Economics, Econometrics and Finance," "Business, Management and Accounting."
- Publication Stage: limited to "Final" stage publications

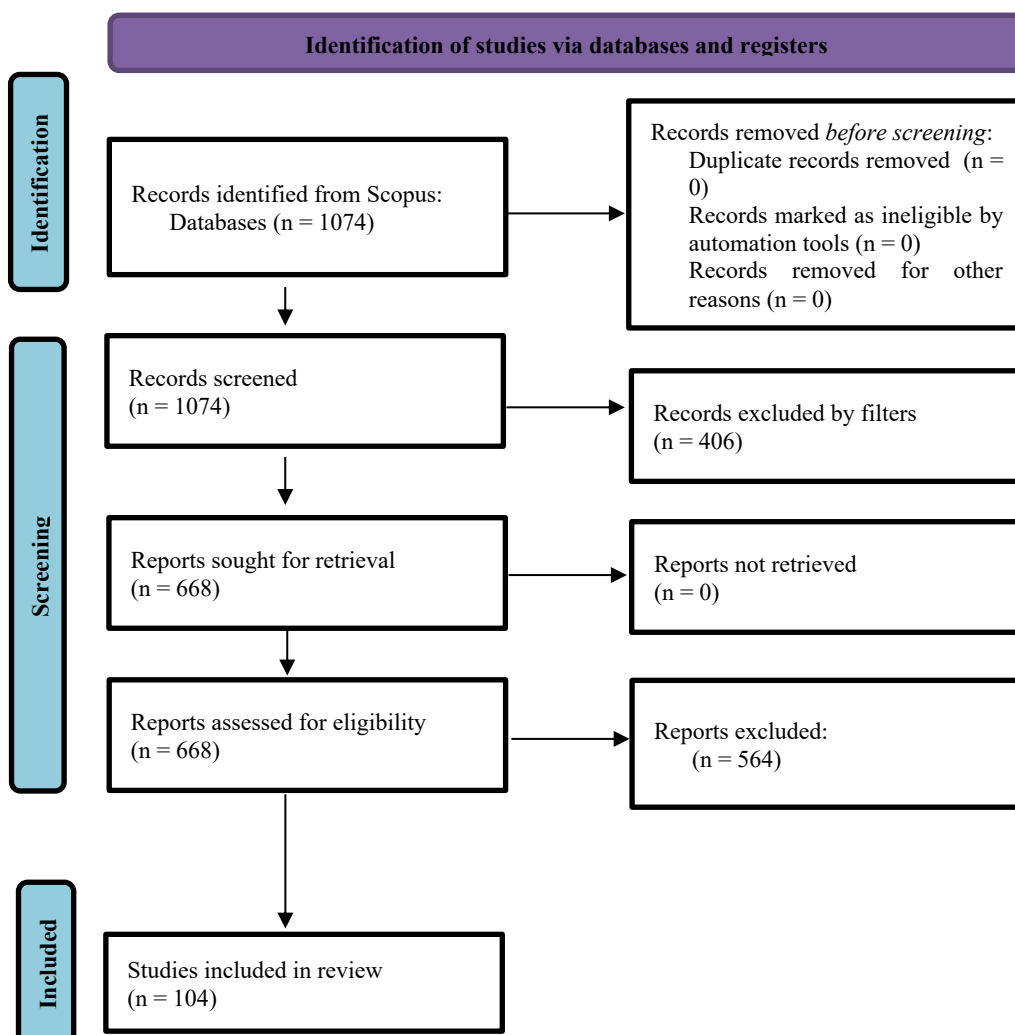


Fig. 1. PRISMA Diagram flow. Source: Authors' own work.

After applying these filters, 668 documents were retained. We manually screened the titles and abstracts of this refined dataset to verify direct relevance to the research theme. The screening applied specific exclusion criteria:

- Studies where Africa was not the primary geographical focus
- Research where the trade-growth nexus was not explicitly and directly investigated
- Studies focused predominantly on BRICS as a collective entity
- Articles using trade variables merely as control variables without substantive analysis of the trade-growth relationship

Conversely, studies focusing on African nations within the MENA region were included. Our final corpus includes 104 records. The bibliographic data for these articles were exported in BibTeX format to facilitate subsequent computational processing and analysis. That said, several limitations of this approach deserve explicit acknowledgment. Relying exclusively on Scopus means that journals not indexed by the platform (including many published by African institutions or in regional outlets) are absent from the corpus. Scopus coverage skews toward established international journals, so the analysis may systematically undercount scholarship produced closer to the ground in Africa itself. The English-only filter compounds this as large parts of Africa are francophone or lusophone, and research published in French or Portuguese simply does not appear here, regardless of its quality or relevance. What this study maps is therefore the Anglophone, internationally indexed slice of the field, which is important but not comprehensive. The manual screening of titles and abstracts also involves judgment calls that no set of criteria can fully eliminate.

1.2 Data processing

Following the data export, we analyzed the curated data using the Bibliometrix R-package (version R-4.5.1) and its Biblioshiny web-interface (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Moral-Munoz et al., 2020). The code line `bibliometrix: biblioshiny()` was executed in RStudio to access the software's functionalities. Bibliometrix enabled diverse analyses, including the construction of keyword co-occurrence networks, examination of temporal trends and visualization of scientific production. We also used Microsoft Excel for supplementary data tabulation and creation of graphical representations.

1.3 Data analysis

Following Donthu et al. (2021), we combine two distinct bibliometric methodologies:

- Performance analysis: highlights the contributions of research constituents through quantitative metrics. It directly addresses RQ1 and contributes to RQ3. This descriptive approach encompasses publication-related metrics, such as the evolution of scientific production over time and its global distribution. It also includes citation-related metrics, which identify the most relevant sources, prolific authors and influential articles.
- Science mapping: traces the connections between research constituents and maps the intellectual structure of the field. It addresses RQ2 and RQ4. It includes co-word analysis and the analysis of thematic evolution.

We complement the quantitative component of our study with a systematic qualitative review of the ten most recent articles and the ten most cited articles. This directly addressing RQ3 and RQ4. The integration of these methodological approaches provides a robust framework for

understanding the evolution, current state and future trajectories of research on the trade-growth nexus in Africa.

2. Results and discussion

2.1 Findings

2.1.1 Scientific production

Interest in trade can be traced as far back as the mercantilist era. It was later formally theorized by classical economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo. However, the empirical analysis of this relationship, particularly within specific regional and developmental contexts, is a more recent scholarly practice. This surge is illustrated in Fig. 2.

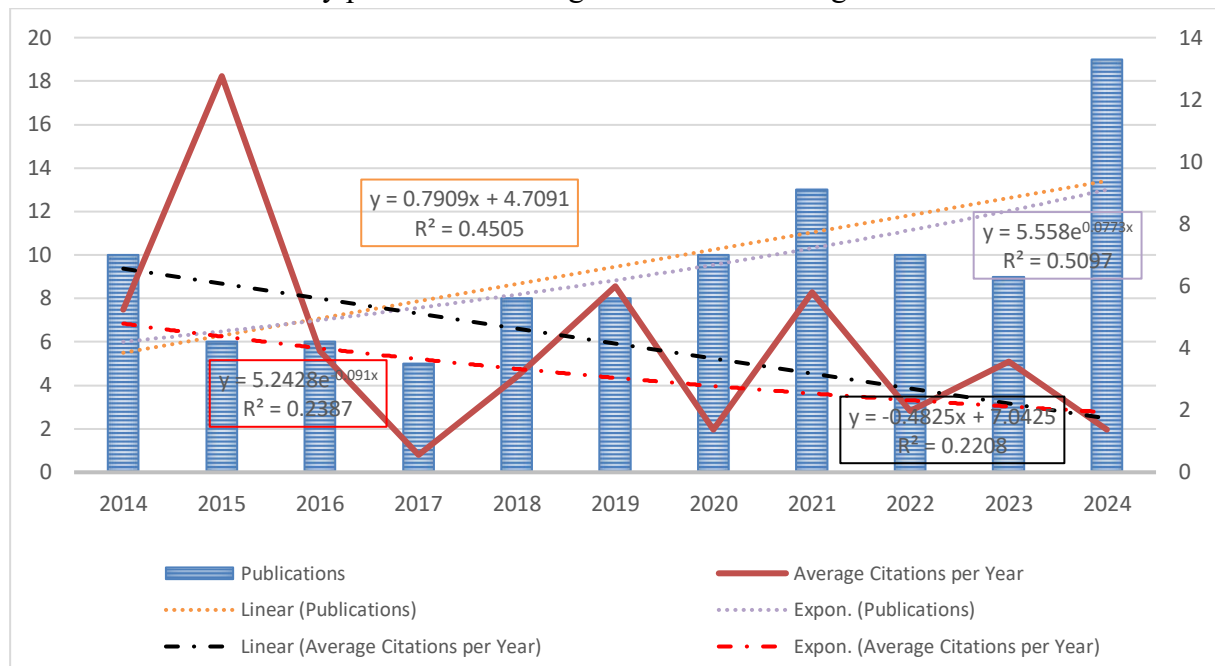


Fig. 2. Scientific production over the years. Source: Authors' own work.

The analysis reveals a steadily evolving research landscape characterized by modest inconsistent growth in scholarly output. The exponential model provides a marginally better fit ($R^2 = 0.4606$) than the linear one ($R^2 = 0.4505$). This indicates a mature yet steadily developing field. A notable acceleration commencing around 2020 can be observed, with peak productivity achieved in 2024. This pattern indicates the established nature of research on the topic. It also shows that the question is far from stagnating, potentially driven by the emergence of new methodological tools, new contextual elements and the overall never-ending debate surrounding it. Conversely, the citation impact analysis presents a more complex picture. The average citations per year exhibit considerable variability throughout the observed period, with the exponential model ($R^2 = 0.1184$) providing a relatively poor fit to the data. This indicates that while the quantity of research is growing, the immediate annual impact per publication has not kept pace. This variability suggests that research impact in this field may be influenced by multiple factors beyond mere publication volume. It can be due to the emergence of seminal works, shifting research priorities or external contextual influences. The recent decline in average citation rates for 2023-2024 publications may be attributable to the temporal lag between article publication and citation accumulation.

2.1.2 Relevant authors and networking

Following Montalvan-Burbano et al. (2021) and Atienza-Barba et al. (2023), Table 1 presents the author ranking of the most relevant researchers on the topic.

Tab. 1 *The 10 most relevant authors and their affiliations.*

Rank	Authors	Country	Affiliation	N of articles	Total Citations	h_index
1	Choga, I	South Africa	University of Fort Hare	3	21	2
2	Ngepah, NN	South Africa	University of Johannesburg	3	113	3
3	Buysse, J	Belgium	Universiteit Gent	2	26	1
4	Golam hassan, AA	Malaysia	Azman Hashim International Business School	2	29	2
5	Loganathan, N	Malaysia	Azman Hashim International Business School	2	29	2
6	Manwa, F	Australia	School of Business and Tourism	2	81	2
7	Mardani, A	Vietnam	Ton Duc Thang University	2	29	2
8	Opoku, EEO	China	Nottingham University Business School	2	96	2
9	Sunge, R	South Africa	University of Johannesburg	2	28	2
10	Wijeweera, A	UAE	Khalifa University	2	81	2

Source: Authors' own work.

The geographic diversity of contributing authors underscores the worldwide relevance of the topic. Despite this dispersion, South Africa emerges as the leading contributor. Among the authors, Ngepah, NN is the most influential, with the highest citation count (113) and h-index (3). This impact is particularly notable given that their publication volume matches that of other leading authors. Similarly, Opoku, EEO demonstrates considerable impact, with 96 citations accrued from only two articles. The data further highlights the role of specific institutions as key research hubs. These include the University of Johannesburg in South Africa and the Azman Hashim International Business School in Malaysia. The data also supports evidence of cross-country collaborations, most clearly illustrated by Golam Hassan, AA, Loganathan, N and Mardani, A.

2.1.3 Relevant journals

Following Carri'on-Mero et al. (2022) and Atienza-Barba et al. (2023), Table 2 presents the most relevant academic journals for research on the trade-growth nexus in Africa. The rank is determined by the number of relevant documents published by each journal in the Scopus database.

Tab. 2 The 10 most relevant sources.

Rank	Journals	Articles	CQ	SJR	JIF	CiteScore	Topics
1	African Development Review	6	Q1	0.838	3.1	6.4	Social sciences
2	International Journal Of Finance And Economics	4	Q2	0.791	2.8	8.4	Business, Management and Accounting Economics, Econometrics and Finance
3	Cogent Economics And Finance	3	Q2	0.539	2.5	4.1	Economics, Econometrics and Finance
4	International Trade Journal	3	Q2	0.268	1.1	2.2	Business, Management and Accounting Economics, Econometrics and Finance
5	Journal Of International Trade And Economic Development	3	Q1	0.658	2.2	4.9	Social Engineering sciences
6	Journal Of The Knowledge Economy	3	Q1	0.694	4.0 (2023)	-	Economics, Econometrics and Finance
7	Transnational Corporations Review	3	Q2	0.462 (2021)	1.8	4.8	Business, Management and Accounting Economics, Econometrics and Finance Social sciences
8	African Journal Of Business And Economic Research	2	Q4	0.156	-	-	Business, Management and Accounting Economics, Econometrics and Finance
9	Development Southern Africa	2	Q2	0.460	1.3	4.0	Social sciences
10	Economic Analysis And Policy	2	Q1	1.873	8.7	13.9	Economics, Econometrics and Finance

Note : Category Quartile (CQ); Journal Impact Factor (JIF); SCImago Journal Rank (SJR).

Source: Authors' own work.

The field is predominantly anchored within high-quality journals (Q1 and Q2 tiers) in Economics, Finance and Business. The prominence of the *African Development Review* as the top source, alongside other region-specific journals like *Development Southern Africa* and the *African Journal of Business and Economic Research*, underscores that a central pillar of this research is dedicated to African economic development, applying broader economic

theories to this specific regional context. While the *African Development Review* leads in the number of articles, *Economic Analysis and Policy*, stands out for its exceptional influence. Its significantly higher impact metrics suggest that research which manages to place in this more selective, policy-oriented venue achieves substantially greater reach and impact. The presence of journals such as the *International Journal of Finance and Economics* and *Cogent Economics & Finance* further indicates a research community that heavily employs quantitative and econometric methodologies.

2.1.4 Global distribution of scientific production

Fig. 3 shows the distribution of studies by country on a scale from 1 to 40. The map is based on the affiliation of the primary author, while subsequent affiliations establish the network of collaborative efforts across countries.

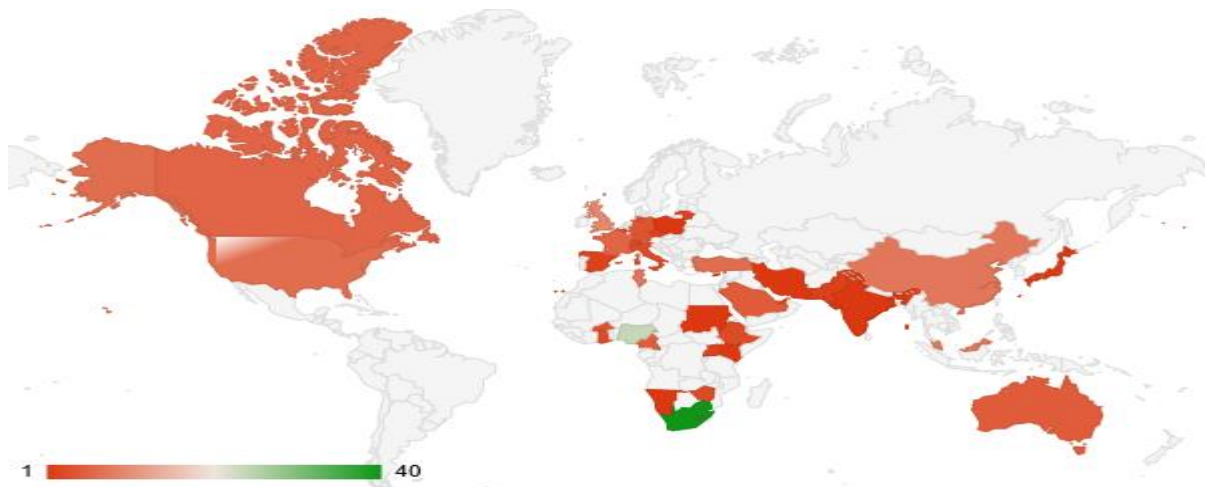


Fig. 3. *Scientific Production by Countries (Based on the First Affiliation of Authors). Source: Authors' own work.*

The analysis reinforces the findings relevant to diverse global participation (30 different countries across six continents) combined with strong regional leadership. South Africa emerges as the dominant contributor with 40 publications, followed by Nigeria with 24 publications, indicating the field's particular relevance to African economic and developmental contexts. Together, these two nations account for nearly half of the total research output. The United Kingdom (10 publications) represents the strongest European presence, while China and Malaysia (8 publications each) represent the Asian contribution to the field. The United States, despite its typically dominant position in many research areas, shows more modest involvement with 7 publications, suggesting this may represent a specialized niche within broader economic research. The concentration of production in specific regions suggests that research activity is closely tied to regional economic priorities. The geographical distribution of research in the field could also be reflecting a language bias. Since vast parts of Africa is francophone, it would be safe to assume that a lot of scientific production could potentially be in French. Nonetheless, the research domain seems to be maintaining connections to the global scholarly community. Country collaboration map shows evidence of cross-continental collaborations (e.g. Nigeria and the UK, Australia and the UAE, Malaysia and Lithuania). This combination between regional concentration and strategic international partnerships, highlights the field's current dynamics and suggests a significant potential for future growth in currently underrepresented regions.

2.1.5 Network of concurrent keywords

Fig. 4 maps the keyword co-occurrence network, with node size reflecting frequency and edge thickness reflecting how often two keywords appear together. Seven clusters emerge, each representing a distinct thematic strand in the literature.



Fig. 4. Network of keyword co-occurrences by authors. Source: Authors' own work.

"Economic growth" sits at the network's center as the node with the highest betweenness centrality, connecting all other clusters to each other. Cluster 1 (Blue) forms the densest core, grouping the field's primary constructs: "trade openness", "international trade" and "foreign direct investment", alongside the dominant regional anchors "South Africa" and "sub-Saharan Africa". The strong internal connections within this cluster reflect the empirical backbone of the literature, since most studies work within this combination of variables and geography. Cluster 2 (Red) branches toward the social dimensions of trade, linking "trade liberalization" to "poverty" and "poverty alleviation". This strand asks not just whether trade grows GDP but who actually benefits. Cluster 3 (Purple) brings in comparative perspectives, with "China" appearing alongside "Africa", reflecting the growing literature on Sino-African trade relationships. Cluster 4 (Green) groups methodological markers: "panel data" and "financial development" cluster together, signalling that financial sector conditions are treated both as a moderating variable and as a core analytical concern in econometric work. Clusters 5, 6 and 7 (Orange, Brown and Pink), built around "growth rate", "free trade" and "manufacturing" respectively, sit at the network's periphery. Their relative isolation indicates either nascent research fronts or themes that have not yet attracted enough cross-citation to integrate into the core discourse. "Manufacturing" in particular is worth flagging: given how central industrial policy debates are to the African development literature, its peripheral position here suggests the trade-growth field has not yet fully engaged with structural transformation arguments.

2.1.6 Frequency of keywords over time

Fig. 5 tracks cumulative keyword frequency from 2014 to 2024 and adds a temporal dimension to the network picture in Fig. 4.

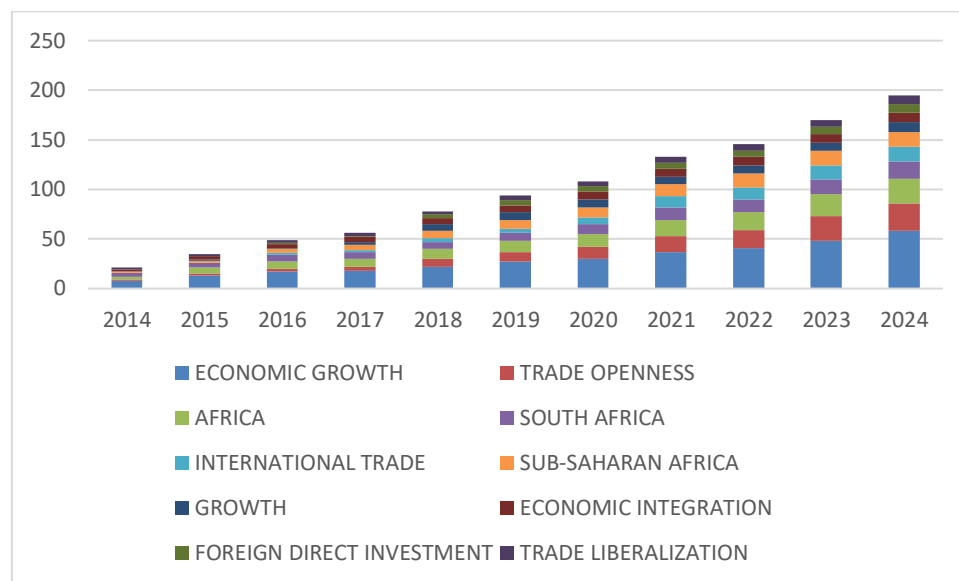


Fig. 5. Frequency of keywords over time. Source: Authors' own work.

The dominance of "economic growth" and the strong regional keywords are consistent with the co-occurrence analysis already discussed. What the temporal lens reveals that the network cannot is the sequencing of thematic shifts. "Trade openness" barely registered before 2017, with just one occurrence in 2014, but reached 28 by 2024. This suggests the term became standard in the literature's vocabulary only in the second half of the decade, possibly as the AfCFTA entered policy discourse after 2018. More telling is the post-2020 acceleration of "economic integration" and "regional integration" as keywords, which tracks closely with the AfCFTA coming into force in January 2021. This is not simply growth in publication volume. It signals a genuine reorientation of research questions toward the architecture of integration rather than the simpler question of whether openness correlates with growth.

2.1.7 Thematic map

Fig. 6 positions the field's thematic clusters on two axes: centrality, meaning how much a theme connects to others in the network, and density, meaning how internally developed and cohesive a theme is. Following the Strategic Diagram framework of Callon et al. (1991), each quadrant carries a distinct interpretation. High centrality and high density marks a Motor Theme, one that is both well-developed and actively drives the rest of the field. High density but low centrality marks a Niche Theme, which is specialised and self-contained but not structurally central. High centrality but low density marks a Basic Theme, foundational but underdeveloped. Low on both axes marks Emerging or Declining Themes.

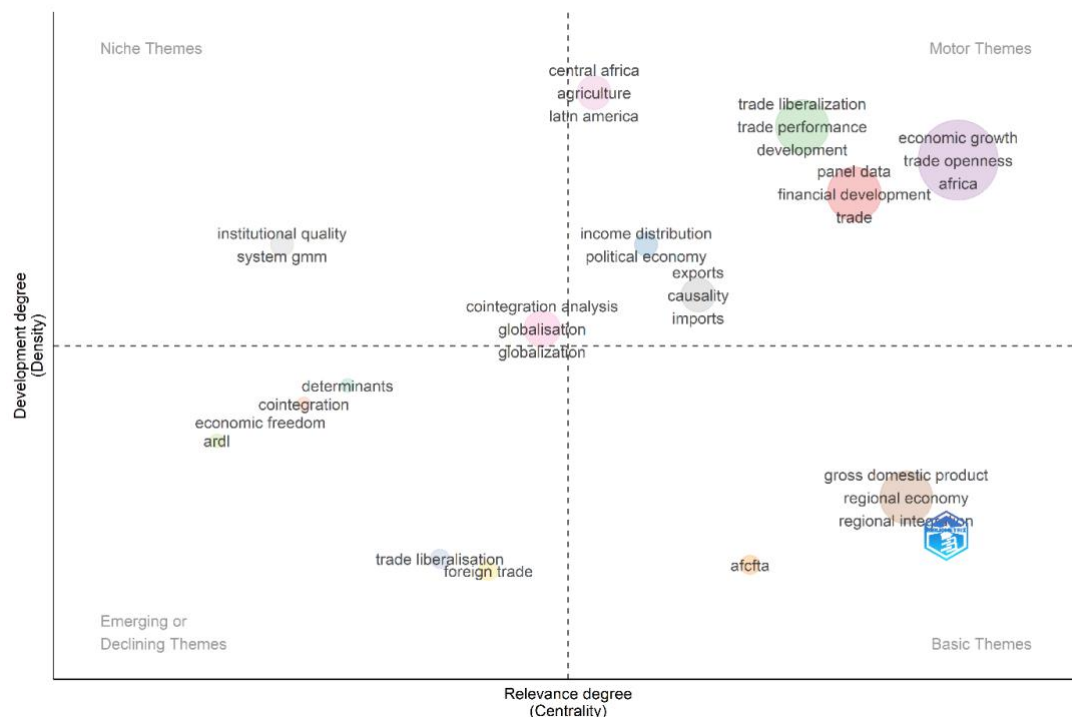


Fig. 6. Thematic map. Source: Authors' own work.

The cluster exploring "economic growth, trade openness and Africa" emerges as a Motor Theme, demonstrating both high development and strong relevance. Characterized by exceptional betweenness centrality (7,108.591), this cluster positions itself as the primary driver of research in the field, connecting various sub-disciplines and maintaining central importance in the scholarly discourse. Other driving themes encompass "panel data, financial development and trade" which indicates the methodological sophistication of the field. Another theme relates to "trade liberalization, trade performance and development" which confirms the continued importance of trade policy analysis in economic growth research. The upper-left quadrant reveals several Niche Themes that are well developed but relatively isolated. These include methodologically focused research avenues like the "cointegration analysis and globalization" cluster and the "institutional quality and system GMM" cluster. The lower-right quadrant features Basic Themes that serve as foundational elements for the research topic. The "gross domestic product, regional economy and regional integration" cluster acts as a cross-cutting theme with strong external connections, while the "AFCFTA" cluster represents an emerging (expected given the novelty of the agreement) basic theme with potential for future development and integration. Meanwhile, the lower-left quadrant contains Emerging or Declining Themes characterized by both low development and marginal relevance. These include clusters focused on "trade liberalization and foreign trade" suggesting these are either nascent research fronts or themes that have received limited scholarly attention in recent years, representing considerations for future research trajectories.

2.1.8 Factorial analysis

Fig. 7 presents a factorial map generated through Multiple Correspondence Analysis of the keyword co-occurrence data. Where the thematic map in Fig. 6 assessed each cluster's development and centrality on its own terms, this map shows how the clusters relate to each

other spatially, revealing which research traditions sit close together and which are structurally distant. The two dimensions together explain 40.61% of the variance.

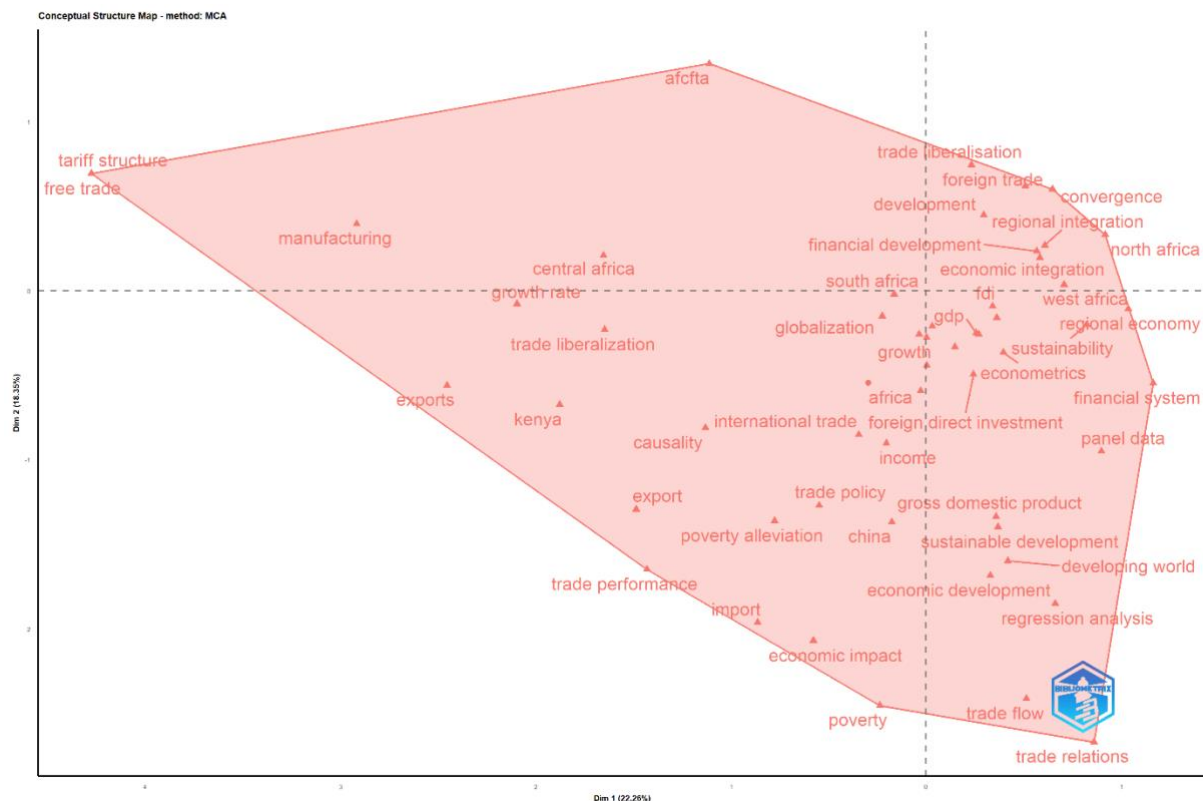


Fig. 7. Factorial analysis. Source: Authors' own work.

Dimension 1 (22.26% of variance) establishes a clear dichotomy. The map's left side is characterized by keywords such as "tariffs", "trade" and "manufacturing". This suggests a thematic cluster focused on traditional trade barriers and industrial production. In contrast, the right side features terms like "economic integration", "regional economy" and "international trade". This indicates a body of literature concerned with broader economic partnerships and development. Dimension 2 (18.35% of variance) adds nuance to these themes. The top of the map, with keywords like "AfCFTA" and "trade liberalization" emphasizes trade policy mechanisms. Meanwhile, the bottom is defined by outcome-oriented terms such as "economic impact", "poverty" and "trade flow", highlighting a focus on economic growth and its measurable developmental effects.

From this spatial arrangement, three primary research clusters emerge:

- A trade policy & manufacturing cluster, focusing on the impact of tariffs.
- A regional economic integration cluster, centered on Africa and economic growth.
- An economic development & analysis cluster, which employs methods like regression analysis to study trade flows and poverty.

Notably, "AfCFTA" appears relatively isolated, potentially signifying it as an emerging or niche topic within the dataset. Again, this is expected given the relative novelty of the agreement.

2.1.9 Trend topics

Fig. 8 visualizes the temporal progression of scholarly focus from 2014 to 2024, and it complements both the keyword frequency analysis in Fig. 5 and the thematic map in Fig. 6.

Where Fig. 5 tracked how often specific keywords appeared in cumulative terms, Fig. 8 shows when particular topics peaked in relative prominence, which allows a periodization of the field's intellectual trajectory that cumulative counts alone cannot provide.

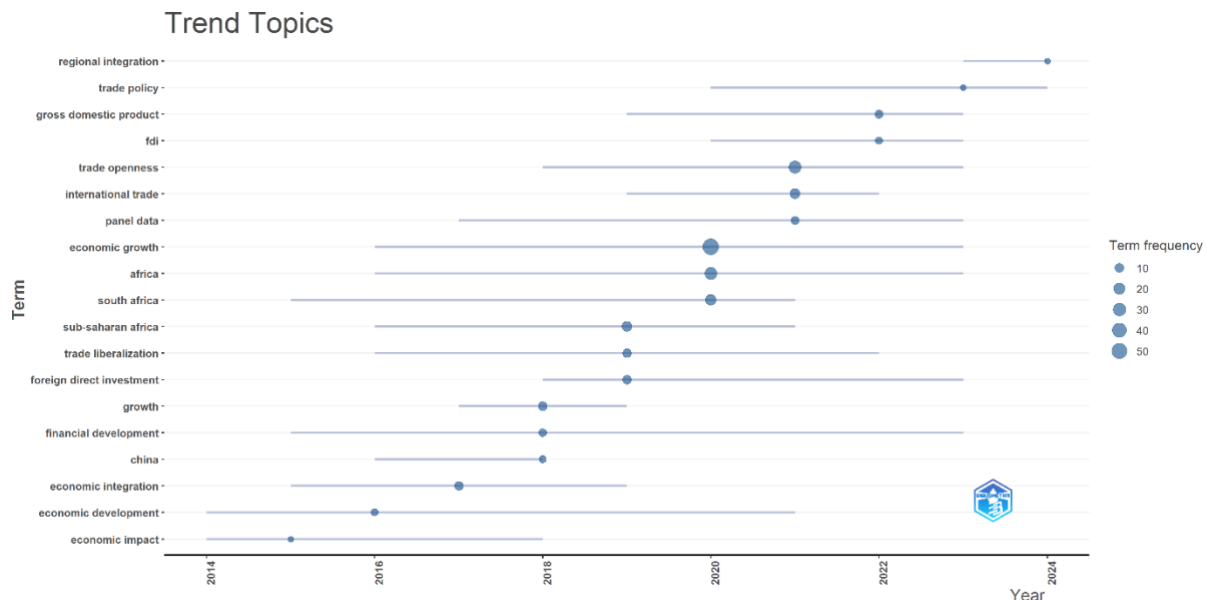


Fig. 8. Trend topics. Source: Authors' own work.

The early period (2014-2016) was dominated by foundational concepts like "economic impact" and "economic development" indicating an initial focus on broad outcomes. It then evolved into a mid-period (2018-2020) where investigation focused on specific growth drivers (e.g. "Foreign Direct Investment", "Financial Development", "Trade Liberalization"). This phase also saw a pronounced regional concentration, marked by the peak prominence of "Africa", "South Africa" and "Sub-Saharan Africa" around 2020. In recent years (2022-2024), the research focus has expanded towards macro-level policy and integration. Keywords such as "International Trade", "Trade Policy", "Trade Openness" and "Regional Integration" have come to the fore, reflecting a growing scholarly engagement with the architecture of global trade and its relationship with aggregate economic indicators like "Gross Domestic Product". The shifts in trends are likely influenced by real-world events, such as shifts in global trade agreements or regional development initiatives in Africa (e.g. the AfCFTA).

2.1.10 Top 10 cited articles

An analysis of seminal works from 2014 to 2021 (Tab.3) reveals the historical debate and evolving complexity of the trade-growth nexus in Africa. Early to mid-2010s were marked by findings that challenged the universality of the trade-led growth hypothesis. From the late 2010s onwards, and with the progressive sophistication of methodological approaches, research began to uncover more nuanced and conditional relationships.

Tab. 3 Systematic analysis of the 10 most cited articles.

Authors	Articles	Methodology	Main contributions
Omri et al. (2015)	Financial development, environmental quality, trade and	Quantitative based on simultaneous-equation panel data models for a panel of 12	Found evidence of bidirectional causality between trade openness and economic growth, with

	economic growth: What causes what in MENA countries.	MENA countries covering the period 1990-2011.	financial development being pivotal to this relationship.
Menyah et al. (2014)	Financial development, trade openness and economic growth in African countries: New insights from a panel causality approach	Panel bootstrapped Granger causality tests for 21 African countries, using a novel composite financial development index.	Found limited empirical support for the trade-led growth hypothesis, challenging the effectiveness of recent trade liberalization policies in stimulating economic growth.
Anyanwu (2014)	Factors Affecting Economic Growth in Africa: Are There any Lessons from China?	Comparative cross-sectional analysis using five non-overlapping three-year averages for Africa (1996-2010) and time-series data for China (1980-2010).	Found that trade openness does not significantly drive growth in Africa due to the structure of trade (i.e. the nature of exchanged goods).
Busse et al. (2016)	China's Impact on Africa - The Role of Trade, FDI and Aid	Solow-type growth model estimated with panel data for sub-Saharan African countries (1991-2010).	Found that the benefits of the China-Africa relationship are uneven and contingent on the structure of the African economy.
Adeleye et al. (2021)	The criticality of ICT-trade nexus on economic and inclusive growth	Panel data analysis of 53 African countries (2005-2015) using mobile and fixed telephone subscriptions as ICT indicators.	Found that ICT adoption enhances the positive impact of trade on growth, with significant regional heterogeneity across African sub-regions.
Opoku & Yan (2019)	Industrialization as driver of sustainable economic growth in Africa	Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimation for 37 African countries over the period 1980-2014.	Found that trade openness amplifies the positive impact of industrialization on growth.
Udeagha & Ngepah (2021)	The asymmetric effect of trade openness on economic growth in South Africa: a nonlinear ARDL approach	Applied the Nonlinear Autoregressive Distributed Lag (NARDL) model to South African data (1960-2016), using an innovative trade openness proxy that accounts for both the domestic trade share and relative world trade.	Found robust evidence of asymmetric effects of trade openness on economic growth in South Africa, both in the long and the short terms.
Tumwebaze et al. (2015)	Regional Economic Integration and Economic Growth in the COMESA Region, 1980–2010	Instrumental Variables Generalized Method of Moments (IV-GMM) regression applied to a panel dataset of COMESA countries from 1980-2010, framed within a cross-country growth model.	- Found that COMESA had no statistically significant positive impact on economic growth in the region. - Identified the true drivers of growth in the COMESA region,

			including general openness to international trade.
Abendin et al. (2021)	International trade and economic growth in Africa: The role of the digital economy	Panel data analysis (POLS, FE, RE, sys-GMM) of 53 African countries (2000-2018), with sub-regional decomposition and an interaction term between trade and the digital economy.	• Found robust, multi-model evidence that trade has a consistently positive impact on economic prosperity. • Found that the digital economy enhances the positive effect of international trade on Africa's economic growth, with sub-regional heterogeneity.
Asamoah et al. (2019)	Trade openness, FDI and economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa: do institutions matter?	Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with data from 34 sub-Saharan African countries (1996-2016).	Found that institutions moderate the trade-growth relationship.

Source: Authors' own work.

The systematic analysis of the most cited articles reveals a research domain that is moving beyond simple trade liberalization arguments toward understanding the institutional, technological and structural conditions that determine whether and how trade translates into sustainable economic growth. Three main research streams emerge. First, studies consistently challenge simplistic assumptions about trade openness, demonstrating either limited growth effects (Menyah et al., 2014; Anyanwu, 2014) or context-dependent outcomes through sophisticated methodologies like nonlinear ARDL (Udeagha & Ngepah, 2021). Second, research identifies critical moderating factors that enhance trade's effectiveness, particularly institutional quality (Asamoah et al., 2019), digital infrastructure (Adeleye et al., 2021; Abendin et al., 2021) and industrialization (Opoku & Yan, 2019). Third, regional integration emerges as complex, with studies showing either limited direct growth impacts (Tumwebaze et al., 2015) or conditional benefits dependent on economic structure (Busse et al., 2016). Methodologically, the field demonstrates increasing sophistication, evolving from basic panel models to advanced techniques including simultaneous-equation modeling, GMM estimations and structural equation modeling. This progression reflects the field's recognition of the multifaceted nature of trade-growth relationships and the need for nuanced analytical approaches that account for bidirectional causality, asymmetric effects and mediating variables.

2.1.11 Top 10 latest articles

Table 4 presents an examination of the most recent publications on the trade-growth nexus in Africa, with all cited studies published in 2024.

Tab. 4 Systematic analysis of the 10 most recent articles.

Authors	Articles	Methodology	Main contributions
Asogwa & Azu (2024)	Agriculture Trade Exports Tracing and Economic Growth Among Integrated Blocs	Panel cross-section analysis and descriptive trend analysis for six global regions (1980-2022), using data from the World Bank Indicators.	- Found that agricultural exports have no significant impact on economic growth in Western and Central Africa. - Argued for deeper regional integration beyond trade policy to include single currencies, infrastructure connectivity, and currency harmonization.
Sylvester (2024)	Globalisation of Economies: The Role of Regional Integration in Repositioning African Economies within the Global Order	A systematic literature review, using the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as a central case study.	Positioned the AfCFTA as a pivotal mechanism for boosting economic growth and development by creating a unified continental market.
Monyela & Saba (2024)	Trade openness, economic growth and economic development nexus in South Africa: a pre- and post-BRICS analysis	Vector Error Correction Model (VECM) applied to South African data, comparing pre-BRICS (1991-2010) and post-BRICS (2011-2021) periods.	- Found that trade openness in the post-BRICS era substantially influences GDP growth. - Found a unidirectional causal link running from trade liberalization to economic growth in contemporary South Africa.
Chiranga et al. (2024)	An Empirical Analysis of Africa Continental Free Trade Area Economic Growth Prospects in the SADC Region: Evidence using Autoregressive Distributed Lag-PMG Estimation Techniques	Panel Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) and Pooled Mean Group (PMG) estimation for eight SADC countries over the period 1996-2022.	- Found a positive long-run relationship between trade openness and economic growth in SADC nations. - Found that economic growth drives trade openness (unidirectional causality), suggesting that growing economies naturally become more open, rather than openness solely initiating growth.
Kutu & Ohonba (2024)	The Impact of Trade Liberalization on Economic Growth in South Africa	Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model applied to South African data from 1986 to 2022, selected due to the mixed order of	- Found a strong positive relationship between trade liberalization and economic growth. - Argued that economic integration is healthy for the national economy.

		integration of the variables.	
Lee et al. (2024)	Effects of a Customs Union on Economic Growth: Empirical Evidence from Southern African Customs Union (SACU)	Pooled OLS, Fixed Effects (FE), and Random Effects (RE) models applied to an unbalanced panel dataset of SACU member states.	Found that intra-SACU trade (exports and imports) has no statistically significant effect on the economic growth of its member states.
Yuni (2024)	How Does International Trade Cum Regional Integration Affect Economic Growth? Insights from African Countries	System Generalized Method of Moments (S-GMM) dynamic panel model for 40 African countries.	• Found that both regional integration and international trade have separate and joint positive effects on economic growth in Africa. • Provided strong empirical justification for ongoing continental initiatives like the AfCFTA, as a viable strategy for achieving economic growth.
Mwatu et al. (2024)	Impact of tariff liberalization on economic and social benefits: Computable general equilibrium application to Kenya	Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) model policy simulations.	• Found a heterogeneous impact of tariff liberalization at the sectoral level, with a complex mix of overall welfare gains (e.g., higher GDP, lower cost of living) and specific sectoral losses (e.g., in investment, manufacturing, and jobs). • Advocated for strategic reciprocal trade agreements (like EPAs) while emphasizing the critical need for complementary domestic policies to manage the disruptive effects of liberalization and offset lost tariff revenue.
Nchofoung et al. (2024)	Determinants of economic resilience response in sub-Saharan Africa to a common exogenous shock: roles of demographic differences, exchange rate regimes and institutional quality	System Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimation on a panel of 22 sub-Saharan African countries from 1996–2018.	Identified trade openness as a key driver of economic resilience in SSA.

Diallo et al. (2024)	Growth, fiscal and welfare implications of trade liberalization in Africa: A macro-micro modeling assessment of the Senegalese economy	A static Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) model (PEP variant) linked to a non-parametric microsimulation, calibrated with Senegal's Social Accounting Matrix and household survey data.	Found that AfCFTA tariff removal will have net positive macroeconomic, fiscal, and welfare impacts for Senegal (3.36% reduction in poverty, a modest decrease in income inequality) with disparities between urban and rural households.
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Source: Authors' own work.

The systematic analysis of the most recent literature (2024) shows a maturation of the scholarly discourse from debating whether trade fosters growth to understanding the specific conditions under which it succeeds. Recent research appears to be intensely focused on evaluating the practical impacts of existing and proposed trade agreements, particularly the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). A central theme is the critical reassessment of regional integration, with studies presenting both optimistic and cautionary evidence. While some research provides strong empirical support for the AfCFTA's growth and poverty reduction potential (Yuni, 2024; Diallo et al., 2024), others reveal significant limitations, such as the ineffectiveness of intra-SACU trade (Lee et al., 2024) and stark regional disparities (Asogwa & Azu, 2024; Diallo et al., 2024). Methodologically, the field shows a clear evolution towards sophisticated, context-aware analyses. The widespread use of techniques like ARDL, GMM and Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) models allows researchers to move beyond simple correlations and uncover complex, non-linear relationships. This is evident in studies examining asymmetric effects (Monyela & Saba, 2024), unique causal directions (Chiranga et al., 2024) and detailed sectoral impacts of liberalization (Mwatu et al., 2024). Notably, a common insight among the recent studies is that trade policy is necessary but not sufficient. The consensus points to the indispensable role of complementary domestic policies, including investments in infrastructure, institutional quality and targeted sectoral support.

2.2 Discussion

The findings reveal a field that demonstrates sustained scholarly engagement, despite its long-standing history. The field remains dynamic due to the proliferation of advanced econometric techniques, new datasets and refined measurement approaches, all underpinned by the topic's enduring policy relevance. As such, it has matured from a debate over whether trade fosters growth to a more sophisticated investigation into the conditions, mechanisms and specific contexts under which this relationship holds.

The most prominent insight is the field's definitive move beyond universalist assumptions. The early, mixed findings on the direct trade-growth link (Menyah et al., 2014; Anyanwu, 2014) served as a critical catalyst, pushing the research community to identify moderating variables. The subsequent proliferation of studies on digital infrastructure (Adeleye et al., 2021), institutional quality (Asamoah et al., 2019) and industrialization (Opoku & Yan, 2019)

represents a paradigm shift. It demonstrates a collective realization that trade openness operates as part of a complex system conditioned by a country's internal characteristics. This is corroborated by the trend topics analysis, which shows the rise of integrative and policy-focused terms, as well as the thematic map, where "economic growth, trade openness and Africa" acts as a motor theme intimately connected to these moderating factors.

The reviewed literature (the most cited and most recent articles) presents a paradox regarding regional integration. While the AfCFTA is presented as a sort of cure in theoretical and policy-oriented reviews (Sylvester, 2024), empirical evidence remains decidedly mixed, potentially due to the relative novelty of the agreement and lack of data coverage to properly examine its effects empirically. The most recent studies highlight this contradiction, with some affirming the AfCFTA's potential (Yuni, 2024; Diallo et al., 2024) and others revealing the ineffectiveness of existing customs unions (Lee et al., 2024) and stark sub-regional disparities (Asogwa & Azu, 2024). This suggests that the mere formation of trade agreements is insufficient, and that the design and complementary policies of integration are what determine its success (Mwatu et al., 2024). The field is thus converging on the consensus that trade liberalization is necessary but not sufficient. Its benefits are contingent on a supportive ecosystem of domestic infrastructure, institutions and industrial policies.

Methodologically, the observed evolution from basic panel models to Nonlinear ARDL, CGE models and micro-simulations, is a direct response to the complexity of the research question. The adoption of these sophisticated techniques allows the field to move from establishing correlation to probing causation, asymmetry and distributional effects. For instance, the finding by Chiranga et al. (2024) that growth can drive openness inverts traditional causality and has profound implications for policy sequencing. Similarly, the use of CGE models provides vital insights into the distributional effects of trade, moving the discussion beyond aggregate GDP growth to the crucial politics of implementation and compensatory measures. This methodological maturation is a sign of a healthy, self-critical field developing the tools needed to match the complexity of its subject matter.

The strong presence of scholars from the Global South is unsurprising given the subject matter, and researchers based in Africa have obvious reasons to study African economic questions. The Asian contribution likely reflects interest in whether elements of the Asian development experience can be translated to the African context. What demands more critical attention, though, is why the output is so heavily concentrated in South Africa and Nigeria specifically. This is not simply a matter of those countries being more studied because they are more important. It reflects the structural conditions that make research production possible: South Africa and Nigeria have the largest economies on the continent, which means more data available in international databases, more research universities with international links, and greater access to the collaborative grants and publishing networks that shape what ends up in Scopus-indexed journals. Researchers working on smaller, poorer, or more data-scarce economies face real practical obstacles that have nothing to do with the intellectual interest of their questions.

The language filter built into this study reinforces the same pattern. Francophone North, West and Central Africa are not research deserts, but their scholarship largely does not appear in an

English-only Scopus search. The result is an intellectual map drawn from a narrow band of African experience. South Africa and Nigeria both have relatively sophisticated financial systems and significant industrial bases by continental standards, and dynamics documented there may not travel well to landlocked economies, fragile states, or small island developing states, which together constitute a large share of the continent. The AfCFTA findings point to the same gap from a different angle: despite being the continent's defining trade policy initiative, it appears as an emerging rather than established theme in the bibliometric analysis, with relatively few empirical studies directly assessing its effects. The most recent literature begins to fill this space, but the bulk of country-level and sector-level work still needs to be done.

Our findings also point to some fairly concrete things that policymakers should take seriously. The recurring finding that institutional quality, financial development and digital infrastructure shape whether trade produces growth means that liberalization in isolation is unlikely to deliver much. Opening markets while leaving these underlying conditions weak is essentially removing a barrier without having built the road behind it. African governments and their development partners should treat complementary investments (e.g. contract enforcement, domestic financial markets, digital connectivity, etc.) as essential elements of trade reforms. This applies especially to SMEs, which are most likely to be left out of regional value chains when transaction costs remain high.

On the AfCFTA specifically, the evidence reviewed here suggests that what matters is not the agreement's existence but how it is implemented. Rules of origin that are too technically complex for small exporters to navigate, non-tariff barriers that exceed formal tariffs in practical significance, and cross-border infrastructure gaps that make regional trade physically costly are all things that will determine whether the AfCFTA delivers on its stated potential. The CGE studies reviewed also highlight that the distributional effects of liberalization are uneven across sectors and households, which points to a need for differentiated implementation schedules and domestic policies that manage the adjustment costs in vulnerable sectors rather than assuming aggregate gains will trickle through on their own.

The geographical gaps in the research itself also have a policy implication. If the evidence base is dominated by South Africa and Nigeria, then policy guidance drawn from it may simply not fit most of the continent. Development agencies and national research councils should invest in the statistical infrastructure and research capacity that would make it possible to study trade-growth dynamics in fragile states, landlocked economies and smaller markets. This means support for national statistical offices, regional data-sharing frameworks, and funding streams that reach non-Anglophone research communities. Future empirical work needs to follow the same logic: more geographical diversity in case selection, more micro-level and sectoral analysis of AfCFTA impacts, and more attention to moderating factors that the current literature handles only partially.

Conclusion

Using a systematic bibliometric analysis, this study provides a comprehensive mapping of the intellectual landscape of the trade-growth nexus in Africa over the decade 2014-2024.

In response to RQ1, the analysis reveals a field in a state of robust and sustained growth. Scientific production has followed a clear upward trajectory, accelerating markedly from 2020 and peaking in 2024. Addressing RQ2, the main thematic fields are structured around a well-defined core. The central, motor theme unites "economic growth" with "trade openness" and the African context. This core is surrounded by specialized thematic fields that investigate the roles of key moderators, including financial development, institutional quality and the digital economy. A distinct and prominent thematic field is dedicated to regional integration, particularly the AfCFTA, reflecting its significant policy relevance even as empirical findings on its effectiveness remain complex and sometimes contradictory. Regarding RQ3, the research directions have demonstrably evolved from questioning the existence of a trade-growth link to examining the conditions that govern it. Methodologically, this shift is reflected in a clear progression from basic panel data analyses to sophisticated econometric techniques like GMM estimations, ARDL models, Nonlinear ARDL models and Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) models. Finally, in answering RQ4, there are several critical gaps and future research directions. A significant geographical bias exists, with research heavily concentrated on a few nations like South Africa, leaving large parts of the continent underrepresented. Furthermore, while the AfCFTA is a dominant policy theme, it remains an underexplored empirical frontier, requiring more country and sector-specific studies on its implementation and impacts. Future research must prioritize this geographical diversification, deepen the micro-level and sectoral analysis of trade policies, and more fully integrate emerging moderators such as demographic and political factors into analytical frameworks. By addressing these gaps, the field can move from simply providing an understanding of the trade-growth relationship to providing actionable, context-specific policy guidance for inclusive and sustainable growth and development across Africa's diverse economies.

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