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Thematic trends of future studies in Persian texts: Analysis of conceptual structure

Saleh Rahimi*
[1] Associate Professor, Department of Knowledge and Information Science, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. s.rahimi@razi.ac.ir
Faramarz Soheili
2 Associate Professor, Department of Knowledge and Information Science, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran. f_soheili@pnu.ac.ir

Abstract

Objective: This research aims to present the scientific structure of futures studies from 1999 to 2023 using bibliometric techniques to identify the main research, key topics, and evolution path of clusters.
Method: Using bibliometric techniques and co-occurrence analysis, 690 documents were extracted from (ISC) to identify the research trends in futures studies. Cluster analysis and strategic diagrams were used to depict the conceptual structure of research in the field of futures studies.
Results: Eleven clusters were identified, including: Foundations of Foresight, Foresight and Mahdism, Methods and Techniques of Futures Studies, Foresight in Urban Planning, Urban Governance Drivers, Scenario Building and Media, Foresight and National Security, Futures Studies in Higher Education, Futures Studies and Security, Scenario Writing, and Rural Planning and Development. Additionally, emerging topics were identified through content analysis of the articles.
Conclusion: The results of the research will help researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept of futures studies and identify the future research directions in this field.

Key Words: Futures studies, Foresight, Future orientation, Scenario writing, ISC citation database.

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Publisher: Imam Khomeini International University
Corresponding Author/ E-mail: Saleh Rahimi /s.rahimi@razi.ac.ir

Introduction

Futures Studies, as an interdisciplinary and strategic field, play a pivotal role in understanding, analyzing, and forecasting future developments. By employing diverse scientific methods and tools, this domain identifies emerging trends, opportunities, and challenges, enabling decision-makers to plan evidence-based strategies to address future uncertainties. In recent decades, the growing significance of Futures Studies at national and international levels has led to a substantial increase in research and knowledge production within this field.

A critical challenge for researchers and policymakers in Futures Studies is the lack of a comprehensive understanding of its research structure. The vast volume of scholarly outputs, thematic diversity, and fragmented information complicate the identification of dominant trends, emerging topics, and knowledge gaps. In this context, thematic analysis and the visualization of scientific maps of Futures Studies research can serve as effective tools for clarifying scholarly connections and structural dynamics. This study aims to provide a holistic overview of the current state of Futures Studies by analyzing its thematic landscape, identifying scientific trends, emerging topics, and knowledge gaps. The findings can inform strategic research planning, enhance interdisciplinary collaboration, and guide future investigations to address complex societal needs.

Many studies have explored various dimensions of Futures Studies. Inayatullah (1990) highlights conceptual similarities between planning and Futures Studies, introducing three key approaches. Godet and Roubelat (1996) emphasize organizational adaptability in response to change and advocate for scenario-based methods to translate future studies into action. Marien (2002) positions Futures Studies as a horizontal field bridging disciplines. Godet (2000) proposes tools such as Mactor and MICMAC to mitigate common errors, underscoring the importance of intuition and common sense alongside methodological rigor. Bradfield et al. (2005) and Amer et al. (2013) address methodological ambiguities in scenario planning. From a historical perspective, Masini (2006) and Kuosa (2011) categorize the evolution of Futures Studies into deterministic and modern indeterministic paradigms, while Son (2015) and Schultz (2015) trace its trajectory from rationalism to neoliberal fragmentation. Recent bibliometric studies, such as those by Fergnani (2019) and Ay et al. (2024), highlight dominant clusters like corporate future studies and futures literacy. Collectively, these studies emphasize methodological evolution, interdisciplinary integration, and the critical role of structured tools in enhancing understanding of possible futures.

Materials and Methods

This study employs bibliometric analysis to map the intellectual structure of Futures Studies. Co-word analysis, which measures the strength of conceptual linkages between representative terms in scholarly publications, was used to visualize the field's conceptual space and trace its evolution (Ding, Chowdhury, & Foo, 2001). Data were extracted from the Islamic World Science Citation Center (ISC) using the keyword "Futures Studies," covering 690 documents published between 1999 and 2023. After preprocessing and standardizing 3,059 keywords, a final set of 1,471 unique terms was analyzed. A threshold of three occurrences applied to filter insignificant terms. Using BibExcel, VOSviewer, and UCINet, a symmetric co-occurrence matrix was generated, converted into a correlation matrix, and subjected to cluster analysis via the K-means method in VOSviewer.

Results and Discussion

The frequency distribution of frequently used concepts during the examined period is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The Twenty Most Frequently Used Concepts in

No.	Concept	Frequency	No.	Concept	Frequency
1	Futures Studies	518	11	University	18
2	Scenario-building	97	12	Future	17
3	Iran	35	13	Tourism	16
4	Drivers	34	14	Tehran City	16
5	MICMAC	30	15	Tabriz City	15
6	Scenario	25	16	Futures Thinking	15
7	Delphi	24	17	Mahdaviat	14
8	Foresight	24	18	Higher Education	13
9	Sustainable Development	23	19	Key Drivers	12
10	Structural Analysis	19	20	Scenario Planning	12

Table 1. lists the 20 most frequent concepts in Futures Studies research. "Futures Studies" (518 occurrences), "Scenario-building" (97), and "Iran" (35) ranked highest.

Strategic Diagram Analysis

The strategic diagram (see Table 4) classifies clusters into four quadrants based on centrality (influence) and density (internal cohesion):

Table 4: Density and Centrality of Clusters Resulting from Co-word Analysis in the Future studies

Cluster Number	Cluster Name	Density	Centrality
1	Fundamentals of Future studies (1)	0.238	4.762
2	Future studies and Mahdism (2)	0.324	6.476
3	Methods and Techniques of Future studies (3)	0.287	5.158
4	Urban Planning Future studies (4)	0.288	4.889
5	Urban Governance Drivers (5)	0.243	3.882
6	Scenario Planning and Media (6)	0.231	3.000
7	Future studies and National Security (7)	0.440	5.714
8	Future studies in Higher Education (8)	1.689	15.200
9	Future studies and Security (9)	0.361	2.889
10	Scenario Writing (10)	0.500	3.500
11	Rural Planning and Development (11)	0.393	2.750

Cluster 8 has the highest centrality with a value of 2.15 and also the highest density with a value of 1.689.

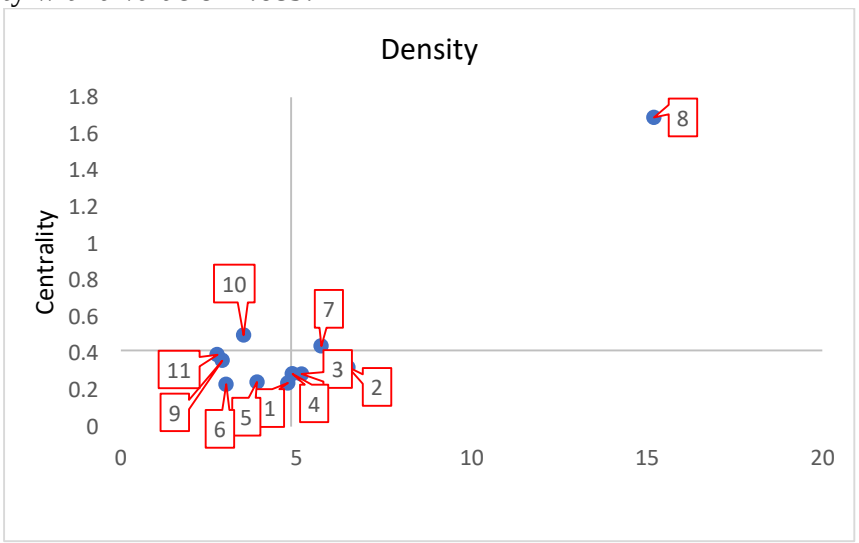

Chart 1: Strategic Diagram of the future studies

- Quadrant I (Core Themes): Futures Thinking and National Security (centrality: 5.714, density: 0.44) and Futures Studies in Higher Education

(centrality: 15.2, density: 1.689) dominate, reflecting their high cohesion and strategic influence on macro-level policymaking.
- Quadrant II (Established Themes): Scenario-building (centrality: 3.5, density: 0.5) remains widely used but exhibits limited scholarly impact.
- Quadrant III (Emerging Themes): Clusters such as Foundations of Future studies (centrality: 4.762), Drivers of Urban Governance (3.882), and Rural Development Planning (2.75) represent nascent topics requiring theoretical and empirical consolidation.
- Quadrant IV (Immature Themes with High Potential): Futures Thinking and Mahdaviat (6.476), Futures Methods (5.158), and Urban Futures (4.889) hold promise but lack maturity in scholarly integration.

Conclusion

The strategic diagram reveals that Persian-language Futures Studies research is anchored in national security and higher education, reflecting their centrality and policy relevance. While scenario-building remains a widely applied tool, its scholarly influence is comparatively limited. Emerging themes in urban governance, media-driven scenarios, and rural development necessitate further theoretical and empirical refinement. Quadrant IV highlights underdeveloped yet promising areas, such as religiously informed Futures Studies and advanced methodological innovation. To foster a balanced and sustainable research ecosystem, policymakers should prioritize support for emerging and interdisciplinary clusters, enhancing their capacity to address complex societal challenges. This analytical framework provides a roadmap for aligning research priorities with the strengthening demands of Futures Studies, ensuring its continued relevance in navigating an uncertain world.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no actual or potential conflict of interest concerning this article.