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Ziel des Beitrags ist die Untersuchung der thematischen Schwerpunkte und Publikationspraktiken in der Erwachsenenbildungsforschung aus Ländern des Globalen Südens. Auf Grundlage eines Structural Topic Modells, das 830 empirische Texte aus Mainstream- und Non-Mainstream-Journals analysiert, werden unter anderem Themen wie funktionale Alphabetisierung, berufliche Bildung, nachhaltige Entwicklung und soziale Gerechtigkeit identifiziert. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass zentrale Themen wie nachhaltige Entwicklung und soziale Gerechtigkeit, die häufig in Non-Mainstream-Journals veröffentlicht werden, im globalen Publikationsraum der Erwachsenenbildungsforschung unsichtbar bleiben. Abschließend wird diskutiert, wie eine stärkere Einbindung dieser Perspektiven in den internationalen Diskurs gelingen könnte und welche Desiderate sich daraus für künftige Forschung ergeben.

This article aims to analyze the thematic focus and publication practices of adult education research in countries of the so-called Global South. A structural topic model that analyzed 830 empirical texts from mainstream and non-mainstream journals was used to identify topics in the texts, which included functional literacy, vocational education, sustainable development, and social justice. The results revealed that key themes that are frequently published in non-mainstream journals, such as sustainable development and social justice, remain invisible in the global publication space of adult education research. These perspectives could be better integrated into the international discourse and suggest directions for future research.

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## Adult Education Research Between the Center and Periphery – Publication Practices and Topics of Adult Education Researchers in Countries of the So-Called Global South

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# Adult Education Research Between the Center and Periphery – Publication Practices and Topics of Adult Education Researchers in Countries of the So-Called Global South

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**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze the thematic focus and publication practices of adult education research in countries of the so-called Global South. A structural topic model that analyzed 830 empirical texts from mainstream and non-mainstream journals was used to identify topics in the texts, which included functional literacy, vocational education, sustainable development, and social justice. The results revealed that key themes that are frequently published in non-mainstream journals, such as sustainable development and social justice, remain invisible in the global publication space of adult education research. These perspectives could be better integrated into the international discourse and suggest directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Adult education research, Global South, Publishing practices, Non-mainstream journals, Topic modeling

**Zusammenfassung:** Ziel des Beitrags ist die Untersuchung der thematischen Schwerpunkte und Publikationspraktiken in der Erwachsenenbildungsforschung aus Ländern des Globalen Südens. Auf Grundlage eines Structural Topic Modells, das 830 empirische Texte aus Mainstream- und Non-Mainstream-Journals analysiert, werden unter anderem Themen wie funktionale Alphabetisierung, berufliche Bildung, nachhaltige Entwicklung und soziale Gerechtigkeit identifiziert. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass zentrale Themen wie nachhaltige Entwicklung und soziale Gerechtigkeit, die häufig in Non-Mainstream-Journals veröffentlicht werden, im globalen Publikationsraum der Erwachsenenbildungsforschung unsichtbar bleiben. Abschließend wird diskutiert, wie eine stärkere Einbindung dieser Perspektiven in den internationalen Diskurs gelingen könnte und welche Desiderate sich daraus für künftige Forschung ergeben.

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## 1 Introduction

Publication in internationally oriented (peer-reviewed) journals is becoming increasingly important in educational science and adult education research, even though the publication culture of this sub-discipline has traditionally been characterized by highly diverse publication media (Heck et al., 2024, p. 368). Even in the discipline's more nationally oriented communities, such as Germany, the publication culture has shifted, and scholarly work is no longer aimed only at national publication and reception, but also international (Schmidt-Hertha et al., 2024; Stollfuß et al., 2021, p. 1).

The increasingly powerful publication gatekeepers – the international and prestigious journals of adult education research – also perceive this change, justifying it as the integration of the discipline into an overarching scientific culture that relies on performative evaluation criteria, such as impact factors and rankings. Thus, in addition to the tendencies toward mainstreaming and commercialization, this culture is increasingly oriented toward quantitative, globally applicable evaluation standards (Roor, 2025). These standards increase the pressure to publish, as academic careers and research funding are increasingly linked to the frequency and visibility of publications, which is further promoted by the prioritization of shorter formats by commercial publishers (Milana et al., 2016; Hodge et al., 2023).

An accurate insight into scientific publishing in high-ranking journals of adult education research is provided. The bibliometric field surveys compiled in the edited volume *Mapping Out the Research Field of Adult Education and Learning* (Fejes & Nylander, 2019) provided an accurate insight into scientific publishing in high-ranking journals of adult education research: This publication culture is highly concentrated in English-speaking countries, such as the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia, which dominate the majority of publications and citations in leading journals (Larsson et al., 2019, p. 74; Nylander et al., 2018; Fejes & Nylander, 2019, pp. 110–112). Thus, researchers from non-Anglophone countries face significant structural hurdles, as their work in their native language is rarely published in English-language journals (Nylander et al., 2018, p. 90). As a result, non-Anglophone researchers receive less visibility and recognition in the international scientific community than their Anglophone peers. This structural disadvantage is further reinforced by the Anglophone composition of editorial boards and the almost exclusive focus of international adult education journals on English-language publications, which further complicates access to central discourses and networks (Fejes & Nylander, 2019, p. 106). Furthermore, the lack of international networking is problematic, emphasizing national publication patterns and limiting the global dissemination and recognition of research results. Overall, these factors result in a distorted map of adult education research (Nylander & Fejes, 2019, pp. 232 f).

The Anglophone bias in adult education publishing identified by Fejes & Nylander (2017) is accompanied by socio-economic bias or, more specifically, a neo-colonial bias (Vetter, 2022, p. 123). For example, the proportion of articles in leading international

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adult education journals by scholars from countries in the so-called Global South (GS)<sup>1</sup> is minimal (Vetter, 2022). Additionally, a study examining the phenomenon of predatory publishing in adult education research showed that, quantitatively, illegitimate open access (OA) journals do not pose a major problem in this field compared to other disciplines. However, when these journals are consulted, it tends to be by authors from countries in the so-called GS (Vetter & Schemmann, 2021).

Overall, from the perspective of the so-called Global North, the mapping of international adult education research seems to be sufficiently developed. According to the bibliometric data, little adult education research has occurred in the countries of the so-called GS. However, the bibliometric field studies conducted thus far have only examined journals indexed as adult education research journals, ignoring the journalistic periphery and the strong overlaps between adult education research and its neighboring disciplines (Elfert & Rubenson, 2015). This overlap suggests that adult education publications appear in journals that are not explicitly adult education journals.

This study aims to explore the adult education research contributions from countries in the so-called GS by examining peripheral or non-mainstream journals. While existing bibliometric studies have primarily focused on indexed mainstream journals, they often neglect research published in local or regional outlets, which may better reflect context-specific priorities and challenges. Building on the assumption that topics emerging from a GS perspective – which are underrepresented in the discursive center of adult education research – differ from those found in mainstream publication venues, the study briefly considers the notion of *intraversion* as a background dynamic. *Intraversion* refers to a tendency among academic communities to concentrate on nationally or regionally produced knowledge, often displaying limited engagement with external scholarly work (Collyer, 2016, p. 64), and may inform how thematic isolation or lack of global integration manifests in publishing practices.

The central research question is: To what extent are the thematic priorities of researchers from the so-called Global South related to their positioning and visibility within the global scientific publishing system?

To answer this question, the study applies a structural topic model to compare adult education publications authored by scholars from the GS in both mainstream and non-mainstream journals.

This paper's structure is as follows: First, as the central subject of this paper, the publication sphere of non-mainstream journals, which has been marginalized within the publication culture, is defined from a macrosociological perspective (Chapter 2). This section is followed by an explanation of the methodological approach, ranging from data generation (3.1) to the application of structural topic modeling (STM) to identify latent topics in both corpora (3.2). The subsequent presentation of the identified

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, „countries of the so-called Global South“ is a relational category that describes economically disadvantaged regions of the world and, in combination with its counterpart, „countries of the so-called Global North,“ emphasizes (economic) power asymmetries. The adjective „so-called“ is always used to make it clear that „south“ is not to be understood as a geographical classification. In the following, whenever the focus is economic asymmetry, this linguistic category will be used. When the focus is epistemic inequality between world regions, such as in the theoretical-conceptual framework of this article (Chapter 2), the terms center and (semi-)periphery are used.

latent topics is structured according to whether the topics appear to a similar extent in both publication groups (4.1) or are predominantly present in either the mainstream (4.2) or non-mainstream corpus (4.3). The concluding discussion of these topics (5), framed within a macrosociological perspective, focuses on the findings of Chapters 4.2 and 4.3 and derives assumptions that extend beyond the methodological framework of this study.

## **2 Theoretical-conceptual framework: Non-mainstream publishing in the context of the world system and world polity**

Academic recognition processes are characterized by a structural decoupling between local relevance and international visibility, which reinforces asymmetries in the valuation of scholarly work across the global academic landscape (Beigel, 2018). These asymmetries have led to the emergence of two distinct journalistic communication spheres across disciplines: the mainstream and non-mainstream circuits. Understanding the formation of these spheres and their role within the academic system requires an analytical approach that considers power and resource dynamics as well as the processes of globalization and standardization in academia. Accordingly, this study employed world-polity and world-system perspectives to analyze non-mainstream journals both as products of global institutional norms and as manifestations of hierarchical positions within the economic and scientific world system.

Although scientometrics – the study of scientific networks through quantitative analyses of bibliometric data – is not known for its high level of theorization, Wallerstein's world-systems approach is frequently referenced via the center–periphery framework (e.g., Demeter & Toth, 2020; Hladchenko & Moed, 2021; Schubert & Sooryamoorthy, 2010). In this approach, Wallerstein described a global system of centers and peripheries interconnected by economic exchange processes. Building on the dependency theory, he introduced the concept of the semi-periphery, which is both peripheral to the center and central to the periphery. This structure blurs the boundaries between different levels of the world system, stabilizing its socio-economic order (Schubert & Sooryamoorthy, 2010, p. 182).

Applying this economic world-systems approach to academia, core nations with strong economies are positioned by their ability to process data sourced from the (semi)periphery, develop theories and methods, and export these back to the periphery in the form of literature, research conventions, and publication standards (Larson, 2017, p. 523). As Von Gifycki (1973, p. 474) noted, the center is a place where „works produced receive more attention and recognition than works produced elsewhere. A center is a place from which influence emanates.” Centre, semi-periphery, and periphery can thus be understood as epistemic categories.

From a world-systems perspective, scientific journals function as communication arenas within distinct power spheres. Journals controlled by the center align with Wal-

lerstein's center, operating as 'centres of excellence' and setting the norms for scientific quality, citation practices, and publication standards. This center-periphery distribution of the scientific publishing system aligns with the economic North-South asymmetry. Furthermore, the hegemony of the so-called core journals is reinforced by the hypercentrality of English and the standardization of impact criteria established through indexing systems such as the Science Citation Index, which was introduced in the 1960s (Beigel, 2014, p. 745). These systems have played a significant role in elevating the global prestige of certain research centers, while publications outside these frameworks have been dismissed as 'local science' (Beigel, 2021, p. 3). In the domain of scientific journals, the hegemonic position of the academic center is further perpetuated by self-referential citation networks within core journals (Larson, 2017, p. 525) and strengthened by the influential mechanism of the impact factor.

From a macrosociological perspective, the world-systems approach highlights the inequalities that define the scientific publishing landscape and underpin the dichotomy between core and peripheral journals. However, the reasons for the relevance and normative penetration of international scientific publishing across core and peripheral journal boundaries remain unclear, as these cannot solely be explained by power and resource dynamics given the decentralized nature of the scientific publishing system.

Unlike Wallerstein's world-systems perspective, Meyer's (2005) world polity approach conceptualizes world society as a network of social actors – nation-states, organizations, and individuals – 'embedded in and shaped by a global cultural, social, and political environment, resulting in a high degree of decoupled isomorphism among them' (Cole, 2017, p. 86). In the context of scholarly publishing, this implies that institutions and journals worldwide conform to global norms to attain legitimacy, which leads to institutional isomorphism, in which national or regional publishing practices increasingly mirror global models. For example, English publishing standards have been adopted in non-Anglophone countries. The world polity approach also addresses decoupling: institutions formally adopt global standards and practices but often fail to implement them fully. For instance, peripheral actors may establish journals that mimic global standards without being genuinely integrated into the global network (Silva & Avrichir, 2024).

These two perspectives, the world-systems approach and world polity theory, highlight the structural heterogeneity and hierarchies within the global academic system. They demonstrate how scholarly publications are segmented not only by power and resource dynamics but also by global norms and standards. To better understand the role and significance of non-mainstream journals in this context, Beigel's (2014) model of four academic publication circuits is a useful framework. Beigel outlined four distinct yet interconnected and segmented circuits of the global academic landscape, each reflecting different forms of academic prestige and scholarly visibility.

First, mainstream publishing circuits (a) are dominated by large commercial publishers, such as Elsevier and Thomson Reuters (Beigel, 2014, p. 745), and occupy central positions within the world system. These circuits set global standards and exert hegemonic influence. Semi-peripheral circuits (b), by contrast, operate as OA transnational

networks and repositories, offering an alternative to commercial publishing systems. Supported by non-profit institutions, they provide full-text access to scientific articles and promote global accessibility to scientific knowledge (Beigel, 2014, p. 749). From a world-systems perspective, actors within semi-peripheral circuits consciously oppose the hegemonic power structures of the publishing industry and seek to establish systemic access for researchers outside economic centers. Within the framework of the (scientific) world polity, their efforts align with the institutional expectation of knowledge as a global public good, thereby gaining legitimacy. Simultaneously, actors in these semi-peripheral circuits, such as the DOAJ, are increasingly integrated into the global logic of science. The need to expand reach and enhance scientific recognition leads OA platforms to adopt structures and technologies similar to those of mainstream circuits.

Beigel (2014, p. 345) further distinguishes the field of peripheral or non-mainstream journals into regional Southern circuits (c). The scholarly publishing systems of the so-called GS are organized through OA platforms, such as SciELO, RedALyC, and AJOL. These platforms disseminate regional and local research, enable publication in non-English languages, and are primarily publicly funded. They not only provide an alternative to mainstream journals, which often charge fees but have greater international visibility and prestige (Beigel & Salatino, 2015, p. 16; Russo et al., 2024, p. 83), but also pursue counter-hegemonic objectives.

Finally, national circuits (d) represent local publishing systems characterized by non-indexed journals with limited distribution. These journals are predominantly print-based; are not listed in international or regional databases, such as SciELO or RedALyC; and target a local audience. With minimal international visibility, they occupy a marginalized position in the global scholarly system (Beigel & Salatino, 2015, p. 16). However, they may achieve some visibility through mega-indexes, such as Google Scholar, Dimensions, or Lens (Beigel et al., 2024, p. 5). Journals in this circuit reflect the material and institutional fragmentation of the periphery, as they are often published by underfunded universities or research institutions.

The distinctions within non-mainstream journals – such as those between regional, transnational, and national circuits – are often overlooked by the mainstream circuit. Instead, all publications outside the hegemonic networks are dismissed as peripheral and local. This disregard occurs either because these journals fail to meet the global standards established by mainstream indices and publishers (hegemonic quality justification) or because the topics addressed by the adult education periphery prohibit integration into the central publication space (topic-centered justification). This article explores the latter assumption: The generalized classification by the center ignores specific regional or transnational relevance, thereby contributing to the epistemic marginalization and invisibility of alternative scholarly networks.

In summary, non-mainstream journals mirror the hierarchical structures of the scientific world system, with national circuits remaining highly localized and marginalized, while regional southern circuits (e.g., SciELO) hold a semi-peripheral position. Transnational OA networks (Circuit b) bridge the periphery and the center by promot-

ing global knowledge access but simultaneously adhere to mainstream logics. From a world polity perspective, non-mainstream journals increasingly adopt global standards, such as peer review and citation metrics, yet remain decoupled from hegemonic networks. The mainstream circuit's hegemonic dominance is evident in its blanket classification of other venues as „local” or „peripheral” – a classification that disregards their transnational relevance. This leads to epistemic marginalization, despite these journals' offering vital alternatives to existing power asymmetries in the global scholarly system.

### 3 Methodical Design

This paper examines topics in adult education research from countries of the so-called GS, focusing on academic publications in both mainstream and non-mainstream journals. It aims to identify topics by authors from the so-called GS that remain overlooked in international adult education discourse by highlighting non-mainstream journals in this context for the first time. The following sections outline the data sampling for both corpora (3.1) and describe STM as the analytical method (3.2).

#### 3.1 Sampling

As defined in Chapter 2, the distinction between mainstream and non-mainstream journals forms the basis for operationalizing the two corpora in this study. Mainstream journals are globally oriented, predominantly English-language publications (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Gómez, 2019, p. 118; Chavarro et al., 2017, p. 1668) that employ rigorous peer review, achieve high citation and retrieval rates, have an impact factor, and are indexed in leading services, such as Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, or PubMed (Vesuri et al., 2014, p. 650).

For the operationalization of mainstream journals, indices that include impact-factor journals are relevant. In education disciplines, the most pertinent indices are the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) and the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). These indices are integrated into larger databases: the Journal Citation Report (JCR) within WoS and the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) within Scopus. Both provide key metrics to assess journal visibility and impact.

To identify adult education studies by authors from the so-called GS, WoS and Scopus databases were utilized. Following database-supported systematic review procedures, the search strategy used predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria encompassing both formal (f) and content-related (i) criteria (Theurer, 2024, p. 99), which are summarized in Table 1. The intracoder reliability of these criteria yielded highly satisfactory values for formal criteria ( $\alpha_f = .951$ ) and adequate values for the content criterion ( $\alpha_i = .781$ ) as calculated using Krippendorff's alpha (De Swert, 2012, p. 5).

**Table 1:** Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria No.:	Exclusion if:
f1	Not published between 01/01/2000 and 30/09/2024
f2	Type of journal publication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letter to the Editor</li> <li>• Editorial</li> <li>• Comment</li> <li>• Review</li> <li>• Conference report/summary</li> </ul>
f3	The institution of at least one author of a contribution is not based in a country that is listed by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) as a recipient of official development assistance (ODA) <sup>23</sup>
f4	Title, abstract and keywords not available in English
i1	There is no indication that the article can be categorised as adult education research in the narrow sense, as distinct from the discipline of higher education (Hill et al. 2023).

To investigate the visibility gap between the center and periphery, this study adopted the database indexing approach as the most effective search strategy following Di Céspedes & Robinson-Garcia (2024). This approach assumes that non-mainstream journals are located outside the mainstream databases Scopus and WoS (López Piñeiro & Hicks 2015; Moed et al. 2021; Tijssen et al. 2006). Non-mainstream journals in adult education were defined as those not indexed in Scopus or WoS and not published by major commercial publishers, but rather through self-administration or similar means.

The classification framework proposed by Beigel (2014, p. 745) and Beigel and Salantino (2015, p. 16) (Chap. 2) served to systematize the diverse field of publication channels. Alongside (a) mainstream publication channels, the non-mainstream journals were categorized into three publication circuits, operationalized in this research as follows. First, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) is the largest repository of its kind, indexing 21,143 journals from 136 countries in 2024, with minimal overlap with channel (a) (Cho, 2023). This research utilized the DOAJ database to represent transnational open access networks and repositories. Second, journals from channel (c) were indexed via OA platforms, such as SciELO, RedALyC, and AJOL. Given their distinct geographical focus, SciELO (South America) (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Gómez, 2019, p. 119) and AJOL (Africa) were used to identify adult education studies from countries in the so-called GS published in non-mainstream journals. Finally, the identification of journals from circuit (d) was relevant to this research only if these journals planned to transition from print to digital formats. Many of these journals use the open-source software Open Journal Systems (OJS), which manages the publication process and facilitates this transition. By supporting OA and standardizing metadata,

2 The present study uses the list from the reporting years 2024/2025. This can be found here: <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/oda-eligibility-and-conditions/dac-list-of-oda-recipients.html> (accessed on November 20, 2024).

3 China was not considered in the study due to its economic strength and role as a donor, which contradicts the ODA criteria (Kitano & Miyabayashi, 2023).

OJS enhances journal visibility. Due to its free and user-friendly design, OJS is widely adopted, especially in the so-called GS (Yance-Yupari, 2018, p. 356; Vessuri et al., 2014, p. 655); it is used to manage over 44,000 journals in 148 countries.

For this study, the full January 2024 OJS dataset<sup>4</sup> was used to represent the national circuits. This dataset, published by the Public Knowledge Project (PKP), contains CSV-formatted information about known public installations of OJS. It includes metadata relevant to the operation, location, and subject coverage of these platforms. Table 2 outlines the search strategy for each source. Unlike the mainstream corpus, varying technical requirements prevented a uniform search strategy for these circuits. Additionally, the non-mainstream databases lacked the detailed filters of Scopus and WoS, necessitating manual research.

**Table 2:** Search strategies for each database

Publishing Circuit	Database	Search Strategy
(b)	DOAJ	Article-Search/Subject “Education”: ABSTRACT (“adult”) Year of Publication: 2000–2024 n = 3459
(c)	SciELO	Advanced Search: ABSTRACT (“adult”) SciELO Thematic Areas: Human Sciences; Applied Social Sciences Type of Literature: Article; Review Article; Case Report Publication Year: 2000–2024 n = 2225
(c)	AJOL	Google Assisted Search on AJOL-Homepage: All fields (“adult education”) n = 1231
(d)	OJS	In beacon.tab of Khanna et al. (2024): All fields (“educa*” OR „Pendidikan” OR “التعليم” OR “образование” OR “Éducat*” OR “Eğitim*” OR “শিক্ষা” OR “Освіта” OR “onderwys” OR “Bildung”) <sup>5</sup> n = 8260

In addition to the inclusion and exclusion criteria presented in Table 1, the non-mainstream corpus was checked to ensure that the journal of a relevant article was not listed in the SSCI or ESCI by entering the ISSN into Scopus and Web of Science. Moreover, given the proximity of some non-mainstream journals to potential predatory journals

4 <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/OCZNVY> (accessed on November 24, 2024)

5 In the OJS dataset, only a basic ‘Ctrl-F’ search is possible, covering the following languages: English, Portuguese, Spanish, Indonesian, Arabic, Russian, French, Hindi, Ukrainian, Afrikaans, and German. Journals meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria are then manually searched for relevant papers.

(Mills & Inouye, 2021), each journal was evaluated using the checklist by Vetter and Schemmann (2021, p. 82) and excluded if necessary. The intracoder reliability for identifying journals in the publishing circle (d) was satisfactory ( $\alpha = .804$ ).

The relevant articles identified during sampling were prepared for topic modeling by extracting titles, abstracts, and keywords into unformatted text files. Metadata, including authors' names, institutional affiliations (country), and publication years, were also recorded. The content of the texts in the mainstream and non-mainstream corpus was then analyzed using a probabilistic topic model.

### **3.2 Structural topic modelling: preprocessing and model selection**

To address the research question, STM, a semi-automated quantitative text analysis method, was applied to compare two text corpora in a cumulative topic model using the R package *stm* (Roberts et al., 2019). Topic modeling is an unsupervised machine-learning technique that identifies latent topics in text corpora based on the bag-of-words hypothesis, which assumes word order can be ignored to analyze co-occurrence patterns (Blei et al., 2003; Sievert & Shirley, 2014). Topics, defined as probability distributions over words, emerge from probabilistic modeling and represent clusters of words likely to occur together (Goldenstein & Poschmann, 2019). Among topic modeling approaches, Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) and STM are prominent, with STM offering the advantage of incorporating metadata including geographic origin and publication year (Roberts et al., 2019).

A key aspect of topic modeling is the calculation of statistical indicators, such as beta and gamma values. Beta values measure the relevance of a term to a specific topic, while gamma values indicate the relative frequency of terms associated with a latent topic. These metrics enable comparisons between empirical texts and ideal-typical topics, revealing their thematic imprint (Kuckartz, 2019).

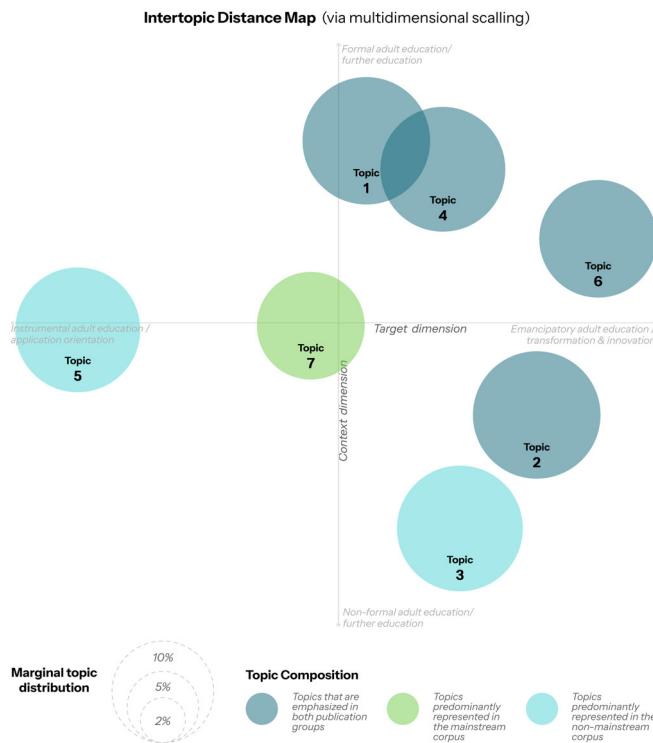
The topic modeling process involved data preparation, during which texts were tokenized, stop words were removed, and word forms were standardized to reduce bias (Muller et al., 2016). Probabilistic modeling was then applied to compute a latent thematic structure, facilitating objective and reproducible analysis of large text corpora (DiMaggio et al., 2013). The results were interpreted using visualization tools, such as LDAvis, which illustrate relationships between topics and terms (Sievert & Shirley, 2014).

Topic modeling offers a robust foundation for examining how the thematic priorities of researchers from the so-called GS relate to those researchers' visibility and positioning within the global publication system. STM, in particular, enables the analysis of contextual factors and epistemic inequalities, as the method visualizes differences between mainstream and non-mainstream journals and supports the exploration of marginalized topics and disciplinary diversity in the global science system (Nylander et al., 2022).

For this study, models with varying topic numbers ( $K = 3$  to  $K = 20$ ) were computed to test various *min\_docfreq* values and the use of word stemming. Models with a low *min\_docfreq* of 0.005 and without word stemming produced the most selective and interpretable results. The optimal number of topics was determined using criteria in-

cluding semantic coherence and exclusivity. As shown in Figure 1,<sup>6</sup> a model with  $K = 7$  topics was selected for analysis.

The modeling results were visualized by extracting the most salient terms for each topic and generating an intertopic distance map with the LDAsvis package (Sievert & Shirley, 2014), providing a two-dimensional representation of the seven topics and their lexical proximity or distance (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2:** Intertopic distance map

Gamma values ( $\gamma$ ) were used to analyze the typical assignment of texts to topics. These values represent the estimated proportion of a document containing a particular topic, where the sum of all  $\gamma$ -values is 1 (Silge & Robinson, 2017). A text is considered typical for a topic if its  $\gamma$ -value is at least 0.5. Therefore, texts with  $\gamma$ -values of 0.9 or higher were deemed highly representative and formed the basis for further interpretations of the topic's content characteristics. The proportion of topics published in mainstream and non-mainstream journals was also calculated to determine which topics were more strongly influenced by each publication group and highlight differences in thematic priorities between the two.

<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmwc3fl8yw8t0s>, located in the „Figures“ folder.

## 4 Results

The search process identified 415 articles published before September 30, 2024. Since an exhaustive search in non-mainstream journals was unfeasible due to frequent non-indexing, the search continued until the non-mainstream corpus also included 415 studies.

Analysis of the bibliometric metadata by authors' countries of institutional affiliation revealed that the non-mainstream corpus was dominated by lower middle income countries (LMICs; 49.88 %, n = 207), followed by upper middle income countries (UMICs; 36.02 %, n = 149.5) and least developed countries (LDCs; 14.10 %, n = 58.5). In this corpus, the most frequently represented countries included Nigeria (145 articles), South Africa (37.5<sup>7</sup>), and Indonesia (37.32). In contrast, the mainstream corpus was led by UMICs (64.33 %), with smaller shares for LMICs (24.04 %) and LDCs (11.58 %). The most frequently represented countries in the mainstream corpus were South Africa (n = 106.82), Brazil (n = 43.33), and Turkey (n = 33). These findings highlight the differences in the geographical distribution of contributions, particularly regarding the prominence of LMICs and LDCs.

Figure 3<sup>8</sup> illustrates the publication years of articles from both corpora. While publications by adult education researchers from countries of the so-called GS were published at a low to moderate level in mainstream journals in the 2000s, non-mainstream journals only featured such publications from 2012 onward, with a sharp increase beginning in 2018.

The mainstream corpus, comprising 138 journals, was dominated by the *International Review of Education* (59 relevant articles) and the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (53), both central to global adult education research. In contrast, articles in the non-mainstream corpus were distributed more widely among the 202 journals, with the *Journal of Vocational, Adult, and Continuing Education and Training* (23 articles) and the *Journal of Continuing and Development Education* (18) leading. Geographically, most mainstream journals were published in the United Kingdom (162.5 relevant articles across 35 journals), Germany (63/5), and Brazil (38/19), while the non-mainstream corpus was dominated by Nigeria (93/39), Indonesia (55/34), and South Africa (28/5). A full list of journals is available in the supplementary material<sup>9</sup>.

The computed model's topics were described and interpreted individually. Here, topics appearing in similar proportions in both the mainstream and non-mainstream journals are addressed first, followed by those that were predominant in the mainstream corpus and then those significant in the non-mainstream corpus.

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<sup>7</sup> The article counts reflect fractional authorship attribution. In cases of co-authorship across countries, the contribution was equally divided among the countries involved (e.g., a paper co-authored by researchers from South Africa and Ghana was attributed as 0.5 to each).

<sup>8</sup> Figure 3 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/jwn52uam65y432gm> located in the „Figures“ folder.

<sup>9</sup> A tabular overview of the journals included in both the mainstream and non-mainstream corpora, the reference list of all 830 included studies as a machine-readable RDF file, and the analyzed titles, abstracts, and keywords as plain text files are available in the appendix at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmcw3fl8yw8t0s>, in the „Dataset“ folder.

The 30 most relevant terms for each topic are presented, reflecting various relevant concepts, from absolute frequency to exclusivity. Irrespective of occurrence frequency, LDAvis controlled this weighting using the parameter  $\lambda$  ( $0 \leq \lambda \leq 1$ ), where lower values emphasize terms that are highly specific to a single topic, while higher values highlight more frequent terms across topics. A value of  $\lambda = 0.5$  represents a compromise between these two notions of relevance, balancing exclusivity and general frequency to provide a more nuanced view of each topic's most informative terms (Sievert & Shirley, 2014). For consistency, all reported terms are based on  $\lambda = 0.5$ . To complement the topic descriptions, texts with gamma values of  $\gamma \geq 0.9$ , considered highly representative, were included.

#### 4.1 Topics that are emphasized in both publication groups

Topic 1 (Fig. 4)<sup>10</sup> centered on the methodological development, implementation, and evaluation of adult education programs, emphasizing practice-oriented approaches and the application of andragagogical principles. Terms such as *andragogy*, *methods*, *training*, *implementation*, and *evaluation* highlight the topic's focus on designing learning processes tailored to learners' needs and experiences. Key principles from Knowles, such as self-directed learning, relevance to learners' lives, and autonomy, played a pivotal role in this topic.

The non-mainstream texts emphasized the practical application of these principles, such as tutorial support in evening classes (A330<sup>11</sup>) or work-based training (A314), often adapted to local contexts. In contrast, mainstream texts, such as B501 and B549, expanded these approaches by developing theoretical models for generalizable applications, including collaborative learning and active-learning methods. The corpora also differed in their objectives: non-mainstream texts prioritized contextual applicability, while mainstream texts focused on systematically developing transferable concepts and empirically validating them. Methodologically, the non-mainstream studies favored qualitative approaches to capture contextual factors, whereas mainstream studies employed quantitative and mixed methods to evaluate outcomes. Further, many studies explored how learning processes can foster intrinsic motivation, reflecting a central emphasis on motivation. Thus, this topic is best described as *learner-centered implementation of andragagogical concepts in practice-oriented continuing education programs*.

Topic 4 (Fig. 5)<sup>12</sup> focused on transformative learning, particularly in the context of distance education and the reflection of social and cultural identities. Terms such as reflection, identity, and community highlight the focus on individual transformation and collective change in educational processes. The emphasis on distance underscored the role of distance education in fostering subject- and community-oriented transformation. Another notable term, indigenous, highlighted the importance of distance

<sup>10</sup> Figure 4 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmwc3fl8yw8t0s>, located in the „Figures“ folder.

<sup>11</sup> This is the randomized code of a text from the data set. „A“ stands for the corpus of „non-mainstream“ and „B“ for the corpus of „mainstream.“ The complete dataset is available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmwc3fl8yw8t0s>.

<sup>12</sup> Figure 5 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmwc3fl8yw8t0s>, located in the „Figures“ folder.

education for Indigenous communities, as this type of education helps overcome geographical and social barriers while offering flexible learning opportunities, especially for those with community or family responsibilities.

The non-mainstream texts explored practical applications of transformative principles, including Mezirow's theory of shifting frames of reference (A265) and the integration of cultural values, like Ubuntu (A340). Mainstream texts, such as B418 and B786, expanded on this perspective by incorporating cultural sensitivity and motivational techniques into distance education programs.

Topics 1 and 4 shared an application of andragogical principles and motivational teaching approaches, both aiming to empower learners and enhance educational effectiveness. However, Topic 1 prioritized measurable competence development and adopted a naturalistic perspective, while Topic 4 emphasized learning processes and their social impact, reflecting a social constructivist andragogical lens. Thus, Topic 4 can be aptly described as *transformative learning in distance education contexts*.

Exploring vocational education and training (VET), lifelong learning, and the role of educational programs in fostering employability and social justice, Topic 2 (Fig. 6)<sup>13</sup> emphasized vocational education and economic integration policies, particularly in regions like South Africa. Key terms included TVET, training, policy, vocational, and market. Non-mainstream texts, such as A75 and A125, highlighted practice-oriented approaches, such as work-integrated learning, while A406 addressed challenges in lifelong learning for older adults. In contrast, mainstream texts, such as B658 and B752, analyzed policy frameworks and their impact on program effectiveness, particularly for industrial workers and global labor markets. A recurring theme was the fight against social inequalities, as discussed in B645 and B658, which demonstrated how education can promote economic and social integration for disadvantaged groups. However, B457 criticized insufficient political commitments to lifelong learning. As seen in these articles, Topic 2 is best described as *VET and lifelong learning for employability and social justice*. It was distinct from other topics due to its focus on labor market integration and structural reforms.

Topic 6 (Fig. 7)<sup>14</sup> explored the role of education in historical, social, and political developments in South America, focusing on emancipatory approaches inspired by Paulo Freire's pedagogy and its connections to social movements. Within this topic, education was framed as a tool for promoting social justice, political participation, and the decolonization of knowledge (A325). Key terms including history, movement, and political, alongside references like Brazil and Brazilian, emphasized the topic's historical and geographical roots. Freire's concepts, particularly the pedagogy of the oppressed and conscientization, formed the theoretical foundation of many studies (A217; A347). These perspectives link education with political struggles and social change, as exemplified by movements like the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) (B686; B576).

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<sup>13</sup> Figure 6 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmcwc3fl8yw8t0s>, located in the „Figures“ folder.

<sup>14</sup> Figure 7 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmcwc3fl8yw8t0s>, located in the „Figures“ folder.

Since history serves as both a subject of analysis and a methodological approach, studies in this topic analyzed historical developments and actors to reflect on structural challenges and the transformative potential of adult education. Here, education is viewed as a continuation of historical struggles aimed at individual liberation and collective transformation (B688; B613). Methodologically, studies on this topic relied on qualitative approaches, including historical analysis, document studies, and critical theory, facilitating in-depth reflections on education systems and their role in addressing social inequalities (B540; B585). Topic 6 is labeled „*historical-political education perspectives in South America: Emancipation through social movements.*”

#### **4.2 Topics predominantly represented in the mainstream corpus**

Topic 7 (Fig. 8)<sup>15</sup> addressed functional literacy and women's education as central approaches to promoting autonomy and social participation. Educational programs combine basic skills, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, with application-oriented skills to enable participants to actively shape their lives. A particular focus was placed on addressing intersectional disadvantages that arise from the intersection of gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic isolation (B622). The key terms of the topic – literacy, functional, women, rural, skills, and participation – underscored the programs' focus on strengthening individual skills and collective participation. The studies showed that women in rural areas benefit particularly from functional literacy, as it allows them to acquire practical skills, such as accounting and problem solving, which enhance their economic independence and social participation (A225). At the same time, the studies identified challenges, such as inadequate funding and a lack of infrastructure, that hinder the implementation of effective educational programs (A79).

Methodologically, the studies employed qualitative needs assessments to determine the specific needs of participants (B472) and used quantitative measurements to evaluate functional literacy levels and their impact on daily and working life (B471). The results demonstrated that functional literacy in rural areas not only contributes to individual empowerment but also facilitates collective development by breaking down social barriers and promoting economic participation (B702). A suitable label for the topic could therefore be „*functional literacy and women's education: promoting autonomy and social participation in rural areas.*”

#### **4.3 Topics predominantly represented in the non-mainstream corpus**

Topic 3 (Fig. 9)<sup>16</sup> investigated the role of non-formal education as a pivotal instrument for advancing sustainable development, alleviating poverty, and addressing climate protection, with a particular emphasis on the Nigerian context. Central terms, such as non-formal, community, poverty, environment, challenges, and development, underscored the deliberate and strategic utilization of education to reduce social inequities and enhance environmental awareness. The non-mainstream texts, including A202

<sup>15</sup> Figure 8 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmcwc3f18yw8t0s>, located in the „Figures” folder.

<sup>16</sup> Figure 9 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmcwc3f18yw8t0s>, located in the „Figures” folder.

and A253, provided empirical insights into how non-formal education facilitates the realization of the Millennium Development Goals, and A302 and A243 emphasized the critical role of environmental adult education in addressing climate change. Furthermore, texts such as A407 and A393 highlighted structural challenges, such as inadequate funding and the importance of public–private partnerships (PPP) in sustaining adult education programs. The mainstream text B820.4 extended this discourse by analyzing the relationship between education and Nigeria's political reform agenda.

The thematic connection between Topics 3 and 2 arises from their shared objective of leveraging education to foster social and economic participation. However, while Topic 2 primarily focused on labor market integration, Topic 3 emphasized community empowerment and sustainable development. Accordingly, Topic 3 was characterized as *non-formal education for sustainable development, social justice, and climate protection*.

Topic 5 (Fig. 10)<sup>17</sup> is characterized by predominantly quantitative research and evaluation of educational programs, particularly within specific regional contexts, such as Nigerian states (state). Key terms, including questionnaire, data, survey, findings, learners, and programs, emphasize the focus on data collection and analysis to evaluate and adapt educational programs to regional conditions. Moreover, the significant presence of the term „state“ underscored the regional grounding of this topic, with numerous studies addressing challenges and successes in Nigerian states. For instance, A129 and A130 investigated the effectiveness of regional entrepreneurial, agricultural, and political education initiatives for women, particularly in terms of poverty alleviation and social inclusion, utilizing validated questionnaire instruments. Similarly, the mainstream text B763 expanded this perspective by examining the role of libraries in facilitating educational resources through a descriptive questionnaire approach. Overall, the thematic focus and target groups were secondary to the methodological approach, which centered on quantitative data generation and analysis. The isolated position of this topic on the intertopic distance map reflects its distinct methodological orientation and differentiation from topics with a more subject-centered focus. Topic 5 was therefore described as *quantitative evaluation and data collection in regional education programs in Nigeria*.

Based upon the results presented, the following interpretation emerged for mapping adult education research from countries in the so-called GS: the vertical positioning of topics reflected a distinction between research on formal adult education and discussions of non-formal settings. Thus, the vertical axis was labeled as a *context dimension*. The horizontal axis, in contrast, distinguishes between studies that framed adult education interventions as application-oriented or instrumental and those that viewed these interventions as transformative and emancipatory. Thus, this axis was referred to as the *target dimension*. This distinction is exemplified horizontally by the intertopographically isolated Topic 5, which includes programs – often quantitatively researched and evaluated – that pursue functional goals such as poverty reduction or (agricultural) skills development. In contrast, the transformative-emancipatory side is

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<sup>17</sup> Figure 10 is available in the appendix of the dataset at <https://doi.org/10.57743/smmcwc3fl8yw8t0s>, located in the „Figures“ folder.

characterized by an epistemological orientation that, drawing on historical paradigms and framed within lifelong learning, conceptualizes adult education as largely detached from (economic) exploitation goals.

## 5 Discussion, Conclusion & Outlook

To enable a concise discussion and outlook, the labeled topics are analyzed within the macrosociological framework of this article. These reflections extend beyond the methodological limitations of the current analysis and highlight potential influencing factors. Implications for publication practices and directions for future research in the field are derived from these assumptions.

The overall analysis of the seven topics revealed that the thematic priorities of adult education research from the so-called GS were strongly influenced by regional specifics. For instance, texts from Nigeria dominated Topics 3 and 5, while Topic 4 was heavily shaped by contributions from Brazil (58.15 %) and other South American countries. Topic 2 comprised 58.23 % of works from Ukraine and South Africa, whereas Topic 1 was largely defined (40.41 %) by contributions from Indonesia. With the exception of Topic 1, country designations appeared among the most frequent terms in the „most frequent words” lists of the respective topics, emphasizing the strong localization of these discussions within national, regional, and local contexts.

In the non-mainstream corpus, papers from Nigeria had a high frequency (Topic 3: 68.35 %; Topic 5: 78.08 %), with Topic 5 consisting entirely of African contributions. The Nigerian research landscape reflects a complex interplay of colonial legacies, economic instability, and global dependencies. During the post-colonial era, international organizations, such as UNESCO and NGOs, have provided significant support for research and science. However, a sustained lack of state investment and political prioritization since the 1980s has led to a substantial reduction in public funding and infrastructure (Lebeau, 2003, pp. 184 f.). Subsequently, international sponsors became central actors, supporting infrastructure but simultaneously fostering dependencies and aligning research priorities with global rather than national needs (Lebeau, 2003, pp. 193 f.). Thus, Nigerian researchers face significant challenges, including fragmented networks, insufficient state funding, and inadequate technical resources, and these challenges render their working conditions particularly precarious compared to other GS countries (Lebeau, 2003, 194 f.).

Additionally, universities in Nigeria frequently use international publications as a promotion criterion, irrespective of the bibliometric prestige of the journals (Omobowale et al., 2014, p. 672). This practice may account for the relatively high use of potential predatory journals by Nigerian adult education researchers (Vetter & Schemmann, 2021, p. 89). However, it does not explain the extensive local Nigerian journal output identified in this study or the finding that only  $n = 17.5$  of the texts in the mainstream corpus were authored by Nigerians. Rather, the dominance of local Nigerian journals can be attributed to institutional requirements and national research structures. These

journals function less as vehicles for global visibility and more as tools to advance academic careers and secure promotions within the national context (Mills & Branford, 2022, p. 841).

The highly representative texts from Topic 5, which emphasize the evaluation and methodological research of educational programs within Nigerian local contexts, demonstrated the practical orientation of many studies that directly address the specific challenges of Nigeria's educational landscape. This research, deeply rooted in regional contexts, focuses on adapting education policies and practices to local conditions and needs, explaining the topic's strong prevalence in local journals (Mills & Branford, 2022, p. 842). Furthermore, these studies were frequently accompanied by direct appeals to educational policy institutions advocating for increased support for regional adult education projects, initiatives, and organizations.

The latter point – namely, the frequent appeals to educational policy institutions – also applies to another topic in the non-mainstream corpus, Topic 3.: Unlike Topic 5, which was more theoretically and conceptually oriented than methodologically or empirically so, Topic 3 focused on education policy, advocating for increased financial support for adult education as a key instrument for sustainable national development. Contributions to this topic frequently discussed sustainability through the „three pillars of sustainability” framework, which considers social, economic, and environmental dimensions as equally significant and operationalized via the Sustainable Development Goals (Purvis et al., 2019). National challenges, such as discrimination against minorities, poverty, and water pollution, were framed as fields of action for adult education, aiming at national and community development. The strong emphasis on the government as a funding agency highlighted the marginalization of adult education, which stems partly from political decision-makers' limited understanding of the sector's role in promoting social inclusion, civic participation, and lifelong learning (Grotlüschen et al., 2024).

In summary, the topics primarily discussed in the non-mainstream corpus, particularly Topic 3, highlighted issues that were also highly relevant to the center, but within the non-mainstream corpus these were directed at specific audiences, such as national education policymakers or funding bodies. Thus, scientific influence on local or regional stakeholders is likely mediated through peripheral, locally oriented journals. However, the audience for these publications remains limited, as does their intended impact on decision-makers. This leads to the assumption that the struggle for recognition of adult education, particularly in Nigeria, occurs in isolation from the central discourse of adult education research, thereby diminishing its broader impact.

The only topic predominantly represented in the mainstream corpus was adult literacy, frequently analyzed in terms of risk variables, such as gender and rurality. The prominence of this topic in mainstream publications can be understood through a paradox highlighted by Hanemann and Robinson (2022, p. 242). In the so-called GN, literacy is once again receiving political attention despite ostensibly resolved challenges, whereas in the so-called GS, it has been increasingly marginalized due to national education policies that prioritize child and youth education. As a result, the so-called GS

continues to face significant literacy deficits, while literacy is sidelined in national agendas. Simultaneously, the so-called GN has reframed literacy within the context of emerging social and technological demands, thereby influencing global discourses. This observation supports the assumption that agenda-setting by the so-called GN not only shapes the central discourse in adult education research but also both enables and constrains the participation of peripheral scientific communities.

Considering the central research question of this study, the likelihood that adult education researchers from the so-called GS are represented in the center of the publication space increases in UMICs. In terms of the world-system approach, this suggests that authors from the semi-periphery oscillate more frequently between mainstream and non-mainstream publication spheres. Given the underrepresentation of adult education researchers in mainstream adult education journals (Vetter, 2022), the topic model revealed that Nigerian authors, in particular, often opt for peripheral and thus internationally less-visible publication pathways. In terms of content, these authors contribute to regional Southern circuits and national circuits by either employing quantitative methodologies to evaluate the needs and impacts of regional formal and non-formal adult education programs or emphasizing the importance of adult education initiatives in addressing social, economic, or environmental challenges through programmatic approaches. Both topics commonly focus on national education policy and advocate for increased public support. Other nations, such as Brazil (historical perspectives on liberation pedagogy), South Africa, and Ukraine (work and vocational pedagogy approaches), are visible both in mainstream publication venues and the (semi)periphery. In the South American context, this visibility reflects successful national efforts to promote locally oriented publication venues (Beigel, 2014).

While the topic model provides a broad cross-section of adult education research from previously underrepresented regions, it cannot claim full representativeness. For instance, the sampling excluded publication venues lacking an impact factor, even if they were produced by large commercial publishers. The robustness of the model could be improved by repeating the study with an expanded dataset ( $n \leq 1000$ ). Moreover, including papers by authors from the so-called GN could help identify regional specificities in adult education research independently of publication venues and assess whether certain topics can be attributed to the so-called GS. Since questions of scientific quality were excluded from the analysis, addressing quality criteria would require reflection through a critical race theory lens. Discussions around „good” science often fail to mitigate inequalities, as they provide participants with opportunities to uncritically regard knowledge from the South as „unknown,” „untested,” or „of questionable relevance or validity” (Collyer, 2018, p. 70).

In the future, alongside the diversification of editorial boards to ensure greater geographical representation, a more reflective quality assessment of scientific contributions by the academic community as a whole will be needed. Alternative evaluation methods, such as Altmetrics, could complement the increasingly dominant quantitative indicators in adult education research, potentially enhancing bibliodiversity within the discipline. The findings of the topic model provide a basis for qualitative-recon-

structive research on publication decisions, exploring whether publications in peripheral channels represent deliberate choices aimed, for instance, at achieving greater national political impact.

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