Natural Resources for Human Health
eISSN: 2583-1194

Original Research

Received 20 July 2026
Revised 28 Aug 2026
Accepted 10 Sep 2026

Natural Resources for Human Health 2026, Vol. 6 (22s): 184–193

KEYWORDS:
Food retail; SMEs; Bibliometric analysis; Food health; Commercial viability.

Critical Viability Factors for Investment in Brick-and-Mortar Food and Beverage MSME Stores in Guayaquil

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ABSTRACT: The commercial viability of food retail stores determines physical access to nutritional resources in consolidated urban environments, directly influencing the prevention of malnutrition. A systematic review and bibliometric analysis were conducted following the PRISMA 2020 protocol and the PICO framework in the Scopus database (2015–2025). The sample comprised $n = 95$ scientific articles processed in VOSviewer using the full counting method. The scientific output revealed a clear hegemony of the United States ($n = 49$), exponential growth since 2020 peaking in 2023 ($n = 16$), and a marked interdisciplinary nature where Medicine (21.8%), Environmental Science (12.8%), and Nursing (12.8%) outweigh the Business area (5.9%). Keyword co-occurrence mapping uncovered four thematic clusters linking retail management with healthy diets, public policies, and phytochemicals. These findings demonstrate that local businesses do not operate as isolated economic units, but rather as critical public health infrastructures. It is concluded that the financial and operational sustainability of small and medium retail enterprises constitutes a direct prerequisite for guaranteeing urban food security and health.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, urban food systems have undergone a structural transformation driven by drastic shifts in consumption patterns, the pursuit of sustainable diets, and the sustained increase in non-communicable diseases associated with malnutrition (Smetana et al., 2019). In this global scenario, food retail outlets and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the food and beverage sector have ceased to be strictly commercial intermediation units and have instead become strategic nodes for physical access to natural, functional, and safe food resources (Ersoy and Budak, 2025; Goh et al., 2024).

As Goh et al. (2024) point out, the operational viability and financial sustainability of these business units ultimately determine the availability, diversity, and freshness of food accessible to the population in established urban environments (Gómez-Escoda, 2025). On an international scale, agri-food MSMEs face a highly volatile environment characterized by input inflation, cold chain disruptions, high post-harvest loss rates for perishable goods, and intense competition from large supermarket chains (Tung et al., 2024).

Although the scientific literature highlights the growing demand for natural-resource-based, ultra-processed-free foods (Willits et al., 2024), retail MSMEs experience severe constraints in ensuring the viability of their physical investments (Valdivia Rivera et al., 2026). As warned by Valdivia et al. (2026), the lack of management models tailored to products with shorter shelf-life,

combined with inadequate infrastructure for safe food handling, such as the quality certification schemes analyzed by Rodríguez et al. (2024), constantly threatens commercial profitability and fosters "food deserts" across various global urban centers.

In Latin America, this problem acquires a critical dimension due to high business informalities, the vulnerability of local agricultural supply chains (Linner, 2025), and profound shifts in the region's nutritional transition. Traditional physical stores and food and beverage MSMEs represent the primary source of supply for large segments of the population; however, they operate with low profit margins, limited access to productive financing, and low adoption of technologies such as artificial intelligence (Bravo Acosta et al., 2026) or preservation methods that safeguard bioactive compounds and food safety.

According to Rojas and Echagüe (2026), the disconnect between public health nutrition policies and the commercial viability strategies of food retailers hinders the regional shift toward natural and healthy consumption alternatives. In the regional and Ecuadorian context, the food and beverage retail sector constitutes a driving force for employment and urban economy, albeit heavily constrained by liquidity bottlenecks and working capital limitations (García Aguilar et al., 2024; Salazar et al., 2025).

As analyzed by Cagua Hidrovo (2025), physical MSMEs operate under conditions of marked economic uncertainty, fixed location costs, interest rate fluctuations (Rodríguez, 2020; Correa y López, 2024), and logistical pressures that compromise their ability to offer a diversified portfolio of fresh, organic, and locally sourced natural products (Caicedo et al., 2023; Puyol, 2024). This vulnerability is reflected both in productive sectors and in the operational planning of new physical store proposals across the country (Delgado, 2022). The scarcity of systematized evidence regarding the critical viability factors of these commercial units limits the development of resilient corporate strategies that simultaneously safeguard financial performance through adequate microfinance access and public food health.

The present research is justified from a multidimensional perspective. First, it aims to contribute theoretical and methodological relevance by examining the integration between retail investment management and food and public health sciences through bibliometric analysis using network mapping tools (VOSviewer) and systematic review methodologies, exploring whether commercial viability and access to food health emerge as interdependent variables in recent scientific literature (Smetana et al., 2019). Second, it intends to offer socioeconomic and managerial benefits by projecting a reference analytical framework to assist managers in resource optimization, financial risk mitigation, and business model structuring for physical stores (Mayett Moreno et al., 2022). Finally, it strives to highlight the potential impact on human health and sustainability by analyzing how consolidating effective physical distribution channels can foster the availability of natural-resource-based foods, encouraging healthy diets and urban food security (Goh et al., 2024).

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyze international scientific production indexed in the Scopus database using bibliometric analysis to corroborate the relationship between critical investment viability factors in physical stores of food and beverage MSMEs and their impact on urban food health.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Material

The study material comprised international scientific literature indexed in the Scopus academic database. This platform was selected due to its rigorous indexing process, multidisciplinary coverage, and the compatibility of its metadata for co-occurrence bibliometric analysis and network mapping. To delimit the object of study, the "PICO" conceptual strategy proposed by Chocobar and Barreda (2025) was applied and adapted to generate a systematic bibliometric analysis:

- **P (Population):** Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the food and beverage sector with physical stores.
- **I (Intervention/Phenomenon):** Critical factors of investment viability and operational sustainability.
- **C (Comparison):** Traditional retail management models versus models oriented toward health and sustainability.
- **O (Outcome):** Impact on the availability of natural-resource-based foods and urban food health.

2.2 Sample Collection

The collection of the documentary sample was conducted strictly adhering to the guidelines of the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). The exhaustive literature search was executed in the Scopus database, querying the title, abstract, and keyword fields using the following advanced search syntax:

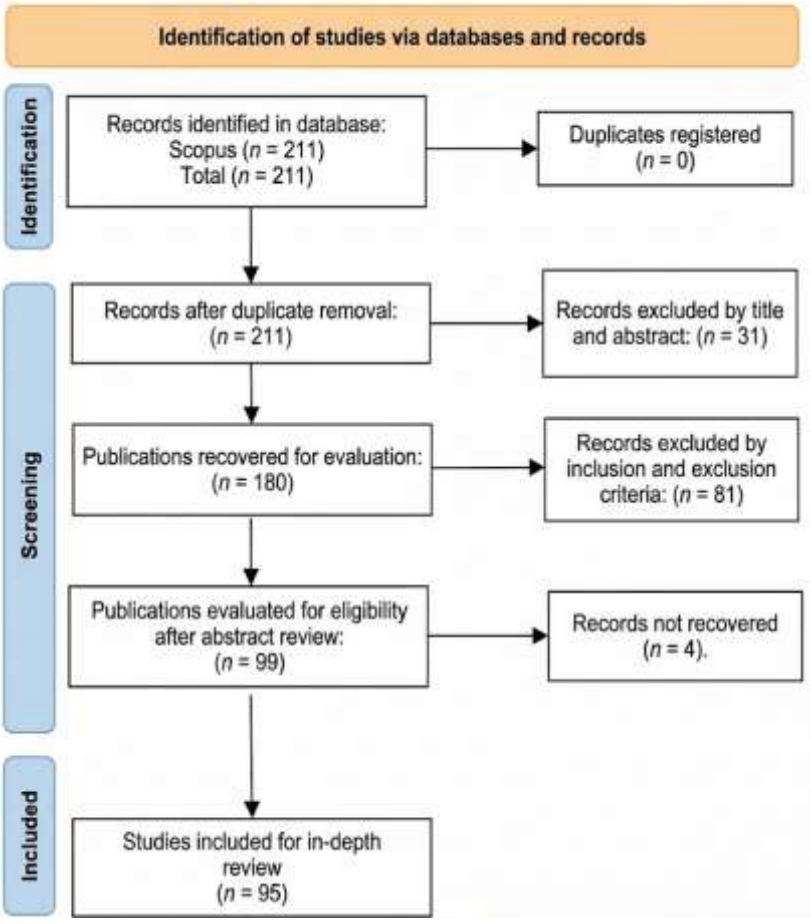
TITLE-ABS-KEY ((("food retail" OR "food store*" OR "grocery store*") AND ("viability" OR "sustainability" OR "investment") AND ("health" OR "nutrition")) AND PUBYEAR>2014 AND PUBYEAR<2026 AND (LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE,"ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")))

Methodological note: The query was structured by combining three interdependent thematic blocks (food retail/stores, viability/investment factors, and health/nutrition dimensions). The timeframe was delimited to the period between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2025 ($2014 < \text{PUBYEAR} < 2026$), restricting the document type exclusively to peer-reviewed research articles (DOCTYPE = "ar") published in English (LANGUAGE = "English"), thereby ensuring metric quality and metadata standardization for subsequent processing in bibliometric mapping tools.

2.3 Extraction and Selection Procedure

The selection procedure was structured into four continuous phases according to the PRISMA flow diagram: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. In the identification phase, complete metadata were extracted in comma-separated values (.CSV) and bibliographic information (.RIS) formats. Subsequently, inclusion criteria were applied (studies focusing on the viability of physical food retail stores, food security, and natural resource management) alongside exclusion criteria (duplicate records, conference proceedings, thesis dissertations, book chapters, and non-peer-reviewed publications). The selected records were screened through title and abstract reviews to ensure thematic relevance.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram for the documentary selection of articles indexed in Scopus.



Source: Prepared by the authors, (2026).

The document selection process was conducted following the guidelines of the PRISMA 2020 protocol. In the initial identification phase, a total of $n = 211$ records were retrieved exclusively from the Scopus database. Because this was a single primary information source, no duplicate records were identified ($n = 0$), preserving the total corpus ($n = 211$) for the screening phase (Figure 1).

Subsequently, a preliminary review based on the critical reading of titles and abstracts was conducted, excluding $n = 31$ records for lacking direct alignment with the research objective, thereby retaining $n = 180$ publications for a more rigorous evaluation. In the eligibility stage, thematic inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied in detail, discarding $n = 81$ documents that addressed purely commercial aspects without a link to food health or vice versa. Consequently, the eligibility of $n = 99$ publications were assessed via analytical reading; from this group, $n = 4$ records could not be retrieved in full text. Finally, a corpus of $n = 95$ studies successfully passed all evaluation phases and was included for in-depth review and bibliometric metadata extraction (Figure 1).

2.4 Analytical Methods

Information analysis was performed using computational bibliometrics and knowledge network visualization techniques. VOSviewer software (version 1.6.20) was utilized to process the metadata downloaded from Scopus. The full counting method was applied to analyze keyword co-occurrence (All Keywords and Author Keywords), co-citation, and author and country collaboration networks. This analysis allowed for the identification of node densities, total link strength, and the formation of thematic clusters connecting the commercial viability of MSMEs with food health.

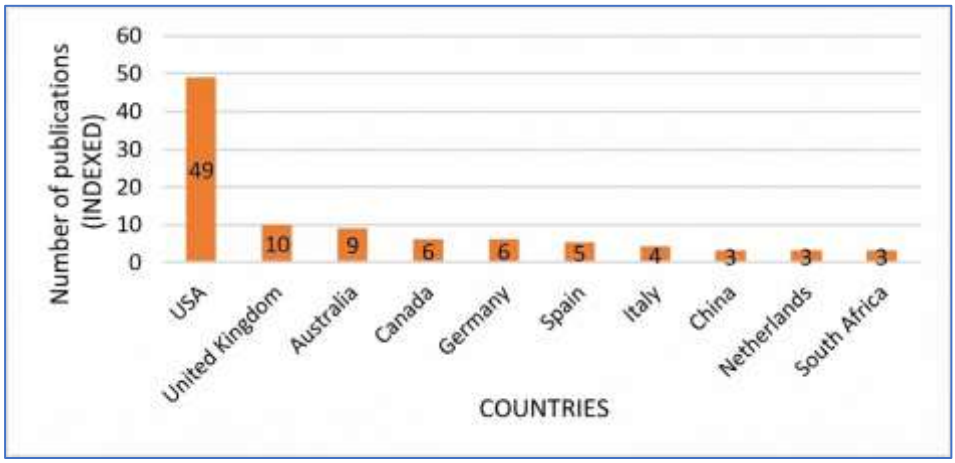
2.4 Statistical and Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive and inferential analysis of scientific production was consolidated using quantitative bibliometric indicators (Alata et al., 2025), such as the annual publication growth rate, the geographical distribution of output, the citation index, and term concordance. The structural validation of the clusters generated in VOSviewer was based on association strength normalization algorithms, allowing for the quantitative verification of the interdependence between retail commercial investment variables and human health and natural resource components.

3. RESULTS

The quantitative and metric findings derived from the bibliometric analysis of the corpus of $n = 95$ scientific articles selected from the Scopus database (global scientific impact) are presented below. This section synthesizes the geographical distribution, the temporal evolution of production, the predominant disciplinary areas, and the conceptual structure of co-occurrence networks obtained in VOSviewer.

Figure 2. Geographical distribution of scientific publications by country of origin.

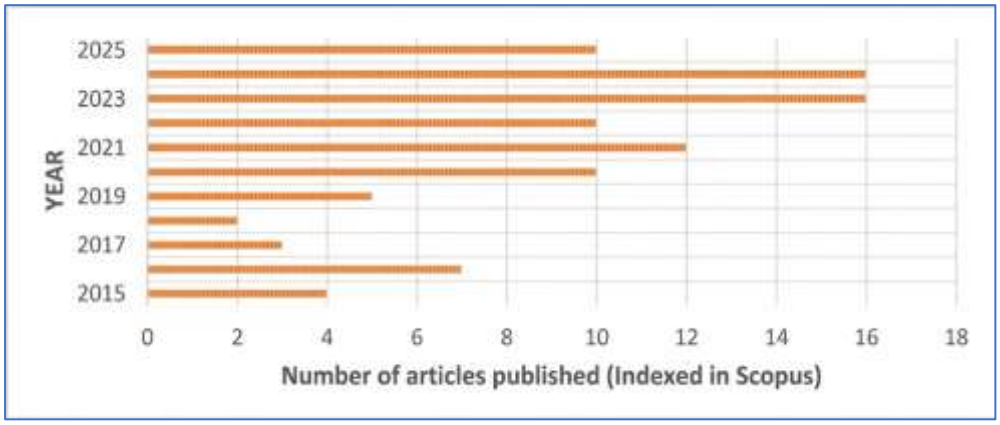


Source: Prepared from bibliometric data extracted from Scopus, (2026).

As shown in Figure 2, scientific production on this topic is overwhelmingly concentrated in the United States, with a total of 49 documents. This figure reveals a massive gap relative to the rest of the world, positioning North America as the primary engine driving research in this field. European and Oceanian countries follow at some distance: the United Kingdom occupies second place with 10 publications, closely followed by Australia with 9. Further behind are Canada and Germany, both tied with 6 papers, followed by Spain with 5 and Italy with 4. Finally, a block comprising China, the Netherlands, and South Africa closes the list with only 3 contributions each.

This landscape clearly demonstrates that academic knowledge in this field is driven almost entirely by the dynamics of Anglo-Saxon and developed nations. The overwhelming dominance of the United States indicates that they lead in financing, researching, and publishing on commercial viability linked to food and health, leaving Latin America and other regions with virtually no representation in high-impact databases. This confirms that theoretical debates and guidelines concerning the management of these businesses stem from geographical realities vastly different from our own, making it all the more necessary to analyze these gaps from our own perspective.

Figure 3. Temporal evolution of scientific production in Scopus (2015–2025).

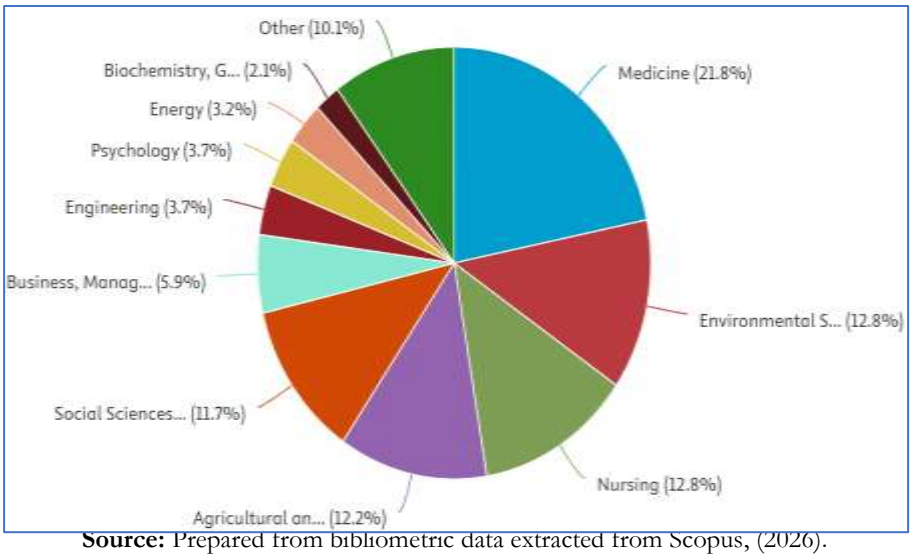


Source: Prepared from bibliometric data extracted from Scopus, (2026).

When examining the timeline, Figure 3 clearly illustrates the growth of scientific interest in this topic throughout the ten-year period analyzed. Between 2015 and 2019, production remained relatively modest, with low annual volumes ranging from 2 to 7 articles per year. This reflects that the intersection between the commercial viability of food retail stores and public health was only beginning to emerge on the global academic agenda.

However, from 2020 onward, and accelerating toward the middle of the decade, there is a evident surge in publications. The year 2023 and recent periods mark the highest points on the chart, reaching a peak of 16 published articles. This sudden sharp increase coincides with post-pandemic shifts in consumer habits, wherein the global population and academic researchers began paying substantially greater attention to how local retail businesses supply healthy and nutritious foods. This upward trajectory confirms that the topic is highly relevant and continues to gain momentum within indexed journals.

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of scientific publications by subject area in Scopus.



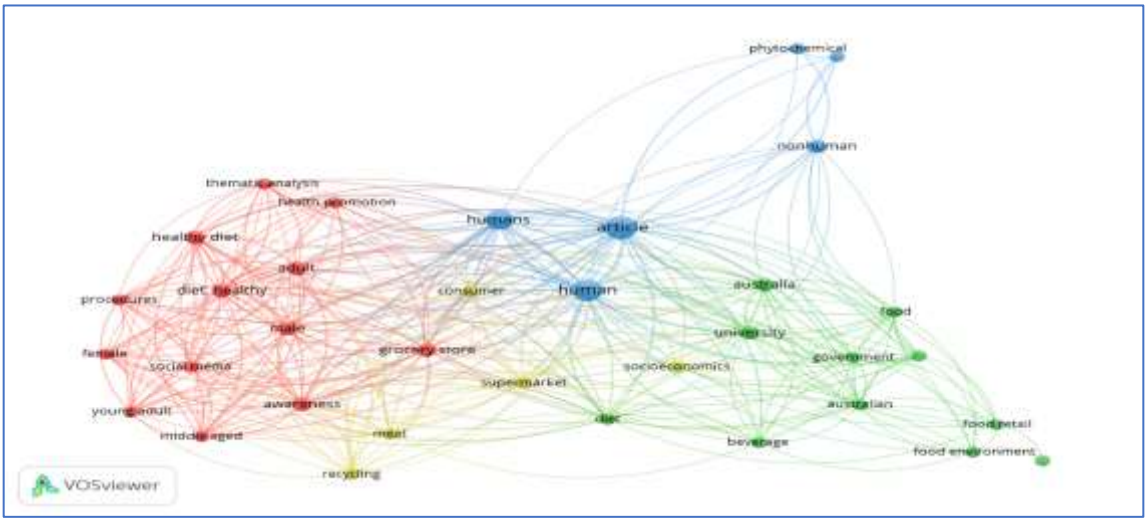
Source: Prepared from bibliometric data extracted from Scopus, (2026).

The pie chart underscores the markedly interdisciplinary nature surrounding the study of food retail stores, their commercial viability, and food health (Figure 4). Upon analyzing the percentages, the most represented discipline is Medicine at 21.8%,

followed closely by a technical tie between Environmental Science and Nursing, both at 12.8%. Immediately following are Agricultural and Biological Sciences at 12.2% and Social Sciences at 11.7%. In more moderate proportions, the scientific literature records contributions from Business, Management and Accounting at 5.9%, accompanied by fields such as Engineering at 3.7%, Psychology at 3.7%, Energy at 3.2%, and Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology at 2.1%, concluding with a heterogeneous grouping categorized as Other representing 10.1%.

This percentage breakdown is particularly revealing for the present investigation. Although the central focus of MSMEs addresses investment viability and commercial management (associated with the 5.9% in Business), the overwhelming majority of the scientific corpus frames its analysis around public health, nutrition, environmental sustainability, and social context (collectively exceeding 70% across Medicine, Environmental Science, Nursing, Agricultural Sciences, and Social Sciences). This strong concentration within healthcare and biological disciplines demonstrates that the international scientific community does not analyze food retail outlets as isolated commercial entities, but rather as critical infrastructure directly impacting population health and resource sustainability.

Figure 5. Keyword co-occurrence network in VOSviewer.



Source: Prepared from bibliometric metadata extracted from Scopus by the authors, (2026).

The keyword co-occurrence map generated in VOSviewer reveals the conceptual structure and thematic interconnection present in the examined scientific literature (Figure 5). The network is organized into four interrelated thematic clusters demonstrating how research directly links retail commerce with human health, public policy, and the socioeconomic environment. Positioned on the left margin of the map is the cluster with the highest node density, centered on consumer behavior and dietary habits (*healthy diet*, *diet*, *healthy*, *awareness*, *health promotion*, *social media*, and *thematic analysis*), which is closely articulated with various demographic categories (*adult*, *young adult*, *middle aged*, *male*, *female*). This grouping evidences that a primary line of inquiry analyzes how nutritional awareness and the adoption of healthy diets impact the population through physical distribution channels (*grocery store*) and digital environments.

Toward the lower right sector of the network, a second grouping oriented toward the food environment and public policy is consolidated, integrated by strategic terms such as *food retail*, *food environment*, *beverage*, *food*, *government*, *university*, *socioeconomics*, *diet*, and geographic markers (*australia*, *australian*). This block represents the structural dimension of the system, demonstrating the influence exerted by governmental regulation, socioeconomic conditions, and commercial environment planning on effective access to nutritious foods and supplies. Meanwhile, located in the upper-central and right regions is a medical and biological cluster (*human*, *humans*, *article*, *nonhuman*, *phytochemical*), which connects the study of retail consumption with the presence of bioactive compounds and phytochemicals in urban population diets.

Finally, distributed across the center and bottom of the map are a series of bridge nodes (*grocery store*, *supermarket*, *consumer*, *meat*, *recycling*) that articulate the operational management and sustainability of retail points of sale with consumer dietary requirements. The spatial arrangement and high association strength among retail nodes (*grocery store*, *food retail*, *supermarket*) and those related to health and socioeconomic environment (*healthy diet*, *health promotion*, *socioeconomics*, *government*) empirically corroborate a

fundamental conceptual interdependence: the financial and operational viability of physical food stores does not constitute an isolated element, but rather a determining condition in shaping sustainable, public health-oriented urban food environments.

4. DISCUSSION

The present research evidences that the commercial and operational viability of retail points of sale and food and beverage MSMEs does not constitute an isolated financial phenomenon, but rather a structuring node in the configuration of urban food health and access to natural resources (Smetana et al., 2019; Goh et al., 2024). The central finding of the bibliometric analysis demonstrates an empirical convergence between retail commercial investment variables and the mitigation of nutritional problems, revealing that the financial performance of physical establishments directly determines the availability and diversity of safe food for the urban population (Gómez-Escoda, 2025). These results reinforce the premise that local distribution channels act as the first line of defense against malnutrition and food deserts in contemporary cities (Valdivia et al., 2026).

When contrasting the geographical distribution of scientific production, a strong asymmetry is observed, led by the United States, followed by European and Oceanian nations, whereas the contribution of Latin America and other regions in high-impact databases is marginal. This disparity corroborates the warnings of Linner Johanning (2025) and Rojas and Echagüe (2026) regarding the structural vulnerability and informality experienced by agricultural supply chains and regional retail trade. International research dynamics predominantly respond to highly technified and stable economic contexts, which explains why the analytical models reported in Anglo-Saxon literature do not always adapt directly to the reality of Latin American MSMEs, which are characterized by working capital constraints and low technological adoption (Bravo et al., 2026; García et al., 2024).

Regarding the temporal evolution of publications, the analysis reveals a significant inflection point with exponential growth starting in 2020, reaching its peak in the recent period. This behavior aligns with the structural transformations described by Tung et al. (2024) and Willits et al. (2024), who note that post-pandemic market volatility intensified academic interest in the resilience of short supply chains and the demand for ultra-processed-free foods. This increase confirms that retail investment viability is no longer treated solely from a perspective of private profitability, but has become fully integrated into the Sustainable Development Goals and global food security agendas (Salazar et al., 2025).

Similarly, the distribution of subject areas and the keyword co-occurrence mapping via VOSviewer demonstrate that the research object is intrinsically interdisciplinary. Although business and management sciences represent a minority proportion of the corpus, the hegemony of disciplines such as medicine, environmental sciences, nursing, and agricultural sciences shows that the survival of retail stores is inextricably linked to public health and natural resource management (Ersoy and Budak, 2025). The identified clusters logically connect store inventory and operational management decisions with the promotion of healthy diets and the prevention of non-communicable diseases, theoretically validating the propositions of Rodríguez-Tineo et al. (2024) regarding the need for rigorous quality and safety frameworks in proximity commerce.

The findings successfully fulfilled the general objective of the study, which consisted of analyzing international scientific production indexed in Scopus to corroborate the relationship between critical factors of physical store investment viability and its impact on food health. Through the articulation of bibliometric indicators and the co-occurrence network, the specific objectives oriented toward mapping temporal evolution, geographical origin, disciplinary structure, and the main conceptual lines mediating this relationship were met. The results ratify that factors of operational sustainability, waste control, and perishable product management act as critical pivots between commercial investment and consumers' nutritional well-being (Cagua Hidrovo, 2025; Puyol-Cortez, 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, this work expands the state of the art by establishing a methodological bridge between economics applied to MSMEs and public health sciences, demonstrating that the financial viability of food businesses is a social determinant of health. Methodologically, the efficacy of combining systematic review under the PRISMA 2020 protocol with bibliometric mapping in VOSviewer is validated to synthesize large volumes of heterogeneous literature. In practical terms, the results offer a reference analytical framework for commercial managers, decision-makers, and local public policy designers to recognize that any strategy aimed at fostering healthy diets in urban environments must necessarily include mechanisms for financial support, fixed cost reduction, and logistical strengthening for small retail units (Delgado Díaz, 2022; Correa y López, 2024).

Among the methodological limitations of the study, the exclusive use of the Scopus database must be noted, as well as the temporal restriction (2015–2025) and language limitation to English, which excludes grey literature, academic books, and articles

published in other languages or indexed in platforms such as Web of Science or SciELO that might more accurately reflect the socioeconomic reality of developing countries. However, this coverage bias does not invalidate the structural trends found; rather, it delimits the analytical scope of the evaluated corpus toward mainstream scientific literature.

Derived from these findings, various avenues for future research emerge. It is imperative to develop empirical studies of a regional and local nature, particularly in Latin American urban contexts such as Ecuador, evaluating the direct impact of access to microfinancing and operational digitalization on the profit margins of traditional food stores. Likewise, it is suggested to delve into econometric models that measure the exact correlation between the survival rate of food MSMEs and the reduction of malnutrition incidence in vulnerable urban communities, thus contributing to the formulation of more comprehensive and effective food sovereignty and security public policies.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of international scientific production indexed in Scopus made it possible to corroborate the direct relationship between critical investment viability factors in physical food and beverage MSME retail stores and their impact on urban food health, demonstrating that the operational and financial sustainability of these commercial establishments functions as a vital determinant of physical access to food resources in urban environments. The findings reveal a marked geographical asymmetry dominated by Anglo-Saxon economies in contrast to sparse regional representation, an exponential surge in scientific output from 2020 onward driven by post-pandemic shifts in consumer habits, and a clear interdisciplinary convergence wherein medical, environmental, and social sciences prioritize the study of food retail channels as critical public health infrastructures over their purely commercial dimension.

This study provides an integrative analytical framework that consolidates the intersection between retail investment management and food sciences, demonstrating through computational bibliometrics and the PRISMA 2020 protocol that the financial viability of local proximity retail units directly conditions the availability and diversity of healthy, natural foods for citizens. The practical implications of this research lie in the imperative need to direct strategies of financial support, fixed cost reduction, and logistical strengthening toward small commercial units, recognizing that any intervention aimed at mitigating malnutrition and urban food deserts must incorporate the preservation of operational viability for MSMEs in this sector.

The scope of these conclusions is conditioned by methodological limitations stemming from the exclusive use of the Scopus database, the temporal restriction to the 2015–2025 period, and the English language filter, which limits the generalizability of the results to mainstream scientific literature and excludes local academic output not indexed in said platform. Based on the identified gaps, the research projects future lines of inquiry focused on conducting empirical studies within Latin American and Ecuadorian contexts to evaluate the direct impact of microfinancing and operational digitalization on the profit margins of physical stores, as well as formulating econometric models to measure the correlation between the commercial survival of food MSMEs and the reduction of urban malnutrition incidence.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Lady Johanna Calvas Gómez: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing - Original Draft.

Eva Esther Velez Aspiazu: Formal Analysis, Writing - Review & Editing.

Juan Carlos Briones Macias: Data Curation, Investigation.

Lileana Carolina Saavedra Robles: Validation.

Susy Grey Morales Cobos: Visualization, Data Curation, Software, Writing - Review & Editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Prior approval from a Human or Animal Research Ethics Committee was not required for the conduct of this study, as it did not involve experimental procedures, clinical interventions, invasive biological sampling, or interaction with human participants or animals. Research data collection was restricted exclusively to the extraction and analysis of secondary bibliometric metadata from the Scopus database, following the PRISMA 2020 protocol. All analyzed literature belongs to public domain academic publications, ensuring complete anonymity, transparency, and compliance with international standards for non-invasive secondary research and documentary analysis.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used "GEMINI AI" exclusively for language editing, grammatical correction, and academic style refinement. The authors explicitly declare that ai technologies were not used for data collection, data processing, or the generation of research findings; all bibliometric metrics, data analyses, and scientific conclusions are the direct product of the authors' original research. The authors reviewed and edited the finalized text and assume full responsibility for the content of this publication.

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