

Cross-Mapping Interactions between Corruption, Accounting and Audit: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Recent literature considers corruption as a plague of society which exceeds beyond political areas, that initially consecrated it about three decades ago and ends up affecting the economic sphere and at the same time negatively impact the lives of individuals and economic activities. The aim of this study is to develop a bibliometric analysis and a scientific mapping of existing research regarding the relationship between corruption, accounting and audit, using the Vosviewer application and the Web of Science Core Collection database, from 1995 to 2024. Based on literature review of a sample of 211 studies, the findings reveal that corruption negatively affects the quality of accounting and auditing through accounting fraud, financial reporting manipulation, bribery, incentives, unofficial payments or hidden audit fees, conflict of interest, avoidance of transparency and disclosures rules. This analysis highlights the importance of public policies in anti-corruption fight and accounting rules' development, undesirable with corruption.

Key words: accounting, audit, corruption, bibliometric analysis, Vosviewer

J.E.L. classification: M41, M42, D73

1. Introduction

Unfortunately, corruption has become ubiquitous in the contemporary world, arousing the interest of governments, various international institutions and the academic community, as it affects all spheres of economic, social and political life. Describing the mechanisms whereby corruption manifests itself, identifying the indicators by which it could be measured and, above all, implementing those policies through which it can be combated, represent major challenges of today's economies. Corruption affects both the public and private spheres, and many of its forms are still unknown, insufficiently explored and difficult to discover, because corruption involves hidden links between individuals, who use their power and functions to obtain undeserved personal benefits.

Although blamed in all institutional and governmental approaches, corruption still dominates diverse environments, societies and economies. Previous research suggests that the negative impact of corruption on economic growth and development is a challenge faced by all contemporary societies, affected by various forms of corruption, on a financial or non-financial level, on a large or small scale, in public or private environments (Bahoo et al., 2021, p. 565). On the other hand, a new wave of studies is emerging that bring arguments in favour of the benefits of corruption for the states, framed in the "grease in the wheel" stream, according to which the mechanisms of corruption (different corrupt practices, nepotism, bribery, etc.) act as a lubricant that speeds up bureaucratic public procedures and reduces the time (Boudjana et al., 2023, p. 101). The opposite of this approach - represented by the "sand in the wheel" - has associated corruption with the decrease in the ability of companies to do business, obstacles to economic growth, the decrease in human capital, the proliferation of the shadow economy etc. (Hoinaru et al., 2020, p. 3).

Accounting or auditing does not escape corruption either and the internal mechanisms through which corruption takes hold of these professional fields have been refined over time and are often almost impossible to unmask (Matei and Aivaz, 2023, p. 986; Savu et al., 2022, p. 1021; Malagueño et al., 2010, p. 372). The accounting choices of entities in regions with corruption are especially oriented towards the manipulation of revenues and earnings (for the reduction of taxes and fees owed to the state and various authorities), the recognition of losses in a faster manner, different accounting methods of accelerated depreciation in the conditions in which corrupt and abusive officials pursue personal financial interests from bribery and accept illegal accounting and tax practices (Zhang and Zhang, 2023, p. 443). The impact of strong accounting standards on corruption turns out to be non-linear, and auditing moderates the relationship between them, while financial disclosure and perceived strength of accounting and auditing standards significantly reduce perceived corruption (Rahman, 2024, p. 414).

Starting from these fundamentals of the possible positive or negative effects of corruption on economic activity, but also with the intention of delimiting the causal and/or bidirectional relationships between corruption and accounting, respectively audit, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the tendency of publications on corruption, accounting and audit??

RQ2. What topics involving interactions between corruption and accounting, respectively auditing, are addressed by specialized literature?

The central objective of the study is to analyse the prevailing body of literature on corruption, accounting and audit, to determine which are the favourite topics addressed in the studies on the mentioned topics, how the approaches are clustered and what are the trends that can be identified in a literature on the subject that is not very vast and of relatively recent date.

This paper contributes to literature on corruption and accounting, respectively audit, in several ways. First, it focuses on the connection between these major topics and describes the existing studies on the field, through bibliometric analysis and literature mapping. Second, this study identifies and describes the main research directions that have analysed the subject in the existing literature and that have led to prior mixed findings. This approach contributes to the understanding of the influences and mechanisms by which corruption influences accounting or auditing, and how these fields, in turn, affect corruption.

The rest of the paper is structured on the following sections: after presenting the current stage of knowledge in the field and the theoretical background, it continues with the presentation of the research methodology, results and discussions and ends with conclusions and bibliographic references.

2. Theoretical background

Based on a recent previous literature, where studies on the interactions between corruption, accounting and/or auditing are limited, this section presents the key themes identified in prior research. It aims to outline the general characteristics of corruption and its economic impact, particularly on accounting and auditing practices. Additionally, the literature examining how accounting and auditing can either foster corruption or, conversely, assist in its control and eradication is also explored.

In general, corruption is associated with the public sector, as "the misuse of public office for private gain" (Wawrosz, 2022, p.1), but once with the change of perspective and the embracing of the idea that corruption affects all sectors and areas of life, the definition has been nuanced and many studies use the definition agreed by the Transparency International, a non-governmental organization fighting against corruption, that defined the term as being "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Transparency International, 2024). Corruption is usually the consequence of many factors including individual traits, social norms and situations, the behaviour of other people, and so on (Wawrosz, 2022, p. 3), and as such, due to its wide meaning of the term of corruption, there are various definitions of it (Mantescu, 2022, p. 646).

A person can act in accordance with the law and condemn corruption in some situations, but still act in a corrupt manner in another situation. Also, it is important to understand that even if in the past corruption was mostly associated with the purpose of gaining personal benefits, there are authors

who stated that there might be many other reasons for a persons' corrupt way of acting, beyond private gains (Hodgson and Jiang, 2007 in Wawrosz, 2022, p. 4). These authors also concluded that the lack of research on corruption reasons leads to limited contributions of the theoretical studies to practice.

The phenomenon of corruption is a complex one, whose roots are difficult to identify entirely, but the following four theories could summarize the different facets of corruption in public sector (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021):

- *The principal-agent theory* (where the agents are the public officials, whose role should be to protect the interests of the principal, represented by citizens, the public, companies etc. Often, however, public officials have personal interests that generate corruption);
- *The collective action theory* (which explains corruption as a generalized, systemic phenomenon, a true social norm, given that individuals believe that if those around them have corrupt behaviours, then this is normality);
- *The institutional theory* (which present corruption as a result of the institutional characteristics of countries and governments, which deviate from their role and contribute to the institutionalisation of corruption);
- *The game theory* (which describes corruption through the corrupt behaviour of public officials, who choose to engage in corrupt practices, as those around them do so, even if in general, corrupt actions do not bring them greater benefits than in the absence of corruption. They face the "prisoner's dilemma", the fear of being disadvantaged if they do not resort to corrupt practices and experience a conflict between their intrinsic way of reasoning and the mentality of the corrupt group).

The phenomenon of corruption is on the agenda of numerous international institutions, which develop policy frameworks on governance and corruption issues, given that corruption is considered a contemporary scourge that is difficult to manage and eradicate. Named in the '90s even "cancer" by the president of the World Bank (World Bank, 2024), corruption is considered by the United Nations as a threat to the stability of societies, which can undermine democratic, ethical institutions and values, justice and compromise sustainable development and the rule of law. Against this background, the United Nations developed in 2003 the UN Convention Against Corruption, which it considers "an insidious plague that has a wide range of corrosive effects on societies" (United Nations, 2003).

Whilst the United Nations defines corruption as "a threat to the stability of societies" (United Nations, 2003), the International Monetary Fund explains this term as a governance vulnerability, that is judged to be macroeconomically critical (International Monetary Fund, 2018).

The intrinsic relationship between corruption and the well-being of individuals is a topic on the World Bank's agenda, one of the institutions involved in the fight against corruption and according to it, two major targets are set for the next years: one being ending extreme poverty by 2030 and the other being bosting shared prosperity for the poorest 40 percent of people in developing countries (World Bank, 2023). Even if eradicating corruption may not be possible, lowering its level has a direct impact on the purpose of a society where all countries are prosperous, but this goal cannot be achieved without eradicating extreme poverty in the developing countries, where 40 percent of people live in poverty.

This concern was also expressed by the United Nations in 2023 when it was analysed the level of achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It was stated that with just seven years left to achieve the global goals, the progress towards achieving Goal 16, which calls for peace, justice and strong institutions, is dangerously off track because, among other reasons, widespread corruption persists, especially in low and middle-income countries, impacting individuals and businesses (United Nations, 2023). One of the Sustainable Development Goals is *Global unity needed to recognize threat of corruption (SDG 16)*, whose analysis from 2023 showed that widespread corruption persists, especially in low and middle-income countries, impacting individuals and businesses (United Nations, 2023).

Corruption produces effects on three key stages of a good global governance, specifically peace, global security and sustainable development. Corruption causes a domino effect for pieces consisting of foreign direct investments, which are discouraged by a national market where competition is not fair and transparent, economic growth, which becomes stifled, with a final effect on sustainable

development, that is either achieved at a slower pace or is no longer achieved at all (United Nations, 2023). The effects of corruption are not limited to aspects mentioned above, but they also consist in weakening national institutions, influencing gender equality and reducing the trust in public health system (United Nations, 2023).

Corruption is considered harmful to society in the European Union and often associated with the obscure mechanisms of organized crime, terrorism, and other forms of criminality, comprising money-laundering or drug trafficking (European Commission, 2024a). The manifestation of corruption contributes to inequalities, erodes citizens' trust in public institutions, undermines good governance and social justice, and constitutes a serious threat to the rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights (European Commission, 2024a). Corruption also has a negative impact on prosperity and economic growth by creating business uncertainty, lowering investment levels, hampering fair competition and reducing public finances (European Commission, 2024a). It also adversely affects government objectives that focus on improving income disparity and environmental protection (European Commission, 2024a).

Corruption affects the GDP of European Union by 6% (European Commission, 2024a) and according to a 2023 Eurobarometer survey, 70% of Europeans think that corruption is widespread in their countries, which is 2% higher than in 2022 (European Commission, 2023a). Also, 35% of European businesses consider corruption to be a problem in doing business, while 59% of them agree with the statement that bribery and the use of connections is often the easiest way to obtain certain public services (European Commission, 2023b).

To achieve the goal of combating corruption, the European Commission adopted in May 2023 an anti-corruption package of measures intended to ensure high standards against the full range of corruption crimes. Among others, this package aims to contribute to corruption prevention and create a culture of harmony, but also to update and harmonise EU rules on definitions and penalties for corruption offences (European Commission, 2024b).

Thus, based on the above considerations, we note various facets of corruption in different public and private environments, a generous general previous literature on corruption, as well as the active involvement of numerous international institutions in the development of anti-corruption guidelines and policies.

As regards corruption and its interactions with accounting and/or auditing, previous studies are less widespread and contain specific technical aspects through which the accounting profession can contribute to corruption or can diminish it. When accounting and auditing standards rise, and especially as audits become more mandatory, more frequent, and more independent, countries should experience less corruption (Malagueño et al., 2010, p. 374).

Adoption of international accounting standards positive influence on corruption perception and an indicator named the strength of auditing and reporting standards mediates the relationship, as revealed by a study conducted for 130 countries and three years (Kurniawati and Achjari, 2022, p. 737). Accounting disclosure decreases corruption and there is a direct link between the power of accounting and auditing and corruption – in countries where accounting disclosure is increasing, there is an improvement in the control of corruption, as demonstrated for a sample of 71 states in the period 2010-2017 (Rahman, 2024). Accounting standards that improve the information environment and transparency contribute to the detection of corrupt practices (Taylor et al., 2024; Houqe and Monem, 2016).

On the other hand, national corruption negatively impacts on the speed and extend of IFRS – International Financial Reporting Standards – as the basis of worldwide accounting, as it results from a study developed for 89 non-EU states in the period 2003-2014 (El-Helaly et al., 2020, p. 2). Corruption also negatively influences the quality of accounting in jurisdictions that have already adopted IFRS (Agyei-Mensah, 2017, p. 727).

3. Research methodology

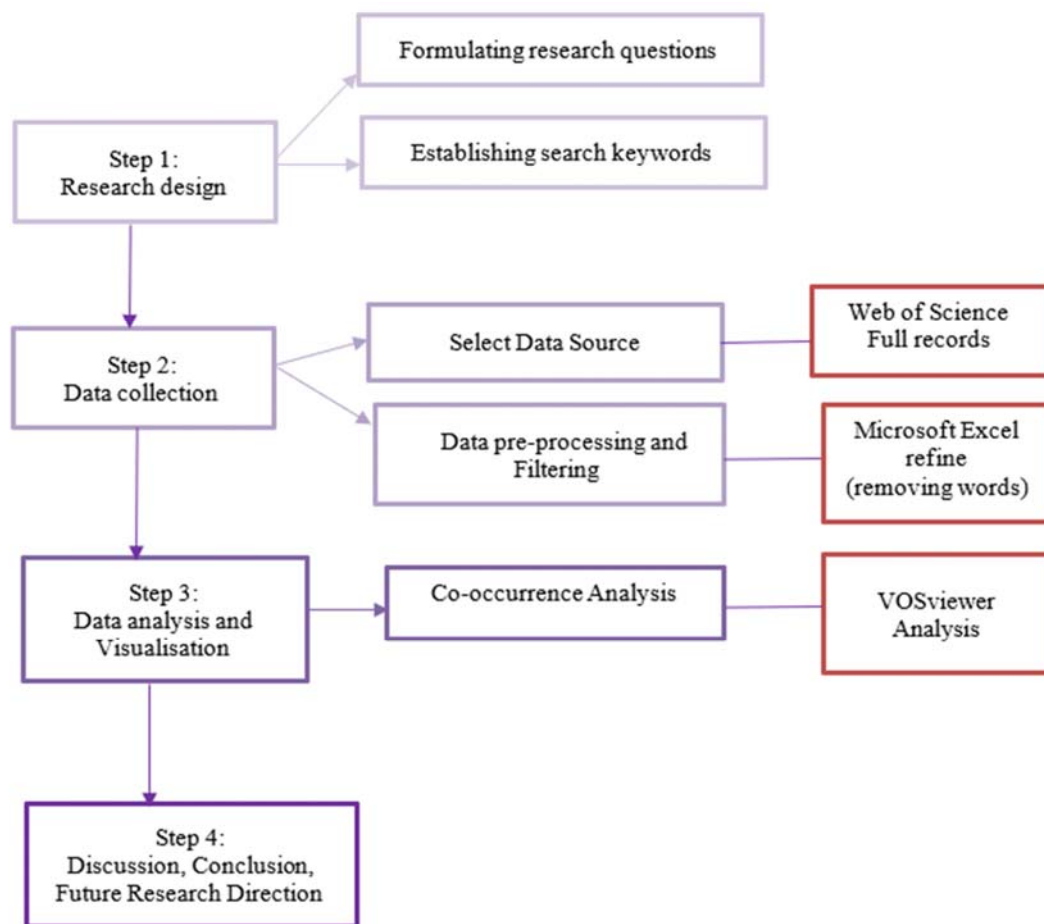
This section outlines the methodology used to conduct the bibliometric analysis and map the existing research regarding the unidirectional or bidirectional relationship between corruption, accounting and audit. Data for this study are obtained from the Web of Science Core Collection

database on 23 October 2024 and the VOSviewer software is used for bibliometric analysis and scientific mapping.

To target relevant studies, we used specific search terms in all fields, all languages, all types of documents and all categories: "accounting", "audit" and "corruption" (using the Boolean indicator "and", in order to identify studies that contain all the three terms). A total of 212 published studies were obtained from this search (of which one was excluded because is a correction of another study). Thus, the sample is composed of 211 studies (published in 1995 and from 2007 to 2024), with an increased interest in the correlation between the three terms starting from 2015. Between 1995 and 2007 there were not published studies with these search terms.

The procedural phases of the research are presented in Figure 1, which highlights a combination between the qualitative analysis and a bibliometric approach, which are based on the studies published in the Web of Science Core Collection database, given the qualitative characteristics of the studies published in it and the prevalence of its use in bibliometric analyses (Bota-Avram, 2024, p. 183).

Figure no. 1. Methodological stages of the research



Source: Authors' own processing

Bibliometric analysis is relatively new in business research, an effective method of summarizing and synthesizing literature, that gained popularity with open access to programs like Vosviewer and which allow handling large volumes of scientific data (Donthu et al., 2021, p. 286).

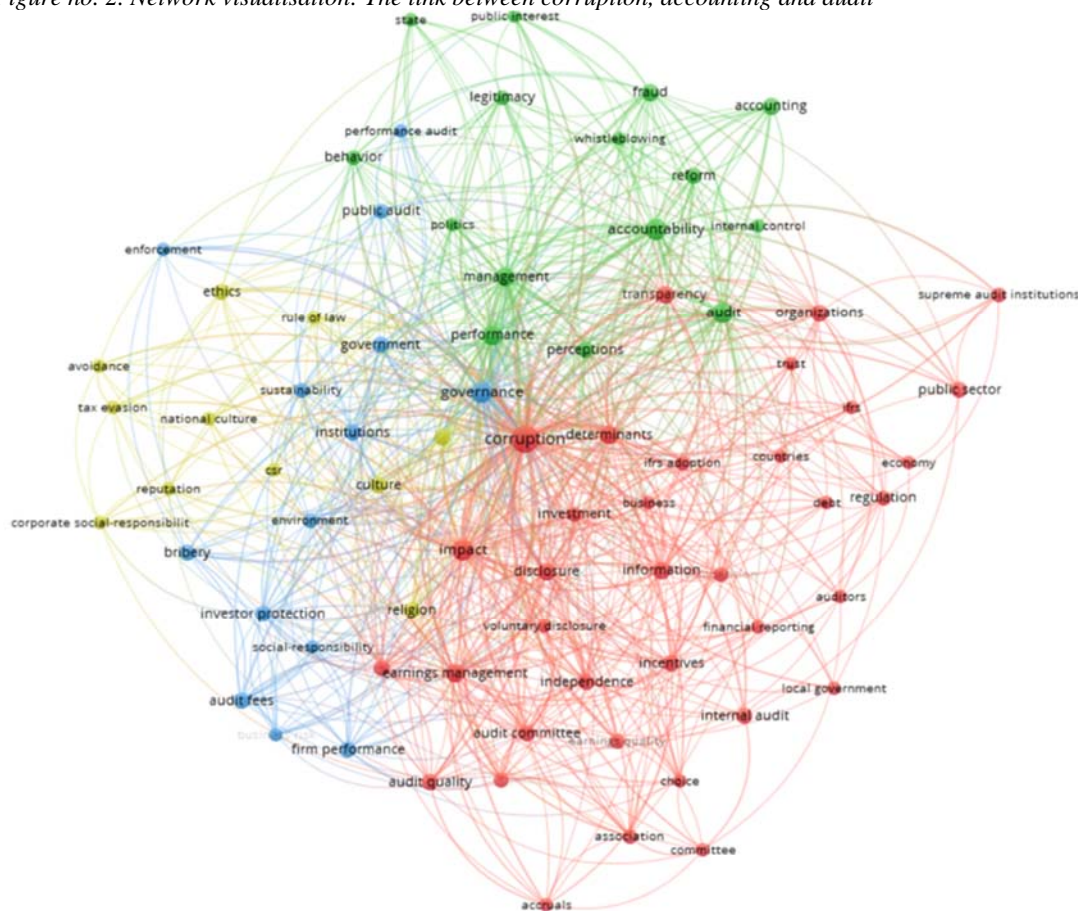
We used VOSviewer program to analyse the co-occurrence of these three key terms previously mentioned, with the aim of identifying the connection between them, present in the studies sample obtained from Web of Science database. By using the full count method, all keywords with at least

four occurrences in the entire study were extracted. The words that had the similar meaning (such as "audit committee" and "audit committees", "reform" and "reforms") were replaced with the same term to avoid duplication of relevant key terms and a possible distortion of the relevance of the links. After replacing these terms, 91 of the 1133 terms met the minimum threshold of 4 occurrences for mapping in VOSviewer. From the list of the 91 terms generated, some terms considered by the authors of the study as not being relevant for the topic under study, were removed, more specifically "Africa", "China", "construction", "corporate governance", "cost", "costs", "firm", "firms", "framework", "market", "media", "networks", "Nigeria", "quality" and "sector".

4. Results and discussions

To achieve the objective, this study employed scientific publications from the Web of Science Core Collection database, on which it applied the search criteria mentioned in the previous section. We graphically configured the map on the interactions between corruption, accounting and audit and Figure 2 exhibits the network visualization of them relationship. The size of the nodes and interconnecting lines that connect them indicates the relevance and strength of the links (Donthu et al., 2021, p. 292).

Figure no. 2. Network visualisation: The link between corruption, accounting and audit



Source: VOSviewer authors' own processing using data extracted from the Web of Science database

The link map was created at a resolution of 0.7, resulting a number of four clusters (Figure 2), in which the most frequent words were *corruption* (119 occurrences and 75 links), *accountability* (32 occurrences and 36 links), *impact* (32 occurrences and 57 links), *performance* (23 occurrences and 45 links), *audit* (29 occurrences and 40 links), *governance* (29 de occurrences and 52 links).

As shown in Figure 2, the analysis revealed the existence of four clusters consisting of groupings of key terms, each of them having a distinct colour. The exploration of this linking network led to the identification of five main research directions.

The first cluster – marked in red – is centred on one of the terms around which is focused the attention of this study, namely corruption, which is associated with audit and financial reporting (audit quality, financial reporting, management, transparency, whether it refers to its existence or whether to voluntary transparency, internal audit). This cluster based on determinants of corruption (between public and internal perspectives of a company) denote that there is a mix of macroeconomic or microeconomic aspects that contribute to the existence of corruption's roots. The analysis of this cluster indicates that financial reporting and the international financial reporting standards IFRS (regardless of whether we refer to aspects regarding the process of IFRS adoption or their actual application), have a direct impact on a state's level of corruption. To the same extent, the public sector's policies and activity, for example the supreme audit institutions' activity, produces effects on a state's level of corruption through the disclosure level of the information it generates. Also, the public sector's policies have a direct impact on the voluntary disclosure level and the earnings management. The choices of the committees related to the internal audit procedures have an impact on the earnings quality, not only on the earnings quantity. Therefore, when the state encourages a fair board composition that allows auditors to carry out their activity in conditions of independence, not only will raise the audit quality, but also the financial reporting quality, with the natural consequence of a decrease in the level of corruption.

The second cluster – marked in yellow – mainly studies explanatory behavioural determinants of corruption (aspects related to religion, culture, national culture, the rule of law, ethics, tax evasion, sustainability). This group links cultural, ethical and non-ethical factors, the rule of law and illegal misconducts in corruption equations. It indicates that the rule of law is powerfully influenced by ethics, national culture, religion, culture. Also, the corporate social responsibility policies and the social responsibility disclosure policies have an impact on tax evasion, positive or negative depending on their content, manner of their enforcement, but also depending on factors that are specific to each country or area, such as ethics, national culture, religion, culture. In conclusion, ethics, national culture, religion and culture can be considered factors that influence the rule of law strength and influence corruption.

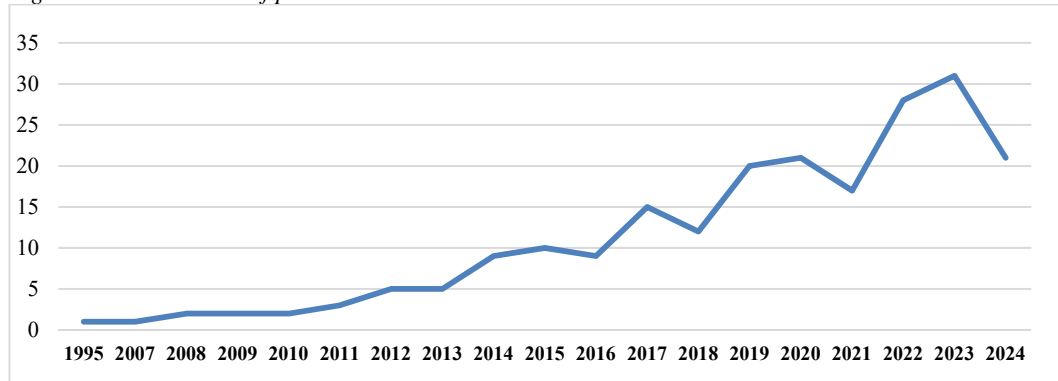
The third cluster – marked in green – revolves around the deep aspects of accounting and auditing, with an impact on corruption (the terms of accountability, audit, accounting, performance, management, fraud, public interest, reform, whistleblowing). This cluster emphasizes the importance of corruption perception in accounting and audit fields. The perception of fraud affects company performance through the internal policies implemented by management boards concerning accounting. The management holds accountability for the policies regarding the accounting activity, which is both responsible not only for the company's performance, but also for ensuring compliance with fraud prevention regulations. From a macroeconomic perspective, implementing a reform that balances public and private interests requires an audit process serves an effective whistleblowing mechanism in managing corruption.

The fourth cluster – marked in blue – highlights the importance of state governance in controlling corruption (has governance as its central element, but also terms such as bribery, performance audit, public audit, sustainability, investor protection, enforcement, audit fees, social-responsibility). This cluster underlines the importance of governance and enforcement in fighting against corruption and presents bribery as a very widespread form of corruption. Social-responsibility and sustainability policies are essential in controlling bribery, given that audit fees can prove in certain circumstances to be tools through which acts of corruption are carried out. In such situations, investor protection and companies' performance are affected, and the role of auditing cannot be objectively manifested, but on the contrary, auditing is integrated into the vicious circle of bribery and thus catalyses corruption.

The network of keywords identified in the published studies shows that interest in studying this topic has increased since 2007 (Figure 3), in the context of the international financial crisis, which carried under the magnifying glass of the international community accounting and auditing behaviors often associated with corruption, in companies that went bankrupt during that period and which, paradoxically, benefited from "clean" audit reports. The set of International Auditing Standards and

the accounting framework represented by the International Financial Reporting Standards (issued by the International Federation of Accountants) have undergone numerous changes in the years after the international financial crisis, in the sense of increasing the degree of confidence of users in the audited financial statements of companies.

Figure no. 3. Evolution of publication's number between 1995 and 2024



Source: Authors' own processing using data extracted from the Web of Science database

This study does not perform an exhaustive content analysis on the 211 papers in the sample, given that it is not methodologically based on the systematic literature review method, which represents a limitation of the research. However, founded on an unstructured examination of the sample, we conclude that previous studies addressing the link between corruption, accounting and audit are mainly based on qualitative research methods, for example the development and exploration of theories underlying corruption, as well as delineations on the positive or negative effects of corruption on the society and economy in general, respectively on accounting and audit in a special manner. Studies applying quantitative research methods, represented by case studies or analysis of applied questionnaires, are less numerous and such specific literature has developed in the recent period, in which methods of econometric analysis of different data series on the interactions between corruption, accounting and audit are used.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to identify the main themes of the interaction between corruption, accounting and audit in the prior published studies. A first stage of research was represented by the analysis of the theoretical framework of the theme, the identification of the general characteristics of corruption, of the international institutions interested in it and the establishment of the favourite themes that concretely examine the links between corruption, accounting and audit. Then, we developed a bibliometric analysis and a scientific mapping of the previous literature, based on sample of published papers in the Web of Science Core Collection, between 1995 and 2024. A total of 211 studies were analysed using the VOSviewer software and a map of the co-occurrence of terms addressing the interactions between corruption, accounting and audit was made. In 1995 only one study was identified, in the period 1995-2007 there are no studies published on this subject, which began to be analysed more intensively after the manifestation of the international financial crisis in 2007, amid growing fears about the role of accounting and auditing in maintaining financial stability. After 2017, the studies are more frequent, which denotes the topicality of the research topic and the growing interest of the scientific community.

The existence of four distinct clusters has been documented, that reproduce the groupings of terms specific to the link between corruption, accounting and audit in the published studies. First cluster focuses on the determinants of corruption, a mix of macroeconomic or microeconomic aspects that contribute to the existence of corruption's roots. Second cluster links cultural, ethical and non-ethical factors, the rule of law and illegal misconducts in corruption equations. The third group of terms refers to the deep technical aspects of the accounting and auditing, with an impact on corruption,

while the last cluster underlines the importance of state governance in controlling corruption, as well as the role of accounting and auditing tools in mitigating corruption.

Previous literature analysing the relationship between corruption, accounting and audit uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Existing studies render both the explanatory theories of corruption, its implications on the economy and society in general, but also on accounting and auditing in a distinct manner. Also, we note an incipient flow of literature, in an accessible expansion, which is based on quantitative research methods and econometric analysis of different data series on the links between corruption, accounting and audit.

In terms of public policy, the study is useful by highlighting the complexity of the unilateral and bilateral relationships that can be identified in the literature between corruption, accounting and audit. In this way, the regulatory authorities can have access to useful information in the processes of legislating anti-corruption packages, but also of effective accounting and auditing rules in the control of corruption.

One of the most important limits of this study refers to the analysis of a relatively small number of existing studies in the literature, through a bibliometric analysis and outside the application of the systematic literature review method, which could lead to more reliable results and more valuable findings. Also, the search terms used and the use only of the Web of Science database represent limits of the research. Future research directions aim to explore the issue of the interaction between corruption, accounting and audit in the existing literature based on systematic literature review and by expanding the research on other databases of published studies.

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