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Deciphering the Nexus: Blockchain-Smart Contracts and Their Transformative Potential in the Construction Industry

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***Abstract*- The construction industry, characterized by its intricate processes and extensive stakeholder networks, stands at the cusp of a digital revolution. The adoption of blockchain-smart contract (BCSC) technology is at the heart of this transformation. This research delves deep into the BCSC within the construction arena to provide comprehensive insight into its probable applications, inherent challenges, and potential future trajectories. Leveraging the PRISMA analysis technique, a curated collection of relevant academic research articles was assembled, shedding light on the existing body of knowledge regarding the application of BCSC technology in construction. The authors developed an innovative user interface tool customized to automatically analyze Excel files exported from Scopus and Science Direct databases to ensure a rigorous approach. Preliminary findings highlight the existing gaps between the theoretical potential of blockchain and its tangible implementation in the construction domain. This study consolidates existing literature and emphasizes the critical domains and key parameters that future studies should address. The paper paves the way for innovative breakthroughs by pinpointing these gaps, pushing the boundaries of how blockchain and smart contracts might reshape the construction industry's future landscape.**

***Keywords*- Smart Contracts; Blockchain; Modern Technologies; Construction Industry; PRISMA Analysis; PICO Framework.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Construction is a critical industry for any global infrastructure development to cope with the ever-increasing demands of our modern society. However, construction is a complex field with traditional practices, which inherited more challenges, inefficiencies, poor regulation and compliance, lack of transparency and accountability, poor payment practices, and information sharing [1]. Consequently, emerging technologies have sought to revolutionize this traditional construction industry. Blockchain-smart contract (BCSC) technology has emerged as a transformative force to reshape how any construction project is conceived, executed, and managed (Fig. 1).

The construction sector is grappling with the increasing need to ensure the safe exchange and protection of construction-related data. The rise of digital transformation in the construction realm has fostered a growing interest in applying BCSC. Researchers consider blockchain a pivotal

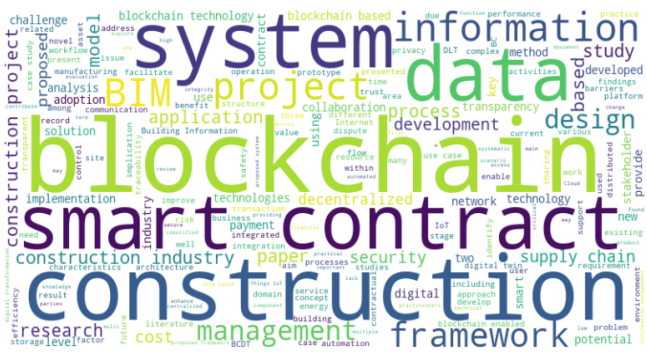

Figure 1: WordCloud of BCSC in Construction

tool to ensure a secure environment for storing and analyzing construction data. Blockchain can be described as a comprehensive concept that utilizes a decentralized file system to safeguard, distribute, and administer data. Blockchain offers various industries, including the construction sector, solutions to enhance transparency, trust, and traceability. The construction field offers ways to optimize workflows in construction projects and mend broken trust relationships among project stakeholders [2].

The blockchain serves as the foundational distributed ledger technology (DLT) supporting the functionality of the Bitcoin cryptocurrency system [3]. This technology documents and verifies digital activities, such as information in encrypted 'blocks', and maintains a 'chain' of these transactions across various nodes [4]. As outlined by X. Li et al. [5], blockchain consists of three principal elements:

- Cryptography
- Consensus processes
- Decentralization

Cryptography, via block hash values, safeguards the integrity of the data; consensus processes establish protocols for verifying data's structure and accuracy based on identity verification; and decentralization pertains to the spread-out nature of data storage in ledgers across numerous nodes or individual computers. These foundational elements underscore blockchain's inherent features, which include (i) data transaction traceability, (ii) permanent data records, (iii) direct

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transaction oversight without intermediaries, and (iv) the facilitation of smart contracts.

Blockchain is characterized by several fundamental attributes, including being decentralized, distributed, and reliant on consensus mechanisms. A standard public blockchain operates through thousands of computer nodes interconnected within a decentralized structure, eliminating the need for a centralized governing entity [6]. The blockchain system is self-reliant, incentivizing users through rewards when they engage in mining. Mining involves the generation of new blocks, which are then propagated to every node in the network [7]. Bitcoin, established in 2009, was the pioneer blockchain system. Its framework has remained resilient against breaches and avoided accounting mishaps, such as double-spending incidents [8]. Following Bitcoin, Ethereum surfaced in 2015, marking the introduction of smart contracts. These contracts empower parties to create and implement peer-to-peer agreements without depending on an intermediary or trusted third party [9]. In light of the challenges above, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of BCSC technology applications within the construction arena by analyzing the literature applications and studies. The study searches for initial evidence to demonstrate the eligibility of blockchain-based applications within the construction research domains.

II. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Blockchain is an innovative technology that can ensure data protection. A blockchain is a decentralized database that securely and chronologically records transactions (e.g., financial and the transfer of value). Data is recorded via a sophisticated decentralized consensus mechanism, eliminating the need for a central overseer. Before any data is accepted, all participating nodes must verify it. Each node keeps a copy of the data, ensuring no single entity can dominate or control the information [10].

The data derived from nonconformance, which signifies not meeting the set criteria, can help identify the party accountable for upholding quality standards. However, within the construction sector, the need for a consistent and transparent method for handling quality data hampers the assurance procedure and could spark disagreements among involved parties. To tackle this challenge, Sheng et al. [10] introduced an innovative framework utilizing blockchain technology to aid organizations in recording their quality management details, enhancing their ability to learn and boosting business outcomes. This management system for quality-related data is called "Product Organization Process (POP) quality." The on-chain quality data is organized according to the POP model, delineating the interconnections between an organization, its product, and the process dimension. Subsequently, we crafted an architecture based on Hyperledger Fabric, complemented by an array of blockchain-based solutions, such as consensus methods, smart contracts for handling quality data, authorization protocols, and operational procedures to facilitate the management of this quality information.

A. Blockchain Types and Common Platforms

Blockchain systems can be divided into two categories based on how they handle identity and grant access [3]. Permissionless platforms, like Bitcoin and Ethereum enable any participant to join and initiate transactions. On the other hand, permission platforms, like Hyperledger Fabric, limit who can access and thus conduct transactions. These systems can be further distinguished as public ('on-chain') or private ('off-chain'). For a more in-depth comparison of these blockchain varieties, one can refer to works by Helliar et al., and Hewa et al. [11], [12]. The capability of blockchain to enhance the efficacy of construction projects is rooted in its features of traceability and permanence, which foster a heightened sense of trust in transactions and bolster the audit and accountability of information. This ensures that data remains unaltered and undeletable while still being available to every participant within the blockchain network [13].

B. Smart Contracts

Blockchain can support smart contracts [12]. Smart contracts are programmable entities capable of autonomously executing contract terms. The contract is carried out transparently by embedding the terms in code without a central governing body. Once set in motion, it can consistently track data modifications on the blockchain or an external data source and activate automatically once the stipulated conditions are fulfilled, bypassing the intricate stages of conventional business procedures. Progress in the development of smart contracts is gaining attention as a fundamental element in the ongoing digital transformation. Smart contracts hold promise in solving a series of growing challenges in construction, such as contract disagreements and payment issues, and can facilitate Building Information Modeling (BIM) adoption [14], [15].

A smart contract is a set of automated digital instructions that activate when specific conditions are met [14]. This automatic execution is driven by rules-based directives (e.g., If/Then/Else/Otherwise) in alignment with conventional paper contract standards [16]. Beyond their self-executing nature, smart contracts are also binding; once initiated, their predetermined outcomes are typically irreversible [16]. Smart contracts are programmable tools designed to autonomously draft, confirm, and enforce transaction conditions as they promise to enhance automation, fortify information security, and refine the digital construction environment.

Contractual disputes are a frequent concern in the construction industry [17]. Ambiguities, oversights, or vague terms within construction contracts can impede their effective execution. The dominant use of traditional paper contracts complicates monitoring alterations and documentation of execution processes. As a result, claims often need more solid foundations, paving the way for inconsistent practices and a lax approach to contract enforcement among stakeholders. By

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leveraging smart contracts, data permanence is ensured, with all modifications securely logged and easily traceable. Payment issues also loom large in the industry. Ensuring timely payments and maintaining consistent cash flows are pivotal to the success of construction initiatives. Challenges like payment omissions, delays, or errors can spawn project postponements, extra expenditures, compromised efficiency, and further disputes [18]. Contemporary advancements in smart contracts offer the means to ensure protected and precise automated payments [19].

Ye et al. [20] presented eight primary research areas: administration, design, contract and payment structures, quality oversight, site coordination, supply chain dynamics, facility oversight, and data management. In terms of tech integration, BIM emerged as a focal point. The viability of smart contracts within construction was contingent upon the nature of these research domains and how information was stored (i.e., on-chain or off-chain). The benefits of smart contracts in construction span areas like adaptability, security, automation, openness, dependability, and traceability.

In many documented research domains, the use cases for Blockchain-Smart Contracts remain primarily theoretical, often leaning toward the construction of conceptual models and establishing frameworks. There is a pressing need for more hands-on research in the days ahead. Gleaning insights from tangible scenarios and case studies will further validate the efficacy of smart contracts and unearth avenues for technical and administrative enhancement. While there is potential for smart contracts to make inroads in emerging sectors like digital twin technology, evaluating their integration with pioneering notions and avant-garde ICT solutions such as BIM, IoT, and AI is equally pertinent. Such amalgamations can pave the way for a transparent, secure, intelligent construction landscape in forthcoming years. Combining blockchain and BIM is a cornerstone for the upcoming communication paradigm in construction. BIM is a data creation and management platform, while blockchain safeguards this information [2].

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Within this dynamic realm of construction, efficiency, and transparency are paramount, with a compelling need for innovative solutions to persistent challenges. The presented work is a qualitative research endeavor that tries to understand the perceptions and experiences of construction industry researchers regarding the integration of BCSC technology. In this section, the authors delineate the research methodology utilized to investigate the multifaceted role of BCSC technology within the construction industry. The applied systematic approach encompasses the processes of data collection and screening, analysis, and quality assessment, aiming to provide a comprehensive framework to uncover deep insights into this transformative technology.

A. Developing the Research Questions

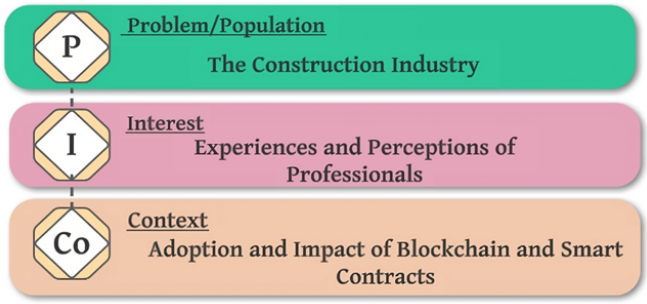

Figure 2: The Research Question from Qualitative PICO Framework

(Fig.2) shows the PICO framework that shaped the main research question guiding this inquiry: "What are the experiences and perceptions of construction industry professionals regarding the adoption and integration of BCSC technology, and how do these technologies impact the construction arena?" This question encapsulates the population or problem: construction industry researchers, the interest: experiences and perceptions (understand how these technologies are perceived, adopted, and integrated from the literature work); and the context: adoption and impact of BCSC in construction (how this technology could be utilized or considered to address industry-specific issues). This question gives a clear focus, allowing to delve into the various perspectives and insights involved in the industry.

B. Research Objectives

The authors in this research target mainly to delve deep and investigate the applications, roles, and challenges of blockchain and smart contracts within construction. Hence, the overarching research objectives could be summarized as follows:

- Retrieving and categorizing existing literature,
- Synthesizing the literature's key findings and implications and
- Presenting a comprehensive overview of current and future developments in the BCSC domain.

These three interconnected objectives are structures to build the framework for this study's exploration of this transformative technology.

C. Data Sources and Search Strategy

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) framework guides the systematic literature search during data collection. PRISMA is a framework that ensures a rigorous and transparent selection and analysis process while providing a standardized and systematic identification and review of relevant works in an unbiased and comprehensive manner [21]. For this literature review research, Scopus and Science Direct were selected as two reputable online databases with extensive coverage of

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academic journals in technology, engineering, and management. The following sequential steps formulated the search strategy:

- **Search Query Construction:**

The authors formulated a search query using some relevant keywords and Boolean operators (AND, OR) to ensure that the retrieved articles are related to construction and blockchain-smart contracts. The keyword terms were selected to represent the targeted objectives and focus areas.

1. Construction Industry Keywords:
   - "Construction"
   - "Building "
   - "Construction projects"
2. Blockchain Keywords:
   - "Blockchain"
   - "Distributed ledger"
   - "Hyperledger fabric"
   - "Ethereum"
3. Smart Contracts Keywords:
   - "Smart contracts"
   - "Automated contracts"

By combining the Boolean operators with the keywords ((Construction OR Building OR Construction Projects) AND ((Blockchain OR Distributed ledger OR Hyperledger fabric OR Ethereum) AND (Smart contracts OR Automated contracts)), the search query was constructed. This ensures that most articles relevant to blockchain, smart contracts, and construction are combined in the search results.

- **Publication Date:**

To focus the study on recent developments and ensure a comprehensive analysis, the authors have limited the search time range between 2018 and 2023.

- **Document Type and Language:**

The search was structured only to include peer-reviewed articles written in English to maintain research rigor.

- **Search Execution:**

The search was executed through the two databases (Scopus and Science Direct) separately on the 5th of September, 2023. All retrieved records from each database were exported and organized in an Excel sheet to remove duplicates and for further screening and selection.

D. Screening and Selection Process:

The screening and selection process adhered to the PRISMA guidelines. This process encompassed four critical steps, starting with the title, abstract, and full-text screening, and then an inclusion for qualitative synthesis. Each step involved records of independent assessment by two individual reviewers against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Relevance to predefined research questions or objectives.
- Focus on BCSC technology applications within the construction industry.
- Provision of related original findings or empirical insights.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Irrelevance to predefined research questions or objectives.
- Lack of emphasis on BCSC technology applications within the construction industry.
- Absence of related original findings or empirical insights.
- Duplicate articles, review, editorial, or commentary status.

Any disagreements between the two reviewers' results were resolved through discussion with a third reviewer. The screened, included, and excluded records numbers from each database were recorded and compared. The results are then saved for any subsequent required analysis (Table 1). (Fig.3) shows the PRISMA flow diagram through the screening and selection process.

Table 1: List of Selected Papers

Year Range	Research Articles	No.
2018-2020	[1], [2], [4], [10], [13], [17], [19], [22] – [33]	**19**
2021-2023	[5], [7], [14], [23], [34] – [78], [78] – [111]	**83**

E. Data Extraction and Analysis Methods:

The authors have customized a Python tool with a user-friendly interface to deal with data extraction and analysis (Fig. 4). This developed tool helps to facilitate data extraction and analysis such as author name, publication year, author keywords, abstract, Source title (journal), word cloud generation, and other pertinent data from the selected papers. The tool was implemented in a Visual Studio Code environment utilizing multiple Python libraries, including Pandas, Matplotlib, tkinter, Seaborn, networkx, itertools, xlsxwriter, and WordCloud. To start the literature analysis, the user should first upload the Excel file of all selected papers outputted from the screening phase (Fig. 5). After uploading the file, the user can easily perform any analysis from the available while moving between tabs and pressing the buttons. This tool provides a range of descriptive statistics, visualizations, and insights derived from uploaded files, making it compatible with all Excel files exported from various databases, only with consistent column headers.

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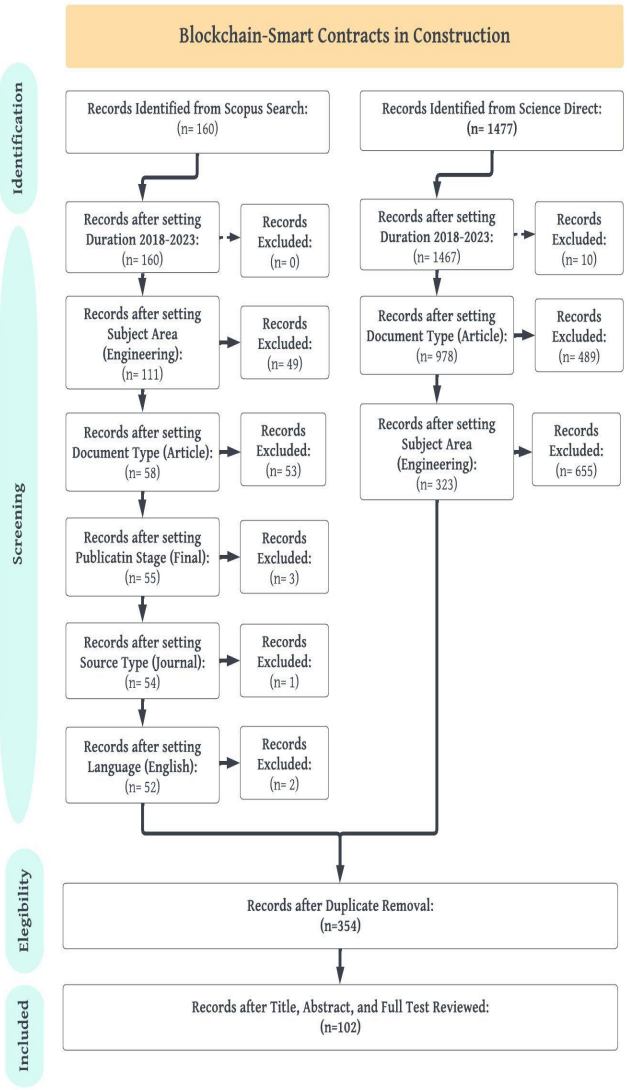

Figure 3: PRISMA Flow Diagram

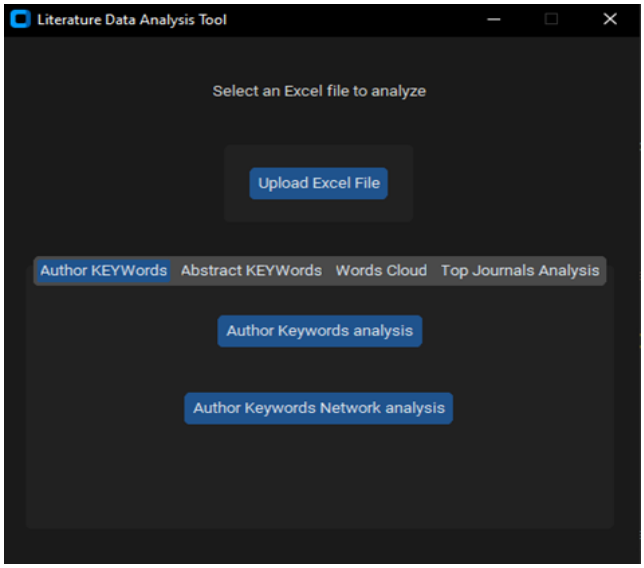

Figure 4: Literature Data Analysis Tool User Interface

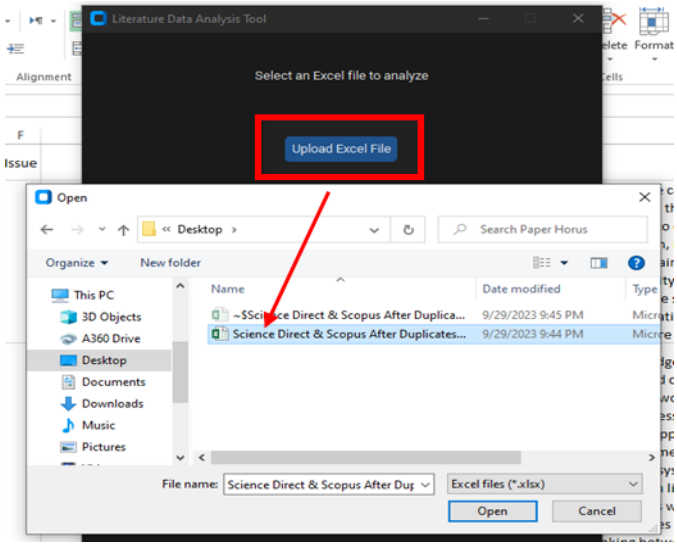

Figure5: Uploading Excel File for Data Analysis

IV. Results & Discussion

The initial objective of the presented research is to recognize the existing literature on BCSC technology within the construction industry. This objective could be achieved through a comprehensive review of the collected papers. The findings of this intensive review are as follows:

- A total of 102 papers were retrieved and screened from Scopus and Science Direct databases (Table 1).
- The selected research spans a range of various applications in the construction industry.
- (Table 2) discuss the limitations and shortcomings of some previous literature were scanned to build a robust framework for future research.

A. The Developed User Interface Tool Analysis

The developed tool produces the author's keyword count chart analysis (Fig. 6), which provides insight into what the frequently used keyword terms are. This type of analysis helps the researchers to pinpoint the main terms that represent focusing areas within the literature. The results from this analysis, show that the core terms in this body of knowledge are smart contract, and blockchain, with both building information modeling (BIM) and Industry 4.0.

The network of keywords visually represents various relationships between authors' keywords to uncover the current research trends. (Fig. 7) shows the resulting network from the developed tool. The network indicates the co-occurrence of keywords through the literature (Blockchain, Smart contract, Industry 4.0, Building Information Modeling, and Construction Industry). Each node represents a keyword, the edge represents the occurrence of the two keywords in the same article, and the node size corresponds to the frequency of repetitions.

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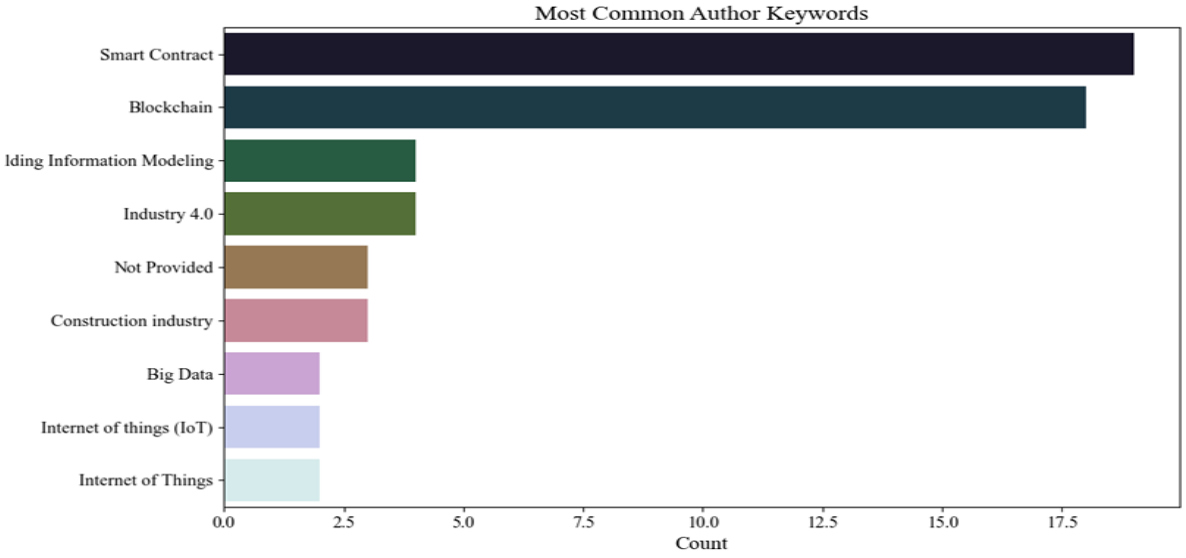

Figure 6: Author's Keyword Analysis 1

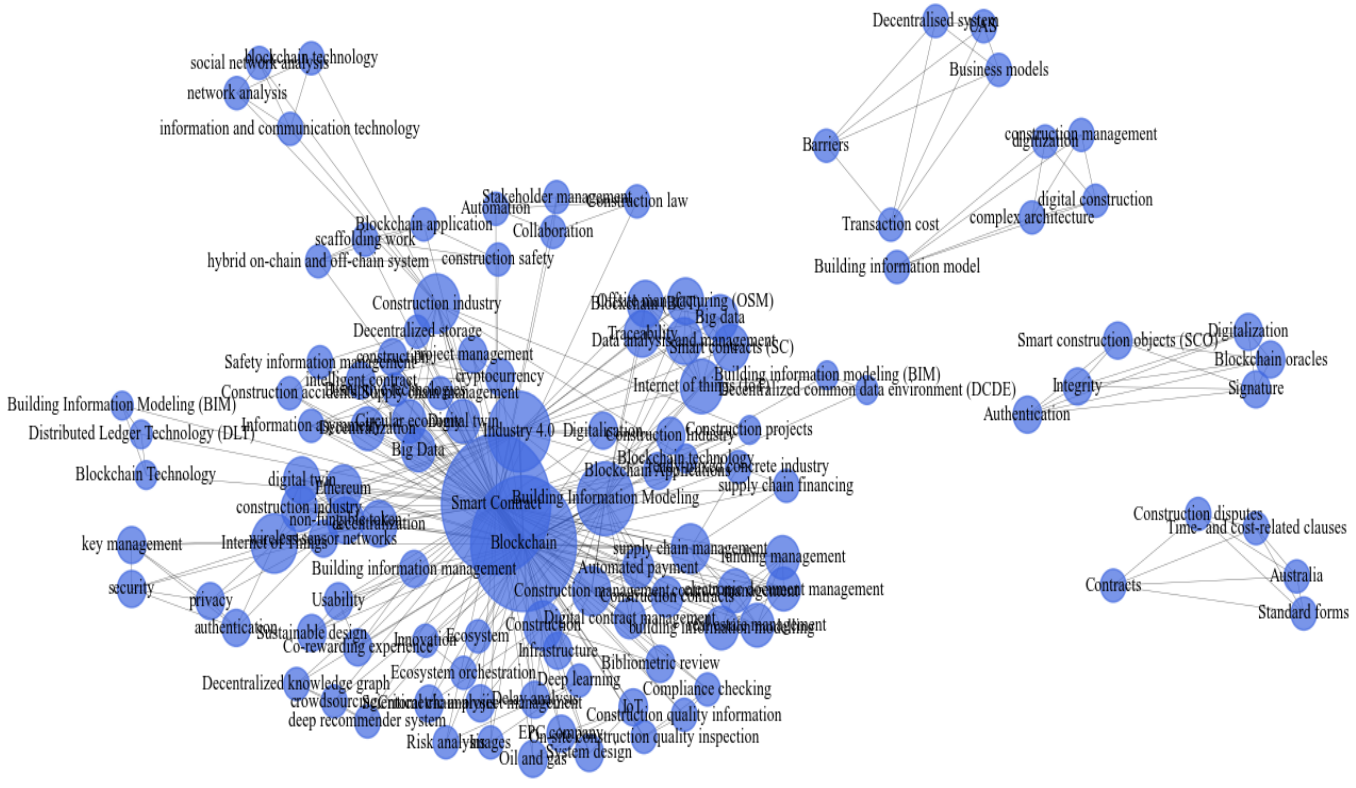

Figure 7: Author's Keyword Network 1

Figure 7 shows the author's keyword network conducted from the analysis tool.

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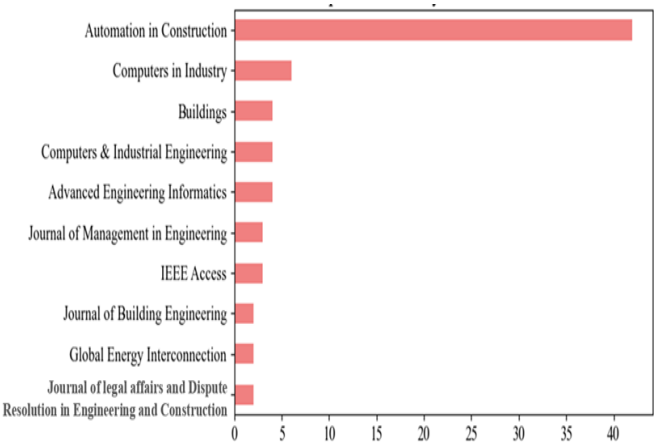

Figure 8: Top 10 Journals by Number of Articles

Figure 8 shows the top 10 scientific journals by number of articles, where "Automation in Construction" has the advantage in terms of the number of publications, which makes it a key platform for BCSC research in construction.

Figure 9: Publications Yearly Distribution

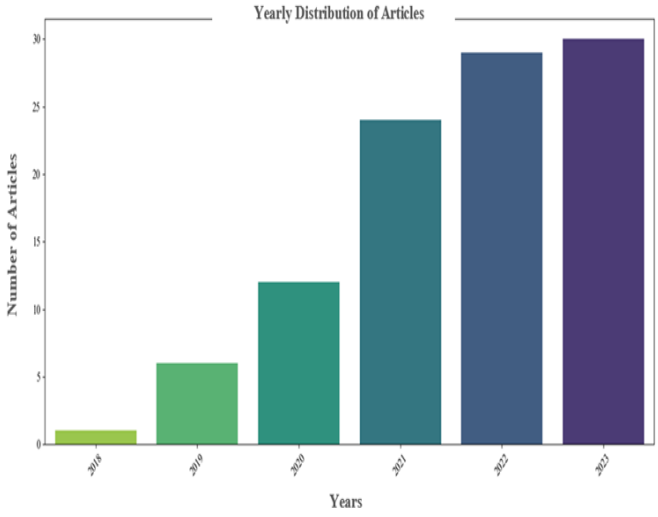

Figure 9 shows the publications' yearly distribution from 2018 to 2023 to indicate the research trends over time. The figure confirms the rapidly increasing interest in the research effort, with a notable publication number covering this body of knowledge.

B. Existing Gaps

One of the most common methods to measure the literature gaps is to compare the existing domains and applications in the research literature with the future expected needs and challenges in the industry. After this intensive review, the authors extracted some main application domains of BCSC in the construction indicated as follows:

- Contract payments
- Logistics and supply chain
- Information management
- Regularity compliance

However, these applications only address some of the industry domains, such as disputes, safety management, quality management, construction operations, and environmental sustainability. The gaps could be searched from a different angle as follows:

- Some researchers have proposed their study model application based on the blockchain platform without developing scalable or secure solutions that can work across various platforms.
- Some proposed models have drawbacks in their application mechanism, such as low adoption rates, high transaction costs, uncertainties, or ethical problems. These issues must be studied and mitigated.
- Most of the existing studies developed conceptual frameworks without validation or real case testing.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

After thoroughly analyzing and studying the identified gaps, the authors have drawn new directions and steps to guide potential research in BCSC construction. These new directions provide an objective direction for construction research scholars and practitioners. The authors propose ten key requirements for all future BCSC models to mitigate the identified research gaps (Table 3). These proposed requirements aim to solve the majority of identified gaps and limitations in the existing BCSC body of knowledge to provide a reference model to explore and validate future models.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research study searched for initial evidence to demonstrate the eligibility of blockchain-based applications within the construction research domains. The authors have explored the technological world of BCSC applications through an extensive review of related literature publications. The presented study, using PRISMA analysis and the customized user interface tool, sheds light on the rule of BCSC in reshaping the industry. The study managed to:

- Perform in-depth analysis of available literature publications.
- Introduce a new user interface tool to automate the literature analysis process (applicable for other topics analysis).
- Identify the literature gaps and limitations
- Offer clear direction and practical recommendations for potential research and investigations.

However, the study has not fully fulfilled its desired possibilities, as it has the following limitations:

- The study needs a fully structured framework with practical implementation.
- It has not studied extensively all previous BCSC models' assumptions and applications.

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Table 2: Strengths and Gaps in The Literature

Research Paper	Research Application Domain	Weaknesses
(Brandín and Abrishami) [43]	Proposed a framework for utilizing blockchain and IoT with BIM for tracking asset information through its life cycle. The framework holds potential in terms of efficiency and transparency.	▪ A framework without validation or real testing. ▪ Ignored ethical, legal, and social implications for sensitive data.
(Sonmez et al.) [94]	Proposed a novel solution to automate construction payments to improve cash flow and increase trust, transparency, and collaboration.	▪ The authors did not provide sufficient details about the technical model or implementation. ▪ They did not discuss the model's limitations or challenges.
(Hamledari and Fischer) [60]	Developed a blockchain system for the supply chain systems based on expert interviews with a total cost reduction equal to 12.4% and lead times minimized by 36.5 %.	▪ The model depended on a single case study without any pilot implementation to validate its performance ▪ The authors did not discuss the model's limitations or challenges
(Reynoso Vanderhorst et al.) [87]	Developed a cost model for UAS in a decentralized system.	▪ The model is limited to other scenarios or countries. ▪ The authors did not provide sufficient details about the technical model or implementation.
(Patruni and Saraswathi) [84]	Developed a simulation system based on historical data to explore the Ethereum BCSC can enhance security and privacy.	▪ A model without validation or real testing. ▪ A system without validation or real testing. ▪ Ignored ethical, legal, and social implications for sensitive data.
(Yang et al.) [106]	Developed a blockchain system for scaffolding work management and validation through a case study.	▪ The model is limited to other application scenarios. ▪ Ignored user satisfaction ▪ The authors did not discuss the model's limitations or challenges
(Celik et al.) [44]	Explored the potential of blockchain applications to streamline collaboration and BIM	▪ A framework without validation or real testing. ▪ Ignored ethical, legal, and social implications for sensitive data.
(Gupta and Jha) [59]	Proposed a novel framework to use BCSC to automate contract execution in the construction megaprojects utilizing the Hyperledger Fabric blockchain environment. The framework allows a price variation clause.	▪ Did not consider all barriers and risks ▪ The authors did not discuss the model scalability, cost benefits, or governance issues.
(Liu et al.) [25]	Proposed a BCSC-BIM framework for sustainable building design, coordination, and collaboration in construction projects.	▪ A framework without validation or real testing. ▪ Ignored environmental impacts or energy consumption ▪ The authors did not discuss the framework's limitations or challenges
(Elghaish et al.) [112]	Explored and examined the integration of BIM, blockchain, and sustainable buildings through the project life cycle within the context of smart cities.	▪ A study without introducing a framework without validation or real testing relying on secondary data may not capture all relevant topics.

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Table 3: Proposed Key Requirements for Future BCSC Models

Requirements	Description
Application Domains	Researchers should expand the application domain to explore new research areas including: ▪ Safety management. ▪ Construction operations monitoring ▪ Quality management ▪ Buildings and Smart Cities Sustainability The construction researchers should investigate the integration of various application domains to build a complete and efficient BCSC system.
Technicality and Scalability	Any developed BCSC system should be scalable, secure, and independent of a specific platform. The researchers should provide all required details and documentation to facilitate the system adoption in other contexts.
Model Validation	The models should be validated and tested with real-world scenarios in various contexts.
Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications	The BCSC models should be investigated to address any ethical, social, or legal implications when handling sensitive data with a defined exploration system to explore users' satisfaction.
Economic Terms	The researchers should develop cost-effective solutions regarding transaction costs and adoption rates.
Challenges, Limitations, and Risks	All challenges and limitations should be addressed and discussed for future reference. Future studies should consider potential risks associated with BCSC to propose sufficient mitigation strategies.
Governance and Compliance	Governance models are necessary to ensure transparent participation aligns with standards and regulatory compliance.
Global Applicability	Any developed mode should maintain global applicability and implementation through various scenarios, countries, or regulatory environments
Usability	Any model should ensure usability and acceptance from its end-users by providing sufficient training among industry professionals.
Knowledge Dissemination	Researchers should share their study findings and framework and collaborate with other academics and professionals to facilitate practical implementations.

- The recommendations should target broader applicability to all scenario cases.

This research aims to serve as a stepping-stone for potential studies to navigate the existing path of BCSC in construction with its challenges and balance it with promising opportunities.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest

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