



Revisiting ethical leadership in social exchange: Mapping thematic trends and future directions

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ABSTRACT

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Ethical leadership is a major factor in determining both moral and immoral behavior in organizations. It leads to a number of consequences, such as loyalty to the organization, job satisfaction, performance, pro-social helping actions, and employee deviance. The combined effect of moral leadership and social interaction is absent, though. This study, therefore, focuses on using VOS Viewer and Biblioshiny software to bibliometrically investigate the thematic trends and future directions on the subject matter. A total of 184 articles from the Web of Science database were analyzed. According to the study's findings, social interchange and moral leadership were associated with theme trends and important concepts. Additionally, it demonstrated four major clusters: leadership, social exchange theory, ethical leadership, and leader-member exchange. The study also demonstrates the value of combining social exchange and ethical leadership ideas to create a new concept, social exchange ethical leadership (SXEL). It further revealed a comprehensive framework that identifies the causes and effects of SXEL. The findings indicate that ethical leadership influences staff attitudes and behaviors and encourages customer-focused actions. Nevertheless, combining social interaction with moral leadership may produce diverse outcomes. The study establishes an integrated framework by emphasizing areas and gaps not previously investigated. This framework illustrates the antecedents and outcomes of SXEL and highlights the need for additional empirical testing of extraneous variables.

Contribution/Originality: By introducing and conceptualizing social exchange ethical leadership as an integrative framework, the study advances understanding of how ethical leadership and social exchange jointly influence employee behavior and organizational outcomes. It further provides a comprehensive research agenda that invites scholars to empirically examine emerging constructs such as responsible leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on principles like justice, responsibility, integrity, and respect (Moore, 2022), ethical leadership is essential to building trust and constructive interpersonal relationships in businesses (Qin, Wen, Ling, Zhou, & Tong, 2014).

Many human and organizational outcomes, such as prosocial behaviors, work satisfaction, and creativity, have been shown to be impacted by it in previous research (Bavik, Tang, Shao, & Lam, 2018; Ma, Cheng, Ribbens, & Zhou, 2013; Nazir, Qun, Hui, & Shafi, 2018). Despite these findings, ethical leadership research lacks theoretical integration specifically concerning the mechanisms linking interpersonal relationship dynamics to broader performance outcomes.

Although research indicates a mutually reinforcing relationship between ethical leadership and successful organizational outcomes (Gu, Tang, & Jiang, 2015; Ma et al., 2013), most of this study ignores these relationships. It has been difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding of how social exchange processes underpin ethical leadership due to theoretical fragmentation. This study integrates disparate literature into a unified framework: Social Exchange Ethical Leadership (SXEL), which identifies how high-quality exchanges drive ethical outcomes.

Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) defined ethical leadership as a blend of transformational and transactional leadership, according to their conceptualization of leadership styles. Although ethical leadership was historically linked to charisma, modern research distinguishes the two; transactional leaders may exhibit high ethical standards, while transformational leaders may occasionally act unethically (Bhal & Dadhich, 2011). Other researchers advise leaders to use LMX to adopt a paternalistic leadership style in order to achieve these outcomes (Dhar, 2016). More research on this contentious conclusion in connection with social trade is necessary.

Social interchange has not been conceptually integrated with ethical leadership in previous research, which has mostly looked at it as a mediating or moderating variable (e.g., Wang, Zhou, Bao, Zhang, and Ju (2020)). By putting out an SXEL framework that views social exchange as a fundamental process rather than as a method through which ethical leadership results in follower and organizational outcomes, this study improves the discipline. According to Pastoriza and Ariño (2013), the relationship between SXEL behaviors and creativity, work engagement, and performance can also be studied using social exchange theory and social learning theory. Even though a good amount of research has been done on the topic, previous studies didn't produce a consistent relationship between topics like leadership, social exchange, leadership styles, ethical leadership, and LMX (Bhal & Dadhich, 2011; Garba, Babalola, & Guo, 2018; Tu & Lu, 2016). Interestingly, nothing is known about the relationship between social exchange and moral leadership.

The concept of social exchange and ethical leadership is attracting researchers' attention. From previous studies, a holistic framework for these subjects has not been established; different studies offer fragmented conceptual relationships. Due to disagreements over antecedents and outcomes, determinants and consequences have also been overlooked. Therefore, this review synthesizes existing literature to construct a framework linking ethical leadership and social exchange principles. This framework aims to guide this dynamic area of scholarship and provide practitioners with a structured foundation for reasonable, ethically-informed decision-making.

The observed theoretical and empirical discrepancies in the literature on ethical leadership serve as the foundation for the justification for this review. Despite the fact that prior research has connected ethical leadership to commitment, citizenship behavior, and engagement (Arshad, Abid, Contreras, Elahi, & Ahmed, 2021; Bah, Xiongying, Tena, & Conteh, 2020; Kim & Vandenberghe, 2021), such relationships have frequently been looked at separately. A thorough synthesis using the SXEL lens can shed light on the reciprocal exchanges that ethical behavior promotes and support, providing a logical basis for further empirical research.

This study maps the conceptual and intellectual structure of SXEL research using bibliometric tools to bring disparate discoveries together. This method exposes areas where theoretical integration is still lacking, highlights important thematic connections, and offers a methodical knowledge of how the topic has changed over time. They can assist in determining consequences, possible directions for further research, and unresolved concerns (Zhu, Song, Zhu, & Johnson, 2019). The study contributes to the field by providing a comprehensive overview of the subject matter.

This study makes a contribution by explaining how and why ethical leadership affects a variety of organizational and employee outcomes, including engagement, innovation, and work satisfaction, when viewed through the lens of social exchange. By identifying mechanisms such as LMX, self-efficacy, and organizational identification, the integrative framework presents a comprehensive account of how ethical leader behaviors are reciprocated through follower actions.

Second, the study identifies important keywords, concepts, notable studies, and a research trend in the subject of SXEL. Additionally, a science mapping was employed to structure the comprehensive framework for future study directions and further refinement by showing the gaps and areas that were not investigated by previous research, such as the integration of LMX, business success, and SXEL with responsible leadership.

The framework charts SXEL's causes and effects. It also demonstrates the need for future empirical testing of unnecessary factors. This work advances the topic by highlighting the need for this integration, which calls for more research on the integration of the components. Third, this study is among the first to quantitatively analyze a sizable dataset on the topic of the SXEL methodologically. This facilitates the discussion of various SXEL-related ideas. Additionally, the study provides future researchers with clues to investigate the impact of specific variables on the topic statistically.

2. OBJECTIVES

This study aimed at exploring performance analysis, scientific mapping, and thematic inclination from the ethical leadership and social exchange perspectives. Accordingly, the following research questions are designed to address specific objectives of the study.

1. What are the primary pillars of the subject of integrated ethical leadership and social exchange?
2. Does the integrated idea of SXEL have antecedents and consequences?
3. How are the subjects covered by SXEL developing thematically and trending?
4. What are the crucial topics in the subject that need further empirical research?

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Study Setting

The first step of this process has identified several areas of study, including social exchange and ethical leadership. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis are employed. The literature has been evaluated for qualitative analysis utilizing co-word and text analysis. The quantity of research on the subject, together with the publication numbers, publication years, and field of studies, was assessed, particularly for quantitative analysis. Put another way, a content-and theme-based analysis was carried out using the keyword, title, and abstract analysis as inspiration.

This is to enable the use of bibliometry, the most effective method for identifying the state-of-the-art in literature (Teixeira, 2014). Due to the fact that it allows us to perform more objective and systematic data gathering and analysis research. A method used by Hailu and Chebo (2024) was mostly applied to choose the database used for this study (see Figure 1).

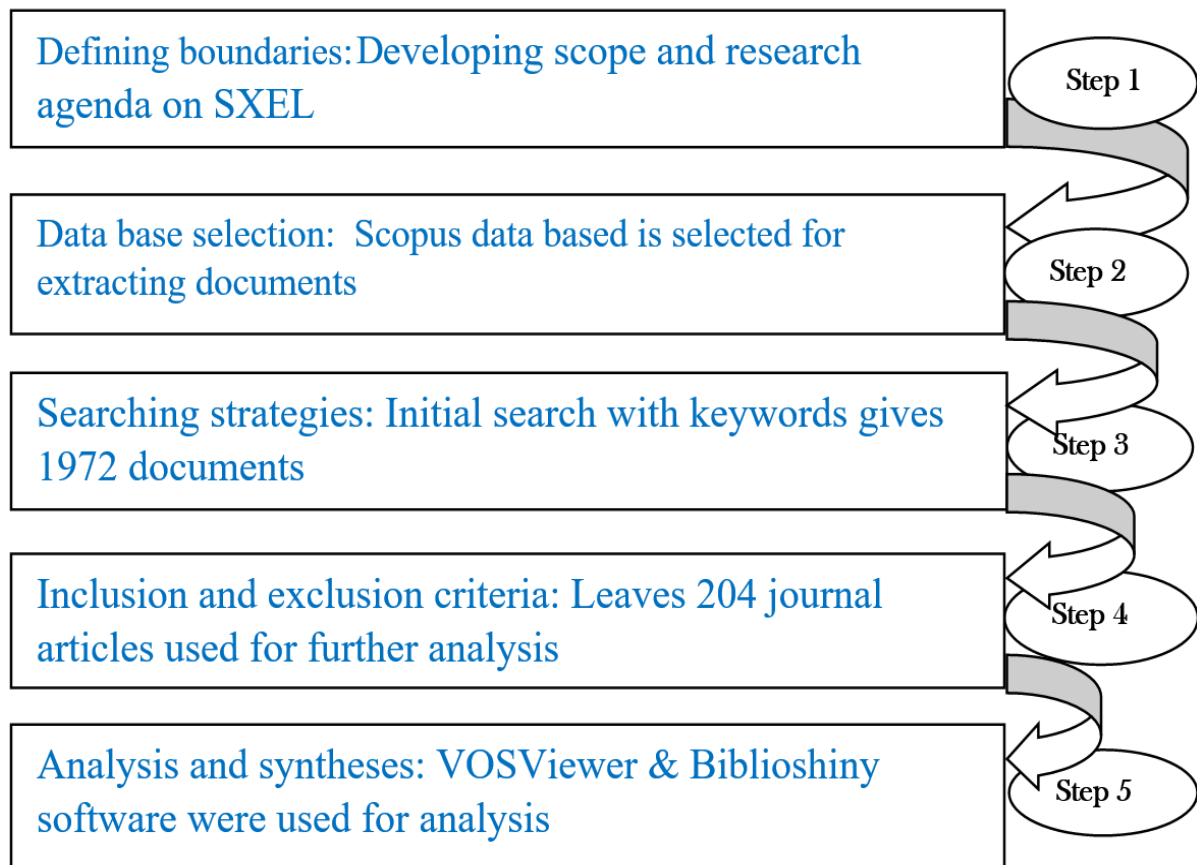


Figure 1. Bibliometric study framework and process.

Source: Hailu and Chebo (2024).

3.2. Sources of Data and Search Strategy

For review research, choosing the best bibliographic database for a bibliometric review is essential. In the academic arena, Scopus and Web of Science are among the top academic databases. Although the functionality offered by the two databases is comparable, there are important distinctions to take into account when making a decision. One significant distinction is the quantity of journals in the humanities and social sciences, where Scopus holds a stronger position (Singh, Singh, & Piryani, 2026). When it comes to journal coverage, Scopus is also more thorough and extensive than Web of Science. Scopus has been chosen as a search database in light of these facts. Elsevier's Scopus is the largest curated abstract & citation database; multidisciplinary; used in global university rankings (Baas, Schotten, Plume, Côté, & Karimi, 2020).

The search terms “(Ethical leader* OR responsible leader* OR moral leader*) AND (Social exchange)” were used to obtain all of the data from Scopus. To retrieve papers from the selected databases, keywords associated with social exchange and ethical leadership were developed. Initially, these two terms were put to the test. We evaluated the quality of reporting and searching queries' capacity to locate pertinent material in order to create an efficient data search strategy. As a result, we have included the relevant synonyms to verify that the keyword selection was adequate. As a result, terms that are synonymous with ethical leadership, such as moral leadership and responsible leadership, have been utilized in relation to social exchange. The search query has then been successfully refined by applying Boolean operators like "AND" and "OR". This helps to provide more focused and accurate search queries. In summary, by improving search query quality, enhancing control and repeatability, and honing search expressions, the application of Boolean operators improves the efficacy of our search.

3.3. Criteria of Inclusion and Exclusion

A popular and frequently used database for reviewing scientific documents, Scopus provides a wealth of published data. A total of 204 publications were discovered during the study's publication period. After excluding review articles and non-English articles, 184 articles in all were eventually included in the final analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Searching strategy.

Strategy for refinement	Excluded articles	No. of refined articles
Number of documents in the first search	-	204
Publication year	No limit	204
Field of study	No limit	204
Removing all other documents except journal articles	18	186
Excluding articles in languages other than English	8	184

Using the search phrases, the contained data is extracted from the title field, keywords, and title and abstract fields. To prepare them for examination with VOSViewer and Biblioshiny R Studio, these articles were exported in Microsoft Excel, RIS, and CSV (Comma Separated Value) formats.

3.4. Data Analysis

Papers were classified and examined based on the authors, study area, journal, country, year of publication, and affiliations with organizations. To identify the most popular subjects in research on social exchange and ethical leadership, keywords were analyzed. Similarity (affinity) was estimated based on association strength using VOSviewer. Keywords were grouped into distinct clusters with the VOSviewer and Biblioshiny R studio methods; each cluster was marked by a different color.

In particular, analysis has been conducted utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Tracing the evolution of the selected subject, finding the leading publishing journals, identifying the institutions with the greatest number of affiliations, and identifying the most cited articles are the main quantitative goals of the selected analysis. Consequently, pinpointing debatable issues in the area, constructing a foundational framework, identifying research gaps, and forwarding future research directions were the major aims of this study. Several important terms that are used in all research publications, yet have universal meanings were overlooked during the investigation. They have then been identified and thoroughly evaluated, focusing on the terms that have the greatest impact on the study. Furthermore, the association between keywords has been established, and its strength has been analyzed. Keyword clustering has also been performed to simplify the content-based analysis. After these clusters are identified, a study theme and material are developed.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Scientific mapping and performance are presented in this section.

4.1. Ethical Leadership - Performance Analysis in Social Exchange Research

In addition to analyzing pertinent sources, connections, and documents, this study also looks at patterns in scientific output. As illustrated in Figure 2, annual scientific production reveals a sharp increase in publications concerning social exchange and ethical leadership after 2010.

Annual Scientific Production

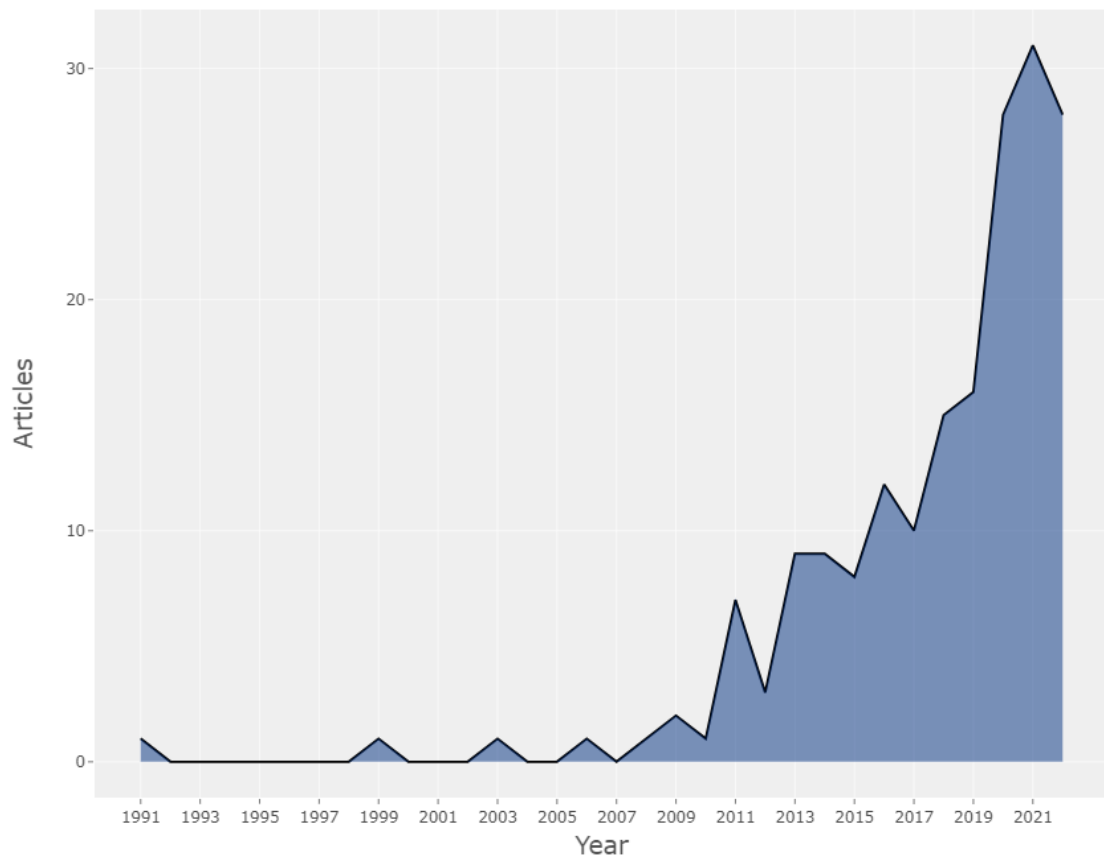


Figure 2. Annual scientific productions in Scopus.

Publication data from 2018 to 2022 discloses a marked increase in scholarly output regarding ethical leadership in the context of social exchange. The exponential increment in the number of publications from 15 in 2018 to 31 as of 2021. This signals that the topic is drawing researchers' attention.

The most productive documents, affiliations, and sources are displayed in Table 2. It reveals that, out of the 184 sample papers, the Personnel Review ($n = 11$), Frontiers in Psychology ($n = 10$), and Journal of Business Ethics (19 documents) rank 3rd, 2nd, and 1st, respectively, for their article contribution. Eleven journals published three or more articles, compared to just two that published more than ten. Besides, about 21.74% of all papers are published in the top three journals, which are Frontiers in Psychology, Personnel Review, and Journal of Business Ethics. Additionally, these journals have the highest H-index.

Regarding affiliation, 414 institutions in all have contributed to the production of works on the present study. Five institutions have produced five or more articles, while just ten of the 414 institutions have published two or more documents. Renmin University of China and Zhejiang University are associated with the most documents. The top fifteen articles with the most citations are shown in Table 2.

In other words, analyses were conducted to emphasize the significance of papers with respect to citations. As it is presented in Table 2, the three most cited papers were Tierney, Farmer, and Graen (1999); Walumbwa et al. (2011), and Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, and Salvador (2009). Only these three authors, according to the data, earned more than 250 citations from Scopus-indexed works. Approximately 34.74% of all citations are shared by these three publications.

Table 2. Most relevant journals, institutions, and articles.

Most relevant sources		Most relevant affiliations		Most relevant documents	
Sources	Art.	Affiliations	Doc.	Documents	Cit.
Journal of Business Ethics	19	Renmin University of China	7	Tierney et al. (1999)	1006
Personnel Review	11	Zhejiang University	7	Mayer et al. (2009)	906
Frontiers In Psychology	10	University of South Africa	6	Walumbwa et al. (2011)	443
Leadership & Organ. Dev. Journal	7	Arizona State University	5	Bedi, Alpaslan, and Green (2016)	243
Ethics & Behavior	5	Monash University	5	Chamberlin, Newton, and Lepine (2017)	216
Journal Of Applied Psychology	5	National Chiao Tung University	4	Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, and Zivnuska (2011)	196
European J. of Work & Org. Psychology	4	National College of Business Administration & Economics	4	Lord, Day, Zaccaro, Avolio, and Eagly (2017)	168
Intern. J. of Environ. Res. & Public Health	4	Sichuan University	4	Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh (2011)	153
J. of Managerial Psychology	4	University of Amsterdam	4	Dhar (2016)	149
Sustainability (Switzerland)	4	University of Hong Kong	4	Yukl, Mahsud, Hassan, and Prussia (2013)	137
Personnel Psychology	3	Beijing Normal University	3	Miao, Newman, Yu, and Xu (2013)	136
Asian Journal of Business Ethics	2	Comsats University Islamabad	3	Mahsud, Yukl, and Prussia (2010)	128
Central European J. of Public Health	2	Curtin University	3	Hansen, Alge, Brown, Jackson, and Dunford (2013)	110
Current Psychology	2	Deakin University	3	Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu, and Hirst (2014)	108
Intern. J. of Hospitality Manage.	2	Durham University	3	Lee, Schwarz, Newman, and Legood (2019)	106

Tierney P's most cited article examines how leadership influences employee creativity, emphasizing the importance of relationships and personalities. The study found a relationship between employee creative performance and LMX, employee intrinsic motivation, and cognitive style. Mayer et al. (2009) study on "the relationships between top management and supervisory ethical leadership and group-level outcomes such as deviance and OCB" was the second most cited article. It also suggests that moral leadership is present at every level of the company. The other study that Walumbwa et al. (2011) most frequently mention is titled "Linking ethical leadership to employee performance: The roles of leader-member exchange, self-efficacy, and organizational identification." This suggests that the research on social exchange ethical leadership needs to be connected to elements like LMX, organizational, and individual psychological aspects, creativity, and performance.

4.2. Scientific Mapping

4.2.1. Authors, Affiliations, and Countries Plot

Figure 3 revealed the most prominent authors, organizations, and nations.

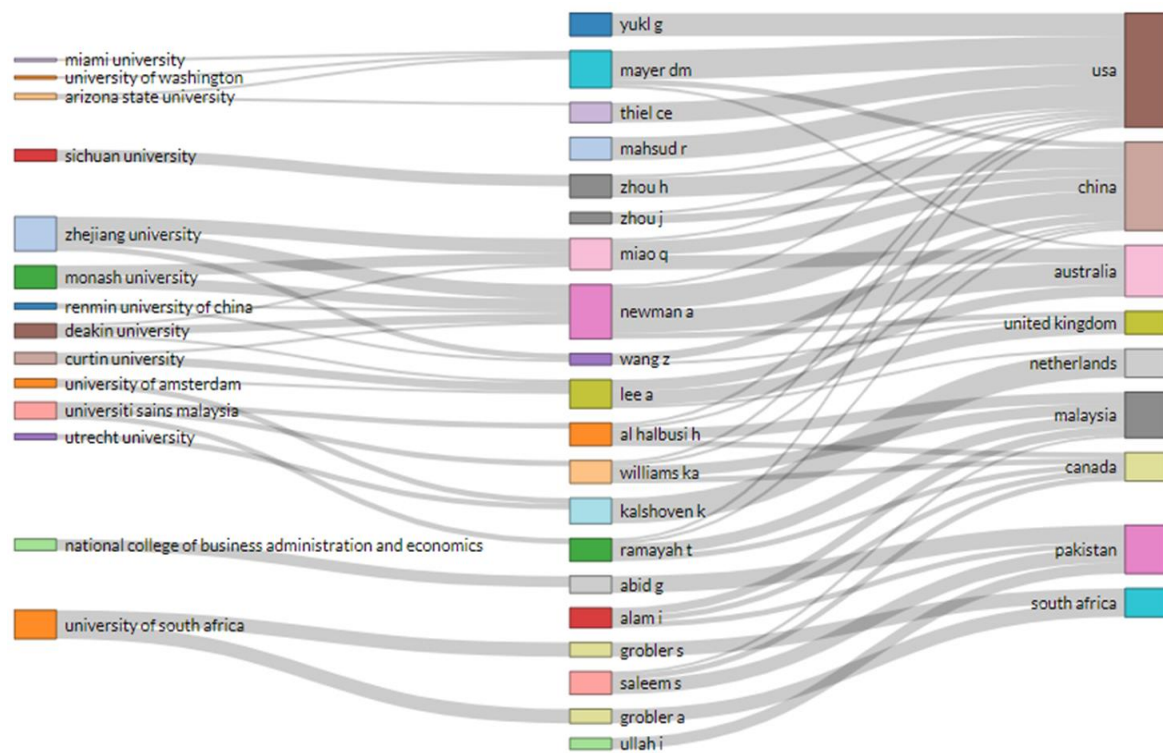


Figure 3. Three fields plot: authors, institutions, and countries.

The column on the left side of Figure 3 shows the institutions that are actively publishing papers on the topic. While the one on the right displays the nations that produce the most, the one in the middle displays authors who are currently active. The United States has the most published authors; China, Australia, and Pakistan take 2nd, 3rd, and 4th ranks in this regard. According to the thickness of the line, Newman is the major publisher connected to Zhejiang University in China and Monash University in Australia, while Mayer, Yukl, Thiel, and Mahsud are the major contributors from the USA. Among the organizations that have published numerous works by authors like Grobler S. and Grobler A. is the University of South Africa. Newman and Miao are among the top authors from Zhejiang University and Monash University, according to the thickness of the line connecting the authors and their affiliated university. Among the leading publishers are also Zhou H from Sichuan University, Grobler S and Grobler A from the University of South Africa, and Abid from the National College of Business Administration and Economics.

4.2.2. Keywords Co-Occurrence

Initially, a minimum threshold of five keyword occurrences was established, and six clusters were found. Afterwards, four clusters are produced by setting a minimum cluster size of 10 and a minimum number of keyword occurrences of 3. 48 of the 504 keywords, with 228 links and a total link strength of 382, fulfill the requirement. A keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted to examine the frequency with which specific terms appeared within the selected papers. The purpose of keyword analysis is to represent the state of the art in the field of SXEL and to gain fresh insights into the distribution of keywords. Figure 4 generally displays the 48 most popular terms arranged into 4 groupings.

assuming command through social interaction. In particular, Lee (2016) proposed that taking the initiative might be encouraged by ethical leadership; however, this study lacked actual data to back up this claim. Consequently, investigating ethical leadership through the lens of social exchange theory is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the field.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this review demonstrate that, although Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) is a specific subject in social exchange ethical leadership, its significance is only negligible. While ethical leadership is a basic and significant theme, responsible leadership is a developing theme, and leadership is a well-developed, underlying, and motivating theme. Therefore, the developing theme of responsible leadership in relation to social exchange ethical leadership should be the focus of future research.

Researchers studying ethical leadership have often employed social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to describe how ethical leadership affects significant results. According to a social learning theory, followers of morally upright leaders do so because they view them as admirable role models. However, other theories, such as social exchange theory, have also been put out to explain the influence of ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2009). According to Wang et al. (2020), social interchange often occurs between subordinates and many groups, including coworkers, direct bosses, employees, and the firms that employ them. The combined idea of moral leadership and social interaction was not given much attention in earlier research. Though it hasn't been scientifically examined, trust in leaders is a social exchange mechanism that connects moral leadership to desired follower behaviors, making it crucially relevant if the two concepts are presented together. Future scholars are therefore encouraged to combine the two ideas and investigate their causes and effects empirically.

Based on the keyword analysis, there are four primary clusters: social exchange theory, leadership, LMX, and ethical leadership. Prior research suggested that to predict employees' ethical intentions and OCB, ethical leadership interacts with colleague ethics. Future studies must, however, better examine the degree to which the integrated notion SXEL influences ethical intentions and organizational citizenship behavior, as this topic was not adequately covered. The findings led to the identification of the following themes.

5.1. Theme 1: Ethical Atmosphere and Job Satisfaction Caused by LMX

LMX, a component of collective interaction, is crucial in creating an ethical environment, which raises job satisfaction even further. Scrutinizing the function of LMX as a social exchange process in the ethical leadership–performance relationship is the focus of Walumbwa et al. (2011). Seldom have these alternative hypotheses been empirically verified, which is necessary (Hansen et al., 2013). It is also necessary to make clear how interactions between leaders and colleagues promote moral behavior and job happiness.

In order to promote social exchange, ethical leadership is an essential independent variable (Garba et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020). To create a new concept, social exchange ethical leadership, this study suggests combining the two ideas. Additionally, it is anticipated that this LMX will mitigate the impact of a novel paradigm, SXEL, on job satisfaction and foster an ethical environment in the workplace. Leaders can provide followers with task-related rewards, organizational resources, and psychological support through a strong LMX connection (Gu et al., 2015). This is due to the notion that a favorable psychological contract between superiors and subordinates may increase SXEL practices, which in turn may improve the ethical climate and job happiness of employees. It's unclear, though, if LMX makes a contribution.

According to research, moral leaders can encourage customer-focused actions by boosting job satisfaction (Qin et al., 2014). Garba et al. (2018) acknowledge this finding. Several employee behaviors and attitudes, such as psychological safety (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009) and job satisfaction (Pastoriza & Ariño, 2013), have also been

found to be influenced by ethical leadership. However, the consequences of combining social interaction with ethical leadership may differ, necessitating additional research and explanations.

5.2. Theme 2: Ethical Leadership as a Means of Enhancing Organizational Livelihood and Leader-Member- Exchange Via Social Exchange

It is anticipated that SXEL will increase LMX and organizational support (Including psychological empowerment, perceived organizational support, and organizational commitment). Numerous employee behaviors and attitudes, including organizational loyalty, psychological empowerment, and desire to put in extra effort, have been found to be influenced by ethical leadership (Gu et al., 2015; Pastoriza & Ariño, 2013). Clarifying the impact of SXEL on organizational vitality is necessary, despite the fact that prior research has validated the importance of ethical leadership. Furthermore, the role of LMX in the interaction needs to be made clear. Referring to the previous studies, LMX was thought to have an impact on POS (Nazir et al., 2018). On the other hand, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, and Tetrick (2002) suggested that workers are likely to seek out positive working connections with their immediate supervisors if they believe they have a large POS. Therefore, it is necessary to make the relationship clear. It is also necessary to test LMX as an unnecessary variable in the future. According to Hansen et al. (2013), employee commitment is favorably correlated with ethical leadership and various forms of social exchange interactions.

5.3. Theme 3: The Relationship Between Ethical Leadership Behaviors and Organizational Performance

Ethical leadership traits, including trust, OCB, servant leadership, organizational identity, self-efficacy, and LMX, are predicted to boost performance. Conversely, it is anticipated that SXEL will improve its leadership abilities. Ethical leadership, for example, has been shown to significantly influence the improvement of employee attitudes and behaviors as well as the importance of tasks, both of which lead to better performance (Walumbwa et al., 2011). This suggests that moral leadership is contributing to improved worker performance. Hence, it is essential to cognize how and why considerate leadership contributes to better performance. According to Walumbwa et al. (2011), ethical leadership behavior improves high-quality LMX and identification with the organization, which is why it predicts performance. Employee performance is therefore enhanced by self-efficacy, organizational identification, and high-quality LMX. This demonstrates how moral leadership improves leadership habits and boosts performance.

Researchers have demonstrated that moral leadership improves subordinates' performance, such as OCB and work performance (Mo & Shi, 2017), which in turn boosts ethical leadership through the characteristics, i.e., OCB and trust in the setting of social trade. Moreover, extant studies have revealed that there is a positive association between innovative behavior, organizational success, and individual psychological empowerment (Hu, Erdogan, Jiang, Bauer, & Liu, 2018). Conversely, LMX and employee identification with the leader are positively correlated with ethical leadership. Social exchange ethical leadership (SXEL), the integration of ethical leadership and social exchange, is a crucial behavioral framework for establishing trust and improving organizational performance. This is due to the fact that an organization's employees develop respect, kindness, and trust when there is ethical leadership and pleasant social interaction. It is anticipated that this will improve the performance of the organization.

5.4. Theme 4: The Linkage Role of Social Exchange Theory and Social Learning Theory Between Ethical Leadership, Social Exchange, and Employees' Engagement and Creativity

The relevance of social exchange and moral leadership conduct has been discussed by theories like social learning theory and social exchange theory. The majority of researchers have attributed the impact of moral leadership on the ensuing results to social learning or exchange (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In particular, followers' perceptions of a social exchange relationship are shaped by the fair and balanced decisions made by ethical leaders (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2009), and followers then return the favor (Ma et al., 2013). It is anticipated that these behaviors will improve performance in turn. According to research based on social learning and social exchange theories, ethical

leadership can foster followers' creativity through role modeling and reinforcement processes in day-to-day interactions (Gu et al., 2015). Therefore, it is worthwhile to study the role of SXEL on creativity.

The significance of social interaction and ethical leadership in developing leadership behavior has been explained by earlier theories from a variety of angles. These theories have a positive influence on subordinates' behavior (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Likewise, according to Bandura's social learning theory, ethical leadership reduces followers' deviant behavior (Bandura, 1977). In other words, if a supervisor behaves unethically, the subordinates will mimic their deviant behavior.

The majority of research examining the psychological mechanisms that connect moral leadership to desirable outcomes (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2009) ignores the pertinent cognitive processes (Tu & Lu, 2016), relying instead on social learning theory and social exchange theory. According to social exchange theory, followers will undertake extra-roles in return for positive treatment from their ethical leaders, such as respect, genuine concern, and justice (Tu & Lu, 2016). Hence, this study focuses on the relationship between job engagement, creativity, and performance and SXEL behavior, considering both social learning theory and social exchange theory.

The following thorough framework for the results and ramifications of the SXEL is constructed based on the theoretical underpinnings provided in the four topics mentioned above. In other words, SXEL improves desirable behavior, which in turn results in better job satisfaction, work engagement, creativity, and performance. It does this by building on social exchange theory and social learning theory. SXEL also guarantees the long-term viability and livelihoods of the organization.

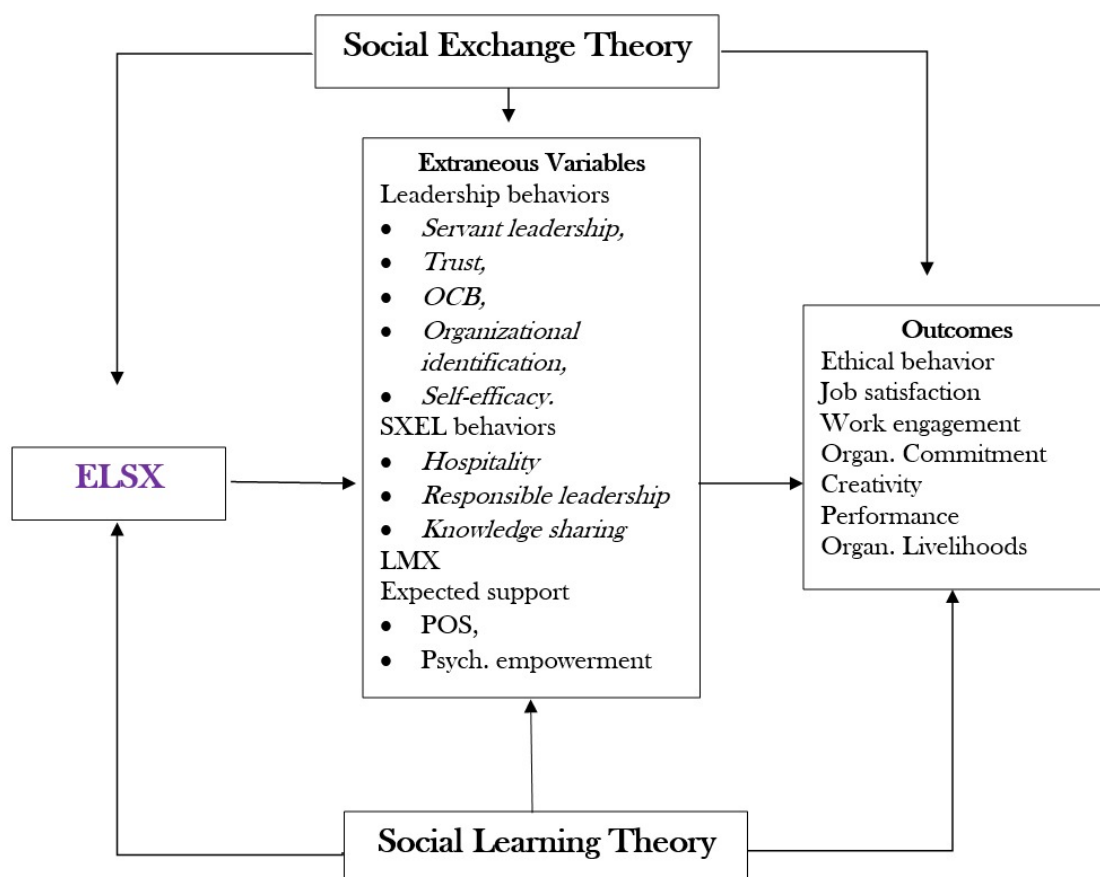


Figure 5. An SXEL framework.

Testing the extraneous variables as a moderator and mediator is also necessary, given the relationship between SXEL and its effects. These factors include trust, organizational identity, self-efficacy, servant leadership, and OCB leadership characteristics. Furthermore, it is anticipated that SXEL behaviors, which arise from the fusion of social

interaction and ethical leadership, will act as a moderator. Furthermore, it is anticipated that future researchers would test LMX as a mediator as well as a moderator.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study's main objectives were to map ethical leadership in social exchange scientifically and analyze performance. The major clusters of this study were Ethical leadership, Leadership, LMX, and Social exchange theory. Practitioners need to consider these variables when performing SXEL. This emphasizes the significance of SXEL since followers are motivated to support and dedicate themselves to leaders who act morally. It also provides practitioners with a better understanding of how to translate SXEL behavior into follower actions, such as effective employee performance.

The findings of the study show that moral leadership promotes customer-oriented behavior while influencing the attitudes and behaviors of organizational members. Ethical leadership and charismatic and/or transformational leadership are strongly correlated, according to research. Additionally, the research methodology shows that SXEL enhances moral behavior, which in turn enhances job satisfaction, creativity, performance, and engagement at work. However, it is expected that organizational identification, trust, servant leadership, self-efficacy, and leadership behaviors would all impact SXEL practice. Future research could benefit from this paradigm, which could also assist leaders in balancing the many variables when making decisions.

There are a number of limitations to be aware of, even though this bibliometric analysis offers insightful information about the development, major figures, and theoretical framework of research on ethical leadership and social exchange (ELSX). First, the study only uses the Scopus database, which is thorough but might not include pertinent papers indexed by other sources like Web of Science or Google Scholar, thus reducing the dataset's scope. Second, the chronological breadth of publications might not adequately encompass new research or preprints that are more recently influencing the area. Third, without examining the qualitative complexity or contextual subtleties of the relationships among concepts, authors, or institutions, the analysis focused on quantitative linkages, such as co-occurrence and citation strength.

Thus, this study could be expanded in future studies by performing longitudinal or content-based analysis to identify changes in conceptual emphasis over time, as well as by combining several databases to ensure wider coverage. Furthermore, bibliometric studies that compare and contrast different fields or cultural contexts may show how social exchange and ethical leadership are operationalized and understood in various situations. The creation of new constructs and understudied intersections, such as the implications of SXEL in digital leadership, sustainability, or cross-cultural management, might be further traced using thematic mapping and network evolution analyses. In the end, expanding this framework (as shown in Figure 5) using meta-analytic or empirical validation techniques may offer a more comprehensive comprehension of the implications and real-world uses of SXEL in organizational behavior research.

7. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL INSIGHTS

This section discusses the data's wider implications from a theoretical and managerial standpoint, building on the bibliometric findings. The network and cluster analyses show how the discipline has developed around important themes, significant contributors, and related ideas in addition to illuminating the intellectual framework of research on ethical leadership and social exchange (ELSX). The ways in which these findings influence managerial practice and advance theory development are covered in the ensuing subsections.

The findings offer several significant theoretical advancements in understanding ELSX. The popularity of terms like social exchange theory, LMX, and ethical leadership indicates that social exchange relationships, emphasizing reciprocity, trust, and leader-follower interdependence, are the most common framework for conceptualizing ethical leadership. This convergence demonstrates how well the social exchange paradigm explains the actions of moral

leaders and their outcomes. However, grouping ideas such as well-being, employee engagement, and organizational justice suggests that the SXEL framework is evolving into a multi-level, integrated theoretical paradigm. To enhance SXEL's explanatory power, further development should explore boundary conditions and mediating mechanisms, including personality traits, digital leadership environments, and cultural contexts. Additionally, understanding ethical impact and moral reasoning in organizational settings could be improved by incorporating complementary theories, such as transformational, servant, or authentic leadership.

From a managerial perspective, the findings demonstrate how important moral leadership is to developing high-caliber, trust-based LMX. Employees react favorably to leaders who exhibit justice, openness, and integrity, as seen by the close relationship between ethical leadership and LMX. These actions promote reciprocal commitment and psychological safety, which improve job satisfaction and organizational citizenship. By incorporating moral principles into leadership development initiatives and matching incentive schemes with moral performance metrics, managers can take advantage of these insights. Organizations' perceived fairness and trust can be further enhanced by establishing ethical climate initiatives, maintaining open lines of communication, and having senior executives consistently demonstrate moral behavior. The literature's comparatively less emphasis on social exchange theory also points to a chance for businesses to intentionally strengthen reciprocity through empowerment, acknowledgment, and collaborative decision-making to maintain long-term employee engagement.

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