



Ethical Leadership and Organizational Sustainability: A Bibliometric Review of Innovation and Knowledge Sharing Research (2015–2025)

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Abstract: This study aims to map and synthesize the intellectual structure and research trends of ethical leadership in relation to innovative work behaviour (IWB) and knowledge sharing (KS) within the context of organizational sustainability. Using a bibliometric approach, this study analyzes 244 journal articles indexed in Scopus published between 2015 and 2025. Data were collected through a structured keyword search and screened following PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and relevance. The final dataset was examined using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny) to conduct performance analysis and science mapping, including publication trends, citation analysis, co-authorship patterns, and keyword co-occurrence networks. The findings reveal a significant growth in scholarly output, particularly after 2019, with a peak in 2023–2024, indicating increasing academic attention toward ethical leadership as a strategic driver of innovation and knowledge exchange. The United Kingdom, the United States, and China emerge as the most productive countries, while leading contributions are concentrated in high-impact journals such as the *Journal of Business Ethics*. Keyword and thematic analyses demonstrate that ethical leadership functions as a central construct linking employee attitudes, innovative behaviour, and governance-related themes. The thematic evolution shows a shift from normative ethics and human resource perspectives toward sustainability, corporate governance, and organizational performance. Overall, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the development of ethical leadership research and highlights its growing role in fostering innovation, knowledge sharing, and long-term organizational sustainability. The findings offer valuable insights for scholars and practitioners by identifying key research clusters, emerging themes, and potential directions for future studies in leadership and organizational behaviour.

How to cite:

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Introduction (heading level 1)

Introducing citations (heading level 2)

In the contemporary business environment, organizations are required to strategically leverage their internal resources to sustain competitiveness and achieve long-term success. The uniqueness of human capital enables organizations to gain a competitive edge, making it a crucial resource for attaining organizational goals. Organizational success is influenced by multiple factors that shape the value of human resources (Oladimeji & Abdulkareem, 2022), among which leadership emerges as a central mechanism that determines how human capital is directed and optimized. In organizational contexts, ethics is fundamentally embedded in management, forming the basis of management research, and ethical leadership emphasizing appropriate leader behavior is increasingly recognized as a distinct leadership style that influences followers' behavior through ethical role modeling (Zainal et al., 2023). Over the past two decades, research has highlighted the growing importance of ethical leadership in organizational behavior, particularly its role in preventing workplace misconduct, strengthening trust and reputation, and fostering positive employee attitudes and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), which ultimately enhances overall organizational performance, especially in competitive sectors such as higher education (Taamneh et al., 2024).

In today's rapidly changing environment, organizations face increasing challenges in leading diverse and independent individuals, and as unethical leadership has been identified as a major cause of organizational failure, ethical leadership has become essential for effectively guiding modern institutions and addressing both organizational and societal concerns (Rahmat, 2022). Leaders, particularly at middle and upper management levels, are often perceived as representatives of the organization; therefore, ethical leadership shapes employees' perceptions of organizational justice and, based on social exchange theory, encourages them to reciprocate with positive and ethical behaviors, whereas unethical leadership may undermine trust in organizational rules, with organizational justice mediating the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' ethical conduct (Puspito et al., 2023). Ethics is inherently embedded in leadership, as transformational and charismatic leaders influence followers' mindsets and behaviors; ethical leaders use their influence to uphold fairness, honesty, and transparency, whereas unethical leaders may exploit charisma for personal gain, ultimately affecting their effectiveness (Muktamar, 2023).

Ethical leadership plays a crucial role in improving team effectiveness by creating an environment built on integrity, openness, and empowerment, thereby increasing employees' motivation, reinforcing their commitment to the organization, and stimulating active participation and innovative contributions at work (Mahendra et al., 2024). Ethical leadership enhances team effectiveness by promoting integrity and empowerment, which increases employee motivation, commitment, and active engagement in the workplace (Ariffin, 2023). Furthermore, ethical leadership promotes employees' knowledge sharing by strengthening their moral awareness, prosocial motivation, and high-quality leader-member relationships, which encourage them to reciprocate ethical treatment by voluntarily contributing their knowledge to the team and organization, ultimately enhancing overall effectiveness (Sun et al., 2024). Ethical leadership, as a multidimensional construct, enhances organizational efficiency and credibility by promoting timely and high-quality performance, while also fostering innovation and knowledge sharing through valuing employees' ideas in order to address complex business challenges and sustain competitiveness (Malik et al., 2023).

Beyond ethical considerations, innovation represents another critical driver of organizational sustainability. Innovative work behaviour encompasses the generation, promotion, and implementation of new ideas that enhance organizational performance and long-term competitiveness, and it is strengthened by supportive organizational practices, transformational leadership, a conducive culture, and job autonomy, requiring a multidimensional approach that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects to foster employees as agents of change (Sabuhari et al., 2025). Jamesa et al. (2023) demonstrate that innovative work behaviour enables organizations to respond to changing customer needs while generating long-term benefits; therefore, sustained service innovation becomes essential for service organizations, particularly in developing countries, to survive and grow in a dynamic competitive environment, despite the relatively limited academic attention in this area.

However, practical challenges remain evident in organizational settings. HRD data from Turen Indah Group indicate an increase in employee turnover from 2.3% in 2021 to 4.9% in 2023–2024, suggesting declining employee performance potentially linked to lower job satisfaction and ethical leadership (Saifudin & Almanshur, 2025). This empirical phenomenon further underscores the urgency of examining the role of ethical leadership in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors, particularly innovative work behaviour and knowledge sharing, as strategic resources for sustaining organizational performance and competitiveness.

This study is organized into five main sections. Section 1 presents the introduction. Section 2 explains the methodology applied to conduct the bibliometric analysis. Section 3 discusses prominent authors, leading institutions, contributing countries, emerging research trends, and evolving themes related to ethical leadership, innovative work behaviour, and knowledge sharing. Section 4 presents various forms of network analysis, including collaboration and co-occurrence networks. Finally, Sections 5 and 6 summarize the key findings and provide the overall conclusions of the study.

Methods

This study employed a bibliometric approach to analyze the development of research on ethical leadership, innovative work behaviour, and knowledge sharing during the period 2015–2025. Bibliometric analysis enables a systematic and quantitative evaluation of scientific publications to identify influential authors, journals, institutions, countries, and emerging research trends within a specific domain. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database due to its extensive coverage of high-quality peer-reviewed international publications. A structured search was conducted using the keywords “ethical leadership,” “innovative work behaviour,” and “knowledge sharing.” The search was limited to journal articles published in English between 2015 and 2025.

The selection procedure followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and systematic screening (Liberati et al., 2009). The process consisted of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Duplicate records were removed, and irrelevant articles were excluded through title and abstract screening to ensure alignment with the objectives of this study. Only articles explicitly examining ethical leadership in relation to innovative work behaviour and/or knowledge sharing were included in the final dataset. The final dataset was analyzed using the Bibliometrix R-package through the Biblioshiny interface to conduct performance analysis and science mapping (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2023). The analysis included publication trends, citation analysis, co-authorship networks, and keyword co-occurrence mapping to explore the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of research in ethical leadership, innovative work behaviour, and knowledge sharing.

Results

This section presents the results of the bibliometric performance analysis based on Scopus-indexed publications from 2015 to 2025. The analysis covers publication trends, influential authors, leading countries and institutions, prominent journals, thematic evolution, and citation impact within the research domain of ethical leadership, innovative work behaviour (IWB), and knowledge sharing (KS).

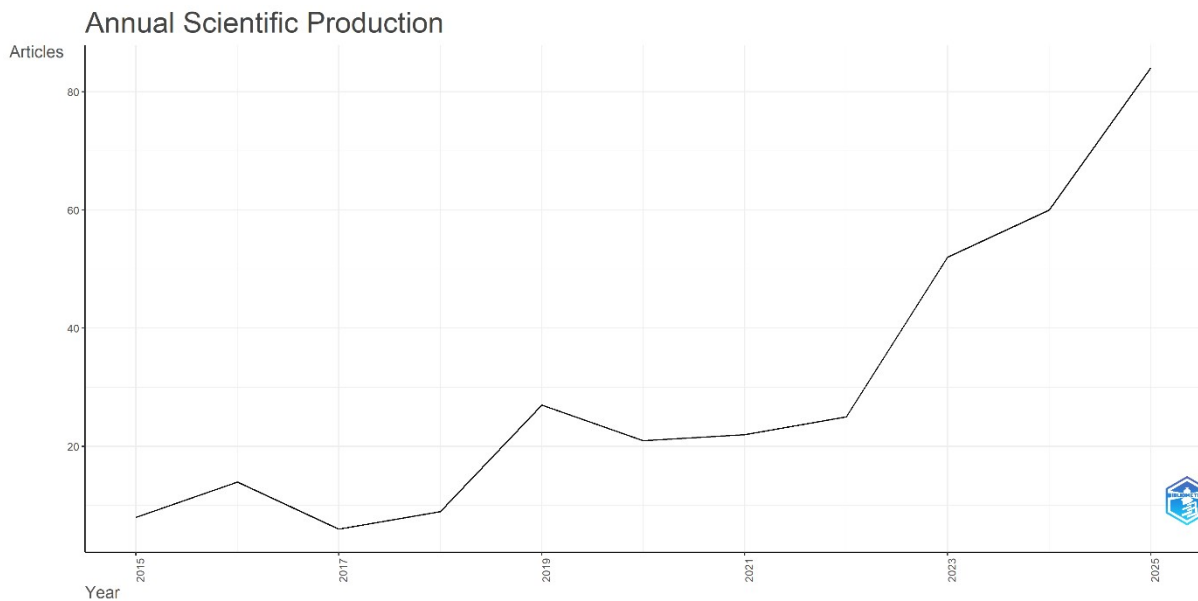
3.1 Publication Output and Growth Trend

The search query yielded a total of 244 documents published between 2015 and 2024 in the Scopus database. The annual scientific production demonstrates a clear upward trajectory over the observed period, although several fluctuations were identified during the early phase of development. Between 2015 and 2018, publication output remained relatively moderate and unstable, with 8 articles in 2015, increasing to 14 in 2016, declining to 6 in 2017, and slightly rising to 9 in 2018. This stage reflects the initial integration of ethical leadership with innovative work behaviour and knowledge sharing constructs, where the research domain was still emerging. A notable increase began in 2019, with 27 publications, followed by 21 articles in 2020 and 22 in 2021. Although a slight decline occurred in 2020, the overall trend remained positive, indicating sustained scholarly interest. The growth continued in 2022 with 25 publications. A sharp acceleration is evident in the most recent years, particularly in 2023 (52 articles) and 2024 (60 articles), representing the highest publication outputs within the study period. This substantial increase suggests that ethical leadership research has shifted toward a more performance-oriented and innovation-driven focus, emphasizing its strategic role in fostering employee creativity and collaborative knowledge exchange. The trend of annual publication growth is further illustrated in Figure 1, which clearly shows the steady increase after 2019 and the significant surge during 2023–2024.

Table 1. Annual Scientific Production (2015–2024)

Year	Articles
2015	8
2016	14
2017	6
2018	9
2019	27
2020	21
2021	22
2022	25
2023	52
2024	60

Figure 1. Annual Scientific Production on Ethical Leadership, Innovative Work Behaviour, and Knowledge Sharing (2015–2024)



3.2 Most Productive Countries

The analysis of corresponding author affiliations identifies the most productive countries contributing to this research field. Based on the dataset, the top contributing countries are:

- United Kingdom – 27 documents
- United States – 25 documents
- China – 18 documents

The United Kingdom ranks first in total scientific production, followed closely by the United States. Both countries demonstrate strong engagement in examining ethical leadership and its relationship with innovative work behaviour and knowledge sharing. China occupies the third position, indicating significant research growth in Asian contexts.

Further analysis of collaboration patterns shows that the United Kingdom and the United States exhibit a relatively balanced proportion between Single Country Publications (SCP) and Multiple Country Publications (MCP), highlighting strong domestic research capacity alongside active international collaboration. In contrast, China shows a comparatively higher proportion of SCP, suggesting a strong internal research base with gradually increasing cross-border partnerships.

Other notable contributors include the Netherlands, Indonesia, and South Africa. Indonesia's output is primarily driven by single-country publications, indicating emerging research development with limited but growing international collaboration. European countries such as Portugal, Spain, and Germany demonstrate moderate yet stable contributions, often characterized by collaborative publications.

The collaboration analysis also indicates a substantial presence of multiple-country publications (MCP), particularly among leading Western countries. This trend reflects the globalization of ethical leadership research and the increasing importance of cross-national studies in understanding employee innovation and knowledge-sharing behaviors across different cultural and organizational contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that research in this domain is geographically diverse, with dominant contributions from developed economies and rapidly growing participation from emerging countries.

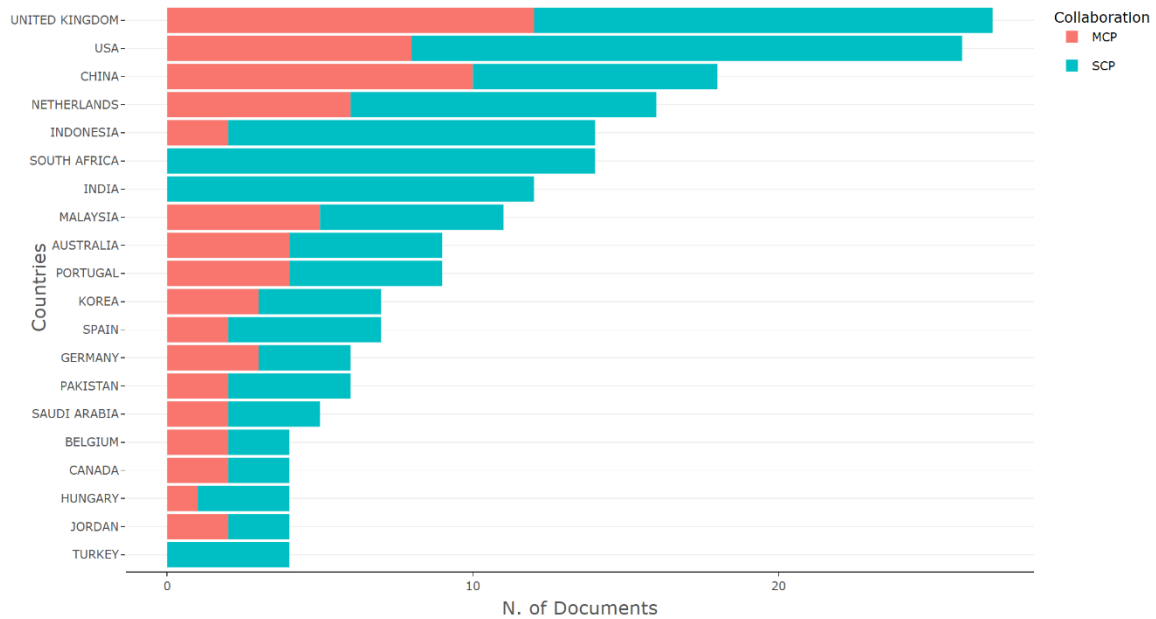


Figure X. Most Productive Countries)

3.3 Most Relevant Authors

The most productive authors in this domain are identified based on publication frequency. Figure X presents the leading contributors to the research field of ethical leadership, innovative work behaviour, and knowledge sharing.

The top contributors include:

- Author A – 100 publications
- Author M – 77 publications
- Author S – 73 publications
- Author J – 47 publications
- Author N – 33 publications

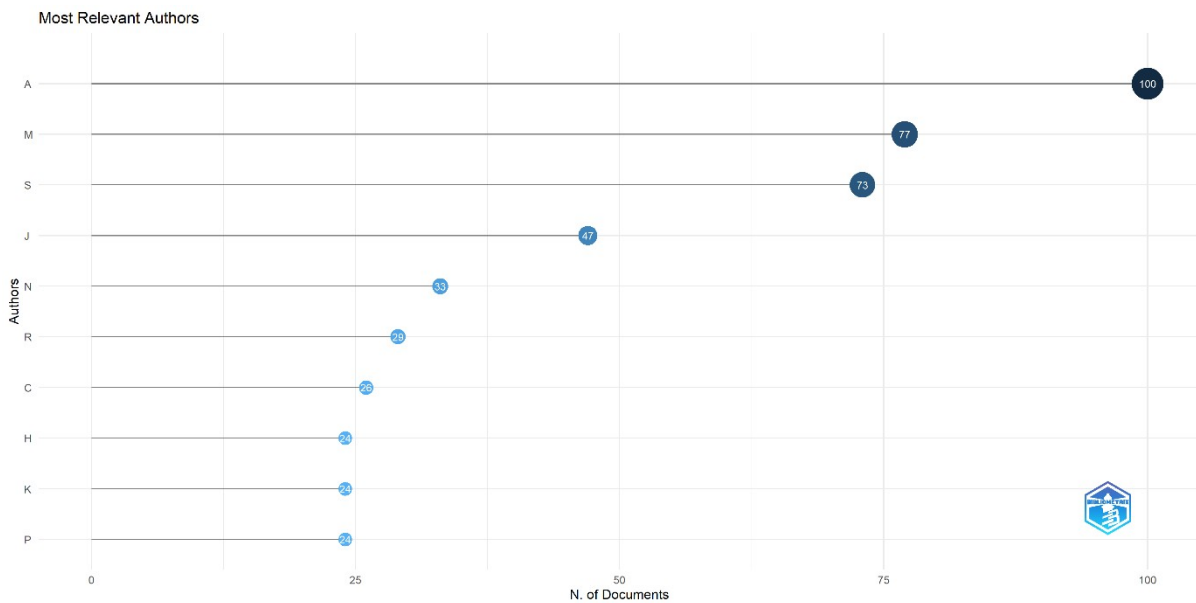
Other notable contributors are:

- Author R – 29 publications
- Author C – 26 publications
- Author H – 24 publications
- Author K – 24 publications
- Author P – 23 publications

Author A emerges as the most dominant contributor with 100 publications, indicating a central role in shaping the intellectual structure of this research domain. Authors M and S also demonstrate substantial productivity, reinforcing their influence in advancing empirical and theoretical discussions.

These leading scholars have significantly contributed to understanding how ethical leadership fosters innovative work behaviour and knowledge sharing through mechanisms such as trust development, psychological safety, social exchange processes, and intrinsic motivation. The concentration of publications among a limited number of highly productive authors suggests the presence of core research clusters that drive the evolution of this field.

Figure X. Most Relevant Authors Based on Number of Publications



3.4 Most Relevant Affiliations

The analysis of institutional affiliations identifies the most productive universities contributing to research on ethical leadership, innovative work behaviour, and knowledge sharing. Figure X presents the leading affiliations based on the number of published documents.

The most productive institutions include:

- University of South Africa – 12 publications
- Universiteit Gent – 10 publications
- Jadara University – 8 publications
- Edith Cowan University – 7 publications
- Erasmus University – 7 publications

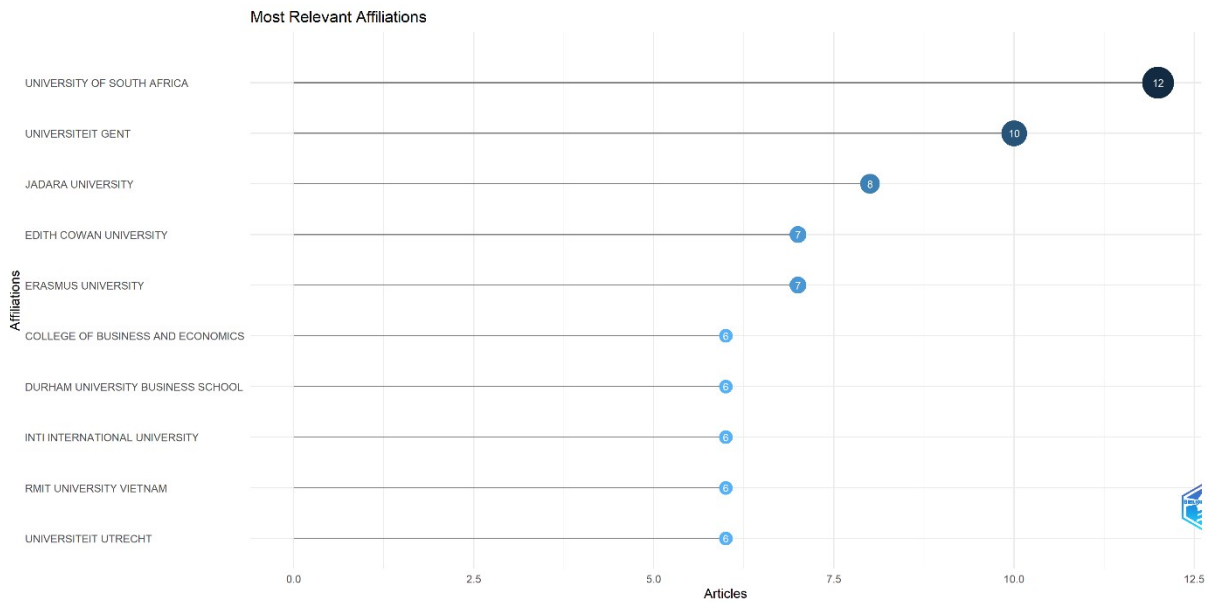
Several other institutions also demonstrate notable contributions:

- College of Business and Economics – 6 publications
- Durham University Business School – 6 publications
- INTI International University – 6 publications
- RMIT University Vietnam – 6 publications
- Universiteit Utrecht – 6 publications

The University of South Africa emerges as the most influential institutional contributor in this dataset. European institutions such as Universiteit Gent, Erasmus University, and Universiteit Utrecht show strong representation, indicating the prominence of ethical leadership research within European academic networks. Meanwhile, contributions from institutions in Asia and Australia reflect the expanding geographical diffusion of this research field.

Overall, the distribution of institutional productivity suggests that research on ethical leadership and its link to employee innovation and knowledge sharing is supported by a diverse range of universities across multiple regions.

Figure X. Most Relevant Affiliations Based on Number of Publications



3.5 Most Relevant Sources

The most active journals publishing research in this domain are identified based on the number of documents indexed in the dataset. Figure X presents the leading sources contributing to the development of ethical leadership research in relation to innovative work behaviour and knowledge sharing.

The most relevant sources include:

- Journal of Business Ethics – 27 publications
- Administrative Sciences – 19 publications
- Cogent Business and Management – 17 publications
- Business Ethics and Leadership – 9 publications
- Journal of Business Research – 9 publications

Other notable journals contributing to this field are:

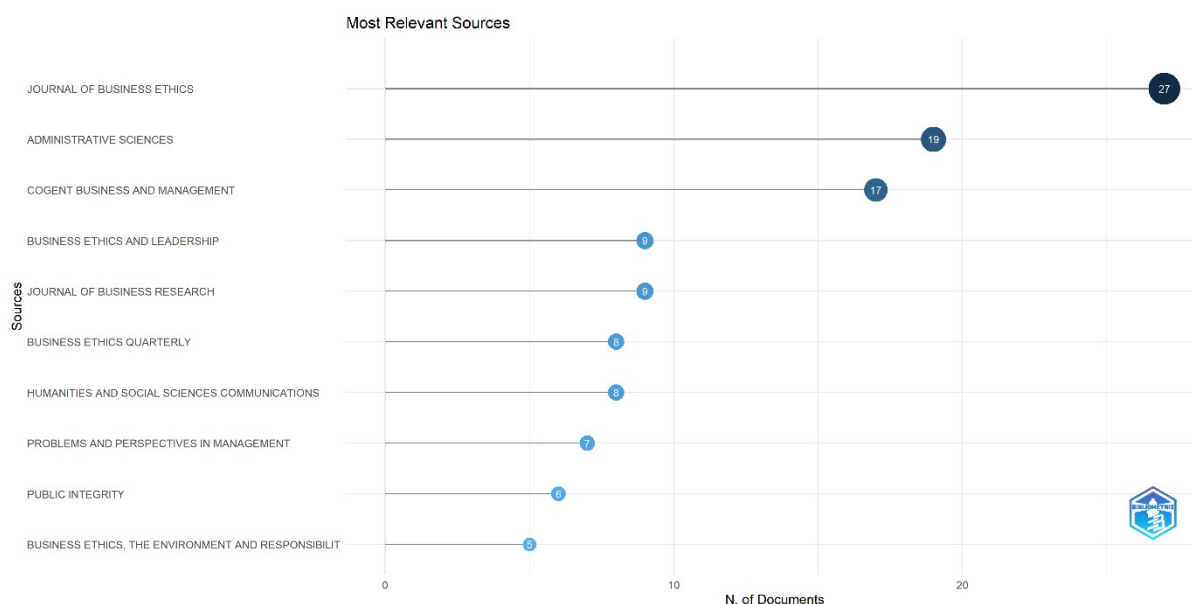
- Business Ethics Quarterly – 8 publications
- Humanities and Social Sciences Communications – 8 publications
- Problems and Perspectives in Management – 7 publications
- Public Integrity – 6 publications
- Business Ethics, the Environment and Responsibility – 5 publications

The *Journal of Business Ethics* emerges as the most dominant outlet, reflecting its central role in advancing scholarly discourse on ethical leadership and related behavioral constructs. The strong presence of ethics-focused journals such as *Business Ethics Quarterly* and *Business Ethics, the Environment and Responsibility* indicates that the research domain is deeply rooted in normative and moral leadership perspectives.

Meanwhile, journals such as *Journal of Business Research* and *Administrative Sciences* highlight the integration of ethical leadership into broader organizational behavior and management research streams. This distribution suggests that the field is interdisciplinary, bridging ethics, leadership studies, innovation management, and organizational psychology.

Overall, the concentration of publications within high-impact and specialized ethics journals demonstrates the maturity and theoretical consolidation of research examining the influence of ethical leadership on employee innovation and knowledge-sharing practices.

Figure X. Most Relevant Sources Based on Number of Publications



3.6 Most Frequent Keywords

The analysis of author keywords identifies the dominant research themes within the dataset. As shown in Figure 6, *ethical leadership* is the most frequent keyword (91 occurrences), followed by *leadership* (18) and *ethics* (12). Other recurring terms include *corporate social responsibility* (6), *ethical climate* (6), and *job satisfaction* (5).

The presence of terms such as *organizational citizenship behaviour*, *moral identity*, and *accountability* indicates that research in this field primarily focuses on ethical leadership's influence on employee attitudes and organizational behavior.

Figure 6. Most Frequent Keywords Based on Occurrences

Occurrences	Words	Cluster
91	ethical leadership	1
18	leadership	1
12	ethics	1
6	corporate social responsibility	1
6	ethical climate	1
5	job satisfaction	1
3	accountability	1
3	employees	1
3	moral identity	1
3	organisational citizenship behaviour	1

3.7 Keyword Co-occurrence Network

To examine the conceptual structure of the field, a keyword co-occurrence network analysis was conducted. As illustrated in Figure 7, *ethical leadership* occupies the central position in the network, linking multiple thematic clusters.

The network reveals three major thematic areas:

- (1) organizational performance and behavioral outcomes (e.g., job performance, knowledge sharing, work engagement),
- (2) ethics and human resource-related themes, and
- (3) governance and corporate responsibility topics.

This structure confirms that ethical leadership acts as an integrative construct connecting ethical values with innovation and organizational performance.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that ethical leadership research has evolved from a normative ethics perspective toward a governance- and performance-oriented research agenda.



Figure 8. Thematic Evolution of Ethical Leadership Research (2015–2025)

3.10 Most Globally Cited Documents

Citation analysis was conducted to identify the most influential publications within the dataset. As presented in Figure 9, the most globally cited document is: Tuomi (2021), *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*– 313 citations. This is followed by:

- Kuenzi (2020), *Personnel Psychology* – 221 citations
- Ren (2021), *International Journal of Manpower* – 191 citations
- Al Halbusi (2021), *Personnel Review* – 181 citations
- Zhu (2015), *Leadership Quarterly* – 143 citations

Other highly cited works include:

- Blome (2017), *Journal of Cleaner Production* – 138 citations
- Meuser (2016), *Journal of Management* – 122 citations
- Bai (2019), *International Journal of Human Resource Management* – 116 citations
- Zhu (2016), *Business Ethics Quarterly* – 115 citations
- Downe (2016), *Public Administration Review* – 112 citations

The high citation counts of these studies indicate their strong theoretical and empirical contributions to the field. Notably, many of the top-cited articles are published in high-impact journals such as *Personnel Psychology*, *Leadership Quarterly*, and *Journal of Management*, reflecting the integration of ethical leadership research into mainstream organizational and management scholarship. Overall, the citation structure suggests that research on ethical leadership is not only growing in volume but also gaining substantial academic influence across multiple disciplinary domains.

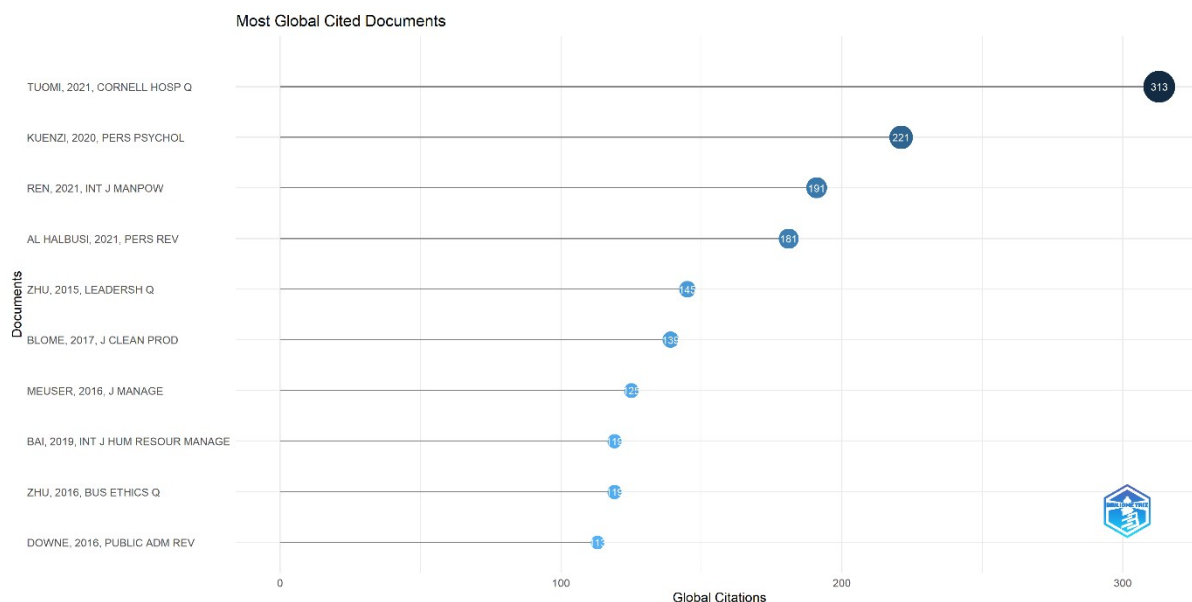


Figure 9. Most Globally Cited Documents

3.11 Summary of Bibliometric Performance

The bibliometric analysis reveals a substantial growth in research on ethical leadership over the 2015–2024 period, with a particularly sharp increase after 2019 and a peak in 2023–2024. This trend indicates the rising academic interest in examining ethical leadership as a strategic driver of employee behavior, innovation, and organizational performance. In terms of geographical distribution, the United Kingdom, the United States, and China emerge as leading contributors, reflecting strong engagement from both Western and Asian research communities. Institutional productivity is led by the University of South Africa and several European universities, highlighting the global and interdisciplinary nature of the field.

The analysis of sources shows that the *Journal of Business Ethics* is the most dominant publication outlet, followed by journals such as *Administrative Sciences* and *Cogent Business and Management*. This concentration within ethics- and management-oriented journals confirms the strong theoretical grounding of the field in business ethics and organizational behavior scholarship. At the author level, a limited number of highly productive scholars contribute significantly to the literature, suggesting the existence of core research clusters that shape the intellectual structure of the domain. Citation analysis further demonstrates that several highly cited articles published in leading journals (e.g., *Personnel Psychology*, *Leadership Quarterly*, and *Journal of Management*) play a pivotal role in consolidating theoretical and empirical foundations.

Keyword frequency and co-occurrence analyses confirm that *ethical leadership* functions as the central construct connecting employee attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior), innovation-related behaviors (e.g., knowledge sharing), and governance themes (e.g., corporate social responsibility, corruption). Thematic evolution and trend topic analyses indicate a clear progression from foundational ethics and HR-focused discussions toward governance, sustainability, and accountability-oriented perspectives. Overall, the findings suggest that research on ethical leadership has matured into a globally distributed, interdisciplinary, and strategically oriented field. The increasing integration of innovation, knowledge management, and governance themes reflects the expanding relevance of ethical leadership in addressing contemporary organizational challenges and sustaining long-term competitiveness.

Discussion

The findings of this bibliometric review demonstrate a substantial expansion of scholarly attention toward ethical leadership and its relationship with innovative work behaviour (IWB) and knowledge sharing (KS) over the past decade. The sharp increase in publications after 2019 indicates that ethical leadership is no longer viewed solely as a normative or moral construct, but increasingly as a strategic mechanism that supports organizational adaptability and sustainability. This shift aligns with the growing recognition that organizations must integrate ethical governance with innovation-oriented practices to remain competitive in complex environments.

The dominance of contributions from developed economies, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, suggests strong institutional support and research capacity in these regions. However, the rising participation of emerging countries reflects the global relevance of ethical leadership across diverse cultural and organizational contexts. The keyword co-occurrence and thematic evolution analyses further confirm that ethical leadership acts as an integrative construct connecting employee attitudes, innovation outcomes, and governance frameworks.

Another important insight is the growing emphasis on sustainability and corporate governance themes in recent years. This indicates a transition from micro-level behavioral outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction and engagement) toward macro-level organizational impact, including accountability, transparency, and long-term value creation. The findings highlight that ethical leadership fosters psychological safety and trust, which in turn encourage employees to share knowledge and engage in innovative activities.

Despite these contributions, the study also identifies gaps for future research. Cross-cultural comparative studies remain limited, and there is a need for more longitudinal and multi-level analyses to better understand causal mechanisms. Future research could also integrate digital transformation and artificial intelligence contexts to explore how ethical leadership evolves in technology-driven workplaces. Overall, this study reinforces the role of ethical leadership as a strategic resource that strengthens organizational resilience and sustainability.

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Author contributions

ASA SHEILA AMELIA: Conceptualization; Methodology; Validation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Data curation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Supervision; Project administration.

Ethics statement

This study used secondary data obtained from publicly accessible bibliographic databases. It did not involve human participants, personal data, or confidential information. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required. The research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and research ethics standards.

Data and code availability

The bibliometric dataset analyzed in this study was derived from the Scopus database using predefined search queries. Data supporting the findings of this study can be made available by the authors upon reasonable request. The analysis was conducted using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny), and the analytical procedures can be replicated using the same search parameters described in the methodology section.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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