

# RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP: A BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW AND INTELLECTUAL STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

*As organizations increasingly confront complex ethical, social, and environmental challenges that transcend the scope of traditional performance-oriented leadership approaches, responsible leadership has emerged as a prominent area of scholarly inquiry and managerial practice. Despite the expanding body of research, the responsible leadership literature remains fragmented and lacks a systematic overview of its intellectual structure. This study aims to examine the evolution and current state of responsible leadership research through a bibliometric analysis of publications indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. A total of 1,059 documents published between 1972 and 2026 were analyzed using descriptive bibliometric methods to identify publication trends, influential authors, journals, institutions, countries, and thematic patterns. The findings indicate a steady growth in the literature, with a notable acceleration after 2015, reflecting increased academic interest in ethical, stakeholder-oriented, and sustainability-focused leadership. The results also reveal the multidisciplinary nature of the field and highlight both well-established and emerging research themes. This study provides a structured overview of responsible leadership research and offers insights for future theoretical and empirical studies.*

**Keywords:** Responsible Leadership, Bibliometric Analysis, Biblioshiny.

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, increasing ethical, environmental, and social challenges have called into question traditional performance-oriented leadership approaches and the economic performance-oriented management of organizations (Maak and Pless, 2006). Contemporary organizations are no longer expected to focus solely on efficiency and profitability; instead, leaders are required to demonstrate accountability, transparency, and responsibility to a wide range of stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2007). In this context, leadership has transformed from primarily an instrumental function to a normative and relational phenomenon embedded in societal expectations (Pless and Maak, 2011).

Responsible leadership has emerged as a framework addressing these evolving demands (Maak and Pless, 2006). Unlike traditional leadership models that focus on the leader-follower relationship, responsible leadership emphasizes the accountability of leaders to both internal and external stakeholders (Voegtlin et al., 2012). This approach, based on stakeholder theory, emphasizes ethical decision-making, relationship-building, and the pursuit of organizational goals alongside long-term social and environmental value (Freeman et al., 2007).

Previous research has linked responsible leadership to positive outcomes at multiple levels, including employee well-being, organizational legitimacy, and societal sustainability (Waldman and Siegel, 2008; Maak et al., 2016). Despite this growing field of study, the literature remains scattered across disciplines and lacks a systematic overview of its intellectual structure and thematic development.

To address this deficiency, this study utilizes a bibliometric analysis of international publications related to the concept of responsible leadership (Donthu et al., 2021). By mapping influential authors,

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institutions, countries, and research themes, it offers an in-depth look at the evolution of the field and identifies directions for future research. This contribution offers a structured, data-driven perspective on academic work in the field of responsible leadership and supports the advancement of theory and practice in leadership and management studies.

The necessity of satisfying current societal expectations, managing crises, and balancing increasing stakeholder expectations has transformed the concept of responsible leadership into a critical need, highlighting the importance of this research. Given the growing interest and importance of this concept in the literature, the aim of this study is to systematically identify the authors, works, and concepts that shape the intellectual landscape of the concept by examining its current state using bibliometric analysis

## Responsible Leadership From A Stakeholder Theory Perspective

Responsible leadership is a leadership approach that centers on the concepts of responsibility, accountability, and trust, treating responsibility as a relational phenomenon rather than an individual trait (Pless and Maak, 2011). From the perspective of responsible leadership, accountability requires leaders to avoid harmful behaviors and engage in beneficial behaviors not only towards organization members but also towards various stakeholders (Stahl and Sully de Luque, 2014).

Maak and Pless (2006) define responsible leadership as a relational and ethical phenomenon that emerges in the interaction processes with actors who are affected by or influence leadership and who share in the purpose and vision of the leadership relationship. This approach goes beyond the traditional leader-subordinate relationship, focusing on leader-stakeholder relationships and considering establishing ethically sound relationships with different stakeholder groups as one of the fundamental responsibilities of leaders. Furthermore, due to its emphasis on sustainability, ethical values, and social responsibility, it inherently constitutes a normative leadership approach (Pless and Maak, 2011). Within this framework, responsible leadership aims to create sustainable value through ethically based relationships between leaders and stakeholders (Pless, 2007).

The theoretical foundations of responsible leadership are largely based on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholder theory argues that stakeholders are not only instrumental elements in achieving organizational goals, but also actors with legitimate expectations (Freeman and Gilbert, 1988). In this context, the theory focuses on the question of what the responsibilities of managers should be towards stakeholders (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). According to Stakeholder Theory, leaders are expected to clearly define organizational values and make visible the role of stakeholders who contribute to value creation (Maak and Pless, 2006). Because stakeholders have legitimate interests, organizations need to balance stakeholder expectations with organizational goals (Freeman, 1984; Suchman, 1995). While Stakeholder Theory emphasizes the moral responsibilities of organizations towards different stakeholders, responsible leadership explains how these responsibilities are reflected in managerial practices (Waldman and Galvin, 2008). Therefore, responsible leaders balance the conflicting interests of stakeholders, harmonize organizational goals with stakeholder expectations, and ensure that value creation processes are carried out in accordance with ethical principles (Harrison and Wicks, 2013).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses bibliometric methods to examine scientific studies in the field of responsible leadership. Complementing traditional review methods (Zupic and Čater, 2015), bibliometric methods provide a quantitative analysis of publications and bibliographic data based on mathematical and statistical principles (Broadus, 1987). This analysis provides a holistic perspective on the research field by transforming and visualizing large and complex datasets into interpretable structures (Small, 1999). The analysis was performed using the RStudio Bibliometrix R package (version 5.2.1) (R Core Team, 2025.20; Van Eck and Waltman, 2010): The identification and selection of studies on responsible leadership were carried out in accordance with Xiao and Watson's (2019) PRISMA framework. The Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases, commonly used in scientific measurement research, were used to obtain the data. To obtain data for the research design, a bibliometric analysis of 1059 publications was conducted. The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- Q1. How has responsible leadership research evolved over time?
- Q2. Who are the most influential authors, publications, journals, institutions, and countries in the field?

Q3. What collaboration patterns and research communities characterize responsible leadership scholarship?

Q4. What is the intellectual and conceptual structure of the responsible leadership literature?

Q5. Which themes are mature, emerging, or underexplored, and what avenues should future research pursue?

## Sampling And Data Selection

The literature review and publication selection process conducted within the scope of this research was carried out in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Elements for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol. For data obtained from the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases, a detailed selection process was followed, including the elimination of duplicate records, filtering according to language criteria, and evaluation of content suitability.

Initially, a total of 1,674 records were identified through database searches; 806 of these were from the Web of Science (WoS) database and 868 from Scopus. After title normalization, 16 duplicate or irrelevant records were excluded, leaving 1,095 records for the search phase. After the search process, 1,079 reports were successfully retrieved, and no reports were found unsuitable for evaluation. Subsequently, all 1,079 reports were evaluated for suitability. At this stage, 20 studies were excluded for specific reasons such as non-compliance with the scope of the study ( $n = 9$ ), insufficient citations or references ( $n = 7$ ), and limited accessibility ( $n = 4$ ). As a result, a total of 1,059 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis.

## FINDINGS AND RESULTS

In this part of the research, bibliometric analysis of data obtained from the WOS and Scopus databases was performed using the R Studio Biblioshny software package.

### Descriptive Statistics

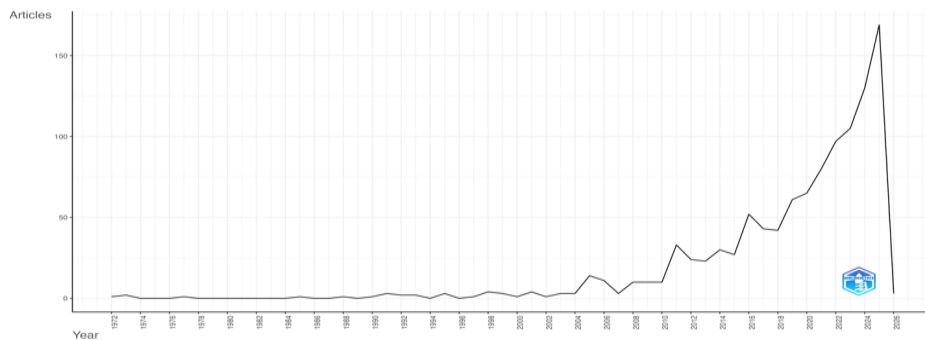
According to the descriptive statistics presented in Table 1, a dataset of 1059 documents covering the years 1972–2026 reveals that the literature on responsible leadership has reached a multidisciplinary structure with a steady growth trend. A consistent annual publication increase of 2.06% and an average document age of 6.06 years indicate that the field is an active research topic that maintains its relevance and possesses sustainable development. The high average citation value of 20.59 for studies published in 475 different sources demonstrates the strong academic visibility and impact of the literature.

The 1466 Keywords Plus and 2432 author keywords reflecting conceptual diversity show that the concept of responsible leadership is addressed within a broad thematic framework across different contexts. In terms of authorship structure, the literature, contributed by 2088 different authors, has an average of 2.56 authors per document and a 22.52% international co-authorship rate, reflecting that the field is produced by a globally collaborative and interactive academic community. The presence of 318 single-authored documents confirms that individual academic contributions also hold a significant place in the field. Overall, the findings clearly demonstrate the dynamic nature of the responsible leadership field in terms of academic impact and collaboration.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics

	Description	Results
MAIN INFORMATION ABOUT DATA	Timespan	1972:2026
	Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	475
	Documents	1059
	Annual Growth Rate %	2,06
	Document Average Age	6,06
	Average citations per doc	20,59
	References	0
	Keywords Plus (ID)	1466
	Author's Keywords (DE)	2432
	AUTHORS INFORMATION	Authors
Authors of single-authored docs		277
Single-authored docs		318
Co-Authors per Doc		2,56
International co-authorships %		22,52

The annual scientific output in the field of responsible leadership is presented in Figure 1. Examination of the table reveals that the literature followed a long period of low intensity, but experienced a significant acceleration, particularly after 2015. From this period onwards, a gradual but steady increase in the number of publications is noticeable. In the years after 2020, a sharper rise in output is observed, suggesting that responsible leadership can be linked to increasing academic interest in current global debates, ethical governance, and sustainability. The abrupt drop in the last year of the graph is considered to be due to early access or data discontinuity effects. Therefore, it reveals that the field has entered a maturing phase but is still a dynamic research area that continues to grow.

**Figure 1.** Annual Scientific Production

## Most Relevant Authors

Table 2 shows the distribution of author productivity in the responsible leadership literature within the framework of Lotka's Law. The findings reveal that the vast majority of authors contribute to the literature with a single publication, while a small number of authors account for a significant portion of the output with multiple publications. The fact that the observed distribution is generally consistent with theoretical Lotka values indicates the existence of a classic scientific output model based on a core-periphery structure in the responsible leadership literature.

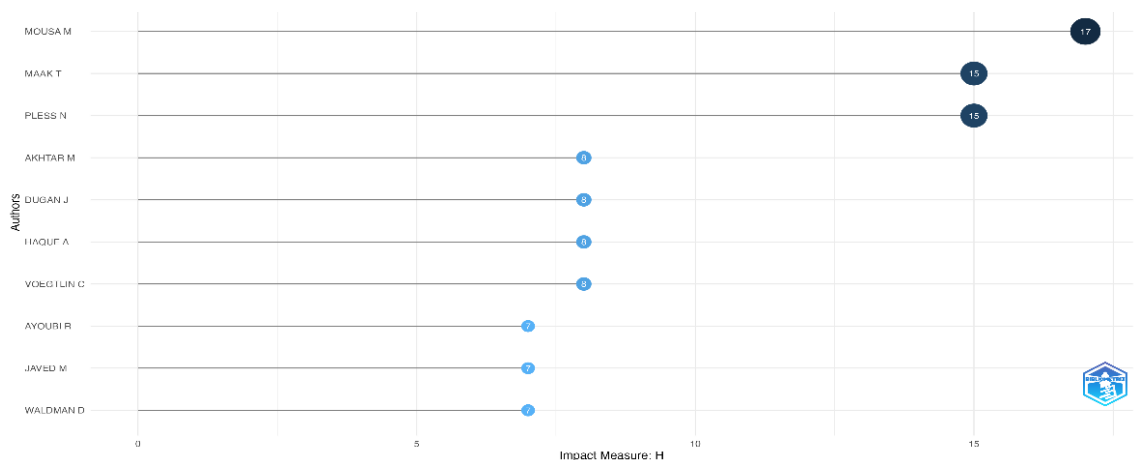
**Table 2.** Author Productivity According to Lotka's Law

Documents Written	N. of Authors	Proportion of Authors	Theoretical
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1	1777	0.851	0.634
2	166	0.089	0.158
3	66	0.032	0.070
4	23	0.011	0.040
5	9	0.004	0.025
6	7	0.000	0.018
7	3	0.001	0.013
8	5	0.002	0.010
9	4	0.002	0.008
10	1	0.000	0.006

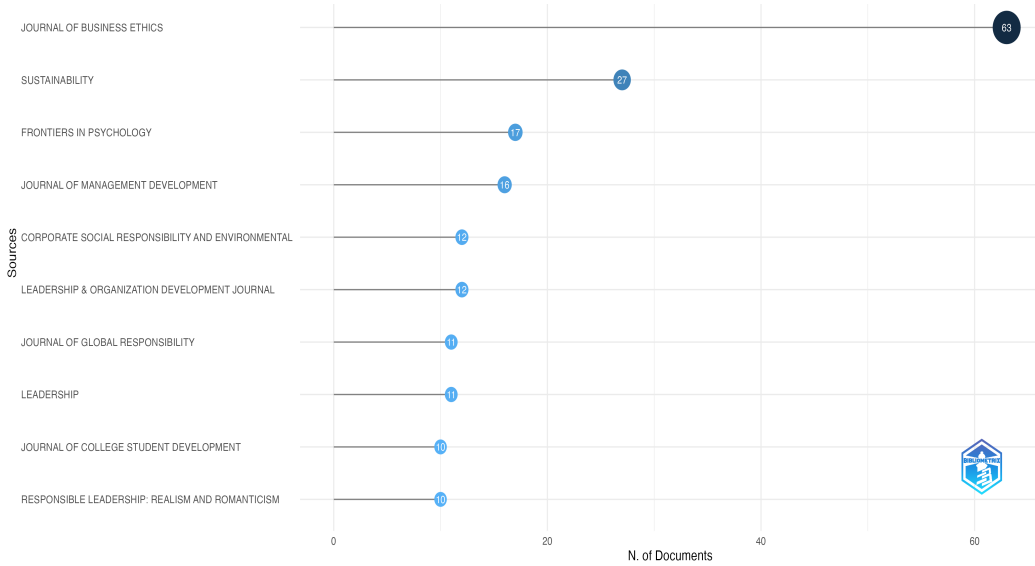
Figure 2 shows the local influence levels of prominent authors in the responsible leadership literature, based on the H-index. The findings show that authors such as Mohamed Mousa, Thomas Maak, and Nicola M. Pless have higher H-index values than others and demonstrate a high level of local influence and visibility in the literature. The fact that other authors are represented with lower H-index values reveals that the influence in the literature is concentrated around a certain core group of authors.

**Figure 2. Authors' Local Influence (H-Index)**



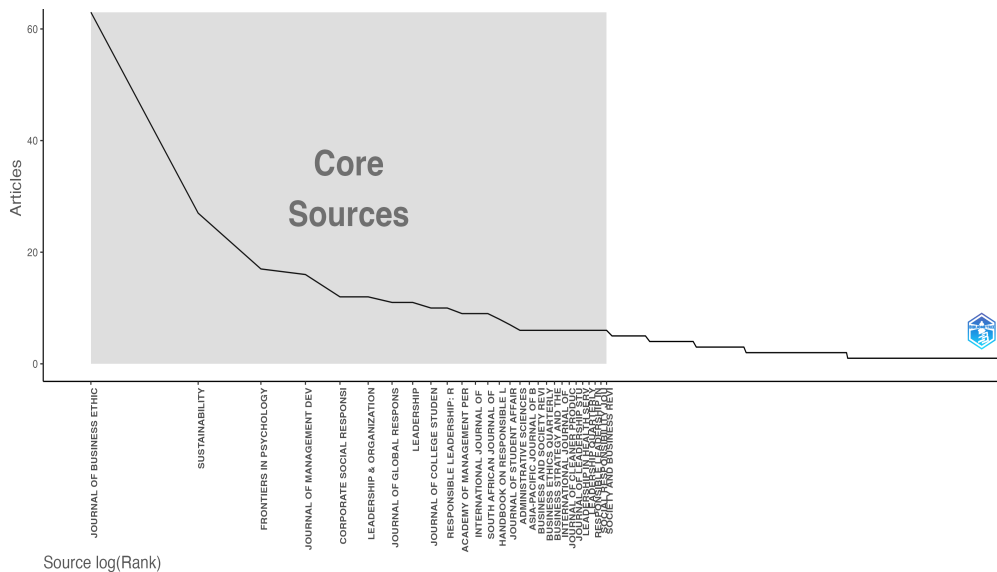
## Leading Journals

Figure 3 presents the most relevant publication sources in the responsible leadership literature and the number of publications in these journals. The findings show that the Journal of Business Ethics is a central publication platform in the literature with by far the highest number of publications. This is followed by the journal Sustainability, which indicates that responsible leadership studies are concentrated around ethics, sustainability, and corporate responsibility. Journals such as Frontiers in Psychology and Journal of Management Development also make significant contributions to the literature. Other journals are represented by a more limited number of publications, indicating that responsible leadership research is concentrated around certain core journals, while there is a more selective and dispersed publication structure across different disciplines.



**Figure 3. The Most Productive Journals**

Figure 8 presents the publication sources in the responsible leadership literature, classified according to Bradford's Law. The graph shows that publications are concentrated around a certain number of core journals, while a broader group of journals contributes only a limited number to the literature. The journals in the core region account for a significant portion of publication output in the field of responsible leadership and constitute the central information sources of the literature. The rapid flattening of the curve after the core region indicates that the field has a scattered but long-tailed publication structure. This finding reveals that responsible leadership research is concentrated in certain journals, but is also represented to a limited extent in numerous journals belonging to different disciplines.



**Figure 4. Core Publications of the Responsible Leadership Literature According to Bradford's Law**

## Prominent Institutions and Countries

Table 3 shows the institutional affiliations that have produced the most publications in the responsible leadership literature. The findings reveal that the University of Auckland stands out with the highest number of publications; institutions such as Comsats University Islamabad, the University of Wollongong, and Universitat Ramon Llull also make significant contributions to the literature. This distribution indicates that responsible leadership research is concentrated around certain universities and that core research centers have formed at the institutional level.

**Table 3. Most Productive Institutions**

Affiliation	Articles
UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND	26
COMSATS UNIVERSITY ISLAMABAD (CUI)	19
UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG	17
UNIVERSITAT RAMON LLULL	16
UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH	16
UNIVERSITY OF ST GALLEN	16
ABELAIDE UNIVERSITY	15
ESCUELA SUPERIPR DE ADMINISTRACION Y DIRECCION DE EMPRESAS (ESADE)	15
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA	15
CENTRAL QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY	14

Table 4 presents data on the countries of origin of prolific authors in responsible leadership. This table shows the total number of scientific publications produced, Single Country Publications (SCP) produced by authors from only one country, and Multiple Country Publications (MCP) involving international collaboration. In terms of the number of scientific publications produced by authors, the USA contributed significantly to the development of the concept with 151 articles, and China with 104 articles. Although on a smaller scale compared to the first two countries, the UK and Australia contributed 71 and 59 articles respectively, making them, along with India, among the countries with medium-sized but stable publication output. Of the 151 publications produced under the responsibility of the USA, 130 were produced by authors from a single country, while 21 scientific studies involved collaboration with authors from other countries. However, the vast majority of scientific publications produced in India and South American countries (37 and 32 respectively) were achieved through local collaborations of authors. Although the total number of articles in studies conducted by authors from multiple countries is not high, 51.9% of publications produced in Malaysia and 47.8% of publications produced in Pakistan were obtained through international collaboration. In the UK, which has a higher number of publications than these two countries, 39.4% of publications were obtained through collaboration with authors from other countries. The national and international scientific publication output of countries regarding responsible leadership is shown in Figure 1 with blue and red horizontal bar graphs. The blue area shows single-country publications, while the red area shows multi-country publications.

**Table 4.** Countries and Affiliations of Corresponding Authors

Country	Articles	Articles %	SCP	MCP	MCP %	Freq
USA	151	14.0	130	21	13.9	348
CHINA	104	9.6	70	34	32.7	250
UNITED KINGDOM	71	6.6	43	28	39.4	191
AUSTRALIA	59	5.5	41	18	30.5	133
INDIA	37	3.4	34	3	8.1	84
SOUTH AFRICA	32	3.0	29	3	9.4	50
SPAIN	32	3.0	21	11	34.4	68
CANADA	27	2.5	19	8	29.6	51
MALAYSIA	27	2.5	13	14	51.9	56
PAKISTAN	23	2.1	12	11	47.8	81

Table 5, which shows the total number of citations (TC) and the average number of citations per article for the relevant country in the field, reveals the impact, or quality, of the articles produced. The USA and China are among the leading countries with 5599 and 2488 total citations respectively, while their impact factors are relatively low at 37.10 and 23.70. Switzerland, on the other hand, has the highest impact factor with a total of 2379 citations and an average citation of 125.20. It can be said that Switzerland, although small in number, contributes to the production of high-quality and reference-quality scientific publications in the field.

**Table 5.** Total and Average Citation Numbers for Countries

Country	TC	Average Article Citations
USA	5599	37.10
CHINA	2468	23.70
SWITZERLAND	2379	125.20
UNITED KINGDOM	1286	18.10
SPAIN	1282	40.10
AUSTRALIA	1272	21.60
PAKISTAN	783	34.00
GERMANY	678	75.30
CANADA	658	24.40
AUSTRIA	423	70.50

## Keyword Analysis

The intellectual structure and thematic clustering of the literature are presented in Figure 6. The network structure shows that the field has a high level of conceptual integration. Node sizes reflect the frequency and centrality of keyword usage, while the thickness of connections reflects the strength of the relationships between concepts. The moderate density of the network indicates that the field is structured around interacting multidisciplinary themes rather than disconnected subheadings.

In the network map, management, performance, corporate social responsibility, and leadership stand out as the most central nodes. This indicates that the literature is structured around management, performance, corporate social responsibility, and leadership.

The blue cluster is concentrated around the concepts of performance, antecedents, and work, representing studies focusing on the determinants of organizational and individual performance. The presence of

concepts such as human resources management, motivation, employee engagement, and organizational citizenship behavior shows that performance is linked to human and organizational factors.

The red cluster is structured around the concepts of management, sustainability, leadership, and corporate social responsibility, forming the center of the network. This cluster reflects contemporary management approaches that integrate strategic management, sustainability, ethics, and stakeholder approaches.

The green cluster, on the other hand, focuses on the moral and value-based dimensions of leadership, centering around the concepts of ethical leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership. The connections of this cluster with other clusters demonstrate that ethical leadership approaches are closely related to corporate social responsibility and organizational performance.

Overall, the network structure reveals that the literature is shaped around performance-oriented empirical studies, integrative approaches in the areas of sustainability and corporate social responsibility, and ethical and transformational leadership perspectives. This indicates that the field is evolving towards more complex and multi-level theoretical frameworks.

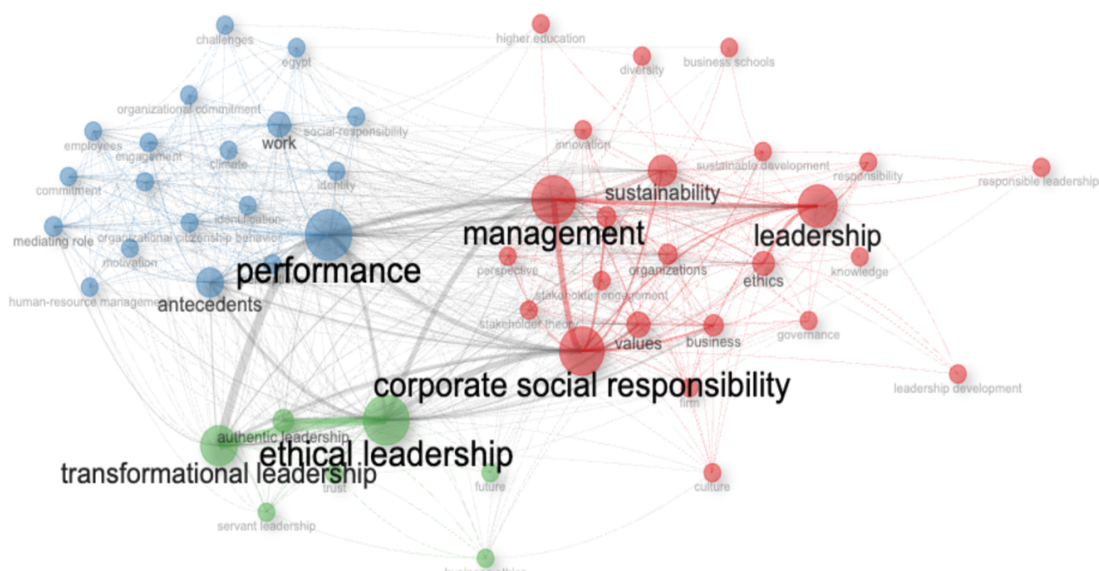


Figure 6. Keywords Authors' Network

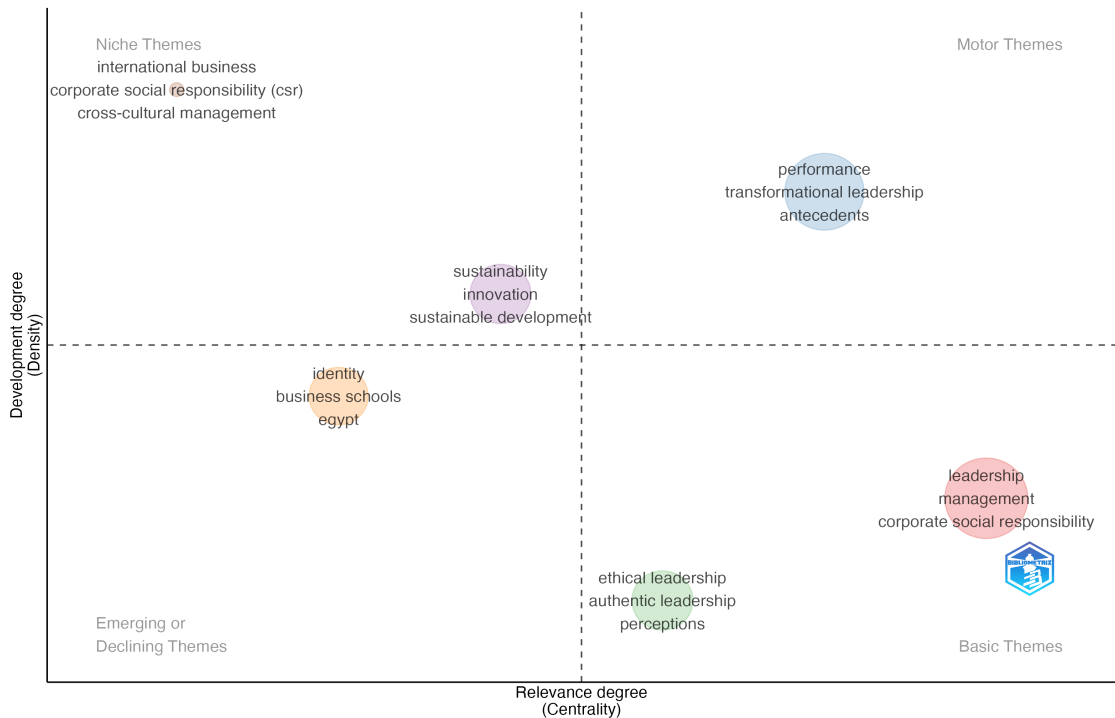
## Thematic Mapping in the Relevant Field

Figure 7 thematic map, which reveals the conceptual structure of the literature in the field of responsible leadership, summarizes the current situation of the academic field from a strategic perspective through centrality and density criteria. According to the analysis results, the motor themes located in the upper right quadrant represent the most advanced elements of the field and the strongest interdisciplinary connections. In particular, the presence of concepts such as "Performance", "Transformational Leadership" and "Antecedents" antecedents in this region shows that responsible leadership studies have traditionally completed the integration with institutional results and established leadership theories. These themes constitute the intellectual backbone of the literature and indicate a high level of academic saturation.

The basic themes in the lower right quadrant of the map cover areas with high centrality but relatively low internal density. The clustering of macro concepts such as "Leadership", "Management" and "Corporate Social Responsibility" here proves that the discipline of responsible leadership is nourished by these basic disciplines, but the theoretical depth in these areas still needs to be developed. In particular, the fact that concepts such as "Ethical Leadership" and "Authentic Leadership" are at the border in this region indicates that the unique distinction and synergy of responsible leadership with these theories offers a critical research gap for future studies.

Niche themes observed in the upper left quadrant include topics such as international business and intercultural management, which are more specific and have high technical depth, but have limited

impact on the general discussions of the field. This shows that the practices of responsible leadership in a global and cultural context constitute a highly specialized literature. On the other hand, titles such as "Identity" and "business schools" in the developing or declining themes section in the lower left quadrant represent aspects of the field that have not yet been explored sufficiently or have begun to lose their currency. The concepts of "Sustainability" and "Innovation", which act as a bridge in the center of the map, predict that the future evolution of the literature will be shaped on these two axes and that the transformative role of responsible leadership in the modern business paradigm will deepen through these concepts.

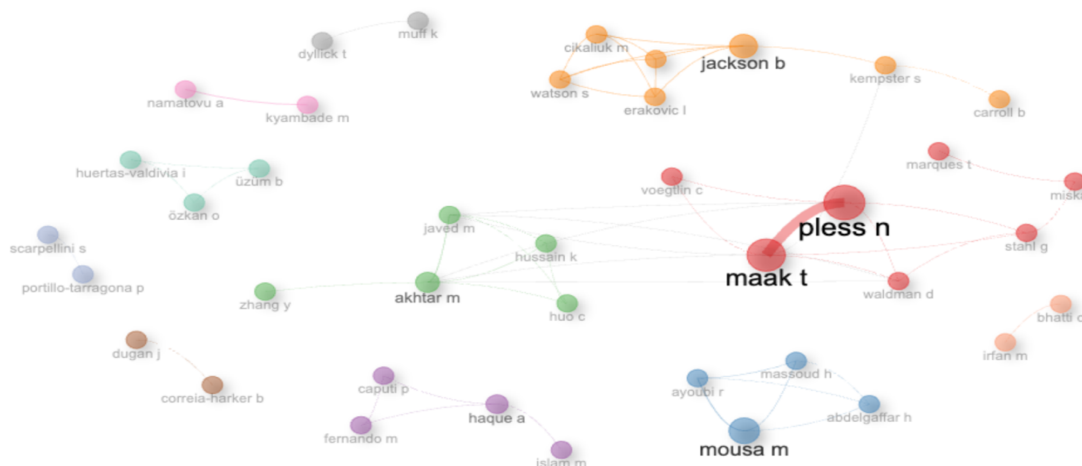


**Figure 7.** Thematic Mapping of The Relevant Field

## Conceptual Mapping and Collaboration Networks

A Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) performed using combined keywords to reveal the intellectual structure of the research area is presented in Figure 8, concretizing the conceptual relationships in the area through two main dimensions and four strategic clusters. This model, which explains a high percentage of the total variance (69.13%), presents both the theoretical framework and the application-oriented outputs of the literature at a systematic level. Accordingly, the first dimension, forming the horizontal axis (53.1% variance), identifies the fundamental ontological line separating macro-level corporate governance and ethical principles from micro-level employee outputs. The vertical axis (16.03% variance) adds vertical depth to the analysis by separating high-level leadership theories and strategic approaches from educational contexts and empirical results. The four main clusters observed in the map reflect the multidimensional structure of the area. The "Core Principles, Ethics, and Governance" cluster, concentrated in the upper left corner, focuses on the normative and structural foundations of responsible business practices through concepts such as governance, business ethics, and sustainability. The studies in this group discuss the structural mechanisms for integrating ethical behavior into organizational structures. The "Leadership Theories and Corporate Social Responsibility" cluster in the upper right corner examines the impact of ethical, authentic, and transformational leadership styles on corporate social responsibility (CSR) dynamics, highlighting the decisive role of strategic leadership on organizational outcomes. Looking at the sub-sections representing the application dimension of the literature, the cluster themed "Education and Social Responsibility" in the lower left corner stands out. Here, the pedagogical role of business schools and their academic contributions to fostering responsible





**Figure 9.** Co-authorship Network Structure

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric overview of the responsible leadership literature, based on 1,059 publications indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The findings demonstrate that responsible leadership has evolved into a dynamic and increasingly prominent research field, particularly since 2015, gaining significant momentum in publication output. This steady growth reflects the increasing importance of ethical governance, sustainability, and stakeholder-focused leadership in both academic and practical contexts.

The analysis reveals that responsible leadership research is inherently multidisciplinary, drawing contributions from management, ethics, psychology, sociology, and political science. A relatively small group of influential authors and journals—particularly the *Journal of Business Ethics*—play a central role in shaping the field's intellectual fabric. Furthermore, while international collaboration exists, it remains moderate, offering opportunities for broader cross-cultural research partnerships.

Thematic diversity identified through keyword analyses highlights the richness of the field, pointing to a degree of conceptual dispersion. Core themes like ethics, Stakeholder Theory, sustainability, and governance are well-established, while emerging issues remain fragmented. Building on this, the keyword co-occurrence network and Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) exhibit a remarkable alignment with Stakeholder Theory, the theoretical foundation of this study. The MCA factorial map empirically validates that responsible leadership operates fundamentally within a broader multi-stakeholder ecosystem. Specifically, conceptual mapping demonstrates how macro-level corporate governance and sustainability-focused expectations seamlessly bridge with micro-level internal outcomes, such as employee engagement and job satisfaction. This structural integration confirms that the core tenet of Stakeholder Theory—balancing conflicting stakeholder interests and harmonizing organizational goals with societal expectations—constitutes the intellectual backbone of empirical inquiries in the responsible leadership literature. Consequently, this bibliometric mapping successfully closes the theoretical loop by illustrating how Stakeholder Theory materializes into concrete managerial practices.

Furthermore, the literature's observed maturation suggests a transition toward consolidation and deeper theoretical refinement. Scholars are encouraged to conduct integrative studies that clarify the conceptual boundaries of responsible leadership. Greater emphasis should be placed on multi-level and longitudinal empirical research to understand the mechanisms of responsible leadership across individual, organizational, and societal levels. Expanding research into underrepresented geographic contexts will also enhance the global relevance of the literature.

This study is limited to examining the international literature using bibliometric analysis, utilizing data exclusively from WoS and Scopus within a specific timeframe, and focusing on citation relationships rather than content depth. For future research, the theoretical limitations of the responsible leadership

literature need to be clearly defined alongside related approaches like ethical, authentic, and transformational leadership. Because employee-focused outcomes dominate, it is important to explore less-studied variables such as innovation, digital transformation, organizational resilience, crisis management, and sustainable competitive advantage. Additionally, increased interdisciplinary and international collaborations can contribute to the intellectual integration of the fragmented co-authorship network. Finally, multi-level and mixed-methods research conducted in new contexts—such as artificial intelligence, digital work environments, environmental crises, and ESG-focused governance—will make significant contributions to the future development of the responsible leadership literature.

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