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Ethical leadership and employee behavior. Scientometric analysis in scientific production

Liderazgo ético y comportamiento de los empleados. Análisis cienciométrico en la producción científica

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ABSTRACT

This scientometric study seeks to analyze scientific articles on ethical business leadership from a social-scientific perspective, considering its relationship or influence with the different behaviors of workers. Using the VOSWiever program, an analysis is carried out on 1 000 articles published in Web of Science (WoS) journals from 1987 to May 2023. The results show the five main contributing countries, these being: China, the United States, England, Canada, and Pakistan and the year 2022 will be the year of greatest scientific production. There are no records of studies in Latin America; however, scientific production is found in academic sites in Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, and Argentina. Using the Laws of Lotka, Price, and the Bradford model, the most prolific authors and the productivity of countries and magazines are discovered. Using Zipf's law and the Hirsch index, the most frequent keywords and the best-known articles are revealed. The article has sought to contribute to the eighth goal of sustainable development (SDG), that is, with the study of ethical leaders who model behaviors that favor economic growth, work well-being, and sustainability of their organizations. For future research, it is suggested that specific effects produced by this leadership as a mediator related to job performance in Latin companies be examined.

Keywords: employee, group behaviour, leadership, social and emotional learning, sustainability.

JEL Classification: J24, O15

RESUMEN

Este estudio cienciométrico busca analizar artículos científicos sobre liderazgo ético empresarial desde una perspectiva científico-social; se consideró su relación o influencia con los diferentes comportamientos de trabajadores. Se utilizó el programa VOSWiever y se realizó un análisis a partir de 1 000 artículos publicados en revistas Web of Science (WoS), desde 1987 hasta mayo del 2023. Los resultados muestran los cinco principales países contribuyentes, a saber: China, Estados Unidos, Inglaterra, Canadá y Pakistán, así como el el año 2022 el de mayor producción científica. No hay registros de estudios en América Latina, sin embargo, en sitios académicos se encuentra producción científica en Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador y Argentina. Bajo las Leyes de Lotka, Price y el modelo de Bradford, se descubrieron los autores prolíficos, así como la productividad de países y revistas. Con el empleo de la ley de Zipf y el índice de Hirsch, se revelaron las palabras claves más frecuentes y los artículos más conocidos. El artículo ha buscado contribuir con el octavo objetivo del desarrollo sostenible (ODS), es decir, el estudio de líderes éticos que modelan conductas que favorecen el crecimiento económico, bienestar laboral y sostenibilidad de sus organizaciones. Para futuras investigaciones se sugiere examinar efectos concretos producidos por este liderazgo, como mediador relacionado con el desempeño laboral en empresas latinas.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje socioemocional, comportamiento de grupo, empleado, liderazgo, sostenibilidad.

Clasificación JEL: J24, O15

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INTRODUCTION

This study presents a scientometric review of the topic of ethical business leadership and its relationship with employee behavior from a social-scientific perspective. That is, an approach oriented toward positive influence on job performance was proposed rather than toward normative conduct (Aguilar-Hernández & Acosta-Tzin, 2023; Dua et al., 2023). In the terms proposed by Treviño, assuming the deontological component as a branch of Philosophy rather than as part of the

social sciences can have social consequences in the areas of health, safety, consumer well-being, and community (Treviño, 1986).

In this sense, Brown and Treviño (2006) affirm that a considerable amount has been written about ethics from a normative or philosophical perspective, specifically regarding suggestions regarding what leaders should do. This has resulted in a platform for promoting opportunities and avenues for research to address ethics and leadership from a more descriptive and predictive social scientific perspective. Along these lines, Eisenbeiss (2012) presents an interdisciplinary normative approach to ethical leadership and transfers it to the social sciences with four essential guiding principles: humaneness, justice, responsibility, sustainability, and moderation.

The exploratory review that served as the basis for the study design found that the most studied topics, from a social perspective, have been innovative behavior (Hoang, Yang, et al., 2023; G. Li et al., 2024; Rasheed et al., 2024) and collaborative behavior (Banks et al., 2021; S. Li et al., 2023). These lines of research suggest that innovative ethical leadership, as a workplace performance, significantly differentiates it from studies with a normative approach.

Given the influence of ethical leadership on organizational results, an analysis of this behavior is necessary as a relevant step for the scientific advancement of the topic. Therefore, the question that motivates the development of this study is posed: What is the current status of ethical leadership in business and corporate studies in Latin America?

To answer this question, a scientometric review is proposed from a social-scientific perspective on ethical leadership in business, globally, and particularly its emergence in Latin America. Thus, the objective was to analyze scientific articles on ethical leadership in business from a social-scientific perspective, considering its relationship or influence on different employee behaviors in organizations as one of the themes associated with creativity, job satisfaction, collaboration among colleagues, and quality customer service.

The relevance of this study is based on the importance of ethical leadership behavior on the future of organizations and on the sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Bakhshi et al., 2023; Karakasnaki, 2024). In particular, it emphasizes the eighth objective, which dictates Economic Growth and Labor Well-being, from the perspective of ethical leaders who model behaviors that favor growth and sustainability, that is, mediators that promote innovation and commitment.

Theoretical bases

According to Brown et al. (2005), ethical leaders are role models, subjects of identification-based processes, encouraged by the emulation of their behavioral patterns. These leaders are portrayed as attractive, credible, and legitimate, so their behavior is viewed as normatively appropriate. Organizationally, they are fundamental in promoting ethical conduct by smoothing communication, establishing stable criteria for assessing behavior, and making informed decisions. Furthermore, ethical leadership focuses on values and actions that conform to ethical standards with implications for job performance (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Furthermore, ethical leadership is related to consideration, honesty, trust in the leader, and fairness in interactions, which are key to the ethical orientation of staff (Vargas-Salgado et al., 2023). In this sense, the social learning theory, considered the theoretical basis for understanding the impact of ethical leadership on organizational behavior, is crucial (Brown et al. 2005).

A decisive aspect of studying ethical leadership has been understanding it as behavior (Dey et al., 2022). From this perspective, "behavior" is understood as conduct, procedures, actions, patterns, practices, and manners (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). Regarding behavior, Albert Bandura, using social learning theory, shows that human beings learn through observation and imitation (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020), so workers are expected to emulate the performance of an ethical leader.

Shandong in the Republic of China is an example of the application of Bandura's theory. Using social learning theory, Yue and colleagues examined the effect of ethical leadership on cheating behaviors (acts that aim to create an unfair advantage or help obtain benefits that an employee would not otherwise be entitled to) in the workplace, finding a positive relationship between ethical leadership and moral identity (Yue et al., 2023).

Finally, regarding the issue of teleworking, which gained relevance following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a sample of 481 employees from mainland China, they found that ethical leadership had a positive effect on the moral

emotion of praising others and significantly influenced online helping behavior among workers (Li et al., 2023). In Pakistan, according to data from 281 employees of public and private corporations in the oil sector in Karachi, employees felt psychologically safe in the presence of an ethical leader with whom they had high-quality social exchanges (Zhu et al., 2022).

Literature as a source of information on ethical business leadership

Research in Australia identified high consistency between the definition and measurement of ethical leadership in tourism and hospitality. This study explains the most commonly used measurement theories and how this leadership positively influenced employee performance's attitudinal and behavioral dimensions (Hoang, Yang, et al., 2023). Similarly, a study of small businesses in Ghana used leader-member exchange theory to examine the link between ethical leadership in the supply chain and sustainable practices associated with circularity, finding a positive and significant relationship (Agyabeng-Mensah et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, the Catholic University of France investigated ethical leadership in the context of "leaders as coaches," using the critical incident technique to identify ethical problems that arise when leaders act as coaches. In that study, seven ethical issues were revealed: definitional ambiguity, conflict of interest, confidentiality, power imbalance, freedom of participation, boundaries, and favoritism (Milner et al., 2023). The above is important for anticipating ethical issues whenever possible and addressing any that arise so that a company can become or remain an ethical organization (Milner et al., 2023).

In another vein, research in the United Kingdom with a sample of 511 company employees revealed that ethical leadership is positively associated with a greater intention to engage in safety voice regarding COVID-19 (Cakir et al., 2023). This underscores the importance of good ethical conduct by leaders to ensure that, at the organizational level, health and safety risks are internalized and communicated effectively (Cakir et al., 2023).

On the other hand, a study in the US hotel sector found that employees' psychological ownership and creative self-efficacy mediate the association between ethical leadership and service innovation behavior (Rasheed et al., 2024). Similarly, in a camp of US military teams actively participating in competitions, ethical leadership was found to preserve team effectiveness and social integration when teams did not perform well (Martin et al., 2022).

To conclude, an investigation in Spain combined a study of pedagogical leadership as an important element in the improvement of educational quality and ethical leadership (Miras & Longás, 2020). Among the main results were the value of humanism in personal and organizational development, the need to foster equity and inclusion in education, and morality as a component of school leadership. Based on these findings, the indelible connection between the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of leadership in school contexts was recognized. This study also pointed to future lines related to the selection and training of school leaders with an emphasis on the exercise of ethical pedagogical leadership (Miras & Longás, 2020).

Organizations and ethical leadership

Regarding the social-scientific perspective of ethical leadership, a study conducted in the Municipality of Mara in the state of Zulia (Venezuela) showed that it is a critical factor in the transformation of organizations, although it was also recognized that the qualities of the leader and their perceived personal and professional profile also exert influence. An important consideration revealed in the research is that these changes generated through ethical leadership must be systematized methodically to achieve a long-term effect (Villasmil-Molero et al., 2021).

Similarly, a bibliometric analysis conducted in Colombia concluded that interactions and their effects were among the main thematic groupings. This study revealed a tendency to define ethical leadership as a preventive instrument, undermining its conception as a value that promotes organizational development, as it contributes to strengthening the climate and culture, consolidates performance, and fosters adaptation (Correa et al., 2018).

Furthermore, a study conducted at the University of Zulia (Venezuela) on ethical leadership found that it promotes organizational change. However, attention is needed to cultural diversity, human talent and its management, institutional objectives, and the relationship with society (Kadi & Acevedo, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The present study was of the scientometric type and consisted of the analysis of the scientific production related to the subject. In this regard, we investigated the development of the lines, the thematic structure, the temporal

and productive dynamics, the general trends, and the relationships with practice, as evidenced in specialized articles published periodically in scientific journals (López-Pernas et al., 2023). Consequently, the research was operationalized through the analysis of a corpus of articles published in journals indexed in the Web of Science (WoS), as well as the identification of the contexts, the analysis of the antecedents that allow a consolidated understanding of the transformations that the subject has undergone over time. This allowed an approach to its prolific authors, and most cited articles, supported by the analysis in the VOSviewer program.

In this way, the topic of ethical leadership was measured using the Hirsch index to identify the authors with the greatest impact on scientific production. Likewise, Lotka's Law was applied to corroborate the productivity of the authors in the field. Finally, we sought to determine the most studied topics according to Zipf's Law.

The methodological purpose was to identify opportunities and challenges in replicating these studies on ethical leadership in Latin American companies. This search was conducted based on the relationship or influence of ethical leaders on different employee behaviors. Therefore, the approach to thematic trends associated with innovation, creativity, job satisfaction, high performance, and employee commitment was added as an indicator.

The review used a database of 1000 articles from the Web of Science (WoS) citation indexing system up to May 2023, indexed in the JCR Journal Citation Report. Data collection and analysis of results were performed using the VOSviewer program. Similarly, the topic was contextualized by analyzing concepts and findings that allowed for greater empowerment and identification of readers on the topic. Using the VOSviewer program, prolific authors were identified by applying Lotka's, Zipf's, Bradford's, and Price's laws. The Hirsch index was used for the most cited articles.

Finally, the inclusion criterion for this study was articles published in scientific journals in the WoS database, using the search equation ["Ethical"] [AND] ["Leadership"] for documents published between 1974 and 2023. Additionally, to provide theoretical grounding and fulfill the final objective of this study, searches for scientific articles were conducted through Google Scholar in Spain and Latin America, regions not found in the aforementioned database.

RESULTS

This study presents the most important findings using the VOSviewer program, which identified the number of publications in relation to time and the total size of the author pool using Price's Law; prolific authors using Lotka's Law to identify the author-article relationship; scientific production by country; word frequency determined by Zipf's Law; the most cited articles using the Hirsch index; and the exponential increase or decrease in references of articles in journals, determined by Bradford's Law.

Scientific production over time, Price's Law

Table 1.
Scientific production during the 20th and 21st centuries

Time Range	Documents
1974-1984	1
1985-1995	4
1996-2005	26
2006-2015	275
2016-2023	694
Total articles	1000

Source: own elaboration

Based on Price's Law, which states the number of publications in a given period of time (Ardeshir et al., 2024), Table 1 shows an exponential evolution of growth over the years in the corpus of 1000 articles from 1974 to March 2023. It is evident that throughout the 20th century, the topic attracted low scientific interest, and a notable development and sustained growth in scientific production is observed from the 21st century onwards (Figure 1), revealing the interest in Ethical Leadership and its influence on organizational performance today.

Figure 2.
Annual scientific production

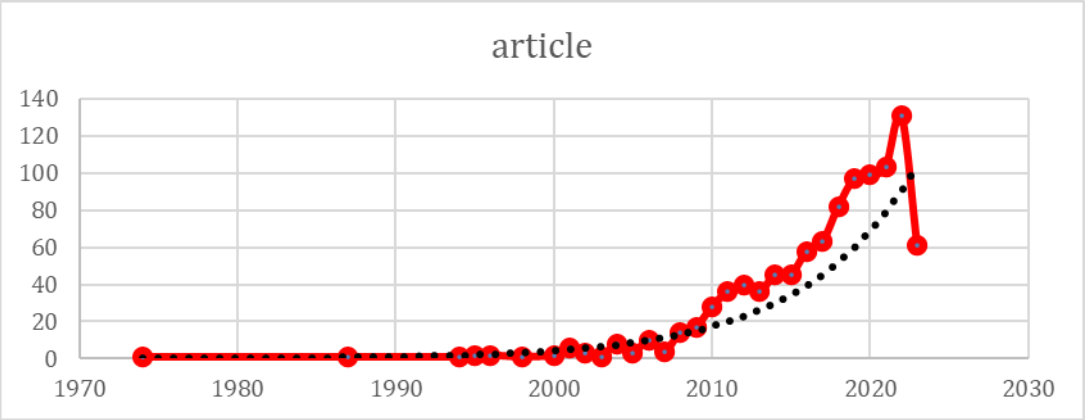


Figure 1 clearly illustrates the average number of scientific publications on Ethical Leadership per year, considering the first article registered in 1974 and the following ones until 1987. Furthermore, it was evident that the topic has experienced a significant increase since 2006, maintaining constant growth throughout the following decades; the exponential growth trend intensified in 2022. It was also identified that the scientific study of the subject continues to grow, reflecting the importance of knowledge management and its contribution to the scientific community. It should be clarified that the data represented covers up to May 2023.

Scientific production per author, using Lotka's Law

Table 2.
Prolific Authors in order of their publications

Authors	Documents	Citations	Link strength
Walumbwa, Fred O.	5	1994	2
Avolio, Bruce J.	3	1823	5
Trevino, Linda K.	3	749	4
Brown, Michael E.	3	606	1
Piccolo, Ronald f.	3	563	2
Folger, Robert	3	468	1
Hannah, Sean t.	4	445	7
Trevino, Linda Klebe	3	421	1
Schaubroeck, John M.	3	402	4
Mayer, David M.	4	358	2

Source: own elaboration

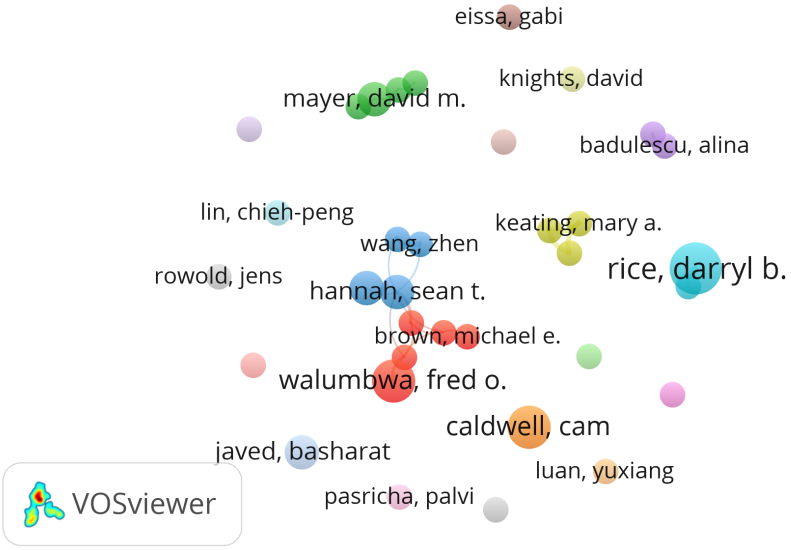
Lotka's law deals with the quantitative relationship between authors and articles produced in a given field of knowledge in a given period of time (Narbaev & Amirbekova, 2021). Table 2 presents 10 of the 34 prolific authors identified out of a total of 3057 in the database consulted; this data represents 113 of the 1000 published articles. Walumbwa, Fred O., was confirmed as the author who published the most from 2006 to 2017, while the second author was Avolio Bruce J. This reveals that there are a good number of prolific authors with a deep interest in contributing to the field of ethical leadership, with topics associated with creativity, job satisfaction, collaboration between colleagues, quality customer service, among others.

By applying Lotka's Law, the nodes were identified with the authors' names classified by the degree of inputs (Figure 2). In other words, the number of times they have been cited, as well as the outputs, from which the intermediation is derived, which is the degree to which they are simultaneously cited and cited. The figure reveals a highly clustered and sparsely dispersed network, with nodes connected to each other.

Clusters of different authors stand out, revealing collaboration in joint research or shared co-authorship, which is evidence of a pronounced thematic cohesion. Also, there is a significant representation of authors showing

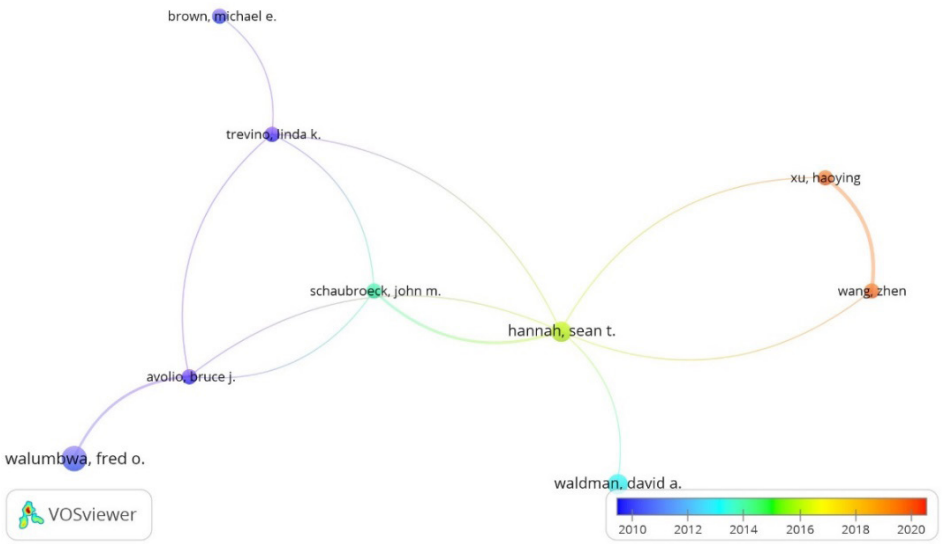
geographic association represented by colors; red, for example, is represented by the network of the United States and Canada. A pattern that suggests the existence of more frequent collaborations or common areas of interest among researchers from these specific regions in the field of Ethical Leadership can be observed.

Figure 2.
Total Network of Prolific Authors, Lotka's Law



Source: own elaboration

Figure 3.
Map of prolific authors in scientific production vs. years, Lotka's Law



Source: own elaboration

Figure 3 shows the presence of academic networks considered the most dynamic, both in terms of time and the quality and quantity of scientific contributions. These data highlight the interconnectedness and collaboration among leading researchers in the field. The lighter colors represent the most recent collaboration networks in terms of time. These results identify key authors, such as Walumbwa, Avolio, and Treviño, among others. This suggests membership or coordination of groups within the research field, highlights collaboration patterns, and indicates possible areas of specialization or shared research interests among the authors. An aspect that shows a strong link between the authors while revealing a solid and constant collaboration.

Scientific production by country

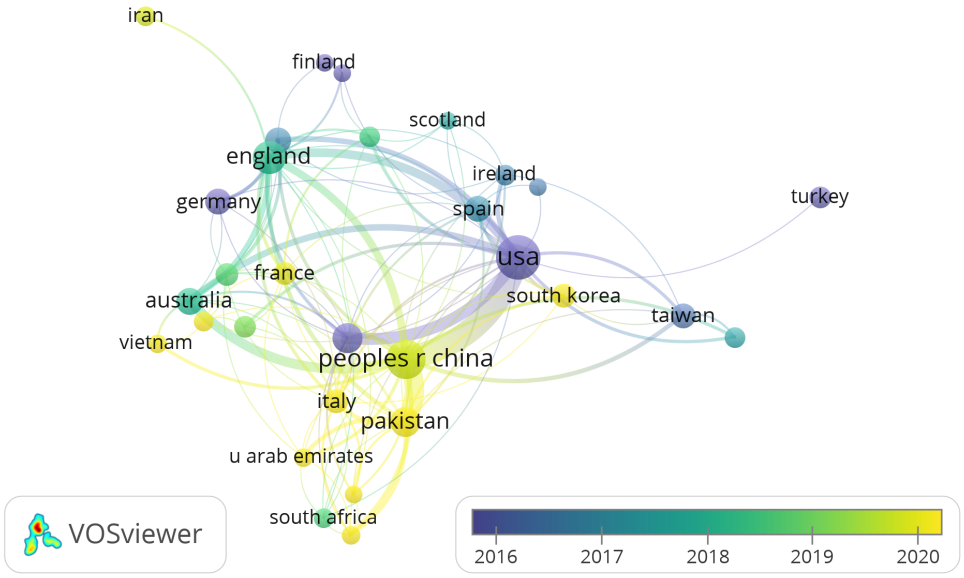
Table 3.
List of Countries with the Highest Scientific Production

Country	Documents	Citations	Link strength
USA	175	11679	85
Peoples R China	106	2104	94
England	56	1241	53
Canada	38	1520	29
Pakistan	38	644	47
Australia	26	713	29
Spain	21	557	14
Germany	20	310	11
Netherlands	20	795	21
Taiwan	18	207	12

Source: own elaboration

Table 3 illustrates some of the countries that have contributed to the study on ethical leadership. The most productive country is the United States, followed by the Republic of China and England. It is important to note that the number of documents produced is not directly related to citations, although it contributes to the overall production increase. It was identified that the Latin American region, according to the database used, has not recorded any scientific production. This finding suggests a significant opportunity for knowledge management on the subject within Latin America, based on the knowledge, tools, and inputs that the field offers due to its revealing scientific output.

Figure 4.
Distribution map of countries with the most scientific production versus years



Source: own elaboration

This map illustrates the relationships between the countries with the greatest scientific production and how these, in turn, collaborate with other nations in the publication of articles (Figure 4). The 21st century has marked a genuine impetus for research on the subject; this change is clearly observed in the relationships between 2016 and 2023. These data reveal that there is close collaboration and the development of joint work among authors from different countries, making it clear that China, Italy, and Pakistan are those presenting the most recent research.

Identification of the most studied topics, Zipf's Law

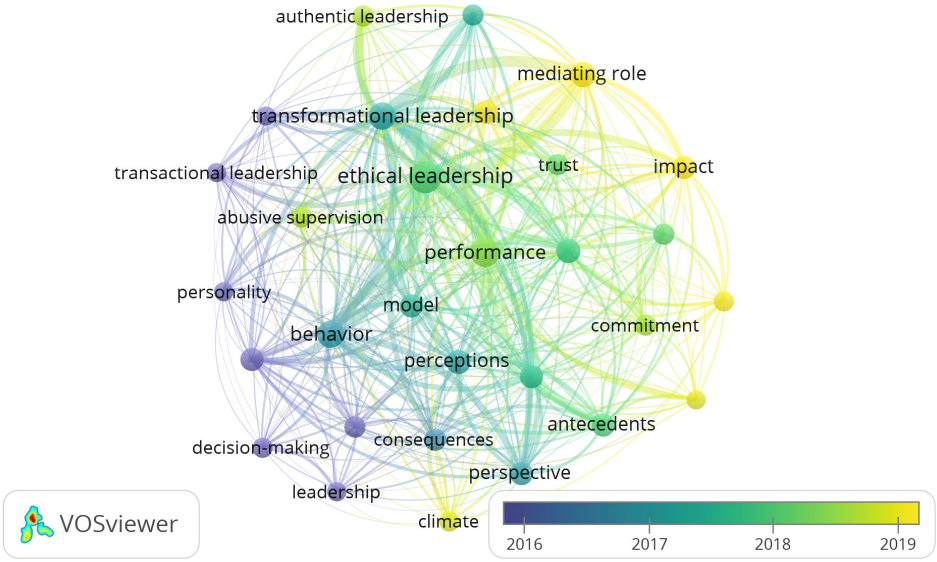
Table 4.
List of Keywords by Occurrences

Keywords	Occurrences	Total link strength
Ethical leadership	179	488
Performance	109	375
Transformational Leadership	92	324
Behavior	87	284
Mediating role	64	210
Perceptions	59	193
Work	56	183
Perspective	50	163
Management	49	160
Organizations	47	162

Source: own elaboration

Zipf's law identifies word frequency in the natural language corpus (Gupta & Singh, 2024). Table 4 shows that, out of 1052 words, 138 are the most frequent; 10 are shown, including ethical leadership, performance, transformational leadership, and behavior, as the most important thematic trends, currents, or areas of study on the subject; all of these are suggested as lines of research in ethical leadership, proposed for Latin America in particular.

Figure 5.
Keyword map by year



Source: own elaboration

Figure 5 highlights the evolution in the use of keywords and illustrates how the relationship between them has changed and mutated over time; the analysis of these reveals the existing opportunities and knowledge gaps. These data offer a clear view of the direction in which knowledge management on ethical leadership is being oriented by the academic community in the Latin American region, with the most recent topic being commitment.

Description of the most cited articles, using the Hirsch Index

The Hirsch index is an author-level metric that measures productivity as the impact of citations in publications (Ali, 2021). The table shows the five most cited research papers, their authors, and the number of citations that achieved the highest scientific productivity. The most cited authors were Brown, YO; Treviño, LK; Harrison, DA, with 2167 citations in 2005 (Table 5). This result reveals the community's appreciation of scientific writings in the field of ethical leadership, as well as the commitment to knowledge management in the field.

Table 5.
Authors with the highest scientific production, Hirsch index

Authors	Article title	Times cited, WoS Core	Year of publication
Brown, YO; Treviño, LK; Harrison, DA	Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing	2167	2005
Brown, YO; Treviño, LK	Ethical leadership: A review and future directions	1563	2006
Walumbwa, FO; Avolio, BJ; Gardner, WL; Wernsing, TS; Peterson, S.J.	Authentic Leadership: Development and Validation of a Theory-Based Measure	1265	2008
Mayer, DM; Kuenzi, M; Greenbaum, R; Bardes, M; Salvador, R.	How low does ethical leadership flow? Test of a trickle-down model	907	2009
Morrison, EE. UU.	Employee voice and silence	651	2014

Source: own elaboration

Table 6.
Top 10 journals with the most scientific output, Bradford Law

Name of the Journal	Publications
Journal of business ethics	187
Frontiers in psychology	52
Leadership quarterly	37
Leadership & organization development journal	30
Sustainability	24
Social behavior and personality	22
Business ethics quarterly	17
International journal of environmental research and public health	17
Ethics & behavior	16
Journal of applied psychology	16

Source: own elaboration

Bradford's law estimates the exponential increase or decrease in references to articles in scientific journals (Cetin et al., 2022). A total of 257 journals were identified that have addressed the topic; the table shows the top 10 with the most publications: 418 academic articles out of 1000 articles, that is, 41.8% of the scientific production to date on Ethical Leadership (Table 6). These data are decisive in understanding the scientific production in the field, as they reveal that it is focused on journals related to the subject that address and promote a variety of methodological and disciplinary perspectives on ethics and business leadership.

DISCUSSION

Leadership can be considered a process of social influence, which stands out as one of the most studied in the sciences concerned with human behavior in group and organizational contexts (Zhang & Gong, 2021). Ethical leadership promotes behaviors that drive growth and sustainability, so the influence of these leaders mediates innovation, creativity, satisfaction, high performance, and commitment (Freire & Bettencourt, 2020; Qing et al., 2020; Ullah et al., 2021).

This study identified the thematic trend of ethical leadership from a social science perspective and not solely as a philosophical field. In other words, it was confirmed that its most prolific authors presented a descriptive and predictive perspective, not limited to studies focused on the leader's behavior or normativity (Treviño, 1986; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Eisenbeiss, 2012).

Furthermore, it is crucial to assess the rise in publicized corporate scandals due to poor management practices in the performance of scientific productivity. In addition, there are social challenges in public and private organizations,

creating a strong incentive for managers to select and develop ethical leadership and, in the case of researchers, to study it to understand its origins and outcomes in all types of organizations (Goswami et al., 2021; et al., 2008; Sarwar et al., 2020).

Similarly, the studies that were found attempted to shed light on the mediation of the ethical leader in workers' behavior. Along these lines, Albert Bandura's perspective on social learning constituted the main theoretical basis (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020). This is the case with the concept of "innovative behavior" (Hoang, Yang, et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Rasheed et al., 2024; G. Li et al., 2024) and the lines on employee performance as an online helping behavior among employees (S. Li et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this study expands the data on the influential behavior of ethical leadership while providing insight into the moral motivation for prosocial behavior among employees in countries that have made significant contributions, including Latin America (Kadi & Acevedo, 2014; Santiago-Torner & Muriel, 2023; Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Villasmil-Molero et al., 2021; Correa et al., 2023).

One of the thematic trends identified as promising in ethical leadership was its association with organizational commitment (Koay & Lim, 2022; Gillet et al., 2023). This line of research has become a major concern for managers, as figures and analyses from various studies suggest a trend toward staff dissatisfaction and low levels of organizational commitment (Islam et al., 2024; Guiling et al., 2022; Qing et al., 2020).

Finally, the association between ethical leadership and inclusive leadership was noted as an emerging trend (Jiang et al., 2023; Younas et al., 2023), as well as the relationship with abusive supervision (Yang & Xu, 2024) and corporate social responsibility (Saha et al., 2020; Servaes et al, 2023; Mahmood et al., 2023). Creativity in organizations (Zhao et al., 2023; Winchester & Medeiros, 2023; G. Li et al., 2024); the importance in supply chain studies (Agyabeng-Mensah et al., 2023), as well as in relation to innovation (Hoang, Luu, et al. 2023; Mao et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Şengüllendi et al., 2024; Rasheed et al., 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to analyze studies on ethical business leadership from a social perspective. A sample of 1000 articles published in Web of Science journals was used, and changes over time, thematic lines, prolific authors, and most cited articles were identified. Furthermore, China, the United States, England, Canada, and Pakistan were identified as the countries with the greatest scientific production on the topic of ethical leadership; considerable growth was observed for the year 2022.

The data indicated the relevance of the topic in the Latin American context, but there was a gap in the database studied. Therefore, it is feasible to highlight opportunities to delve deeper into this field through studies associated with innovation, creativity, job satisfaction, high performance, and commitment.

Finally, future research on ethical leadership requires approaches that contribute to sustainable development, companies' economic growth, and the well-being of employees in organizations. Specifically, the opportunity is identified to develop a construct that deepens its implications, models, principles, and instruments. This theoretical construct could serve as a basis for studying the impact of ethical leadership on employee engagement in service companies in a multidimensional manner.

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