

LEADERSHIP PRACTICE RESEARCH AT A CROSSROADS: A BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW OF THEMES AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Yunxia Liu (Corresponding Author)

Faculty of Economics and Management,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: liuyunxia0404@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0955-3069>

Zaleha Yazid

Faculty of Economics and Management,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: leyha@ukm.edu.my

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4826-5513>

Siti Ngayesah Ab. Hamid

Faculty of Economics and Management,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: ctngayesah@ukm.edu.my

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5850-3581>

ABSTRACT

This study provides a bibliometric review of leadership practice research based on 869 English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus from 2016 to 2026. Using Excel 365 and VOSviewer, the study maps publication trends, influential authors, institutions, countries, and thematic structures in the field. The findings show that leadership practice research has grown steadily, with particularly rapid expansion after 2022. Knowledge production is led mainly by the United States and the United Kingdom, while Asian countries are becoming increasingly active contributors. Keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals four major themes: traditional leadership styles, educational leadership, organizational behavior and workplace outcomes, and the emerging practice- and relation-oriented perspectives such as leadership-as-practice. The study demonstrates that leadership practice has evolved into a dynamic and increasingly coherent field, while also highlighting the need for broader empirical contexts and more process-oriented research to advance theoretical development and practical relevance.

Keywords: Leadership, Leadership Practice, Bibliometric Analysis, Scientific Study

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizational contexts, leadership is increasingly viewed not simply as a set of stable traits possessed by individuals or as the authority derived from formal positions, but rather as a dynamic process embedded in day-to-day organizational activities (Adams et al., 2026; Schweiger et al., 2020). As organizational environments become increasingly complex, uncertain, and highly digitized, academic attention regarding leadership has gradually shifted from the question of “who the leader is” to “how leadership is exercised in specific contexts.” (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2025) This shift has propelled leadership research beyond traditional trait, behavioral, and style theories toward interpretive frameworks centered on processes, relationships, and practices (Fischer et al., 2017; Kantek et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, leadership practice has gradually emerged as a key topic in leadership studies. It emphasizes that leadership is not a static manifestation of abstract abilities, but rather a practical activity that is continuously generated and unfolded through the processes of interaction, coordination, communication, decision-making, and problem-solving among organizational members. From a theoretical perspective, the leadership practice perspective offers a more nuanced analytical framework for understanding the contextual, relational, and emergent nature of leadership (J. Raelin, 2011). Unlike traditional research, which views leadership as a personal attribute, the practice-oriented approach emphasizes how leadership behaviors are enacted, negotiated, and co-constructed within specific organizational contexts, thereby revealing how leadership activities unfold across time, space, and social interactions (Van De Mierop et al., 2020). This perspective aligns closely with the growing emphasis in management and organizational studies on practice theory, relational leadership, distributed leadership, and process-oriented approaches (Kuran et al., 2026). From a practical perspective, real-world challenges such as digital transformation, hybrid work arrangements, pressures related to sustainability, crisis management, and continuous innovation are making it increasingly necessary for organizations to understand and shape the leadership process through “actionable leadership practices” rather than merely “idealized leadership traits.” (Nasrun et al., 2025) As a result, leadership practice research has become widely integrated into various fields, including organizational behavior, educational administration, public sector governance, healthcare management, and entrepreneurship research (Mohamud et al., 2025; J. A. Raelin, 2017).

Nevertheless, existing research on leadership practice remains highly scattered and fragmented. First, there is significant diversity and overlap in the terminology used within this field. Concepts such as *leadership practice*, *leadership practices*, *practice-based leadership*, *leadership-as-practice*, and *distributed leadership* are frequently used interchangeably across different studies, yet their theoretical boundaries, analytical levels, and research focuses are not entirely consistent (J. A. Raelin & Robinson, 2022). On the one hand, this conceptual complexity enriches research perspectives; on the other hand, it makes it more difficult to construct a unified body of knowledge. Furthermore, research on leadership practice spans multiple disciplines and application contexts, and there are significant differences among various research communities in terms of theoretical foundations, research methods, and areas of focus, resulting in a body of knowledge characterized by multiple centres and low integration (Dinh et al., 2014). Third, existing review studies tend to focus on a specific leadership style, a particular industry context, or a specific theoretical school, rather than systematically examining the knowledge base, evolutionary trajectory, core network of authors, and research frontiers in the field of leadership practice as a whole (Zheng et al., 2025). Consequently, the academic community currently lacks a clear understanding of the overall knowledge structure in this field and has yet to fully address key questions such as “how it has evolved,” “who has driven its development,” “what core themes it revolves around,” and “where it might be headed in the future.” (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2021; Karakose et al., 2022, 2023)

Given these shortcomings, there is a clear need to conduct a systematic review of research on leadership practice using bibliometric analysis. Compared to traditional narrative reviews, bibliometric analysis employs quantitative methods to reveal the development landscape of a research field in a more systematic and transparent manner (Zupic & Čater, 2015). By analyzing publication trends, citation relationships, co-citation networks, author collaboration networks, keyword co-occurrence, and the evolution of research themes, bibliometric methods can not only identify the core knowledge base of a given field but also reveal its research hotspots, the structure of its academic community, and potential future directions (Yan & Zhiping, 2023). For a field such as leadership practice which is relatively open-ended, draws on diverse research sources, and lacks a fully integrated body of knowledge, bibliometric analysis is particularly well-suited. It helps distil key themes from the vast body of research, identify representative publications, authors, journals, and institutions, and further illustrate the overall development of the field (Farooq, 2023). Based on this, this paper proposes to conduct a systematic bibliometric analysis of research on leadership practice to comprehensively reveal the knowledge structure, evolutionary characteristics, and future research directions in this field. Specifically, this paper aims to answer the following questions: First, what developmental trends does research on leadership practice exhibit over time? Second, which journals, authors, institutions, and articles are the most influential in this field? Third, which knowledge bases and thematic clusters constitute the core structure of this field? Fourth, in which directions are the current research hotspots and emerging frontiers primarily concentrated? By systematically addressing these questions, this paper hopes to provide a more integrated and visualized knowledge landscape for research on leadership practice. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: The next section describes the research design and methods, including data sources, search strategies, sample selection criteria, and bibliometric analysis tools and techniques; this is followed by a presentation of the research results, including publication trends, core sources, key authors and institutions, co-citation networks, collaboration networks, and the evolution of keyword themes; finally, the theoretical implications and practical implications of the findings are discussed, directions for future research are proposed, and the main contributions and limitations of this paper are summarized.

2. Methodology

In this study, Scopus database was selected as the main data source for this study. Although Scopus was established later than Web of Science (Lu et al., 2024), it has a wider range of advantages in terms of disciplinary coverage, geographic distribution (Lu et al., 2025), and diversity of publishing organisations and languages (Dini, 2024). This breadth makes Scopus an important tool for academic information retrieval, research assessment and knowledge graph construction (de Moya-Aneón et al., 2007). Its richness ensures that this study is able to comprehensively cover the core research findings related to leadership practice (Vittorio et al.,

2024). The study is limited to journal articles and does not include conference papers, monograph chapters or other types of publications. Journal articles usually undergo a rigorous peer-review process and are able to present theoretical evolution and methodological innovations in a more systematic way (Di Stefano et al., 2010; Ennas & Di Guardo, 2015). By focusing on journal articles, this paper aims to capture representative theoretical contributions and changes in scholarly thinking in the field (Broccardo et al., 2023). In the process of data analysis, this paper adopts VOSviewer as the main visualisation tool and the data exported by Scopus as the basis. The time range of the selected literature is from January 2015 to April 2026. VOSviewer has the ability to construct literature network mapping, which can visually display information in multiple dimensions such as the number of studies, author collaboration, institutional distribution, country participation, keyword co-occurrence and co-citation structure (Wong, 2018). Through the visualisation of complex literature data, the tool helps to reveal the structural logic and thematic evolution of the research field, providing an intuitive and systematic support for the in-depth understanding of the knowledge structure of the research field of 'leadership' (Ding & Yang, 2022). So, based on those explanation and definition, this study searched the Scopus database for the keyword "leadership practice", and identified 869 articles. The search string is "TITLE-ABS-KEY ("leadership practice" OR "leadership practise") AND PUBYEAR > 2015 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))".

3. Results; For the analysis of the data, two programs were used in this study: Excel 365 and VOSviewer v1.6.20. Initially 869 articles were collected and screened using Excel. This involved organizing the data and ensuring consistency by standardizing author names and keywords with a pre-constructed thesaurus. VOSviewer was used to create a bibliometric network map based on the keywords (van Eck & Waltman, 2023). This map visually represents different classifications in various colors, allowing for a clear and organized presentation of the data.

3.1 Research Trends: Overall, the number of publications in this research field has shown a clear upward trend, indicating that academic interest in this topic is generally on the rise. Specifically, between 2016 and 2018, the annual number of publications remained at a relatively low and stable level, averaging around 50, suggesting that the field was still in a relatively slow phase of development during this period. After 2019, the number of publications began to grow significantly, rising from approximately 52 in 2018 to about 66 in 2019, and further increasing to approximately 72 in 2020, indicating that the field is gradually entering a phase of expansion.

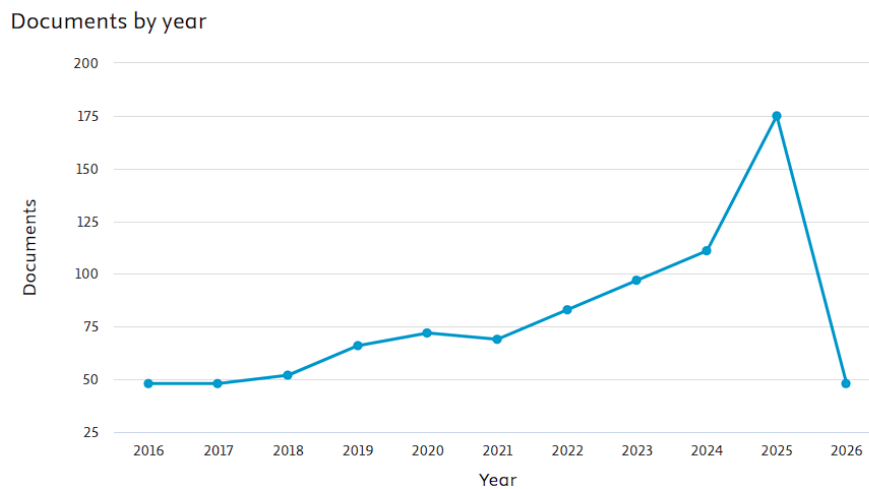


Figure 1 Trends of Research in Leadership Practice

Although the number of publications in 2021 declined slightly from 2020, from approximately 72 to about 69, the overall fluctuation was minor and did not alter the general trend of continued expansion in this field. Since 2022, the number of publications has once again entered a phase of rapid growth, reaching approximately 83 in 2022, increasing to about 97 in 2023, and rising further to approximately 111 in 2024. This indicates that research on leadership practice has continued to gain momentum in recent years and is gradually becoming a key focus in related fields.

It is worth noting that the number of publications reached a peak of approximately 175 in 2025, marking the highest figure throughout the entire observation period. This indicates that the topic garnered significant attention during this phase, with research activity increasing markedly. This upward trend may reflect the fact that leadership practice research is attracting an increasing number of scholars against the backdrop of digital transformation, organizational change, complex situation management, and interdisciplinary integration. In contrast, the number of publications in 2026 showed a marked decline, totaling only about 48. This finding should be interpreted with caution, as the data is likely influenced by factors such as the timing of the statistical collection, incomplete database inclusion, or the fact that annual data has not yet been finalized; therefore, it cannot simply be taken as an indication of a genuine decline in the field's research momentum.

Overall, the figure illustrates that research on leadership practice has evolved from a period of steady growth in its early stages, through gradual expansion in the middle phase, to rapid expansion in recent years. In particular, the increase in the number of publications has become more pronounced since 2022, indicating that the field has entered a relatively active phase of development and holds potential for further deepening and expansion.

3.2 Documents by Author, Affiliation, and Country

As shown in Figure 2, author contributions in the fields of "leadership practice" exhibit a trend of relative dispersion but gradual concentration.

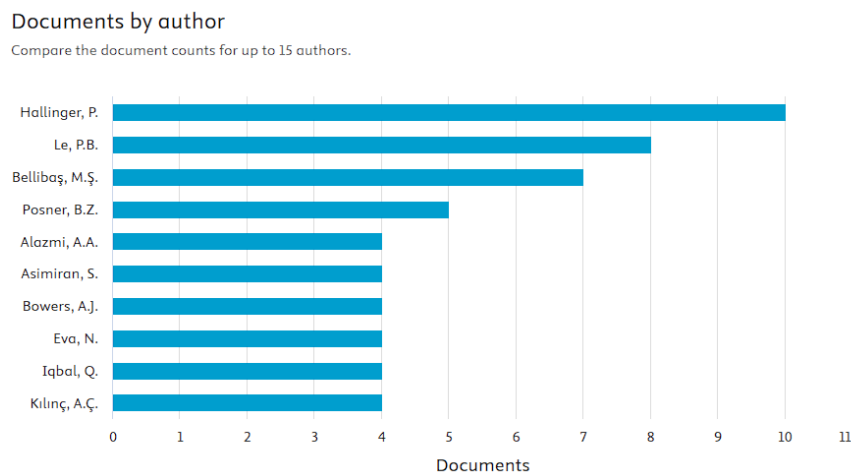


Figure 2 Documents by Author

Overall, a group of highly productive authors has begun to emerge in this field, but there is a noticeable disparity in publication output among them, reflecting a certain degree of hierarchical distribution. Specifically, Hallinger, P. ranks first with 10 publications and is the most active author in this field; Le, P.B. ranks second with 8 publications; Bellibaş, M.Ş., ranks third with 7 publications. This indicates that these scholars possess a high capacity for sustained output in leadership practice research and, to a certain extent, constitute key knowledge producers in this field.

Looking at the second tier, Posner, B.Z. has published five relevant papers, demonstrating a strong level of research engagement. Following them, Alazmi, A.A., Asimiran, S., Bowers, A.J., Eva, N., Iqbal, Q., and Kiling, A.C. each published four papers, indicating that, in addition to a few highly productive authors, there is a relatively stable group of researchers in this field who have collectively driven the advancement of this topic.

From an overall structural perspective, the distribution of authors' publications does not show extreme concentration; however, the lead held by top-ranking authors remains quite significant. There is a substantial gap between the top-ranked author and most of the subsequent authors, suggesting that several core researchers and their academic networks may have already emerged in this field. At the same time, the publication volumes of the subsequent authors are relatively close, indicating that academic contributions to the current research on leadership practice are not entirely monopolized by a small number of authors, but rather exhibit a degree of dispersion and diverse participation.

Documents by affiliation

Compare the document counts for up to 15 affiliations.

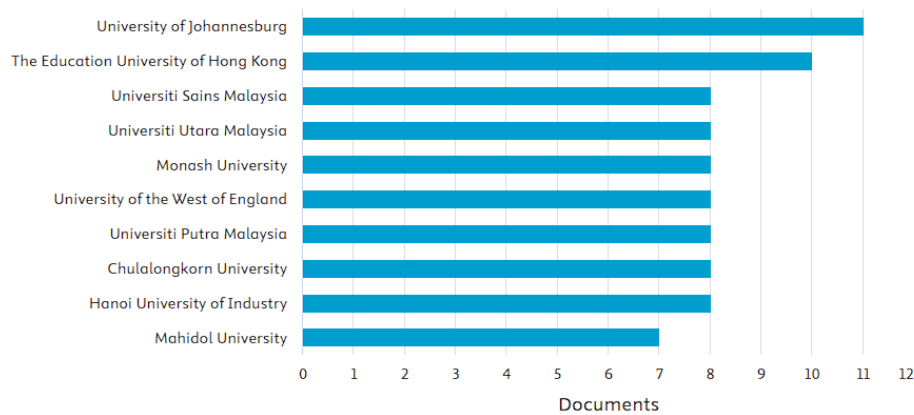


Figure 3 Document by Affiliation

Overall, a relatively distinct group of core institutions has emerged in this field, but the variation in output among these institutions is relatively limited, indicating that knowledge production in this area exhibits a certain degree of polycentric distribution. Specifically, the University of Johannesburg ranks first with 11 publications, making it the most active research institution in this field; The Education University of Hong Kong ranks second with 10 publications, demonstrating strong sustained research capabilities. Following them, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Monash University, the University of the West of England, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Chulalongkorn University, and Hanoi University of Industry each published 8 papers, forming the second tier; Mahidol University closely follows with 7 papers.

In terms of distribution patterns, the gap between leading institutions is not significant. With the exception of the top two institutions, which hold a slight lead, the majority of other institutions have publication outputs concentrated between **7 and 8 papers**. This indicates that research on leadership practice has not yet evolved into a landscape absolutely dominated by a few top institutions, but rather exhibits a relatively decentralized structure of knowledge production characterized by collective participation. This characteristic indicates that the field is highly open, with multiple universities and research institutions continuously contributing relevant findings, collectively driving the expansion and deepening of this research area.

Looking further, the leading institutions are primarily located in Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, though they also include representative universities from Africa and Europe. This indicates that research on leadership practice has attained a certain degree of internationalization, yet research efforts remain relatively concentrated in specific regions. This regional distribution may suggest that the topic receives greater attention in countries and regions where issues related to educational administration, organizational governance, and leadership practice are more prominent; it also reflects how academic communities in different regions are gradually developing their own research strengths.

Overall, research output in this field exhibits distinct variations across countries, with an overall pattern characterized by dominance from English-speaking nations and active participation from Asian countries. Specifically, the United States leads by a wide margin with approximately 150 publications, significantly outpacing other countries. This indicates that the United States holds a dominant position in this research field and serves as the primary source of knowledge production in leadership practice. The United Kingdom ranks second with approximately 100 publications, also demonstrating strong research activity and sustained contribution capacity. The outstanding performance of these two countries illustrates that the English-language academic system continues to hold significant influence and play a leading role in knowledge production within the field of leadership practice.

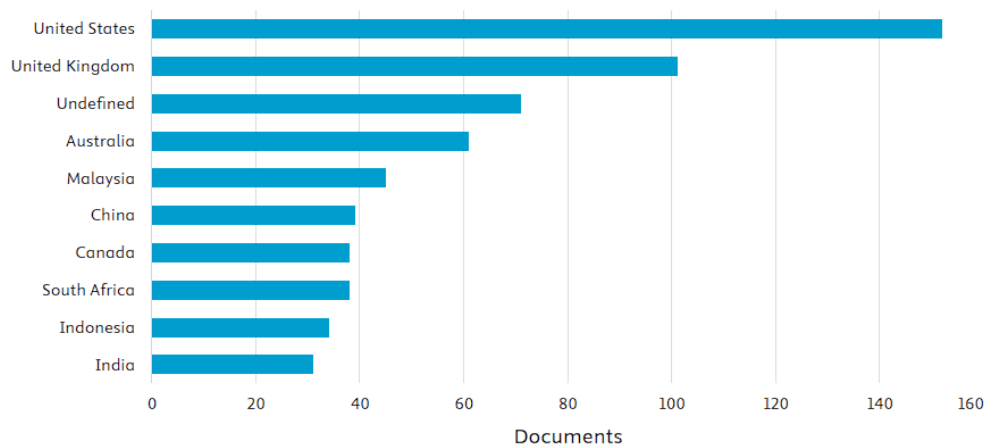


Figure 4 Documents by Country

Overall, the co-occurrence network for this keyword indicates that research on leadership practice has formed a knowledge structure centered on “leadership,” with educational leadership, organizational contexts, traditional leadership styles, and the shift toward practice serving as its main pillars. On the one hand, classical leadership theories continue to form a crucial knowledge foundation in this field; on the other hand, the emergence of keywords such as “distributed leadership,” “relational leadership,” and “leadership-as-practice” indicates that the field is evolving toward a more contextual, process-oriented, and relational direction. This structural characteristic suggests that research on leadership practice not only possesses strong cross-contextual applicability but is also undergoing a process of theoretical deepening, shifting from a style-oriented to a practice-oriented approach and from an individual-oriented to an interaction-oriented perspective.

4 Discussion

This study employs a bibliometric analysis system to examine the developmental trajectory, key contributors, knowledge base, and research frontiers in the field of leadership practice. Overall, the findings indicate that leadership practice has evolved from a relatively fragmented set of topics into a research field characterized by a clear growth trajectory, a core research community, and a multi-thematic structure. However, while the field is expanding rapidly, it also exhibits characteristics such as diverse theoretical origins, uneven application contexts, and asymmetrical regional distribution of knowledge production. Based on this, this paper discusses four research questions.

First, from a temporal perspective, research on leadership practice has generally shifted from a phase of steady accumulation to one of accelerated expansion. The relatively stable number of publications between 2016 and 2018 indicates that the field was still in a relatively slow accumulation phase at that time; since 2019, and particularly since 2022, the growth in publications has accelerated significantly, reflecting that leadership practice has gradually shifted from a marginal topic to a research area receiving greater attention. Reaching a peak in 2025 indicates that the topic has entered a phase of high activity. In contrast, the significant decline in 2026 is more likely attributable to the timing of the data collection and incomplete database coverage, rather than a genuine decline in research interest.

This trajectory indicates that the academic appeal of “leadership practice” is growing. This trend reflects not only shifts in the leadership research paradigm itself but also the ongoing focus within real-world organizational contexts on the question of “how leadership is actually practiced.” As digital transformation, organizational change, crisis management, and cross-boundary collaboration increasingly become the norm in organizational management, scholars find it increasingly difficult to explain complex organizational realities relying solely on traditional frameworks of leadership traits or styles. In contrast, a practice-oriented approach better addresses the contextual embeddedness, interactivity, and dynamism of leadership activities. Therefore, from a developmental perspective, the growth of “leadership practice” is not merely quantitative expansion; rather, it likely signifies a shift in the focus of leadership research from a “leader-centered” to a “practice-process-centered” approach. Second, in terms of knowledge producers, the field has already seen the emergence of distinct core authors, core institutions, and core countries, but overall, it has not yet formed a highly monopolistic and concentrated landscape. At the author level, prolific scholars such as Hallinger, Le, and Bellibaş have become key knowledge producers in the field; at the institutional level, the University of Johannesburg and The Education University of Hong Kong hold relatively leading positions, though the gap in publication output among other institutions is not significant; At the national level, the United States and the United Kingdom clearly dominate, while Australia, Malaysia, China, South Africa, Indonesia, and India also demonstrate sustained participation. In other words, research on leadership practice has formed a production structure that is “core-driven yet open”: on the one hand, there are relatively stable academic leaders; on the other hand, it retains strong characteristics of openness and diverse participation. This structure carries two implications. First, the significant lead held by English-speaking countries—particularly the United States and the United Kingdom—indicates that the field’s theoretical agenda, conceptual definitions, and research norms remain largely influenced by the English-language academic system. This suggests that the current knowledge framework of leadership practice may, to some extent, reflect Western organizational contexts and traditions of educational governance. Second, the continued entry of Asian and Global South countries indicates that the field is undergoing international diffusion of knowledge production. In particular, the emergence of multiple Asian universities and research institutions among the top ranks indicates that leadership practice is no longer merely a niche topic within Western organizational studies but is being reinterpreted and applied across diverse institutional environments and cultural contexts. Therefore, from the perspective of academic discourse, this outcome not only demonstrates that the field has established a relatively clear knowledge hub but also suggests that future research should place greater emphasis on transnational comparisons, validation across institutional contexts, and the reciprocal role of non-Western experiences in shaping theoretical development. Third, as evidenced by the co-occurrence network of keywords, the core structure of leadership practice research is not based on a single theoretical thread, but rather consists of multiple interconnected clusters of knowledge. First, research on classic leadership styles—represented by transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and ethical leadership—continues to form an important knowledge foundation in this field. This indicates that while leadership practice emphasizes practice and process, it has not completely departed from traditional leadership theory; rather, it continues to evolve from existing style-based research toward a more contextual and operational direction. Second, the educational leadership cluster—centered on distributed leadership, instructional leadership, school leadership, and principals—occupies a prominent position, indicating that the educational context, particularly schools and higher education settings, has become one of the most mature and active application areas for leadership practice. Third, the organizational context cluster—represented by organizational culture, job satisfaction, decision-making, trust, and empowerment—indicates that the field is increasingly examining leadership practice in conjunction with organizational culture shaping, employee attitude formation, and organizational outcome variables. Finally, the “practice-relationship shift” cluster, represented by leadership-as-practice and relational leadership, reveals that the field is undergoing significant theoretical deepening: leadership is no longer understood merely as individual influence behavior, but rather as a process-oriented practice jointly constructed through multi-party interactions within specific contexts. This structure indicates that leadership practice is currently in a transitional phase characterized by “the persistence of traditional foundations and an accelerating shift toward practice.” Classic leadership theories provide the field with stable conceptual resources and analytical language, while practice-oriented, relationship-oriented, and distributed perspectives drive it to break free from the framework of leader individualism and shift toward exploring the mechanisms underlying the generation of leadership activities. It is worth noting that educational contexts occupy a prominent position within this entire network; this is both a significant strength and a potential limitation of the field. On the one hand, educational organizations provide rich settings for observing leadership interactions, distributed roles, and practical processes; on the other hand, the highly concentrated nature of the educational field may limit the generalizability of research findings to corporate, entrepreneurial, digital platform, and small and medium-sized enterprise contexts. Therefore, the current knowledge structure indicates that the field has already achieved significant theoretical diversity, but its empirical foundation still needs to be further expanded. Fourth, in terms of current trends and emerging research directions, studies on leadership practice currently focus on four main areas. First, issues related to educational governance and improvement, centered on distributed leadership, instructional leadership, professional development, and school leadership. This indicates that research on leadership practice has established a relatively stable body of knowledge within the field of educational administration, emphasizing how leadership promotes school performance through role distribution, teacher development, and organizational collaboration. Second, issues related to organizational behavior and the workplace, centered on keywords such as organizational culture, job satisfaction, trust, empowerment, and decision-making. This indicates that researchers are increasingly focusing on how leadership practice influences employee attitudes and organizational outcomes through micro-interactions and organizational mechanisms. Third, theoretical innovation topics centered on keywords such as leadership-as-practice, relational leadership, context, and experiential learning. The core focus here is no longer “which leadership style is more effective,” but rather “how leadership-as-practice is co-created in specific contexts.” Fourth, there are contextual application topics linked to COVID-19, the public sector, and higher education, reflecting how leadership practice is being used to explain the complex realities of crisis response, public governance, and higher education management. Looking at emerging trends, the field is likely to continue deepening in three directions. First, the research focus will shift further from static style comparisons to dynamic process mechanisms, with particular attention to how leadership unfolds in interaction, negotiation, empowerment, learning, and meaning-making. Second, research contexts will gradually expand from the educational sector to broader organizational types, particularly corporate organizations, startup teams, digital transformation scenarios, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Third, in terms of research methods, it is necessary to shift from single cross-sectional designs to a combination of multi-level, longitudinal, and process-oriented approaches to better capture the generative and contextual nature of leadership practice. In other words, future research frontiers should not merely stop at identifying “which variables leadership practices are correlated with,” but should further address “through what mechanisms, under what boundary conditions, and on which organizational outcomes leadership practices exert influence.” This represents a crucial step for the field in transitioning from thematic expansion to theoretical maturity.

Overall, this study demonstrates that leadership practice has emerged as a rapidly growing field of knowledge, characterized by three distinct features: first, a rapid increase in publications, indicating strong research vitality; second, a pattern of knowledge production marked by “dominance by English-speaking countries, the rise of Asian nations, and multi-centered institutional participation”; and third, a knowledge structure that encompasses multiple dimensions, including classical leadership theory, educational leadership research, organizational behavior perspectives, and the practice-relationship turn. It is evident, therefore, that the unique value of leadership practice does not lie in simply replacing traditional leadership research, but rather in providing a more explanatory perspective for understanding how leadership activities are enacted, negotiated, and diffused within real organizational contexts.

5 Conclusion

This study employs bibliometric analysis to systematically examine research progress, knowledge producers, and thematic structures in the field of leadership practice. The results indicate that “leadership practice” has evolved from a relatively fragmented research topic into a field characterized by a marked growth trend and a clear thematic structure. In terms of temporal evolution, the field underwent a relatively stable development phase in its early stages, followed by an expansion phase beginning in 2019, and has exhibited even more significant growth since 2022, demonstrating strong academic vitality and sustained expansion potential. Regarding knowledge producers, a research network has formed within the field comprising high-output authors, core institutions, and major countries. However, overall, a highly concentrated monopolistic structure has not yet emerged; instead, the field exhibits a knowledge production pattern characterized by “a prominent core and diverse participation.” In particular, the United States and the United Kingdom dominate the field, while Asian and Global South countries are demonstrating increasing research participation, reflecting the accelerating international diffusion of leadership practice research.

Furthermore, keyword co-occurrence analysis indicates that leadership practice research has formed a multi-thematic knowledge structure centered on “leadership” as the core node. Classic leadership theories—particularly transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and ethical leadership—continue to form the field’s essential knowledge foundation. At the same time, themes such as distributed leadership, instructional leadership, and school leadership highlight the prominent role of the educational context within this field. Additionally, keywords including organizational culture, job satisfaction, trust, empowerment, and decision-making indicate that organizational contexts and workplace outcomes have become significant areas of expansion in leadership practice research. More importantly, the emergence of keywords such as “leadership-as-practice,” “relational leadership,” and “context” reflects the field’s gradual shift from a traditional leadership-style orientation toward a more contextual, relational, and process-oriented research paradigm. This demonstrates that the theoretical value of leadership practice lies not only in expanding the scope of traditional leadership research but also in redefining leadership as a practice process that is co-constructed and dynamically generated within specific organizational contexts. The primary contribution of this paper lies in comprehensively revealing the evolutionary trajectory, knowledge structure, and research hotspots of leadership practice studies, thereby providing a systematic overview for understanding the academic development of this field. Compared to previous research that focused on single leadership styles or specific application scenarios, this study integrates scattered research findings through bibliometric methods to identify the core themes, major research forces, and cutting-edge directions in the field, thus offering a clearer theoretical positioning and research framework for future studies. The findings indicate that leadership practice has gradually evolved into a composite research field that combines traditional theoretical foundations with emerging practical orientations. However, its empirical contexts remain largely concentrated in the education sector. Moving forward, it is necessary to further expand the scope to broader organizational contexts, such as corporate management, startup teams, digital transformation, and small and medium-sized enterprises to enhance the external applicability and explanatory power of theoretical developments in this field. Of course, this study also has certain limitations. First, the literature sample was drawn from specific databases and may not fully cover all relevant research findings; second, although keyword cleaning and standardization improved analytical consistency, they may still be influenced by database indexing methods; third, while bibliometric analysis is better suited for presenting research structures and trends, explanations of theoretical implications and causal mechanisms still require further deepening through systematic content analysis or qualitative reviews. Therefore, future research could further explore the differentiated manifestations and underlying mechanisms of leadership practice across diverse cultural, institutional, and organizational contexts by expanding database sources, optimizing topic identification methods, and integrating multi-method review strategies. Overall, this study demonstrates that leadership practice has emerged as a direction within leadership research with significant theoretical value and sustained growth potential, warranting continued attention from the academic community.

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