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Strategic Leadership: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda

Stratejik Liderlik: Sistematik Literatür Taraması ve Araştırma Gündemi

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the concept of strategic leadership through a systematic literature review, referencing 361 articles indexed in the Web of Science, Scopus, and ScienceDirect databases from 1982 to 2024. First, a bibliometric analysis was performed and the data were visualized using the VOSviewer software. Second, content analysis employing MAXQDA revealed prominent concepts and relationships between them. The results showed that the first study on strategic leadership was published in 1982 and that the number of such publications gradually increased throughout the 1990s. In the 2000s, the concept of strategic leadership expanded due to the impact of technological developments and digitalization, while academic interest reached its peak in the 2020s. The findings further revealed that strategic leadership is often associated with senior managers and that concepts such as innovation and performance are closely related to the study of strategic leadership. While the concept's theoretical roots are in management and organizational behavior, the analysis indicates that the field of education has been a significant and frequent context for its study, alongside recent expansions into psychology and technology. This review concludes that strategic leadership has evolved into a critical capability for ensuring organizational adaptability and long-term competitiveness in turbulent environments. Consequently, future research should explore this concept in cross-cultural settings, digitally intensive industries, and emerging economies to expand theoretical insights and offer practical guidance for organizations facing rapid change.

MAKALE BİLGİSİ

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, 1982-2024 yılları arasında Web of Science, Scopus ve ScienceDirect veri tabanlarında indekslenen 361 makaleyi referans alarak stratejik liderlik kavramını sistematik literatür taraması yoluyla incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. İlk olarak, bibliyometrik analiz gerçekleştirilmiş ve veriler VOSviewer yazılımı kullanılarak görselleştirilmiştir. İkinci olarak, MAXQDA kullanılarak yapılan içerik analizi, öne çıkan kavramları ve bunlar arasındaki ilişkileri ortaya çıkarmıştır. Sonuçlar, stratejik liderlik üzerine ilk çalışmanın 1982 yılında yayınlandığını ve 1990'lar boyunca bu tür yayınların sayısının giderek arttığını göstermiştir. Stratejik liderlik kavramı 2000'li yıllarda teknolojik gelişmelerin ve dijitalleşmenin etkisiyle genişlemiş, akademik ilgi ise 2020'li yıllarda zirveye ulaşmıştır. Bulgular ayrıca, stratejik liderliğin genellikle üst düzey yöneticilerle ilişkilendirildiğini ve inovasyon ve performans gibi kavramların stratejik liderlik çalışmalarıyla yakından ilişkili olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Bu kavramın teorik kökleri yönetim ve örgütsel davranış alanlarında olsa bile, yapılan analiz eğitim alanının bu kavramın incelenmesi için önemli ve sıkça kullanılan bir bağlam olduğunu, ayrıca kavramın son zamanlarda psikoloji ve teknoloji alanlarına da yayıldığını göstermektedir. Bu derleme, stratejik liderliğin, belirsiz ortamlarda örgütsel uyum yeteneğini ve uzun vadeli rekabet gücünü sağlamak için kritik bir yetkinliğe dönüştüğü sonucuna varmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, gelecekteki araştırmalar, kuramsal katkıları genişletmek ve hızlı değişimle karşı karşıya olan organizasyonlar için pratik rehberlik sunmak amacıyla bu kavramı kültürlerarası ortamlarda, dijital yoğunluklu endüstrilerde ve gelişmekte olan ekonomilerde keşfetmelidir.

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1. Introduction

The concept of strategic leadership refers to a leadership approach associated with the long-term strategies and plans of organizations (Elenkov et al., 2005; Vera et al., 2022). Strategic leaders are not only concerned with the execution of current activities but also contribute to the achievement of organizational goals by anticipating future threats and opportunities (Hitt et al., 1994). They set the direction of the organization and ensure its sustainability by making the right decisions, even in complex and uncertain environments. Strategic leadership is particularly important for top managers, CEOs, and others in critical leadership positions (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000; Van Doorn et al., 2023). These leaders not only make strategic decisions but also demonstrate the leadership skills necessary to ensure that these decisions are accepted and implemented throughout the organization. Strategic leadership represents a critical competency enabling organizations to gain a competitive advantage, adapt to market changes, and succeed in the long term (Agyapong & Boamah, 2013; Hunitie, 2018). By clearly defining the organization's mission and vision, this leadership model ensures that all members are motivated to achieve the set goals. In addition, strategic leaders possess the ability to constantly monitor changes in the organization's internal and external environments, adjusting their strategic direction accordingly (Rowe, 2001).

Strategic leadership has become increasingly important as globalization and technological change intensify competition. It has become necessary for organizations to employ leaders able to cope with uncertainty in environments undergoing intense turbulence. Therefore, there has been a notable rise in the number of academic texts on strategic leadership, and the literature on this area has also expanded by spreading into different disciplines and fields of application. Although strategic leadership is a broad concept, it involves creating a vision, communicating that vision to its members, and organizing resources within the framework of that vision (Carter & Greer, 2013; Hitt et al., 1994). While strategic leaders ensure that their organizations move in the right direction in environments of great uncertainty, they also help their organizations achieve their long-term goals. In this context, strategic leaders can be understood to focus on sustainable growth (Dyer & Dyer, 2017; Strand, 2014).

While the growing body of research on strategic leadership underscores the concept's relevance, it has also led to a vast and fragmented literature. This situation creates a clear need for a comprehensive study that maps the field from a holistic perspective, systematically revealing the main trends, intellectual structure, and existing research gaps. Motivated by the desire to fill this evident gap, this study primarily aimed to conduct an extensive literature review focusing on strategic leadership. Within this scope, employing the systematic literature review method, the study examined the distribution of strategic leadership studies by publication year, identified contributing authors, highlighted the most commonly used keywords, noted the journals where these studies were published, and explored researchers' approaches to the topic. In addition to all these analyses, the study sought to identify deficiencies in the current literature and to propose recommendations for future research.

This study adopted a systematic literature review methodology, following a predefined structure. The initial step involved a comprehensive delineation of the strategic leadership concept, aiming to establish the fundamental tenets and scope of the subject matter. Subsequently, a framework necessary for applying the systematic literature review with a specific focus was established. The adopted methodology was then explained and analyzed within this framework. Following this, the dataset was generated, and the analysis results were explained in detail. These findings were then discussed and compared with the existing literature. Finally, after a thorough evaluation of all available data, gaps in the existing literature were identified, and suggestions for future research directions were put forth.

2. Conceptual Framework

Strategic leadership is a leadership approach that involves determining the long-term plans and visions of organizations, creating the strategic plans necessary to achieve these goals, and implementing these plans in the most appropriate way (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Strategic leadership is also regarded as a process in which leaders set extended objectives that shape the organization's future and determine strategies for sustainable success (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). It also requires a leader's aptitude to create compelling forward thinking within the organization, to create an environment that encourages innovation (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004), and to mobilize the entire organization by communicating the vision throughout the organization in line with its goals (Rowe, 2001). Strategic leaders direct and manage the changes necessary to achieve organizational goals and strive for alignment between internal and external stakeholders (Crossan et al., 2008).

Strategic leadership shouldn't be limited to senior managers; it should be embraced by every manager as it empowers organizations to continuously adapt and grow in dynamic and competitive environments (Quong & Walker, 2010). Strategic leaders employ critical thinking and strategic planning skills to manage uncertainty and complexity, identify opportunities, and proactively respond to threats (Finkelstein et al., 2009).

The scope of strategic leadership is extensive, covering activities from defining the organizational vision to setting strategic goals and mobilizing the necessary resources to achieve those aims. This process requires the continuous involvement and support of stakeholders, necessitating a multidimensional set of interaction and communication skills (Quong & Walker, 2010; Vera & Crossan, 2004).

Crucially, strategic leadership enables organizations to adapt to dynamic markets and focus on a course of action that will ensure their long-term success (Boal & Schultz, 2007). Furthermore, strategic leadership requires the alignment of key stakeholders. Strategic leaders integrate an organization's vision with a discerning comprehension of the elements requisite for collective success (Hitt et al., 2010; Semler, 1997). In high-stakes situations, strategic leaders make confident decisions while remaining open to change. By balancing flexibility with consistency, they strengthen organizational resilience (Cannella & Monroe, 1997). Moreover, strategic leaders actively promote a culture of empowerment, innovation, and open

communication. This facilitates problem-solving and knowledge sharing while enhancing collective resilience (Simsek et al., 2018).

The importance of strategic leadership becomes particularly apparent in environments of rapid technological advancements, globalization, and shifts in market dynamics. This leadership style fosters innovation, organizational adaptability, and flexibility, thereby contributing to long-term competitive advantage. Strategic leaders are equipped to initiate the strategic moves necessary to realize their organizations' vision, making them a valuable asset (Salmoni et al., 2010; Simsek et al., 2015).

Different perspectives have discussed the characteristics and necessary competencies of strategic leaders. Schoemaker et al. (2013, p. 132) posited that the ability to "anticipate, challenge, interpret, decide, align, and learn" constitutes the most crucial capabilities of strategic leaders. In a recent publication, Samimi et al. (2022) proposed that strategic leaders should possess the ability to perform the following eight core functions: strategic decision-making, communication with external stakeholders, human resource management, motivation, knowledge management, supervision of activities, management of social and ethical issues, and managing conflicting demands.

Initial academic inquiries into strategic leadership began in the 1980s within the domains of management and business studies (Hosmer, 1982; Pink, 1988; Van der Merwe & Van der Merwe, 1985). The concept has since evolved in response to the increasing complexity and globalization of the business environment. While the term 'leadership' focuses on personal qualities and motivations, the addition of the word 'strategic' indicates a shift towards the development and implementation of long-term plans, particularly in competitive contexts (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000; Carter & Greer, 2013). Recent studies underline new directions for strategic leadership, including digital transformation (Hoessler & Carbon, 2024), dynamic capabilities in SMEs (Quansah et al., 2022), and gender-related differences in leadership effectiveness (Zhang et al., 2022). These perspectives expand the traditional understanding of the concept.

3. Methodology

A systematic literature review is a research approach that rigorously examines published studies systematically and comprehensively to answer a specific research question (Lame, 2019). This process involves identifying, selecting, appraising, and interpreting all available evidence on the topic. A systematic literature review is employed to address research questions, test hypotheses, and contribute to decision-making in such diverse areas as policy-making and clinical practice guidelines (Xiao & Watson, 2019). In the present study, strategic leadership was examined in detail and the method of a systematic literature review was chosen to comprehensively evaluate strategic leadership. The systematic literature review guide proposed by Kitchenham (2004) was used to structure and frame the study for the current research, a structured process was followed based on the information obtained from both the relevant study (Kitchenham, 2004) and the literature (Kitchenham et al., 2009; Thomé et al., 2016; Xiao & Watson, 2019). This process involved the following steps:

- Identification of research questions

- Development of a review protocol

- Conducting searches in the identified databases

- Selection of primary studies

- Data extraction and analysis

- Integration of analyzed data

- Reporting of the analysis

Although this structure provides an overview of the entire study, each step is comprised of distinct components. Furthermore, the reporting of this systematic review adheres to the standards set forth by the PRISMA (Page et al., 2021) statement, which is highly regarded in the academic literature.

3.1. Research Questions

This study aimed to carry out a review of the existing literature on strategic leadership, seeking to identify research trends, prominent themes, and academic contributions in this field. Additionally, by analyzing the development of strategic leadership studies over time, the present study aimed to reveal how this topic is addressed in different sectors and disciplines, as well as determine potential avenues for further investigation. The research questions identified as falling within the scope of this study's objectives are as follows:

Research Question 1: How have academic studies on strategic leadership evolved over time?

Research Question 2: What are the most frequently studied concepts and themes in strategic leadership literature?

Research Question 3: On which disciplines do studies on strategic leadership focus?

Research Question 4: Who are the most cited authors in strategic leadership and do networks of collaboration exist between authors?

Research Question 5: How have different authors defined strategic leadership?

3.2. Document Search Protocol

As Kitchenham (2004) asserts, creating a document search protocol will facilitate a more objective and higher-quality process by eliminating bias. Therefore, prior to commencing the document search process, a protocol was formulated to direct the research. The document search process was then conducted in accordance with the information outlined in this protocol (Table 1).

A crucial stage in performing a systematic literature review is choosing the appropriate database(s) for the research. In the present study, databases were chosen that have both a widespread network and high-quality journals. Accordingly, the decision was made to search for documents in the Web of Science, Scopus, and ScienceDirect databases. Web of Science (WOS) and Scopus are the most prominent academic databases, both widely utilized in literature reviews and encompassing publications across various disciplines (Chadegani et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2018). The three classical citation indices provided by Web of Science (WoS)-Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE), Social

Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI)- are broadly accepted and preferred by the academic community (Zhu & Liu, 2020). However, Scopus provides access to more resources than Web of Science, especially in certain fields such as engineering and biomedical research, and offers a wider range of journals (Singh et al., 2021). These two databases play an essential role in assessing the number of citations and impact factors of scholarly works, data which aid in quantitatively evaluating the impact of a given study on the scientific community (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). The decision to include the ScienceDirect database was based on two pillars. Primarily, its inclusion was a strategic choice because this database hosts many of the most influential and highly cited journals in fields central to the study of strategic leadership, such as management, business, and social sciences. Secondly, this decision was also supported by the fact that the database offers a wide range of disciplines and hosts thousands of peer-reviewed journals (Tober, 2011). Therefore, the inclusion of ScienceDirect is a deliberate methodological choice that ensures the scanning of relevant publications in key journals in the field and undertakes a complementary role to the main databases. All three databases were selected for this study due to their effectiveness in providing comprehensive literature searches and high-quality scientific content. These platforms offer rich resources for interdisciplinary research. Consequently, their inclusion broadens and deepens the scope of the review.

Table 1. Document search protocol

Database	Year	Language	Subject Area	Document Type	Keywords for Searching
Web of Science Scopus ScienceDirect	1980-2024	English	All	Article, Review	Strategic Leadership Strategic Leader Strategy and Leader Strategy or Leader

The selection of keywords represents a crucially important element in the document retrieval process. Keywords are considered a critical factor in systematic literature reviews and impact all aspects of such studies (Wanden-Berghe & Sanz-Valero, 2012). In this study, the keywords "strategic leadership", "strategic leader", "strategic leaders" (with and/or combinations) were used.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The establishment of transparent and rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria constitutes a fundamental phase in a systematic literature review (Grant & Booth, 2009). These criteria provide a framework for selecting relevant studies, thereby increasing the objectivity and replicability of the process (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). In this review, the criteria ensured that the focus remained on empirical explorations, theoretical models, and meta-studies that directly advance the understanding of strategic leadership.

Because the notion of strategic leadership has been extensively examined since the 1980s (e.g. Hosmer, 1982; Kamp & Graf-Vlachy, 2024; Nicholls, 1994; Strand, 2014; Vera & Crossan, 2004), the period selected for the article search was 1980-2024. English, widely accepted in the scientific literature, was chosen as the research language due to its broad accessibility and rich content pool. As no specific field or sector was identified, all fields were taken into account in the search. Documents included in the analysis were categorized as scientific articles and reviews; documents with other characteristics (e.g., books, book chapters, book reviews, etc.) were excluded. Table 2 outlines the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria guiding the literature selection for this systematic review

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria		Exclusion Criteria	
IC1-Language of Study	The study must be written in English.	**EC1-Language of Study**	The study is not written in English.
IC2- Publication status	The study should be in the form of an article.	**EC2-Non-Article Publication Types**	The publication is in a format other than an article, such as a book, thesis, or report.
IC3-Peer-Reviewed	The article has undergone a peer-review process.	**EC3-Lack of Peer Review**	The study is published in a journal that does not employ peer review.
IC4-Database Listing	The study must be listed in one of the specified three databases (Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect).	**EC4-Outside Publication Period**	The study was not published between the years 1980 and 2024.
IC5-Publication Period	The study should have been published between the years 1980 and 2024.	**EC5-Restricted Access**	The study is not openly accessible.
IC6-Access Availability:	The study must be openly accessible.	**EC6- Not Clearly Focused on Strategic Leadership**	Articles that do not clearly focus on the concept of strategic leadership.
IC7-Types of Studies	The study should be either theoretical or empirical.	**EC7-Title or Abstract**	Not containing the concepts of "strategic leadership" or "strategic leader" in the title or abstract.
IC8-Title or Abstract	The terms "strategic leader" or "strategic leadership" must be present in the title or abstract of the study.	**EC8- Insufficient Focus on Strategic-Level Leadership**	Studies that do not adequately concentrate on leadership at the strategic level.
IC9-Focus on Strategic Leadership Concept	The study should primarily focus on the concept of strategic leadership.	**EC9- Unpublished Studies**	Studies that have not been officially published.
		EC10-Gray Literature	This includes corporate white papers and similar types of gray literature.

3.4. Document Identification

The PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021) was used to identify documents, following a five-step process. Inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2) were applied throughout the process. In the first stage, three main databases were searched, utilizing the keywords listed in Table 1. A total of 870 documents were accessed from the Web of Science database, 935 from the Scopus database, and 2,012 from the ScienceDirect database. All these documents were transferred to the Endnote 21 program. As a result of the first check, 362 documents were found to be duplicates. These documents were then removed from the list and the analysis continued with the remaining 3,455 documents. In the subsequent analysis, 1,882 documents were excluded by

automation based on the exclusion criteria EC1, EC2, EC3, and EC10. In the second phase, the remaining 1,573 articles were analyzed. Since these articles had to be written with a focus on strategic leadership, the article titles and abstracts were analyzed. This process identified 1,190 articles that failed to meet the inclusion criteria. In the next step, 383 articles were reviewed, of which 8 could not be accessed, hence these articles were excluded from the list. In the fourth stage, 375 articles were examined, and the exclusion criteria EC4, EC6, and EC9 were applied. This resulted in a final total of 361 articles that met the inclusion criteria, which were then reviewed in detail. All of these articles were considered eligible and were made available for analysis. Figure 1 illustrates the entire process using the PRISMA (2020) flow diagram (Page et al., 2021)
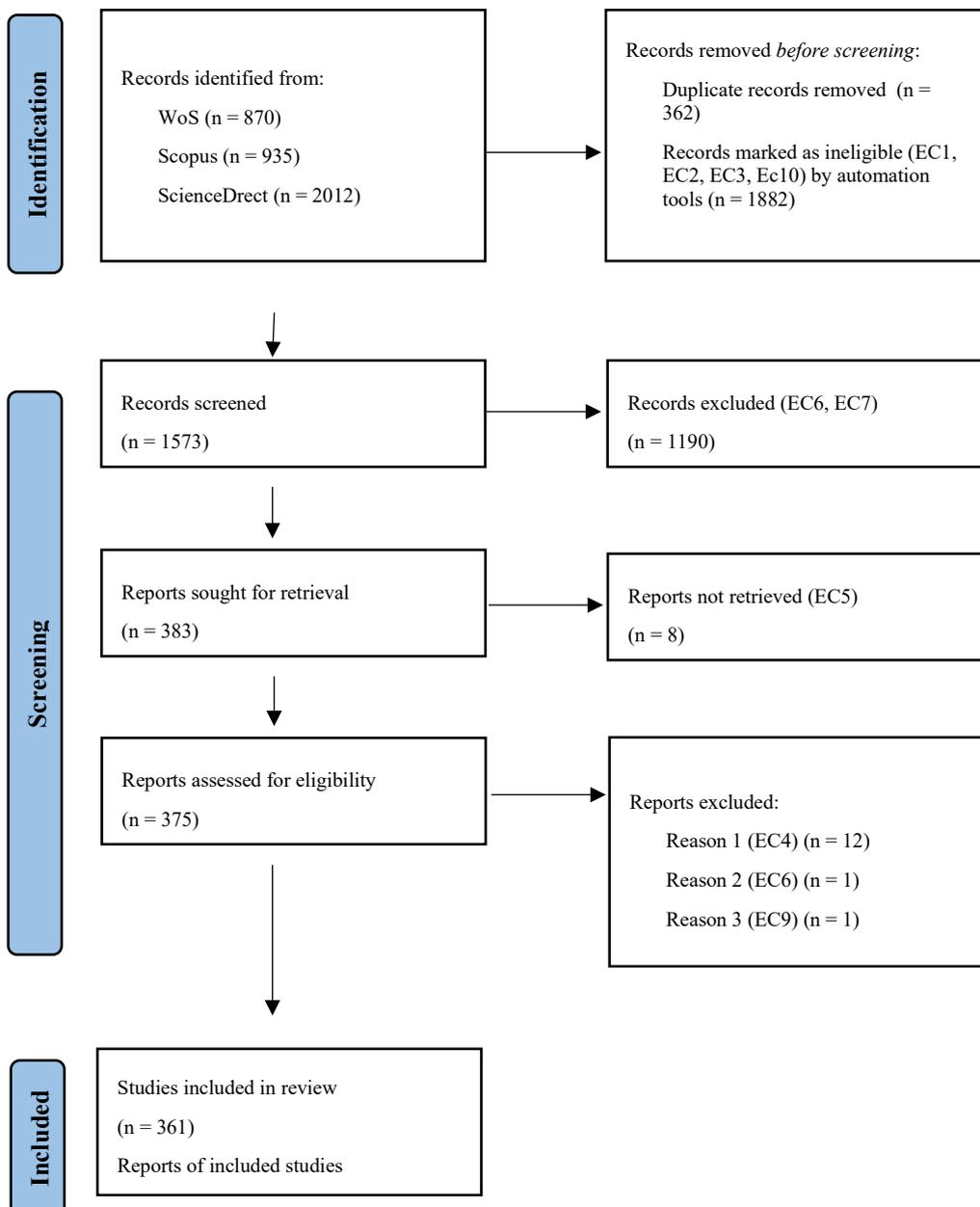
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Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram

4. Findings

The 361 articles selected from the three databases (WoS, Scopus, and ScienceDirect) identified according to the

criteria specified in Figure 1 were brought together for analysis, and a unique code was assigned to each article. It was decided to apply bibliometric analysis and content

analysis, which are commonly used (Gumus et al., 2018; Linnenluecke et al., 2020; Stechemesser & Guenther, 2012), to conduct a comprehensive analysis. The findings section is presented under two separate headings (bibliometric analysis and content analysis), in order to present the information obtained from these two analyses.

4.1. Bibliometric Analysis

Bibliometrics involves the quantitative analysis and measurement of publications (Donthu et al., 2021). This approach helps researchers gain insight into the structure and evolution of scientific literature by examining the number of publications, the volume of citations, collaborations between authors, the journals in which the publications appear, and their geographical distribution (Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015). Bibliometric analysis offers a tool for uncovering trends within the literature, identifying the most influential studies, and recognizing important research centers. It has also been utilized by numerous authors to share their findings in systematic literature reviews (e.g., Gorges & Holz-Rau, 2021; Gumus et al., 2018; Stechemesser & Guenther, 2012).

4.1.a. Publication Distribution by Year and Leading Journals

The temporal distribution of publications serves as an important indicator of the evolution and maturity of the literature. To examine this progression, a year-based analysis of publication trends was conducted. The findings indicate that the concept of strategic leadership has been explored since the early 1980s. The earliest known study on this topic is attributed to Hosmer (1982), which underscored the importance of strategic leadership. During this initial phase, the number of related publications remained limited. From the mid-1990s onward, however, a steady increase in publication output was observed. Despite a minor decline in the 2000s, scholarly attention to the topic continued to grow. Entering the 2020s, academic interest reached its peak, accompanied by a notable surge in the volume of publications.

Figure 2 illustrates the changes in the number of academic publications between 1982 and 2024 and how this field has trended; the increases and decreases over the years indicate how academic interest has changed during this period. In the 2020s especially, there has been a notable surge in publications, underscoring the topic's current significance and relevance.
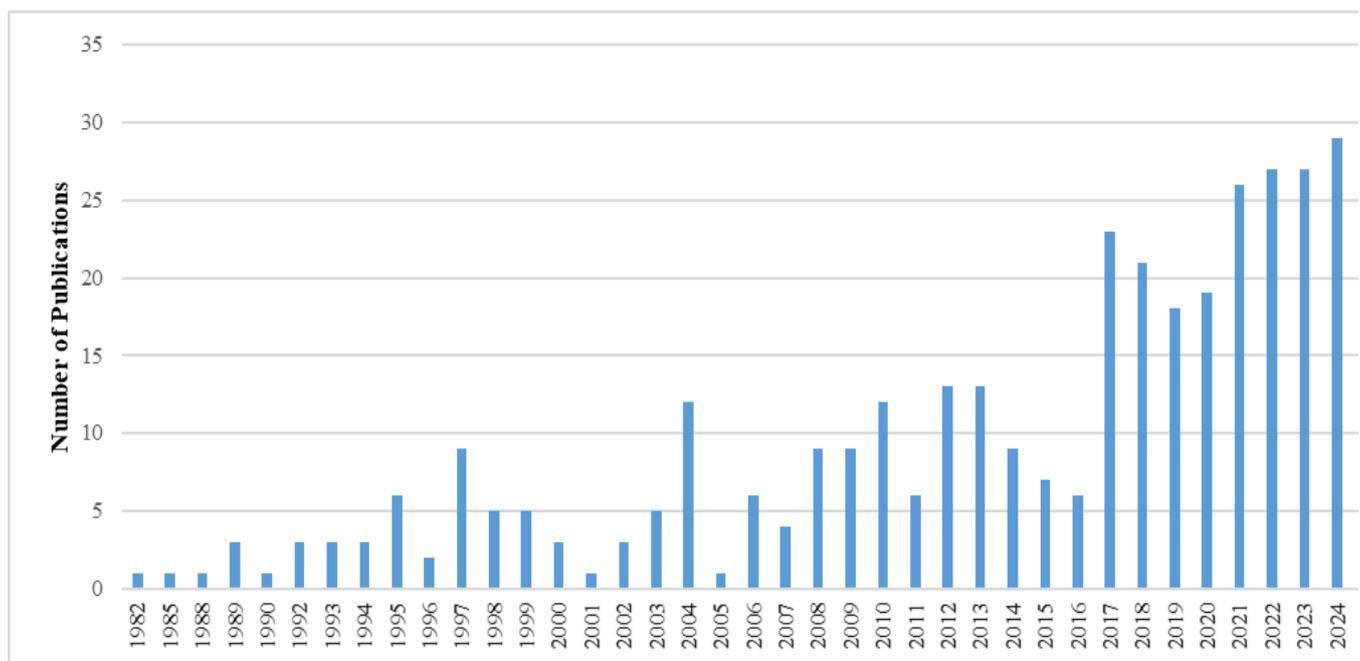
Fig. 2. Publications per year (1982-2024)

Table 3. Journals in Which the Strategic Leadership Articles Were Published

Journal name	1980-1984	1985-1989	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2015-2019	2020-2024	Total
Leadership Quarterly	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	1	4	10
Long Range Planning	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	3	9
Academy of Management Executive	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	5
Journal of Business Ethics	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	0	0	5
Leadership & Organization Development Journal	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	5
Strategy & Leadership	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	0	0	5
Journal of Management	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2	5
Leadership	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
Strategic Management Journal	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	4
Academy of Management Review	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	3

A review of the journals in which studies on strategic leadership are published helped in determining the distribution of this topic in academic literature and the leading journals. To that end, an evaluation of journals with the highest publication counts on strategic leadership was undertaken to assess the impact and importance of these journals on the subject. Table 3 presents the number of publications by journal, with Leadership Quarterly and Long Range Planning standing out as those featuring the largest number of publications on strategic leadership. These journals contain a considerable share of the academic studies on strategic leadership and are among the most prestigious journals in their field.

4.1.b. Most Cited Articles

The articles cited the most frequently within the realm of strategic leadership represent the most influential studies on this subject in the academic literature, hence those articles underwent analysis. Since articles from three different databases Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Scopus were included, the number of citations was analyzed based on these databases. However, Google Scholar was also used for citation counts, as it was thought to be a more comprehensive source. Table 4 presents the ten most frequently cited articles. Both Google Scholar and Web of Science numbers are provided in the citation count.

Table 4. Most cited articles

Title of Article	Authors	Year	Journal	Citation: Google Scholar-WoS
Strategic leadership and organizational learning	Vera & Crossan	2004	Academy of Management Review	2581-723
Strategic leadership for exploration and exploitation: The moderating role of environmental dynamism	Jansen et al.	2009	The Leadership Quarterly	1422-511
Strategic leadership research: Moving on	Boal & Hooijberg	2000	The Leadership Quarterly	1716-332
Achieving and maintaining strategic competitiveness in the 21st century: The role of strategic leadership	Ireland & Hitt	1999	Academy of Management Executive	1365-339
Strategic leadership and executive innovation influence: An international multi-cluster comparative study	Elenkov et al.	2005	Strategic Management Journal	962-267
Governance and strategic leadership in entrepreneurial firms	Daily et al.	2002	Journal of Management	645-220
Storytelling, time, and evolution: The role of strategic leadership in complex adaptive systems	Boal & Schultz	2007	The Leadership Quarterly	654-127
Using meta-analytic structural equation modeling to advance strategic management research: Guidelines and an empirical illustration via the strategic leadership-performance relationship	Bergh et al.	2016	Strategic Management Journal	343-211
Creating wealth in organizations: The role of strategic leadership	Rowe	2001	Academy of Management Executive	936-119
Contrasting perspectives on strategic leaders: Toward a more realistic view of top managers	Cannella & Monroe	1997	Journal of Management	618-169

4.1.c. Author Collaborations and Networks

The practice of author collaboration in strategic leadership research exemplifies the collective nature of scholarly work and the intensity of academic interactions. Author collaboration and network analysis enable the identification of the most influential researchers, the delineation of patterns of collaboration, and the mapping of research communities within a given field. This analysis illuminates the most frequent instances of author collaboration, the nature of intensive intergroup collaboration, and the impact of such collaborations on scientific output. Visualizing and analyzing author collaborations helps to clarify academic interactions within the field of strategic leadership. This analysis also serves to identify potential avenues for future research. Across the 361 articles included in this analysis, contributions came from a total of 690 authors. The number of authors contributing to three or more publications was analyzed. Table 5 lists the names of these authors, the number of publications they contributed to, and their total link strength. The VOSviewer software was employed to analyze the total link strengths. Examination of the table reveals that nine authors contributed to more than two articles. In co-authorship network analysis, 'total link strength' is a metric that indicates the total strength of an

author's collaborative connections with other authors in the dataset; a higher value signifies stronger or more numerous co-authorship ties. Prof. Dusya Vera has the highest total link strength (10), which identifies her as a key hub of collaboration within this research network.

Table 5. Key authors and their publication metrics

Authors	Number of Journal	Total link strength
Michael A. Hitt	6	8
Dusya Vera	5	10
Zeki Simsek	4	3
Mary Crossan	3	4
Brent Davies	3	2
Ciaran Heavey	3	2
Kelly A. Phipps	3	2
Hairuddin Mohd Ali	3	0
Skip Worden	3	0

To achieve a deeper insight into the interconnections among authors, all 690 were subjected to analysis. Figure 3 presents a network analysis conducted using the VOSviewer software, illustrating the networks between the 690 authors. This map offers important clues for understanding the collaborative structure of the field. The 'clusters' shown in different colors on the map represent research groups that publish together frequently and have strong ties among

them. For instance, the large and interconnected clusters formed by authors like Hitt, M.A., and Vera, D. in the center of the map demonstrate how central their role is in the field's

collaborative network. In contrast, the smaller and more isolated groups on the periphery of the map indicate less integrated or more self-contained research circles.
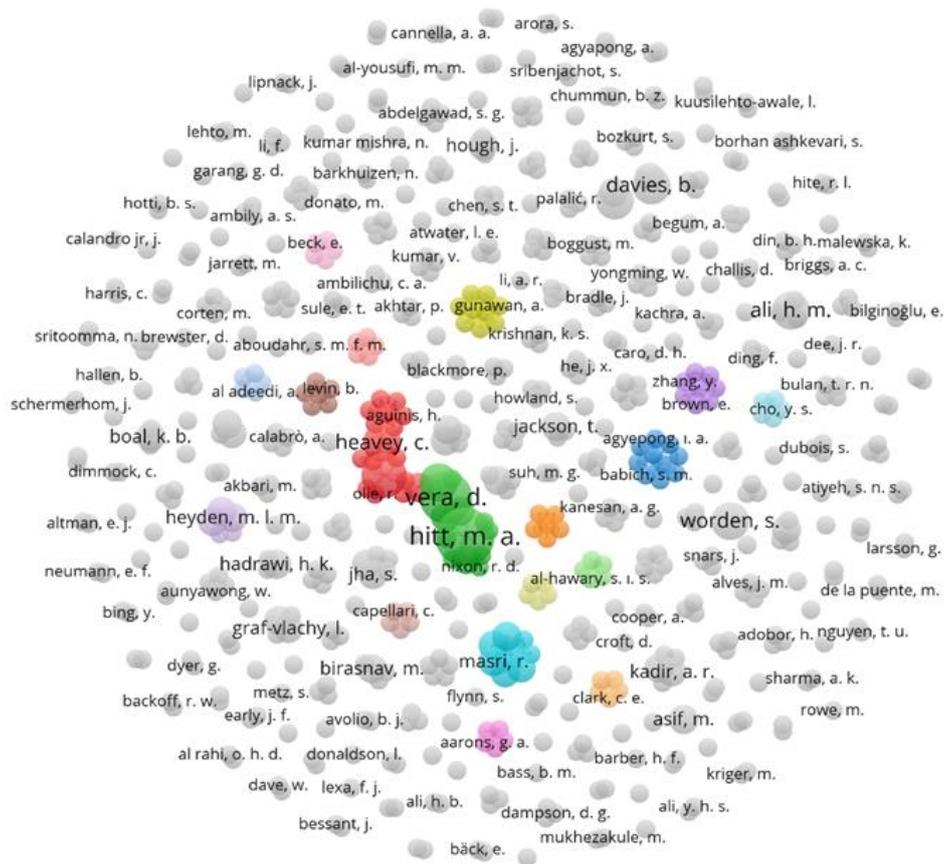
Fig. 3. Author collaborations and networks

4.1.d. Results of Keyword Analysis

The analysis of keywords can assist in the identification of significant concepts, trends, and focal points within this field of study. Keywords encapsulate the principal topics and content of research articles. Hence, keyword analysis enables the elucidation of prevailing trends, the identification of the most popular research areas, and the delineation of prospective research directions within the corpus of literature on strategic leadership. Furthermore, it can facilitate comprehension of the shared interests and collaborative relationships between research communities. Therefore, the keywords identified in the articles were also subjected to analysis; those keywords analyzed using the VOSviewer are illustrated in Figure 4. The analysis yielded 1,289 keywords, among which a total of 40, repeated at least seven times in different publications, were selected for further examination.

The map in Figure 4 visually represents the intellectual structure of the field, showing a large, dense cluster around 'business & economics' and 'performance', and a distinct, though connected, cluster around 'psychology' and 'upper echelons'. The relative distance of the 'education &

educational research' cluster suggests that while the topic is popular in this field, it may be less integrated with the core management and business literature.

A total of 1,289 keywords were identified, with the term "business & economics" emerging as the most frequent. The ten most commonly occurring keywords, along with their respective total link strengths, are presented in Table 6. In keyword co-occurrence analysis, 'total link strength' indicates how frequently a keyword appears alongside other keywords in the dataset, thus revealing its centrality and integrative role within the literature. A higher total link strength suggests a concept is a central hub connecting many different themes. The total link strength column in Table 6 provides a direct measure of conceptual centrality. The findings show that after the primary theme of "Business & economics" (373), concepts such as "Performance" (158), Leadership (132), and "Upper echelons" (122) are the most integral themes, indicating they are highly interconnected with a diverse range of other topics in the strategic leadership literature.

Fig. 4. Keyword analysis (40 keywords)

Table 6. The most common keywords in strategic leadership articles

Keywords	Occurrences	Total link strength
Business & economics	127	373
Leadership	54	132
Performance	34	158
Psychology	23	75
Education & educational research	22	19
Upper echelons	21	122
Management	20	88
Innovation	18	85
Transformational leadership	17	83
Firm performance	13	58

4.2. Results of Content Analysis

In this study, content analysis allowed for a systematic examination of the key elements of the literature on the issues focused on by researchers. Content analysis using the MAXQDA software proved instrumental in comprehending the diverse approaches and prevailing trends. A total of 361 articles in the Endnote software were examined by assigning them to the MAXQDA. A keyword analysis was performed, combining related keywords and subsequently identifying the 15 most common keywords. The frequency with which these keywords co-occurred in the same publications was then analyzed. Table 7 shows the 15 most commonly recurring keywords and their co-occurrence levels. The most frequently recurring keywords, "Strategic Leadership" and "Business & Economics", were employed quite often (56 times) in the same articles.

Table 7. Co-occurrence of the most frequent keywords in strategic leadership literature

Code system	Strategic Leadership	Business & Economics	Leadership	Performance	Management	Education	Top Management	Organization	Innovation	Corporate	Upper Echelon	CEO	Psychology	Competition	Decision
Strategic Leadership	0	56	14	21	14	10	18	18	13	11	16	11	10	16	6
Business & Economics	56	0	18	27	21	1	23	16	20	20	22	19	22	9	11
Leadership	14	18	0	7	9	4	3	11	6	7	3	3	1	4	7
Performance	21	27	7	0	9	1	10	6	12	6	9	6	6	4	1
Management	14	21	9	9	0	2	5	5	8	6	7	7	6	2	6
Education	10	1	4	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Top Management	18	23	3	10	5	1	0	6	5	8	14	12	6	1	5
Organization	18	16	11	6	5	0	6	0	3	5	7	5	5	2	3
Innovation	13	20	6	12	8	1	5	3	0	6	3	4	2	6	1
Corporate	11	20	7	6	6	0	8	5	6	0	7	5	3	2	1
Upper Echelon	16	22	3	9	7	0	14	7	3	7	0	15	8	1	3
CEO	11	19	3	6	7	0	12	5	4	5	15	0	7	1	3
Psychology	10	22	1	6	6	0	6	5	2	3	8	7	0	2	2
Competition	16	9	4	4	2	0	1	2	6	2	1	1	2	0	0
Decision	6	11	7	1	6	0	5	3	1	1	3	3	2	0	0

In the context of content analysis, the article abstracts were subjected to examination, and an analysis was undertaken based on the identified keywords. The objective of this analysis was to ascertain the frequency of occurrence of words in article abstracts and to identify the contexts in which these words were used. The MAXQDA was employed for the purpose of analysis. In this context, each article abstract (361 articles) was subjected to examination through the program, with prominent words identified and categorized in a manner that reflected the general theme of the article. Furthermore, the frequency of occurrence of these words was not the sole focus of the analysis; their contextual meaning was also subjected to examination. This approach enabled the identification of the principal topics under discussion and the manner in which they were addressed in the publications. A word cloud was employed to facilitate the visual representation of the analysis of the distribution and frequency of words, thereby enhancing clarity (Figure 4). Consequently, a word-focused analysis was conducted by examining the article abstracts within the scope of content analysis, thereby elucidating the themes that shaped the articles.

Fig. 5. Word cloud prepared by analyzing article abstracts

The manner in which strategic leadership is approached and defined by various authors also represents a major topic of inquiry. Following the criteria established for the article review, Hosmer (1982) was identified as the first author to publish research on this subject. He differentiated between leadership and management, emphasizing that understanding the difference between these two concepts is important for achieving success. On this basis, strategic leadership was explained as a coherent developmental approach. Hosmer (1982) defined strategic leadership as determining the direction and purpose of an organization and developing a coherent strategy accordingly. This constitutes a comprehensive process ranging from strategy selection based on factors such as environmental opportunities, organizational assets, individual values, and attitudes, to the implementation of said strategy. Nutt & Backoff (1993) evaluated strategic leadership from the perspective of organizational transformation in the long term. According to them, strategic leaders clearly define the objectives of the organization and seek to involve others in the transformation process by making significant changes in the organization. Such objectives often require a lasting commitment, and the entire ecosystem must be considered when planning change at the organizational level. Thus, strategic leadership may be considered a directive process aimed at implementing new strategies. Hitt et al. (1994) associated effective strategic leadership with employees adapting to change within the framework of a strategic leader's vision. Change should not be viewed as a single event, but rather as an ongoing process with a dynamic structure involving efforts to ensure coherence among the components of the vision, communicate continuously, and maintain commitment to the vision. Boal & Hooijberg (2000) explained strategic leadership in terms of interactions with stakeholders used not only to manage current uncertainties but also to prepare for future opportunities and risks. Elenkov et al. (2005) also discussed strategic leadership in the context of a vision for the future, as a process for sharing said vision and interacting with relevant stakeholders. According to Davies & Davies (2006, p. 123), strategic leaders are involved in the following five core activities: "direction setting, translating strategy into action, enabling the staff to develop and deliver the strategy, determining effective intervention points, developing strategic capabilities". Samimi et al. (2022) associated strategic leadership with senior executives, with the former consisting of a set of actions performed by these employees. Table 8 shows the definitions of strategic leadership by different authors.

Table 8. Definitions of strategic leadership from various authors

Author(s)	Definition
Hosmer (1982)	"A consistent analytical and developmental approach to the strategy, structure, and systems of an organization is the true responsibility of the general manager of that organization and is the definition proposed for strategic leadership." (p. 57)
Nutt & Backoff (1993)	"Strategic leadership can be thought of as a process of guidance that sets a new strategy in place." (p. 324)
Hitt et al. (1994)	"Effective strategic leadership is a dynamic process of maintaining coherence among the elements of the evolving vision, continuous communication with all members of the organization, and constant efforts to maintain members' ongoing commitment to the vision (ideal identity)." (p. 20)
Ireland & Hitt (1999)	"Strategic leadership is defined as a person's ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organization." (p. 43)
Boal & Hooijberg (2000)	"Strategic leaders build their social intelligence through their interactions with their stakeholders. In these interactions, strategic leaders explore long-term changes in the environment of the organization." (p. 536)
Elenkov et al. (2005)	"We define strategic leadership as the process of forming a vision for the future, communicating it to subordinates, stimulating and motivating followers, and engaging in strategy-supportive exchanges with peers and subordinates." (p. 666)
Davies & Davies (2006)	"The analysis of the data revealed that those strategic leaders involve themselves in five key activities: Direction setting, translating strategy into action, enabling the staff to develop and deliver the strategy, determining effective intervention points, developing strategic capabilities." (p. 123)
Samimi et al. (2022)	"Based on these conceptions, we define strategic leadership as the functions performed by individuals at the top levels of an organization (CEOs, TMT members, Directors, General Managers) that are intended to have strategic consequences for the firm." (p. 3)

Although different authors have defined strategic leadership in different ways, common points have been identified through analysis of the definitions. First, a fundamental element of strategic leadership is the capacity to craft a clear vision and communicate it to other members of the organization (Nutt & Backoff, 1993; Rowe, 2001). A leader creates a roadmap of where he or she would like the organization to be positioned in the future and articulates this vision in a clear, understandable, and inspiring way. The aim of the leader is to ensure that all employees embrace and follow this vision, which represents not only a goal but also a source of motivation to guide all members of the organization. Regarding this aspect of strategic leadership, researchers such as Ireland & Hitt (1999) and Elenkov et al. (2005) have emphasized that leaders have a responsibility to create a clear and compelling vision. Communicating this vision enables the organization to focus on a common purpose and achieve strategic goals.

Another important aspect is the capacity of leaders to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Organizations are constantly affected by external factors such as dynamic markets, technological developments, and socio-political changes (Baker, 2012; Wilden & Gudergan, 2015). Staying informed about such changes constitutes one of the most critical tasks of strategic leaders. A good strategic leader not only manages the current situation but also anticipates and prepares for future uncertainties (Crossan et al., 2008; Maghroori & Rolland, 1997). Researchers including Ireland & Hitt (1999) and Boal & Hooijberg (2000) have characterized this resilience on the part of strategic leaders as their capacity to both initiate and execute strategic changes that will shape the organization's future. Flexibility and adaptability enable strategic leaders to accurately assess the prospects and challenges in the organization's environment and to make quick and effective decisions accordingly. This ability enables leaders to successfully manage the change process and steer the organization toward achieving competitive advantage.

Effective strategic leadership requires an ongoing process of communication and coordination within the organization. Strategic leaders do not articulate their vision and strategies on just one occasion but rather communicate continuously to ensure that every individual within the organization understands and adopts this vision. The consistency and continuity of communication enable individuals within the organization to act in alignment with the organization's strategies. Hitt et al. (1994) and Elenkov et al. (2005) emphasized this aspect of strategic leadership, stating that leaders need to be in constant communication with all individuals throughout the organization. An important contribution of continuous communication is that leaders can keep the vision alive and ensure that individuals can act according to this vision. Strategic leaders also possess the ability to shape strategies according to the feedback they receive. Coordination, on the other hand, facilitates the successful realization of strategic objectives by increasing cooperation and cohesion among different units and individuals in the organization. Ongoing communication and coordination demonstrate that strategic leadership is a dynamic and interactive process. Through this process, the leader brings all parts of the organization together to focus on a common strategic vision.

Another key component is the capacity of leaders to initiate and effectively manage processes that significantly transform the organization. Change represents an inevitability that an organization must address (Lewis, 2019). Strategic leaders identify the adjustments needed to adapt to technological innovations and other external factors and ensure that these are implemented. Researchers such as Nutt & Backoff (1993) and Ireland & Hitt (1999) have defined this aspect of strategic leadership as the ability of leaders to identify and implement new strategies for the organization and to engage employees in these changes. Managing change involves not only the development of new strategies but also the steps necessary to successfully implement them. In the course of this process, strategic leaders demonstrate the leadership skills necessary to prevent organizational members from resisting change, while engaging them in this process and managing the uncertainties that such transformation brings. Initiating and managing change is a proactive and innovative aspect of strategic leadership that directs the organization toward a path of continuous improvement and growth.

Strategic leadership also requires coherence among an organization's strategy, structure, and systems; leaders must ensure that their visions and strategies are consistent with the organization's structure and operational systems. Hosmer (1982) and Hitt et al. (1994) considered this a fundamental responsibility of strategic leadership. As strategic leaders develop their organization's long-term strategic plans, they must also assess whether these plans are consistent with the organization's existing structure and systems. If a mismatch is identified, strategic leaders make the necessary structural changes to address it. This process ensures that all of the elements necessary for the organization to effectively achieve its strategic goals are aligned and integrated. By ensuring the coherence between strategy and structure, strategic leaders can realize the organization's strategic vision more robustly and effectively.

5. Discussion and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study employed a systematic literature review methodology in researching the concept of strategic leadership. Three databases –Web of Science, Scopus, and ScienceDirect- were searched in the course of this study. Considering that the inaugural article on this topic was published in 1982, subsequent articles pertaining to the theme of strategic leadership within the specified databases were analyzed between 1982 and 2024. A total of 361 articles underwent analysis, and the findings were organized into two principal categories. First, through a bibliographic analysis of strategic leadership articles published between 1982 and 2024, journals in which the articles were published, author contribution, collaboration between authors, most cited articles, and most commonly recurring keywords were identified. Second, the keywords, abstracts, and full texts of the articles were subjected to detailed content analysis in which the frequency of keywords and their relationships were analyzed. The most prominent words in the abstracts were then identified and a word cloud was created. In addition, the full texts were analyzed to determine how different authors addressed the concept.

The results clearly show the evolution of the concept of strategic leadership over time and the increasing academic

interest in the field. The initial publications in the 1980s served as a critical milestone by establishing strategic leadership as a distinct field of inquiry. During this period, seminal works focused on separating the concept from general or operational management and linking it to the responsibilities of the chief executive in setting long-term organizational direction (Hosmer, 1982; Van der Merwe & Van der Merwe, 1985). This laid the conceptual groundwork for all subsequent research. The 1990s marked a significant turning point where the literature moved from 'what is strategic leadership?' to 'what does it do?'. The analytical focus shifted towards the practical application of the concept. This era was marked by milestone studies that demonstrated how strategic leadership could be a lever for tangible organizational outcomes, such as transforming public organizations and achieving strategic competitiveness (Ireland & Hitt, 1999; Nutt & Backoff, 1993). This shift broadened the concept's relevance and spurred an increase in research connecting leadership actions to performance and change. The 2000s can be characterized as a period of theoretical integration and empirical rigor. This maturation is exemplified by highly-cited works that linked strategic leadership to other established theories, such as organizational learning, and called for the field to move on to more complex research questions (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000; Vera & Crossan, 2004). The growing impact of technology and digitalization during this decade provided a fertile ground for researchers to empirically test how leaders managed emerging environmental complexities. The academic interest that peaked in the 2020s represents the latest milestone, driven by a complex set of global challenges. The analytical focus has become more specialized, applying the strategic leadership lens to urgent and specific problems. As recent data from 2022-2024 shows, the agenda is now shaped by issues such as digital transformation (Hoessler & Carbon, 2024), sustainability and green leadership (Khan et al., 2024), and post-pandemic crisis management (Obenauer et al., 2024). This demonstrates that strategic leadership is no longer just a tool for competitive advantage but is now viewed as a critical capability for ensuring organizational resilience and sustainability in a volatile world. Recent evidence reinforces these findings, showing that strategic leadership is increasingly linked to digitalization, innovation, and resilience in crisis contexts (Samimi et al., 2022; Ghazi et al., 2024). Moreover, sustainability and corporate responsibility perspectives have begun to attract scholarly attention, indicating a more comprehensive understanding of leadership effectiveness (Wang et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2024).

As expected, the results of the keyword analysis highlighted the terms 'business', 'management' and 'leadership'. These terms are frequently used in publications on strategic leadership. However, the keywords "performance", "education" and "psychology" were also frequently used. The widespread use of the keyword "performance" can be attributed to the influence of strategic leaders on the work performance of the organization and the individuals within the organization. Considering the impact of leaders on the achievement of organizational objectives, the performance-oriented perspective in strategic leadership studies gains importance. In particular, it was found that the keyword "performance" was used more frequently in studies published after 2015 (e.g., Cho et al., 2017; Ilyas et al., 2017; Lee & Welliver 2018). The frequent use of the keyword "education" is closely related to the application of strategic leadership studies in the field of education. Studies focusing on the quality and sustainability of the education system are noteworthy (Simkins, 2005; Van Oord, 2013). The literature on strategic leadership in the education sector is rich in theoretical and empirical publications (e.g. Caldwell, 1998; Chen, 2008; Gholami et al., 2015; Ucar & Dalgic, 2021). The frequent use of the keyword "psychology" in publications may be related to the increasing interest in the behavior of individuals and leaders in organizations. Psychological factors are fundamental to leaders' decision making and directly affect their ability to cope with stress and manage team dynamics (Eid et al., 2012; Rabiul et al., 2022). Psychological factors have been used in strategic leadership studies as they represent a very important aspect of leadership (e.g., Gavetti, 2011; Zhang et al., 2023).

The results of the analysis of the article abstracts show that certain concepts emerge and that some concepts are more frequently associated with each other. The terms "top management", "top level", and "CEO" stand out as terms that are frequently mentioned in studies. This is an important indication that strategic leadership is associated with the top-level managers. Considering that strategic decisions are determined and implemented by top management and CEOs in organizations (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1994; Ma & Seidl, 2018), the findings are consistent with the prevailing view in the literature. In this context, the fact that the terms "top management", "upper echelon", and "CEO" are frequently used in strategic leadership studies indicates the focus of the literature. On the other hand, the concept of innovation has also become one of the most frequently used concepts, especially in post-2010 studies (e.g., Altman & Tushman, 2017; Ilyas et al., 2017). This shows that organizations are being evaluated more in the context of innovation. These findings suggest that strategic leaders should encourage innovation and create an environment that provides competitive advantage. The relationship between innovation and strategic leadership has been extensively studied, from the stage of vision development to the levels of managing change and promoting innovation. The use of the concept of innovation in strategic leadership studies has allowed the literature to expand in scope and depth. The concept of performance is also a recurring concept in strategic leadership studies. Given that the main issues of strategic leadership are related to improving organizational performance and helping organizations achieve their long-term goals, it makes sense to find a place for studies that focus on organizational performance. In addition, the concepts of innovation and performance are also closely related in strategic leadership studies. Considering these two concepts in tandem when reviewing the literature provides a fuller understanding of how strategic leaders contribute to organizational success.

The full-text reviews analyzed how different researchers approached strategic leadership and presented their findings. The definitions contained certain common themes which were subsequently analyzed under five main headings. The themes that define strategic leaders are as follows:

- Developing a vision and effectively communicating this vision to other members of the organization.

- Helping organizations adapt to changing environmental conditions.

- Ensuring communication and coordination across the organization.

- Initiating changes that significantly transform the organization and effectively managing these processes of transformation.

- Ensuring consistency in the organization's structure and systems.

5.1. Theoretical Implications and Connections

According to Upper Echelons Theory, the strategic choices and performance of organizations are shaped by the personal attributes, experiences, and value orientations of their senior executives (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Finkelstein et al., 2009). The bibliometric and content analyses in this study consistently revealed that the strategic leadership literature is predominantly centered on "top management," "CEOs," and the "upper echelon." This indicates that for nearly four decades, the field has implicitly operated on the core assumption of Upper Echelons Theory: that senior leaders are the primary architects of organizational strategy and direction. The frequent co-occurrence of these keywords with "decision-making" further reinforces this theoretical connection.

The findings also highlight a strong alignment with the theory of Dynamic Capabilities, which emphasizes an organization's ability to adapt and innovate in turbulent environments (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2017; Teece et al., 1997). The analysis shows a significant thematic focus on "innovation," "performance," and adapting to "change," particularly in post-2010 studies. Strategic leaders emerge as the agents who develop and deploy these dynamic capabilities by articulating a vision, managing transformations, and fostering an adaptive organizational culture. The recent increase in studies focusing on digitalization and technological developments (Samimi et al., 2022; Hoessler & Carbon, 2024) further confirms this linkage, positioning strategic leadership as a micro-foundation of organizational agility and competitive advantage.

Finally, the definitional elements of strategic leadership identified in this review overlap with Transformational Leadership theory. Themes such as "developing and communicating a vision," "initiating and managing change," and "ensuring commitment from organizational members" mirror the core tenets of transformational leadership, which emphasize a leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). While strategic leadership has a broader focus on external environments and competitive strategy, the mechanisms through which strategic leaders implement their vision—communication, inspiration, and change management—are fundamentally transformational. Recent studies also support this perspective, noting that effective strategic leadership often requires a transformational style to address digital transformation, sustainability, and post-

crisis challenges (Kamp & Graf-Vlachy, 2024; Obenauer et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this review carry several explicit implications for practice. For managers and business leaders, the primary implication is that strategic leadership must be cultivated as a dynamic capability. This goes beyond traditional planning and requires actively building organizational resilience against environmental turbulence, fostering a pervasive culture of innovation, and championing digital literacy at all levels to navigate technological disruptions. For policymakers, the results highlight a critical role in designing leadership development initiatives. These programs should prepare leaders to navigate sustainability transitions, digital transformation, and global crises, thereby reinforcing both organizational and national competitiveness through support for context-specific and ethically responsible governance. Finally, for educational leaders, the study suggests a dual responsibility: curricula and training programs must be updated to embed modern strategic leadership competencies, equipping future leaders with the vision and adaptability required in today's uncertain world. Simultaneously, they must apply these principles internally by leading the transformation of their own institutions and empowering educators as strategic agents. By addressing these practical dimensions, this review demonstrates the relevance of strategic leadership beyond business and academia and its potential to create tangible value for multiple stakeholders.

5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The methodological profile of strategic leadership research reveals several limitations. First, the geographic distribution of studies is heavily skewed toward Western contexts, with limited engagement in emerging economies. This concentration restricts the generalizability of findings and overlooks the potential influence of cultural and institutional diversity on leadership practices. Second, the field has been dominated by quantitative and theorical approaches, which, while valuable for mapping trends, provide limited insight into the lived experiences of strategic leaders. Qualitative approaches such as case studies, ethnographies, and interviews remain underutilized, reducing the capacity of the literature to capture behavioral and contextual nuances. Third, sectoral concentration is evident, as education has been extensively examined while other domains such as healthcare, technology, and SMEs remain underexplored. This sectoral bias risks creating a monolithic understanding of strategic leadership, potentially ignoring the unique challenges and leadership practices required in different operational contexts. Taken together, these limitations suggest that future research should pursue a more pluralistic approach, integrating diverse geographies, methodologies, and sectors to generate a richer and more comprehensive understanding of strategic leadership.

Strategic leadership has witnessed a surge in popularity as a topic of research within academic literature. The rise in the number of articles published, particularly in the 2020s, suggests that research output in this field will continue to grow in the coming years. The findings of the present study, which revealed that strategic leadership is frequently

discussed in the context of leaders such as senior managers and CEOs, may establish a solid basis for subsequent research initiatives. The analysis also determined that the majority of studies are concentrated on specific sectors. In light of these findings, researchers should in future broaden their scope of investigation by accounting for cultural diversity and conduct more studies across different geographical and sectoral contexts. Such analyses would facilitate our understanding of how strategic leadership is approached in various sectors and cultures, thus expanding and enriching the existing literature. The concept of innovation was observed to have been incorporated into numerous strategic leadership studies; in particular, there has been a notable increase in the number of articles on innovation published after 2010. Nevertheless, this topic merits further investigation; in particular, examination of the impact of strategic leadership on innovation and innovation processes seems warranted. Further research should concentrate on investigating the relationship between strategic leaders and innovation in greater detail, thus enhancing our understanding of this subject. Including innovation as a vital element of strategic leadership rather than as a result-oriented approach would also constitute a valuable contribution to the literature.

The findings suggest that the concept of performance is frequently employed in strategic leadership studies together with innovation. The concept of performance has been utilized in numerous studies in both individual and organizational contexts. The results of future studies may serve to enhance the interplay between strategic leadership and performance. Understanding the effect of strategic leadership on performance in different sectors will constitute an important contribution, especially within the dynamics of the business environment where competition is intense. In addition, technological developments and the resulting digital transformation have been among the most challenging issues for organizations. The issue of technological advances, which can be seen as both a threat and an opportunity, constitutes an important gap in the study of strategic leadership. Studies focusing on this would be pioneering in the field as well as providing valuable information for practitioners by making a significant contribution to the existing literature. Basic problems such as the role of strategic leaders in the digitalization process, strategies created in a digital environment and their implementation, and adapting organizations to digital transformation can be addressed as research topics in future studies on strategic leadership. Moreover, considering that strategic leadership is associated with long-term goals, the concept of sustainability also merits attention. Although sustainability has been addressed in strategic leadership studies, in-depth research on various aspects of sustainability will enrich the field. Examining the interplay between strategic leadership and sustainability could positively impact the sustainability of organizations and help them gain a competitive advantage.

Furthermore, a significant research opportunity lies at the intersection of the themes identified in recent literature: digital transformation and strategic decision-making. While studies have begun to examine the behavioral dynamics of decision-making quality (Thys et al., 2024) and the leadership of digital change (Hoessler & Carbon, 2024), the specific impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the

cognitive processes of strategic leaders remains a critical black box. Future research could address this with concrete questions such as: 'How does the integration of AI-driven analytics alter the established models of strategic decision-making in top management teams?' or 'What new leadership competencies are required to mitigate AI-induced biases in strategic choices?' Answering these questions would provide invaluable guidance for leaders navigating the next wave of technological disruption.

6. Conclusion

This systematic literature review maps the forty-year evolution of strategic leadership, revealing its transformation from a concept rooted in top-management theory to a dynamic, multidisciplinary capability critical for navigating contemporary organizational challenges. The findings demonstrate that the academic interest that peaked in the 2020s is not coincidental but rather a direct response to an increasingly complex global landscape where leaders are expected to manage not only strategy but also continuous innovation, digital transformation, and sustainability.

The primary contribution of this review lies in integrating bibliometric and content analyses to reveal prevailing themes and research gaps. In particular, the results show that while strategic leadership is well established in the education sector, there is still limited understanding of its operation across diverse sectors, geographies, and cultural contexts. Moreover, recent studies emphasize the growing relevance of digital transformation, psychological factors, and sustainability, all of which remain underexplored in mainstream literature.

Theoretically, this review underscores the need to conceptualize strategic leadership as a dynamic capability that enables organizations to adapt to digital disruption and global crises. Practically, it suggests that strategic leaders should not only focus on vision-setting and performance but also foster innovation, resilience, and ethical responsibility in turbulent environments.

Future research should move beyond sector-specific and Western-centric approaches, expanding investigations into emerging economies, cross-cultural settings, and digitally intensive industries. In doing so, scholars can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how strategic leadership contributes to organizational resilience, innovation, and long-term sustainability in an era of rapid change.

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