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Research Trends and Thematic Patterns in the Conceptualization of Meaningful Work: A Bibliometric Analysis of International Literature

Kubilayhan GÖÇ[1]

Abstract: This study aims to investigate the theoretical evolution and conceptual integrity of the phenomenon of meaningful work within the organizational context. This study examined the phenomenon of meaningful work using bibliometric analysis. It seeks to answer three primary research questions: (1) Which themes are prominent in the meaningful work literature, and how have these themes evolved? (2) Which countries, institutions, and researchers are prominent in the literature, and what is the distribution of leadership in terms of academic productivity (3) Given the existing gaps in the meaningful work literature, which areas/topics should future research focus on? The research sample comprised 173 publications published in the Scopus and Web of Science databases between 2000 and 2024. Citation analysis, h-index, Lotka's Law, thematic mapping, and co-authorship network analyses were applied using Biblioshiny (R-based bibliometric analysis software). The findings indicate that studies on meaningful work have increased since 2016-2017 and have begun to gain traction in the literature by 2021. Studies on meaningful work have gone beyond simply questioning the meaningfulness of work, delving into deeper discussions about the purpose of work, its impact on personality, and how it influences organizational commitment. Despite the growth in publications, this field remains young and fragmented. Analyses of international collaboration networks indicate that the United States, India, and China lead the field. Simultaneously, Türkiye lags in terms of academic productivity. Network analyses reveal that meaningful work is not a singular concept; it has become a central theme within a broader conceptual ecosystem that encompassing job design, employee engagement, psychological empowerment, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and values. This study presents current research trends in meaningful work and offers recommendations that serve as guidelines for future research.

Keywords: Meaningful work, Job design, Job characteristics, Bibliometric analysis

Anlamlı İş Olgusunun Kavramsallaştırılmasına Yönelik Araştırma Eğilimleri ve Tematik Örüntüler: Uluslararası Literatürün Bibliyometrik Analizi

Öz: Bu çalışmanın amacı, anlamlı iş olgusunun örgütsel bağlam içerisindeki kuramsal evrimini ve kavramsal bütünlüğünü araştırmak ve ortaya koymaktır. Çalışmada anlamlı iş olgusu bibliyometrik analiz yöntemiyle incelenmiş, üç temel araştırma sorusunun yanıtı aranmıştır: (1) Anlamlı iş literatüründe hangi temalar ön plana çıkmış ve bu temaların zaman içindeki evrimi nasıl olmuştur? (2) Literatürde öne çıkan ülkeler, kurumlar ve araştırmacılar hangileridir ve akademik üretkenlik açısından nasıl bir liderlik dağılımı söz konusudur? (3) Anlamlı iş literatüründeki mevcut boşluklar göz önüne alındığında, gelecekteki araştırmalar hangi alanlara/konulara odaklanmalıdır? Araştırmanın örneklemi 2000-2024 yılları arasında Scopus ve Web of Science veri tabanında yayımlanan 173 yayından oluşmaktadır. Analizde Biblioshiny (R tabanlı bibliyometrik analiz yazılımı) kullanılarak atıf analizi, h-indeksi, Lotka Yasası, tematik haritalama ve ortak yazarlık ağı analizleri uygulanmıştır. Bulgular, 2016-2017 döneminden itibaren anlamlı iş çalışmalarının arttığını, 2021

[1] Research Assistant Dr., Aksaray University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Business Administration, khangoc@aksaray.edu.tr, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7481-0837

itibariyle ise literatüre yerleşmeye başladığını göstermektedir. Anlamlı iş çalışmaları, işin anlamlılığını sorgulamanın ötesine geçerek, işin amacının ne olduğu, kişiliği nasıl etkilediği ve örgütsel bağlılığı nasıl şekillendirdiği üzerine derin tartışmalara yönelmiştir. Yayın sayısındaki artışa rağmen, alan henüz genç, dağınık ve süreklilik göstermeyen bir yapıya sahiptir. Uluslararası iş birliği ağı analizleri, ABD, Hindistan ve Çin'in alanda öncü konumda olduğunu, Türkiye'nin ise akademik üretkenlik açısından geride kaldığını göstermektedir. Ağ analizleri, anlamlı çalışmanın tekil bir kavram olmadığını; iş tasarımı, çalışan katılımı, psikolojik güçlendirme, kurumsal bağlılık, iş tatmini ve değerleri içeren daha geniş bir kavramsal ekosistemin merkezindeki bir tema haline geldiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, anlamlı iş araştırmalarındaki mevcut araştırma eğilimlerini ortaya koymakta ve gelecekteki araştırmalar için rehber niteliğinde öneriler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anlamlı iş, İş tasarımı, İş özellikleri, Bibliyometrik analiz

Introduction

Since the 2000s, the nature of work has undergone a radical transformation driven by technological advances and global changes. Key elements of Industry 4.0, such as digitalization and automation, have made jobs increasingly vulnerable to computerization and digitalization. This process is causing traditional fixed-work structures to give way to "smart work" and "remote/hybrid work" models (Sparrow, 2000; Palumbo et al., 2023). These models offer employees greater flexibility and individual control over their work activities and spatial contexts. While this provides individuals with freedom, it can also lead to professional and spatial isolation by reducing interpersonal communication in the workplace, which in turn can diminish the meaningfulness of work (Palumbo et al., 2023). Along with the structural transformations listed here, employee expectations have also undergone significant changes; work is no longer just a source of financial gain for employees, but has become central to the pursuit of meaningful work (Lee, 2015). Employees expect their jobs provide them with a sense of purpose and value, enable them to use their competencies, increase their autonomy, and foster a sense of social belonging (Martela & Riekki, 2018; Palumbo et al., 2023). In a sense, employees may seek work that integrates with them, opens a career path for them, and represents them. Furthermore, the principles of decent work defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (fair wages, social protection, and opportunities for personal development) are being reshaped through informal networks of relationships such as family and community, particularly in contexts where state support is limited (Ribeiro et al., 2016; Gosetti, 2017). In addition to all these changes, the information overload that has emerged with the proliferation of information technologies strains the capacity of managers and employees to process complex, ambiguous, and rapidly changing information. This increases the importance of the concepts of new mindsets and organizational intelligence (Sparrow, 2000). These multifaceted transformations affect every aspect of the labour market, from employment contracts to career paths, leading to the emergence of new behavioural patterns, such as shorter working hours and increased commitment to professions rather than institutions (Sparrow, 2000; Sharabi, 2009).

To date, studies on meaningful work have primarily focused on theoretical discussions, case studies, and empirical research (Lee, 2015; Martela & Riekki, 2018). However, the general trends in the literature, which themes are prominent, which countries/institutions are leading, and how research has evolved have not been comprehensively documented. Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic comparisons of how academic productivity and thematic focus differ across geographic regions. Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic comparisons of how academic productivity and thematic focus differ across geographic regions. To address these shortcomings, bibliometric analyses that objectively demonstrate the current state of knowledge in this field are crucial. In line with these objectives, the main research questions of this study are as follows: 1) What themes are prominent in the meaningful work literature, and how have these themes evolved? 2) Which countries, institutions, and researchers are prominent in the literature, and what is the distribution of leadership in terms of academic productivity? 3) Given the existing gaps in the meaningful work literature, which areas/topics should future research focus on? Answering these research questions helps fill the gap in the literature and provides a guiding framework for future research.

Theoretical Background of the Concept of Meaningful Work

The historical origins of the concept of meaningful work took shape as the traditional employment contract began to erode in the 1970s and ended in the 1980s (Sparrow, 2000). The theoretical foundation of this period was laid by Hackman and Oldham's definition of meaningfulness as a fundamental psychological state of work (Ribeiro et al., 2016). The Job Characteristics Model, developed by Hackman and Oldham (1976), considers meaningfulness of work as a psychological state experienced by employees (Singh et al., 2020). According to this definition, meaningful work is a central psychological state that enables individuals to perceive their work as personally important, valuable, and worthwhile (Martela & Riekki, 2018; Panda et al., 2022). Meaningful work is defined by how individuals see their jobs as significant, valuable, and fulfilling, influenced by their self-perception and life experiences (Fletcher & Schofield, 2021). This perception fosters a sense that the employee's work aligns with their own life and the organization's overall mission (Palumbo et al., 2023).

However, over time, this perspective has evolved into an understanding that considers a more dynamic, multilayered, and contextual structure. This evolution has expanded to include factors such as work centrality, entitlement norm, obligation norm, and extrinsic and intrinsic orientations (Martela & Riekki, 2018; Lin et al., 2020). Moreover it encompasses new ones, such as emotional stability and inner peace, inspired by Maslow's concept of "self-actualization" and higher-order needs (Joelle & Coelho, 2019). In addition, the conceptual framework has incorporated modern working conditions, such as recognizing the bidirectional effects of "smart work" practices on meaningful

work (e.g., flexibility provided but weakening of interpersonal communication) (Palumbo et al., 2023), and acknowledging workplace spirituality as a distinct dimension (Kumar & Kumar, 2014; Chawla & Guda, 2017; Joelle & Coelho, 2019; Vu & Burton, 2022).

Among the basic dimensions and ways of achieving and experiencing meaningful work, four major psychological satisfactions stand out, derived from self-determination theory. The first is the autonomy, which is the ability of the individual to perform work tasks in his/her own way and to shape his/her working life in line with his/her personal choices (Dimitrov, 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2016; Palumbo et al., 2023). One example is employees having individual control/choice over organizational activities (Lee, 2015). Second, competence is an individual's sense of capacity to succeed at work, use their skills effectively, and overcome challenges (Ribeiro et al., 2016). Third, relatedness refers to establishing social connections and developing meaningful relationships with others at work (Dimitrov, 2012; Palumbo et al., 2023). For example, establishing quality interactions with co-workers and supervisors (Palumbo et al., 2023). Finally, beneficence is the extent to which one's work benefits others, makes a positive contribution to society, or serves a broader purpose (Martela & Riekki, 2018). In other words, it means that one's work provides a "valuable" service. As can be seen, these expectations are closely linked to one's contribution to society (Supanti & Butcher, 2019; Palumbo et al., 2023). Employees want/expect their work to provide them with a sense of purpose, in order to feel like they are making a valuable contribution, and be able to utilize their talents (Dimitrov, 2012; Kim & Beehr, 2020). Furthermore, personal development is an important component of meaningful work, and individuals view their work as an opportunity for personal growth and learning (Dimitrov, 2012; Komase et al., 2020; Kim & Beehr, 2020). Workplace spirituality represents an aspect of work meaningfulness that relates to the search for meaning by an individual (Kumar & Kumar, 2014; Joelle & Coelho, 2019). On the other hand, work centrality is an expression of the value that an individual attaches to work in their life, and it affects their perception of meaning (Templer et al., 2010; Kuchinke et al., 2011). However, the above three points imply that there is a higher meaning of work besides being a source of income: in essence, it is a multi-dimensional space shaped by an individual's identity, meaning, and his or her place(s) in society.

Although the concept of meaningful work is defined as a subjective experience in which an individual perceives their work as personally important, valuable, and meaningful, the perception and experience of this concept vary significantly across international and cultural dimensions. Studies by Hofstede (1980, 1997), Triandis (2000), and Hampden-Turner (1998) have shown that people, particularly from different national cultures, think about their environments differently and thus may perceive the meaningfulness of work differently (Dimitrov, 2012). For example, some authors explain the meaningfulness of work with the experience and value given to it. On the other hand, others' approach

is based on personal beliefs, attitudes, and values concerning the purpose realized (Lee, 2015). Although "work" has the same meaning across cultures, its meaning can change over time and depending on context (Harpaz & Fu, 2002). Supporting this, Hattrup et al. (2007) demonstrated in their study that national culture is a significant factor in the formation of workplace values and the development of organizational culture. For example, a study of Jewish and Muslim academics in Israel found significant differences in the importance of life domains (work, family, leisure, community, and religion) and work goals between these two groups, with Muslims exhibiting higher work centrality than Jews. The main reason for this result stems from the fact that Jews constitute the overwhelming majority in Israel compared to Muslims. Therefore, Muslim academics view their education and profession as a means of social mobility (Sharabi, 2009). In another example, in a Japanese adaptation of a scale measuring gratitude at work, it was found that “meaningful work” was defined somewhat differently than in the West, and Japanese employees found the item focusing on “their achievements at work” confusing because, unlike the West, Japanese employees have a collectivist understanding of the workplace with a culture of “working collaboratively with other employees” (Komase et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that making assumptions or generalizations about the work preferences of employees across countries is risky (Dimitrov, 2012; Woodard et al., 2016). These geographic and cultural gaps in the literature limit our understanding of how national culture influences work values and perceptions of meaning (Woodard et al., 2016). Research encompassing broader cultural contexts can provide significant practical benefits to human resource management (HRM) practices by improving employee expectations, person-organization fit, and the ability to attract and retain a skilled workforce (Dimitrov, 2012; Woodard et al., 2016; Ameen et al., 2021). In terms of Human Resources Management, this theoretical framework shows that meaningful work directly and indirectly increases job performance by increasing the levels of job satisfaction, commitment and organizational commitment of employees (Singh, 2020; Panda et al., 2021; Khusanova et al., 2021). It has been empirically proven that improvements in the perception of meaningful work significantly reduce burnout and intention to leave (Li et al., 2010).

Method

Because the meaningful work literature is growing and becoming dispersed, instead of proceeding through individual studies, the bibliometric analysis method was preferred in this research in order to scan the literature on a global scale, to see which topics the publications are clustered around in which period, and to determine which areas need further studies. This will provide a comprehensive and objective framework for meaningful business literature. Bibliometric analysis is a rigorous method frequently used to explore and analyze large amounts of scientific data. This allows us to uncover the evolutionary nuances of a particular field and sheds light on emerging issues within that field (Aria

& Cuccurullo, 2017). As a quantitative method, bibliometric analysis can identify publication trends, author and country collaborations, key themes, and knowledge gaps in the literature in a specific research field.

The scattered nature of research on meaningful work across disciplines such as nursing, agricultural ecology, human resource management, and social work points to the lack of an integrated theoretical framework that brings together different perspectives and comprehensive models that combine micro- and macro-level variables (Asik-Dizdar & Esen, 2016; Bezner Kerr et al., 2022). The diversity and dispersion characteristics of this body of literature clearly explain the critical importance of systematic bibliometric analyses, performed by searching the WoS and Scopus databases, for objectively revealing the current knowledge of the field and creating a comprehensive roadmap for future research. Therefore, the study sample data was selected from the WoS and Scopus databases. Information regarding the data collection process is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Data collection process of the research

Stages	**Explanations**
Data Source	WOS and Scopus (International databases containing journals with extensive academic content and high citation impact) (Ancarlı et al., 2023)
Time Period	2000-2024
Language Limitation	No language restrictions
Search Terms	Within the Title, Keywords and Abstract: ("meaningful work" OR "work meaningfulness" OR "meaning of work" OR "work purpose" OR "work fulfillment" OR "job meaningfulness") AND ("organization" OR "organizational behavior" OR "workplace" OR "employment") AND ("geographical regions" OR "cross-cultural" OR "international" OR "global" OR "multi-country" OR "comparative study") AND ("research" OR "conceptualization" OR "theoretical framework" OR "empirical study") 203 (134 WOS, 69 Scopus)
Number of Studies Retrieved	Only studies in the form of articles, books, book chapters and conference papers were included.
Exclusion Criteria	173 (final number after merging and cleaning the Scopus and WoS datasets - 26 collaborative studies and 4 studies from 2025 excluded)

134 WOS, 69 Scopus, and 203 academic studies in total, 26 of which were duplicates, were used as a sample, resulting in 177 academic studies. Studies from 2000 to 2024 were included, but 2025 was not included because it had not yet been completed. Therefore, four studies were excluded. Analyses were conducted on 173 studies. The studies were in English (167), Portuguese (2), Spanish (2), Russian (1), and Hungarian (1).

After obtaining the sample, bibliometric analyses were conducted using Biblioshiny, an R-based bibliometric analysis software (Lim et al., 2024). To combine bibliometric data from Scopus and Web of Science, the following steps were followed (Lim et al., 2024).

1) Download, install and run R and RStudio programs

2) Session→ Set Working Directory → Select Directory → Locate and select the "Working" folder.

3) Enter the command to install the Bibliometrix package (if the package is not available, proceed to the next step if it is installed): install.packages("bibliometrix")

4) Enter the installation command for the Bibliometrix package:

• library(bibliometrix)

5) Enter the command to import and convert (standardize) the Scopus file:

• scopus_converted<-convert2df("scopus.csv",dbsource="scopus",format="csv")

6) Enter the command to import and convert (standardize) the Web of Science file:

• wos_converted<-convert2df ("wos.bib",dbsource="wos",format="bibtex")

7) Enter the command to merge or expand datasets:

• combined<-mergeDbSources(scopus_converted,wos_converted,remove.duplicated=T)

8) Update the review protocol (Table 1) based on the number of duplicate documents removed.

9) To read, write and edit Excel file, enter the command:

• library(openxlsx)

10) To export the combined dataset, enter the command:

• write.xlsx(combined, "combined.xlsx")

The study employed analysis techniques such as citation analysis, author performance analysis, trend analysis, thematic mapping, co-authorship network analysis, and application of Lotka's law. Publications from the WOS and Scopus databases were included in this study. Limitations include the study's reliance solely on Scopus and Web of Science databases, the exclusion of other databases, and the timeframe (2000-2024). This study structured its review of the meaningful work literature to focus on studies that explore the concept within an organizational context and encompass international and intercultural contexts. This eliminated a multidisciplinary and theoretically heterogeneous pool of literature and analyzed only the core scholarly body that contributed to the theoretical development of the concept. The possibility that changes to the codes (different word choices) used to identify academic studies in relevant databases for meaningful work could alter the results should not be ignored.

Analysis and Findings

This study presents a bibliometric analysis of academic research on "meaningful work" literature between 2000 and 2024. The analysis, conducted on 173 documents obtained from the WoS and Scopus databases, reveals academic productivity, research trends, and collaboration networks in the field. The general characteristics of the 173 documents analyzed through bibliometric analysis are as follows. The analyzed publications were published in 130 different sources (journals, books, etc.) and are becoming more visible in the field, with an average annual growth rate of 14.35%. This upward trend is shown in Figure 1. An examination of the number of citations to the studies reveals that each document received an average of 12.5 citations. Considering this situation and the number of studies on meaningful work, it can be said that it is not a mature field that has not yet reached a very high number of citations in the academic literature. The average age of the documents is 6.13 years, indicating that the field is relatively young and developing (see Figure 1). Furthermore, a total of 618 Keywords Plus and 672 author keywords were used in the analyzed publications. This finding demonstrates wide conceptual diversity across studies. A total of 550 authors contributed to these studies. Only 31 of the studies were single-authored, while the number of multi-authored publications was quite high. Furthermore, the international co-authorship rate was found to be 24.28%. This rate demonstrates that academic collaborations on meaningful work, although not widespread, are occurring globally. The distribution of the 173 documents analyzed is presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Study types and statistics

Studies	Frequency	%
Article	143	82,66
Conference Proceedings	17	9,83
Book Chapter	6	3,47
Book	6	3,47
Editorial	1	0,58
Total	173	100,00

Table 2 shows that the literature on meaningful work mostly comprises peer-reviewed journal articles.

Figure 1. The trend of meaningful work publications between 2000 and 2024

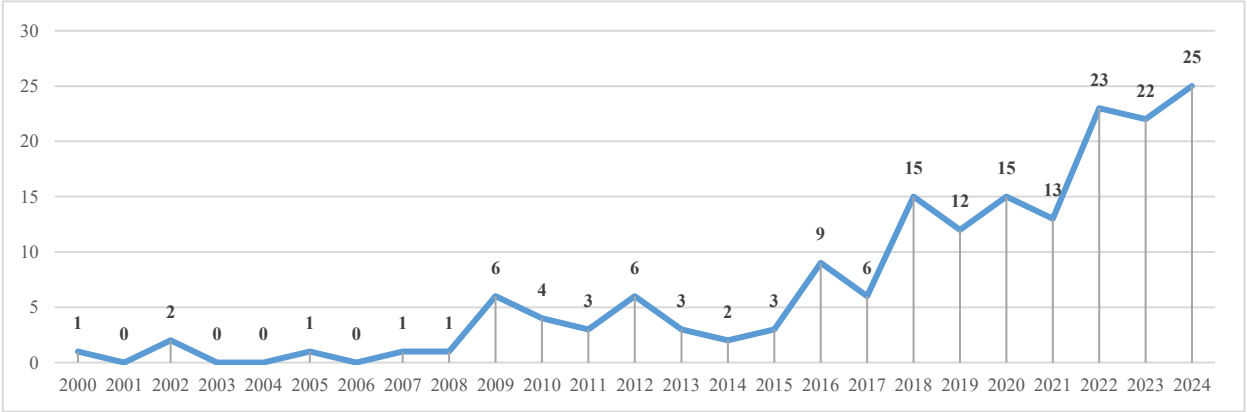
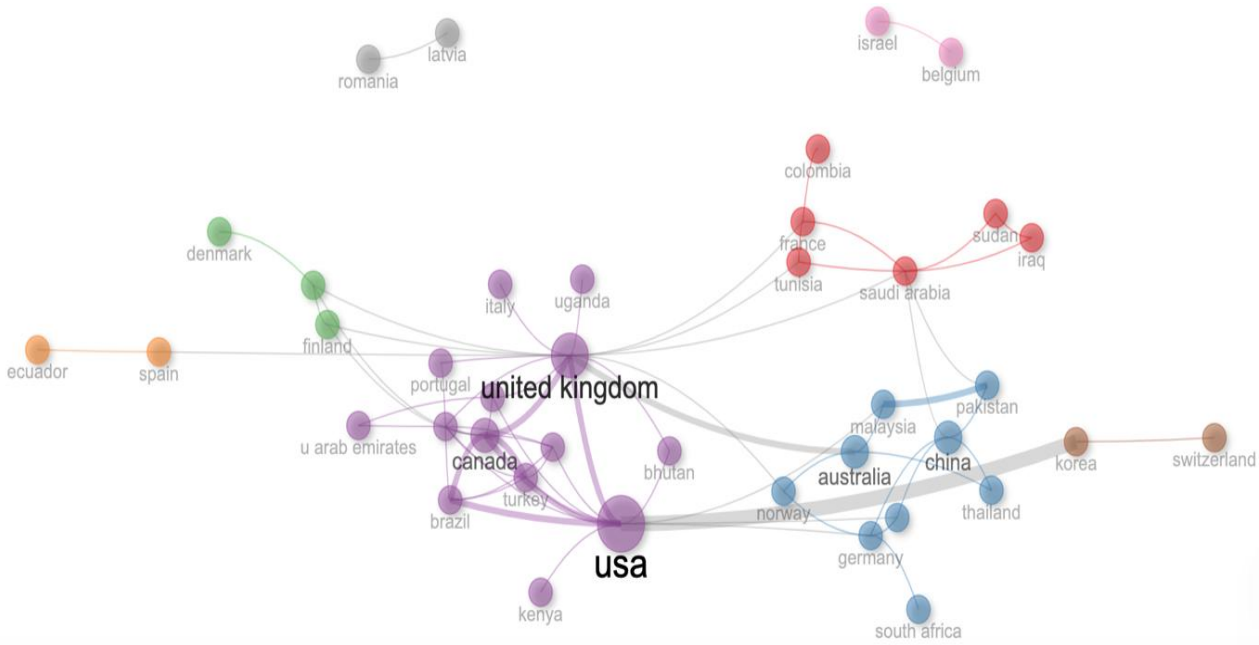


Figure 1 shows the annual academic evolution of the meaningful work literature. When the figure is examined, almost no studies were conducted between 2000 and 2008. A similar pattern of small jumps and decreases was observed between 2008-2012 and 2012-2016. As of 2016, and especially since 2017, the topic of meaningful work has become more prominent on the agenda of academics. Starting in 2018, double-digit academic publications began to appear every year. It can be said that the period after 2021 marks a turning point for these publications. It can be said that the topic of meaningful work has become a subject that began to establish itself in international literature with steady momentum after 2021.

The network graph in Figure 2 reveals collaboration networks between countries. The size of the circles in the visual indicates the activity of the countries, and the networks indicate which countries they cooperate with. The United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) appear to be at the network's center. This demonstrates that the two countries serve as hubs, connecting many countries. Each color in Figure 2 represents the cooperation network to which those countries belong. In the purple cluster, countries such as the US, UK, Canada, Turkey, Portugal, and Kenya closely collaborated. When we look at the blue cluster, countries such as China, Australia, Germany, and Thailand appear as separate clusters. In the red cluster, countries such as Sudan, Tunisia, France, Iraq and Saudi Arabia are more connected to each other.

Figure 2. International collaboration networks



In the figure, some countries (such as Romania, Latvia, Spain, Ecuador, Israel, Belgium, Switzerland) appear more isolated from other clusters and have a marginal position because they have established limited cooperation. It is seen that the USA and the United Kingdom interact with all clusters.

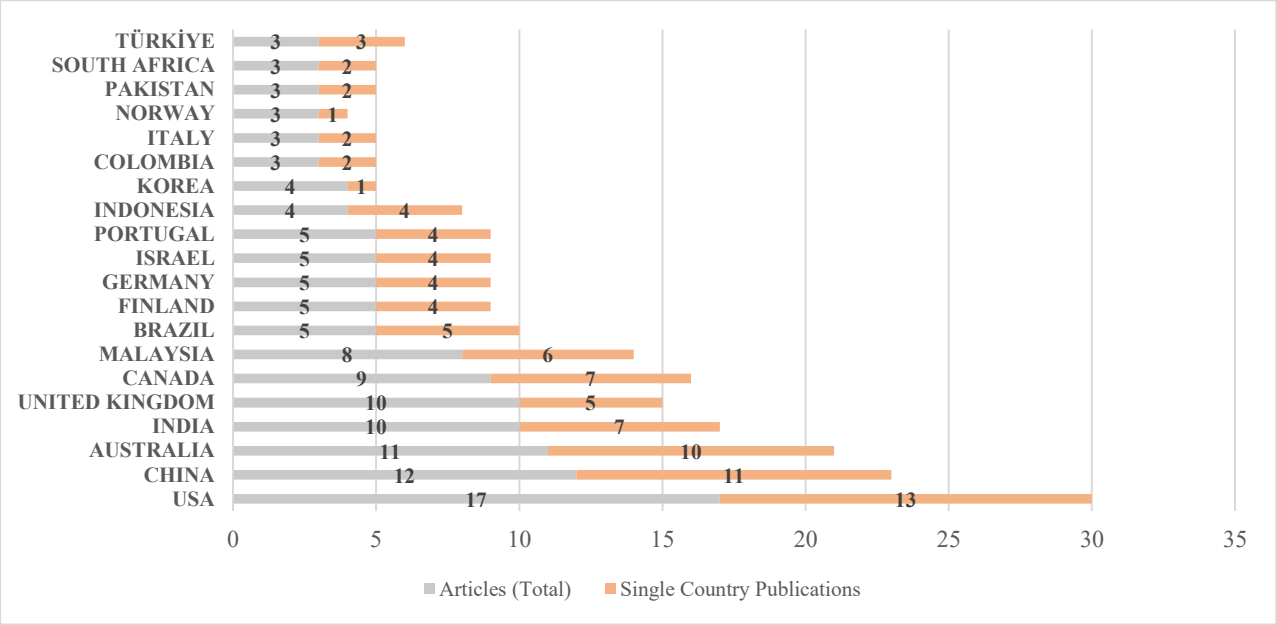
Table 3, which is presented to statistically elaborate Figure 2, includes the Betweenness, Closeness and PageRank Scores of Countries in the Academic Network. According to the table, the country with the most central and strongest collaborations is the United Kingdom. The United States follows. The other three countries with the greatest interactions are Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Germany.

Table 3. Countries' academic network betweenness, closeness, and pagerank

Country	Cluster	Betweenness	Closeness	PageRank
United Kingdom	4	336,569	0,018	0,103
USA	4	202,705	0,016	0,088
Saudi Arabia	1	98,083	0,014	0,043
Canada	4	45,497	0,014	0,06
Germany	2	44,157	0,012	0,031
France	1	34	0,012	0,027
Sweden	3	34	0,012	0,025
Spain	5	34	0,011	0,018
Korea	6	34	0,011	0,024
Ireland	4	30,346	0,014	0,039
...	…	…	…	…
Türkiye	4	0.000	0.011	0.028

Figure 3 presents the ranking of the 20 countries with the most research on meaningful work, based on collaboration type (national/international). The ranking was based on the countries of the corresponding authors.

Figure 3. Representation of countries' level of openness to academic collaboration and their position in the global research ecosystem based on number of publications.



The data show that the US, China, Australia, the UK, and India lead global research networks in terms of publication numbers. The US appears to be more open to global collaboration than China. The United Kingdom, India, and Australia are seen as the other countries trailing behind in terms of publication numbers. Among these countries, the United Kingdom stands out as the most

collaborative country in international joint publications, both proportionally (50%) and in terms of publication numbers (5). Countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, and Türkiye, on the other hand, have continued their publications at the national level. However, Korea and Norway have carried out the majority of their publications through international co-authorships.

Figure 4 presents the results of the trend analysis based on the most frequently used words in publications. To better understand Figure 4, Table 4 provides frequency, median, and quartile information for the concepts shown in the trend analysis. In the early 2010s, studies mostly highlighted demographic variables such as "human, male, female, adult" and focused on the identities of employees. As of 2016, concepts such as "work, workplace, job, values, workplace spirituality, commitment" have become visible. Research has begun to focus more on the characteristics, values, commitment, and psychological dimensions of work rather than on the individual.

Figure 4. Trend analysis results according to the most used words in publications

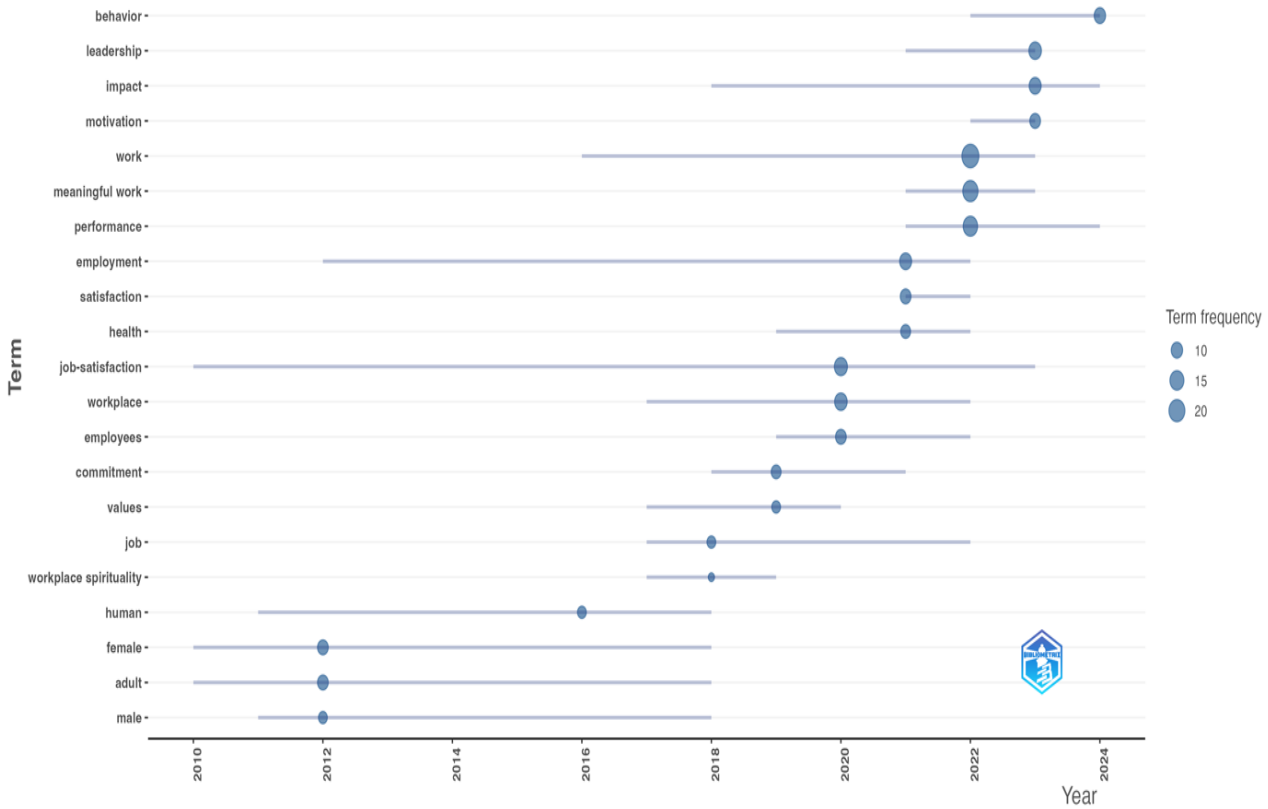


Table 4. Frequency, median, and quartile information for terms*

Terms	Frequency	Year (Q1)	Year (Median)	Year (Q3)
adult	9	2010	2012	2018
female	9	2010	2012	2018
male	7	2011	2012	2018
human	7	2011	2016	2018
job	7	2017	2018	2022
workplace spirituality	6	2017	2018	2019
commitment	8	2018	2019	2021
values	7	2017	2019	2020
job-satisfaction	13	2010	2020	2023
workplace	12	2017	2020	2022
employees	9	2019	2020	2022
employment	11	2012	2021	2022
satisfaction	9	2021	2021	2022
health	8	2019	2021	2022
work	23	2016	2022	2023
meaningful work	18	2021	2022	2023
performance	16	2021	2022	2024
leadership	12	2021	2023	2023
impact	11	2018	2023	2024
motivation	9	2022	2023	2023
behavior	10	2022	2024	2024

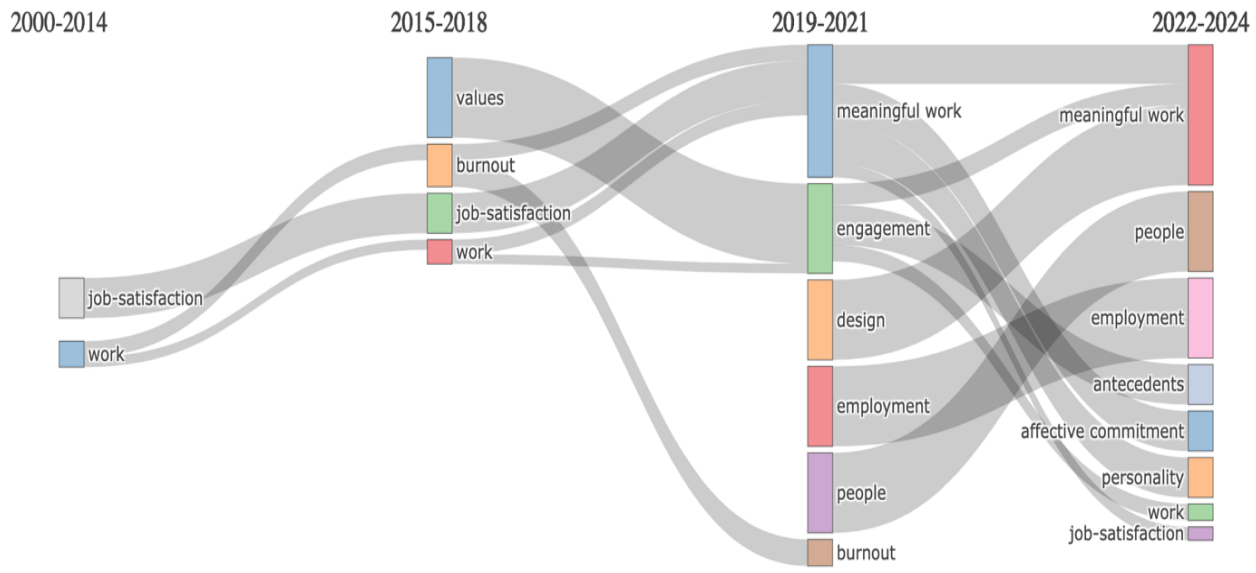
* To better interpret the concepts in Table 4, the median ranking (as a measure of central tendency) has been used. This allows the concepts to be grouped for easier interpretation.

After 2020, concepts directly related to employees' workplace experiences, such as workplace, job satisfaction, employment performance, and health, began to be used more frequently. This period coincided with the pandemic, which brought the psychological and social aspects of work to the forefront and made people more sensitive.

Job satisfaction is an important part of research at every stage, but this period is seen as the most intensively used. After 2022, studies no longer focused solely on the job or the employee, but on deeper themes such as the meaning of work, the impact of the leader, and the consequences of behavior. During this period, concepts such as leadership, behavior, impact, motivation, and meaningful work gained prominence. While research in the 2010s focused on "who works?", after the 2020s, it shifted to questions like "what kind of experience is work, what does it bring to people, and how is it managed?" In other words, the agenda is evolving from identity to experience, from the individual to the organization.

The graph presented in Figure 5 shows the thematic transformation in meaningful work research between 2004 and 2024.

Figure 5. Course of thematic evolution in meaningful work research (2000-2024)

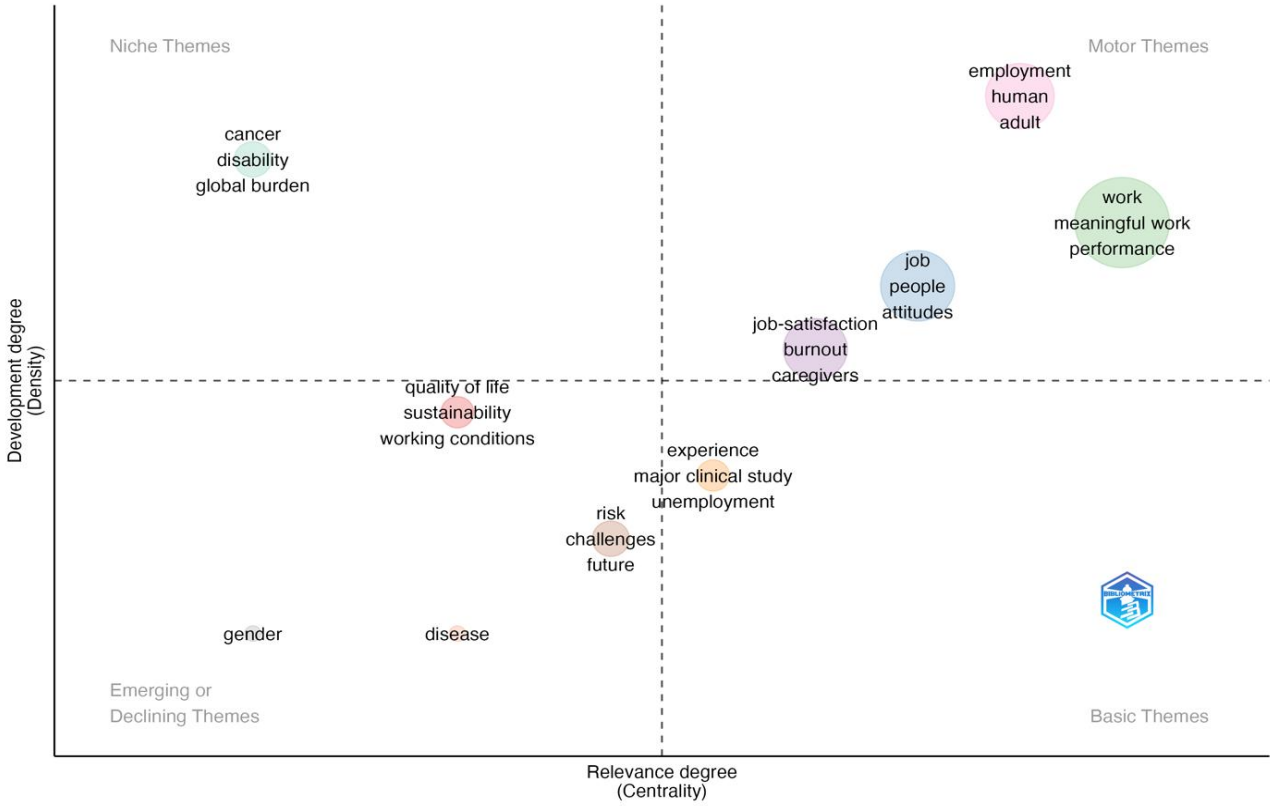


The concepts of job satisfaction and work came to the forefront during the period spanning 2000-2014. This period focused primarily on whether people were satisfied with their jobs and how the work itself was experienced. In the 2015-2018 period, the themes of "values, burnout, job satisfaction and work" were on the agenda, where it can be stated that work is not only a technical activity but also related to values. Negative experiences like burnout are also a key theme in these studies. With this concept, it can be argued that the burden of work on people has become more visible in academia. In the 2019–2021 period, diversity increased: Concepts such as "meaningful work, engagement, design, employment, people, burnout" started to be discussed simultaneously. This period appears to be a transitional period, with research becoming more complex and attempting to address different aspects simultaneously. It is safe to say that the field has matured significantly during the 2022–2024 period. The concept of "meaningful work" is now at the center, and concepts such as "purpose, personality, affective commitment, job-satisfaction, employment" that are more refined and address the individual's internal experiences have been added. In other words, the discussions have moved beyond the question of "Is work meaningful or not?" to deeper questions such as "What is the purpose of work, how does it affect personality, how is commitment shaped?"

Figure 6, described as a thematic map, shows the level of density/maturity (y-axis) and relevance/centrality (x-axis) of the relevant theme in the literature according to the axes (Akter et al., 2021). The motor themes (employment, human, adult, work, meaningful work, performance) are located in the upper right corner of the image. They represent the driving forces of the field and form the main axis of current research. Niche themes are located in the upper left corner of the image and, despite being examined in depth, have a low degree of centrality. Topics within this theme are prominent in specific and limited contexts (health-related topics are prominent here: cancer,

disability, global burden). They attract attention as topics that can bring a different perspective to the field.

Figure 6. Mapping of themes according to density of study and level of academic relevance



Emerging or declining themes are located in the lower left section. This theme includes concepts such as job, people, attitudes, job satisfaction, and burnout. Both the density and centrality of these concepts are low. The themes here can be described as concepts that have not yet developed or have begun to lose their significance. However, the section on 'Basic Themes' in the lower right corner is seen as topics that have not been studied in depth, despite being central issues in meaningful business literature. In other words, they are defined as basic concepts in the field, but they are topics that have not been focused on much. When examined visually, it can be seen that these topics are shifting towards the area of intensity. Concepts positioned on the density and centrality axis have not been evaluated as basic themes because they do not sufficiently transition into the basic theme section. Job, people, attitudes, job satisfaction, and burnout themes are considered as thematic themes because they have a lower density than the others, even though they are located in 'the Motor Themes' area.

Table 5 provides information on the most productive authors in the field of meaningful work. An examination of the most productive author table reveals a dense cluster in 2020: Beehr, Kim, Hart, Mache, Mette, and Robelski participated in production during the same period and each published two publications. This also indicates that interest in the field has gained momentum, particularly in

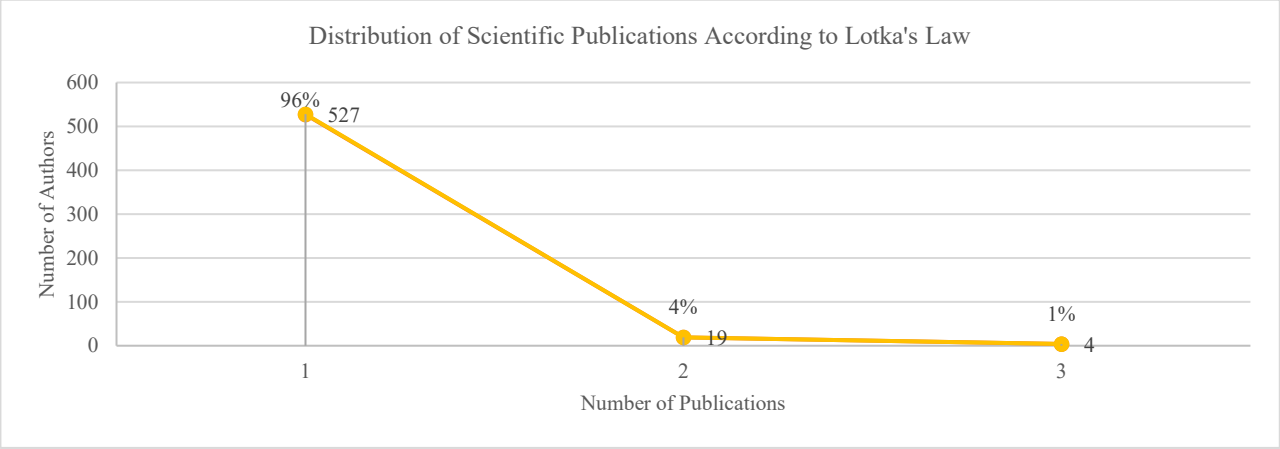
recent years. The h and g index values range between 2 and 3, indicating that the authors are still in the initial stages of their careers and the field has a young literature.

Table 5. The top ten most productive authors

No	Author	h_index	g_index	m_index	Total Citations	Total Publications	Publication Start Year
1	Beehr, Terry A.	3	3	0.500	79	3	2020
2	Kim, Minseo	3	3	0.500	79	3	2020
3	Coelho, Arnaldo	2	2	0.286	37	2	2019
4	Flyvholm, Mari-Ann	2	2	0.143	24	2	2012
5	Harpaz, Itzhak	2	2	0.083	61	2	2002
6	Hart, Volker	2	2	0.333	19	2	2020
7	Joelle, Maria	2	2	0.286	37	2	2019
8	Mache, Stefania	2	2	0.333	19	2	2020
9	Mette, Janika	2	2	0.333	19	2	2020
10	Robelski, Swantje	2	2	0.333	19	2	2020

Lotka's Law describes the distribution of author productivity in a given field and it is used to predict their potential future contributions to literature. According to the law, a small percentage of authors in scientific production produce numerous publications, while the vast majority produce only one or a small number of publications. Mathematically expressed, the probability of an author publishing n papers is inversely proportional to approximately $1/n^2$. That is, while 60 out of 100 authors write a single paper, approximately 15 write two papers, 7 write three papers; only a very small group achieves high productivity (Rowlands, 2005). The graph shown in Figure 7 indicates that author productivity is distributed quite unevenly and that the field is largely shaped by one-off contributions. In light of this information, it can be stated that the data in the graph does not follow a Lotka distribution. This indicates that the field is still young, fragmented, and lacks continuity.

Figure 7. Author productivity according to Lotka's Law



When examining studies on meaningful work, the top ten most cited publications and researchers are presented in Table 6. The studies presented in the table are mostly based on qualitative and quantitative analyses. The studies were addressed in different contexts and macro themes such as hotel management, nursing, cybersecurity, sharing economy, cultural comparisons, pandemic effects

with Covid 19, digitalization and workplace risks. When the most cited studies are examined, it is seen that the harmony of work and employee values and the importance of social contribution for meaningful work are questioned. For example, Supanti and Butcher (2019) question whether corporate social responsibility behavior creates a meaningful job profile for the millennial generation. The second study attributes the source of work meaningfulness to universal psychological satisfaction as autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beneficence (Martela & Riekki, 2018). In another study (Goh & Baum, 2021), a greater good purpose is seen as a source of motivation for meaningful work.

Table 6. Information on the most cited studies

Studies	Journal	Author/s	Citations	Annual Average Number of Citations
Is corporate social responsibility (CSR) participation the pathway to foster meaningful work and helping behavior for millennials?	International Journal of Hospitality Management	(Supanti & Butcher, 2019)	127	18,14
Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness, and Beneficence: A Multicultural Comparison of the Four Pathways to Meaningful Work	Frontiers in Psychology	(Martela & Riekki, 2018)	120	15.00
Keeping customers' data secure: A cross-cultural study of cybersecurity compliance among the Gen-Mobile workforce	Computers in Human Behavior	(Ameen et al., 2021)	85	17.00
Job perceptions of Generation Z hotel employees towards working in Covid-19 quarantine hotels: the role of meaningful work	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	(Goh & Baum, 2021)	73	14.60
Psychosocial work environment and intention to leave the nursing profession: Results from the longitudinal Chinese NEXT study	Scandinavian Journal of Public Health	(Li et al., 2010)	71	4.44
Thriving on demand: Challenging work results in employee flourishing through appraisals and resources	International Journal of Stress Management	(Kim & Beehr, 2020)	62	10.33
Informal and Cooperative Recycling as a Poverty Eradication Strategy	Geography Compass	(Gutberlet, 2012)	62	4.43
The motivational potential of meaningful work: Relationships with strengths use, work engagement, and performance	PloS one	(VanWingerden & Van der Stoep, 2018)	57	7.13
Exploring the meaning of work within the sharing economy: A case of food-delivery workers	International Journal of Hospitality Management	(Lin et al., 2020)	54	9.00
A cross-cultural longitudinal analysis of the meaning of work and the socialization process of career starters	Journal of World Business	(Harpaz et al., 2002)	54	2.25

Table 7 lists the top ten journals that published the most articles in the relevant field. To create the table, we selected only 143 published articles from the initial search results in Scopus and WoS databases. Moreover, this table reveals that studies in meaningful work literature have been conducted across a variety of disciplines. Health, psychology, and organizational behavior are prominent disciplines. This suggests that the field is dispersed/multidisciplinary.

Table 7. Most relevant sources on meaningful work

Journal	Number of Articles
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	10
International Journal of Organizational Analysis	5
Frontiers in Psychology	4
Human Resource Development International	4
International Journal of Human Resource Management	4
International Journal of Business and Society	3
International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education	3
International Journal of Ethics and Systems	3
International Journal of Hospitality Management	3
Career Development International	2

The studies presented in Table 7, including the journals that published the most articles, are listed in Table 8 to be examined according to their productivity and impact. As a result, when the productivity and impact of journals, such as the International Journal of Business and Society and the International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education, are analyzed, it is seen that they do not enter the top 10. The metrics presented in the table represent the journals' performance on a significant sample of works, not their overall impact. Examining the data, IJERPH can be considered a driving force in the field in both volume (10 articles) and speed (m = 0.615).

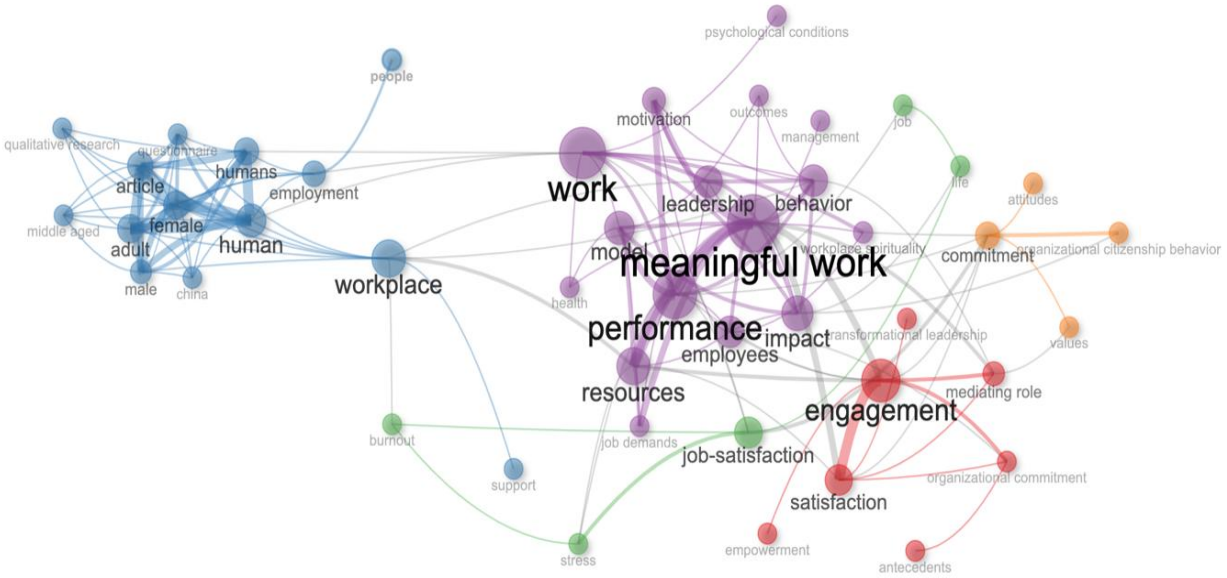
Table 8. Journals productivity and impact

Journal	h index	g index	m index	Total Citations	Total Articles	Publication Start Year
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	8	9	0,615	99	10	2013
International Journal of Human Resource Management	4	4	0,571	81	4	2019
International Journal of Organizational Analysis	4	5	0,4	60	5	2016
Frontiers in Psychology	3	4	0,3	163	4	2016
Human Resource Development International	3	4	0,231	24	4	2013
Career Development International	2	2	0,125	62	2	2010
International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health	2	2	0,143	26	2	2012
International Journal of Ethics and Systems	2	3	0,25	13	3	2018
International Journal of Hospitality Management	2	3	0,286	181	3	2019
International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management	2	2	0,4	32	2	2021

The International Journal of Human Resource Management, one of the leading journals in the field of human resource management, ranks high on the list despite its late start (2019) (m=0.571), and the impact of meaningful business publications in this journal is seen to be high. The International Journal of Hospitality Management (3 articles/181 citations) and Frontiers in Psychology (4 articles/163 citations) stand out as the two journals with the highest citation efficiency, demonstrating significant impact with a small number of articles.

Figure 8 presents the network graph of the terms considered together (co-occurrence network). Each circle in the graph represents a term. The connections between terms indicate their co-occurrence in the same article, while the thickness of the connections indicates the frequency with which these pairs appear together. As the frequency of co-occurrence increases, the connection strength increases. This graph shows which concepts are central, which concepts are discussed together, and which concepts form a thematic cluster. The co-occurrence network shows meaningful work at the center of the field; the second closest circle contains the concepts of work–performance–engagement. This triad is fed from above by leadership/behavior and from below by workplace/resources. The points on the right side show the themes where the results are displayed. Here, one line goes from engagement to job satisfaction/commitment/empowerment, while another line goes from commitment to OCB behavior. In other words, a sense of meaning first increases participation, then attitudes and civic behavior develop.

Figure 8. Co-occurrence network analysis with keyword plus



The blue cluster on the left (human, employment, adult) appears dense within itself but weakly connected to the center. It illustrates us more about the context of demographic framework. While workplace and resources are a bridge to meaning and performance, employees and impact are linked to outcomes.

Conclusion

Studies on meaningful work to date have generally focused on theoretical discussions or case studies, and empirical studies (Lee, 2015; Martela & Riekki, 2018). However, the general trends in literature, which themes are prominent, which countries or institutions are leading, and how research has evolved over time have not been comprehensively explored. This study contributes to the literature in three ways by considering the meaningful work literature indexed in the WOS and Scopus

databases as a whole and showing which themes stand out and how they change over time. First, it clarifies the direction in which conceptual debates are evolving. Second, it maps the terms with which meaningful work is associated at the organizational level. Finally, it highlights thematic gaps for future research.

When the findings are examined (Figure 4 and Table 4), with the emergence of meaningful work literature into mainstream organizational research in the 2010s, the vast majority of studies have focused on defining work values and meaning through identity and generation. The primary objective during this period is to determine what meanings individuals assign to their jobs (Asik-Dizdar & Esen, 2016). Since 2016, concepts such as "work, workplace, job, values, workplace spirituality, commitment" have become more prominent (see Table 4). With the 2020s, the focus has shifted away from identity to more dynamic processes such as how work is experienced and managed at the individual and organizational levels. This process-oriented approach has gained practical importance in the context of the environmental jolts of the 2020s (Martela et al., 2021; Granger et al., 2022). Studies on the professional gig workers showed that work meaningfulness, as an important personal resource, reduces perceived burnout and increases affective well-being even in this time of uncertainty (Granger et al., 2022).

Our network analyses demonstrate that meaningful work cannot be reduced to a single concept but constitutes an emergent theme within a larger construct domain, in which relationships with job design, employee engagement, psychological empowerment, organizational commitment, job satisfaction and values all were reported. This highlights the growing interdisciplinary nature of literature. For example, the research by Pratt & Ashforth (2003) and Lysova et al. (2019) emphasize that meaningful work must be addressed simultaneously at the individual, organizational, and societal levels; this study also reveals a similar pattern.

The most cited studies examine the alignment of work and employee values and question the importance of social contribution for meaningful work. The studies are structured around fundamental motivational concepts such as psychological needs, autonomy, relatedness, competence, and beneficence (Martela & Riekki, 2018).

Additionally, research has focused on micro-contextual studies by examining how new generations, such as Generation Y and Z, find meaning in their work through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities (Supanti & Butcher, 2019; Goh & Baum, 2021) and how new forms of flexible work, such as Smart Working (Palumbo et al., 2023) and the precarious GIG economy, affect sensemaking (Granger et al., 2022). Moreover, studies are carried out on macro themes such as the sharing economy, cultural comparisons, the effects of the pandemic with Covid 19, and digitalization.

Meaningful work is closely associated in literature with sensemaking, a dynamic process in which individuals interpret complex events in their environment and attribute value to their work, and with job crafting, where employees actively reshape their work (Asik-Dizdar & Esen, 2016). Conceptually, in the 2010s, it was emphasized that meaningfulness derives from four basic psychological pathways: Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness, and Beneficence (Martela & Riekki, 2018; Palumbo et al., 2023).

Overall, this study shows that the concept of meaningful work is in the process of maturing both theoretically, empirically, and thematically, and it became an established research area in the literature, especially in the post-2021 period.

The findings strengthen the framework that meaningful work produces more positive outcomes; however, Bailey et al. (2019) and Michaelson (2021) remind that in some cases, meaning overload can create psychological costs by creating pressure on the employee. Secondly, the results of a citation analysis (Table 6) show that most research focuses on Generation Y and Z content, which generally suggests that they are looking for employment where they can make a difference in society and align with their values. These results are in consistency with the existing literature. Lysova et al. (2019) found that two important antecedents of meaningful work are job design in organizations and organizational culture. The findings in Lysova and his collegues' study (2019) can be considered complementary and supportive of each other in meeting the expectations of different generations. In order to have a productive and motivation-generating environment in their work processes, organizations should construct an organizational culture that is up to the expectations of these generations, also they should implement new job designs that are flexible according to technology and digitalization (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025).

While the findings confirm that meaningful work is a fundamental frame of reference for employee psychology, job design, and organizational sustainability, they also reveal the need for more comprehensive, cross-cultural, and methodologically diverse studies, given the multidimensional nature of the concept.

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