



# Leadership for Sustainable Performance: A Systematic Literature Review

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Received: 26 April 2025

Revised: 12 June 2025

Accepted: 25 June 2025

Published: 30 June 2025

## How to cite this paper:

Thapa, A., & Gurung, V. J. (2025).

Leadership for Sustainable Performance: A Systematic Literature Review. *Quest Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 7(1), 66-78.

<https://doi.org/10.3126/qjmss.v7i1.82008>

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## Abstract

**Background:** Leadership is vital in shaping an organisation's long-term success, especially in the current global climate where sustainable business practices are increasingly prioritised. Modern leadership extends beyond vision and communication, requiring adaptability to societal and environmental challenges.

**Purpose:** There is a growing need for leadership that drives sustainable performance. This study intends to explore the leadership style that helps improve sustainable performance using quantitative and qualitative methods. Using a systematic literature review, it aims to establish the relationship between leadership style (LS) and sustainable performance (SP).

**Methods:** Manual in-depth review and network analysis were applied. Current research utilised a sample of 39 peer-reviewed articles from 2010 to 2025 from the Scopus database. The study employed the PRISMA (Preferred reporting items for systematic review and thematic analysis) technique.

**Findings:** After the detailed analysis and synthesis of the sample paper, the author noticed that responsive and transformative leadership was seen as the most preferred, while social exchange theory and upper echelon theory were the two theories used in most of the sample articles. This study synthesizes the effect of leadership upon SP using the author's end result in the analysed paper.

**Conclusion:** This research contributes towards establishing a connection between leadership and sustainable performance from a holistic perspective using methodologically rigorous and multi-layered analysis. The framework of this study not only manifests upon discussion and presentation of outcomes but also contributes to future researchers to study leadership and sustainable performance in a more comprehensive and integrated way, which can establish an ethically successful and lucrative form of leadership.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Sustainable performance, innovation, social exchange theory.

## Introduction

The success and long-term growth of an organisation largely rely on leadership. While leaders' vision and communication are important, they are not enough alone (Chen et al., 2018). Leadership is a dynamic and evolving concept, shaped by ongoing changes in society and the global business environment (Kjellström et al., 2020). In the modern context, investors and stakeholders expect leaders to guide organisations through global changes while promoting sustainable business performance (Smith & Sharicz, 2011). Today's leaders are not solely focused on profit; they are also responsible for maintaining a healthy balance with sustainable practices (Ibarra et al., 2010). Therefore, leadership plays a crucial role in driving sustainable business strategies.

Sustainability is broadly associated with organisational processes and their outcomes (Sulej & Iqbal, 2023). Traditional leadership models were primarily focused on maximising profit, often paying little attention to sustainability. In contrast, today's leaders are more dynamic and better equipped to balance the diverse aspects of business, including environmental, social, and economic goals (Correia, 2019). Emerging enterprises now face growing ethical pressure from stakeholders to reduce their negative impact on the natural environment. In response to global climate challenges, developed nations are enacting legislation aimed at environmental protection. Regulatory bodies are gradually becoming more proactive in encouraging robust environmental management practices. This shift influences all business areas—green manufacturing, sustainable marketing, and eco-friendly operations. As a result, industries seemed to be bothered about the effective implementation of the green policies and practices, such as the green leadership. Modern and sophisticated organisations promote green practices to implement the controlling bodies' regulations to protect biodiversity and the ecosystem (Spreafico & Landi, 2022). The big question arises here, who can initiate such sustainable business culture practice and integrate those with sustainable business performance, the introduction of different form of leadership from traditional form like transactional leadership by Bass, (1990) to new concepts like agile leadership (Cinnioglu & Turan, 2020) should be blended to meet the vested interest of customers and stakeholders through contextual changes and innovation.

Santana and Lopez (2019) highlighted that sustainable leadership remains a relatively unexplored and underdeveloped study area. Alghfeli et al. (2024) attempted to examine the relationship between leadership and sustainable performance (SP), but did not clearly explain their research methodology or review techniques. Afzal and Tumpa (2024) explored leadership styles concerning sustainable practices by reviewing 31 articles. They concluded that no universal leadership style fits all contexts. However, the reviewed studies primarily emphasised promoting sustainability in the construction sector through innovation, behaviour, and knowledge, rather than enhancing sustainable business performance. Similarly, Dharmawan et al. (2024) adopted a quantitative approach to investigate the impact of responsible leadership on SP, but their study focused on establishing this relationship specifically through maintenance management implementation. Udin (2024) analysed the trends in leadership styles and their influence on SP using bibliometric analysis. Rather than employing a systematic literature review (SLR), this study relied on bibliometric methods and utilised VOSviewer software to analyse data from the Scopus database from 2010 to 2024. Likewise, Noman et al. (2022) did not provide detailed methodological information and primarily concentrated on the role of Artificial Intelligence. In another study, Khan et al. (2024) applied a cross-sectional design with a quantitative approach, revealing that the relationship between digital leadership and organisational performance is mediated by circular economy practices and technological innovation. This research investigates the connection between leadership and sustainable performance to identify the key drivers that enhance organisational performance. Gaining insight into this relationship will contribute to advancing both the theoretical framework and practical strategies related to leadership and sustainable performance.

The transformative form of leadership contributes to the green outcomes and practices (Widisatria & Nawangsari, 2021). Servants and responsible leadership positively affected sustainable performances

(Batool et al. 2022). Iqbal et al. (2021) identified that sustainable leadership moderated the innovative relationship. The status of leadership and sustainable performance is still not clear. Hence, the first research question would be, What is the status of the leadership and Sustainable performance in the research field (RQ1). Supply chain management positively affects sustainable performance (Social and environmental) (Chin et al., 2015). Iqbal et al. (2021) identified the positive effect of leadership on environmental performance. Similarly, Octavian (2023) found that toxic leadership negatively affects environmental performance. Hence, which leadership style and SP (General, environment or social) is most focused? (RQ2). Kaferzopoulos and Gotzamani (2022) identified transformational and transactional leadership styles as the most influential for sustainable performance using the hierarchical regression analysis technique (Quantitative method). Iqbal et al. (2020) revealed the direct effect of sustainable leadership on sustainable performance through running the SEM technique (Quantitative method). Martin et al. (2023) found that leadership style can bring positive results for sustainable development by employing qualitative research. The authors use both a quantitative and qualitative approach. The research approach is suitable for the study, but it has not been identified. Hence, which research approach is to be adopted in the study? (RQ3). Alghfeli et al. (2024) employed the resource-based view (RBV) and stakeholder theories. Dynamic capability theory, social learning theory and resource-based view (RBV) theory were highly related to entrepreneurial leadership. Authors employed different forms of theory, but which theory can establish the link between leadership and SP? (RQ4)

This review paper highlights the leadership relationship using detailed and rigorous analysis techniques with content analysis and bibliometry. Based on the data from the Scopus database between 2010 and 2025, 39 articles were studied to identify the status of leadership and SP in the research field. This paper contributes towards improving theoretical and practical leadership and the SP concept approach, which can strengthen the bond through introducing innovation and competency.

## Methodology

This paper adopts a systematic literature review approach, structured around the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework and supplemented by thematic analysis. The selection of articles was carefully designed to address the research questions effectively. The review was conducted over three months, from November 2024 to January 2025. The Scopus database was used to retrieve relevant peer-reviewed publications, as it is widely recognised for its extensive and comprehensive coverage of scholarly literature (Dias et al., 2022). Compared to other databases such as Web of Science (WoS) and Google Scholar, Scopus offers broader content coverage, enhancing the accuracy of article selection and minimising the likelihood of missing relevant studies.

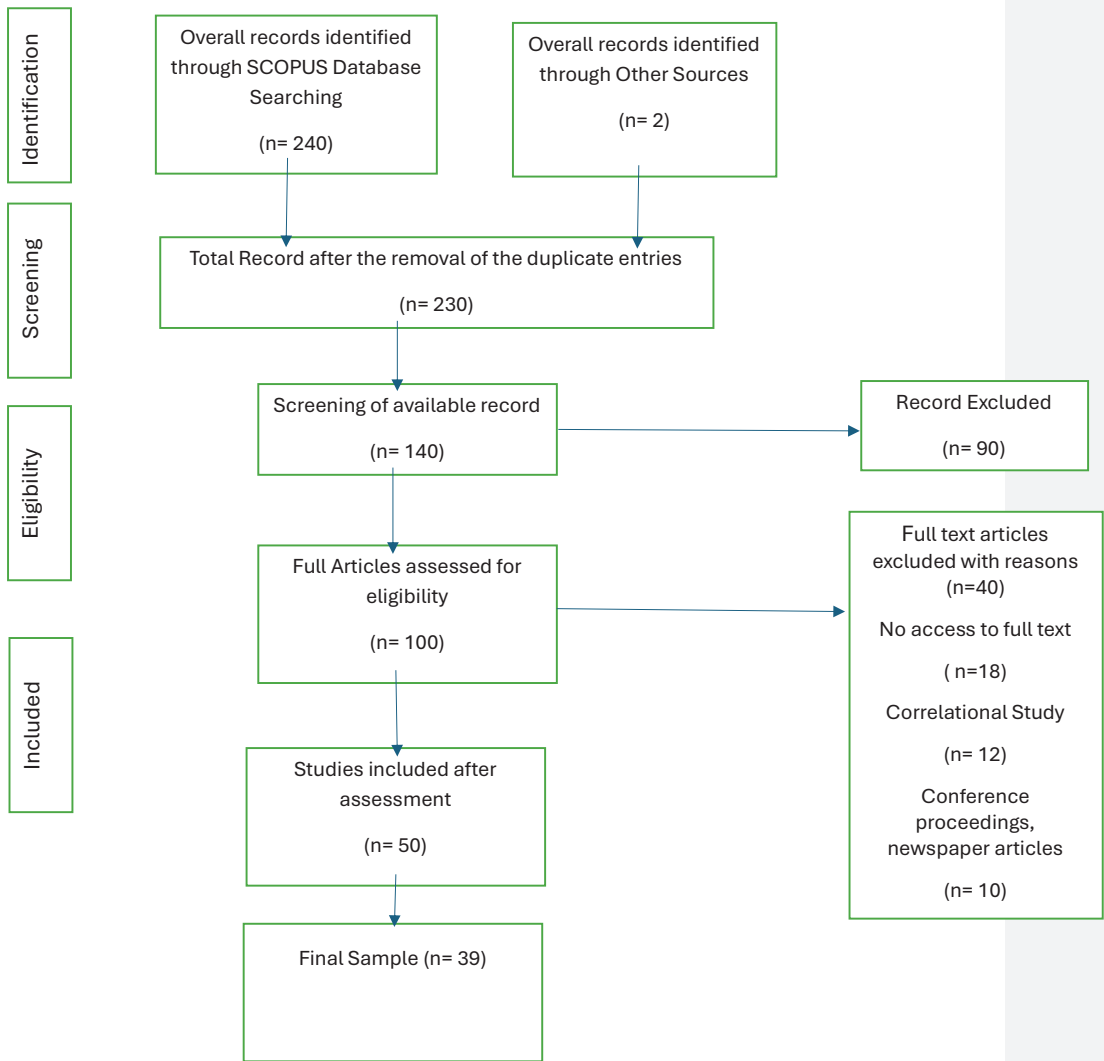
Initially, a CSV file was extracted from the Scopus database between 2010 and 2025. VOS software (Van & Waltman, 2014) performed the necessary analysis. The downloaded file was converted to XLS format to identify the duplication of entries, and manual analysis of the content was done, going through the titles and abstracts as Kitchenham and Brereton (2013) suggested. The articles that matched the current research's aim, i.e., the effect of leadership style on SP (different dimensions of the performance, economic, environmental and social), were individually analysed. At the end, 39 articles were finalised, which can represent the sample. The authors conducted a bibliometric analysis and used indices such as the number of citations and publications (Khan & Idris, 2021). MS Excel and VOS viewer were employed to enhance the graphical presentation of the results and figures.

Using the VOS viewer, two types of network analysis were conducted: a network of co-authorship and a network of keywords. Analysis was conducted on a counting basis (Rodriguez, Waltman, & Eck, 2016). While setting the boundary condition, a minimum of two documents by a single author was selected, and 10 authors were verified through this criterion. The research approach adopted in selected articles was perfect for Systematic literature review research. Next, the keyword analysis helps identify whether the research area falls within the domain and expresses its existing relationship (Xiao et al., 2018). Among 93 keywords shown by the VOS viewer, only five keywords met the condition with the conditional criteria

of five keywords as van Eck and Waltman (2014) recommended.

The authors conducted qualitative analysis to analyse each research paper individually within the scope of leadership and Sustainable performance, which was later compared, aligning the mechanisms and methods of research with previous qualitative results.

Figure 1: Sample Flow chart



As explained in Figure 1, 240 records were extracted from the Scopus database, and two articles were downloaded from other sources. After removing 10 duplicate entries, the record went up to 230. 40 Articles were excluded for various reasons. 18 articles were dropped due to non-accessibility to the full text. 12 articles were removed due to the correlational study, which was unrelated to the study. The 10 Conference, proceedings, and newspaper articles were also rejected. After assessment, the 39 articles were finalised.

## Results

The data related to the study was extracted in January 2025. After 2010, massive changes in leadership and sustainable leadership can be seen (Xiao et al., 2018). Sample articles from 2010 to 2025 were included. 2024 seems to be the year with the highest research article publications. Among the sample, 23 articles were published in 2024.

Using the Scopus database, the data was analysed. Most authors are from China, Malaysia, and Pakistan, as presented in Figure 2. 39 Articles were published, and 23 articles were cited 984 times. Journals specialising in sustainability and management, such as the Sustainability (Switzerland) Journal, received 8.73 % of all citations. European Management Journal, which forms around 50.40 % of sample article citations. European Management Journal is among the most influential journals, receiving the highest citations among the sample journals.

**Table 1: Productivity Details of Authors**

Author	Number of Articles	Number of citations received	Country
Ahmad N.H.	2	112	Malaysia
Iqbal, Q.	2	112	Malaysia
Szekely F	1	496	Pakistan
Jiang W	1	122	China
Halim H.A.	1	87	Malaysia

**Figure 2: Visualization of Network of Keywords**



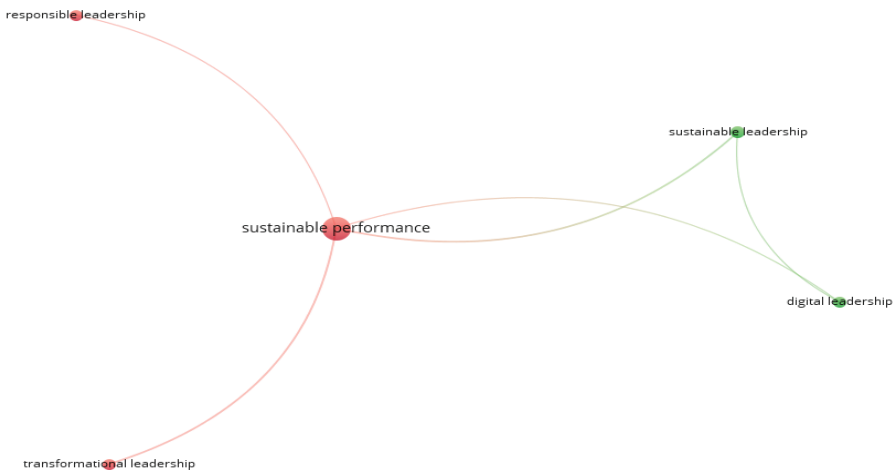
128 authors published 39 articles; on average, one article was written by 2 authors, ranging from 1 to 8 authors for one article. Such single articles with many authors published are usually from Germany, Taiwan, Switzerland, etc. As mentioned in Table 2, Szekely F received the highest citations, i.e. 496, from Pakistan (Table 1), and Ahmad N.H. and Iqbal Q. received 112 citations with 2 published articles from Malaysia (Table 1).

Table 2: Authors with high citations in the sample

Author	Number of Articles	Number of citations received
Ahmad N.H.	2	112
Iqbal, Q.	2	112
Szekely F	1	496
Jiang W	1	122
Halima H.A.	1	87

The author used the help of a VOS viewer to identify the network visualisation of keywords and authors (organisation, countries). Priority was given to the first author of an article. The second author does not contribute significantly to the article (Subramanyam, 1983). Figure 3 shows the outcome of the VOS viewer. Network visualisation analysis shows that transformational leadership in sustainable performance is the most explored.

Figure 3: Visualization of Network of Keywords



## Theories of extracted articles

Among 39 studies, 16 related theories were found. Social exchange theory (Jiang & Chen, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Echebiri & Amundsen, 2021; Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022) and upper echelon theory (Iqbal et al., 2021; Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021; Liao & Zhang, 2020) have been used in the majority of studies. In the same way, organisational learning theory (Basten & Haamann, 2018; Xia, 2022) and others 10 were dynamic capability theory (Hossain et al., 2024), CSR theory (Khanam et al., 2023), Resource-based view theory (Ngoc Huynh et al., 2024), etc., which are mentioned in Table 3 as well.

Table 3: Details of theory in sample paper

Theories Applied	Total number of Studies	Research method
Social exchange theory	2	Questionnaire and other empirical
Upper echelon theory	2	Questionnaire
Organisational learning theory	2	SEM Technique
Others	10	

Similarly, among the sample articles, 10 studies are of transformational leadership (Luo et al., 2024; Lukito et al., 2025), 6 studies are of responsible leadership (Huo et al., 2024; Amir et al., 2022), and Digital Leadership (Esangbedo et al., 2024). In some contexts, two leadership theories are integrated, like ethical and responsible leadership (Khanam et al., 2023), as mentioned in Table 4.

Table 4: Leadership in Sample Papers

Leadership Style	Total number of articles in the sample	Percentage of articles in the sample	Themes
Transformational Leadership	10	25.64%	Sustainable performance
Responsible Leadership	6	15.38%	Innovative performance through CSR
Digital Leadership	4	10.25%	Corporate performance through digital supply chain practices.
Sustainable Leadership	5	12.82%	Sustainable development
Ethical Leadership	4	10.25%	Long-term success of organisational sustainability
Authentic Leadership	3	7.69%	
Servant Leadership	2	5.12%	

In the same way, as mentioned in Table 5, 15 Studies are related of Sustainable performance (Huo et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2022), 14 studies are related to social performance (Amir, Siddique, & Ali, 2022; Karanaskai, 2025), 9 studies is done upon the environmental performance (Umair et al., 20024) and one study is done upon the economic performance (Xuecheng et al., 2022). In some research papers, environmental performance was combined with sustainable performance.

Table 5: Performance details in Sample papers

Type of Performance	Total number of articles in the sample	Percentage of articles in the sample
Economic	1	2.56%
Environmental	9	23.07%
Social	14	35.89%
Sustainable	15	38.46%

Thematic analysis

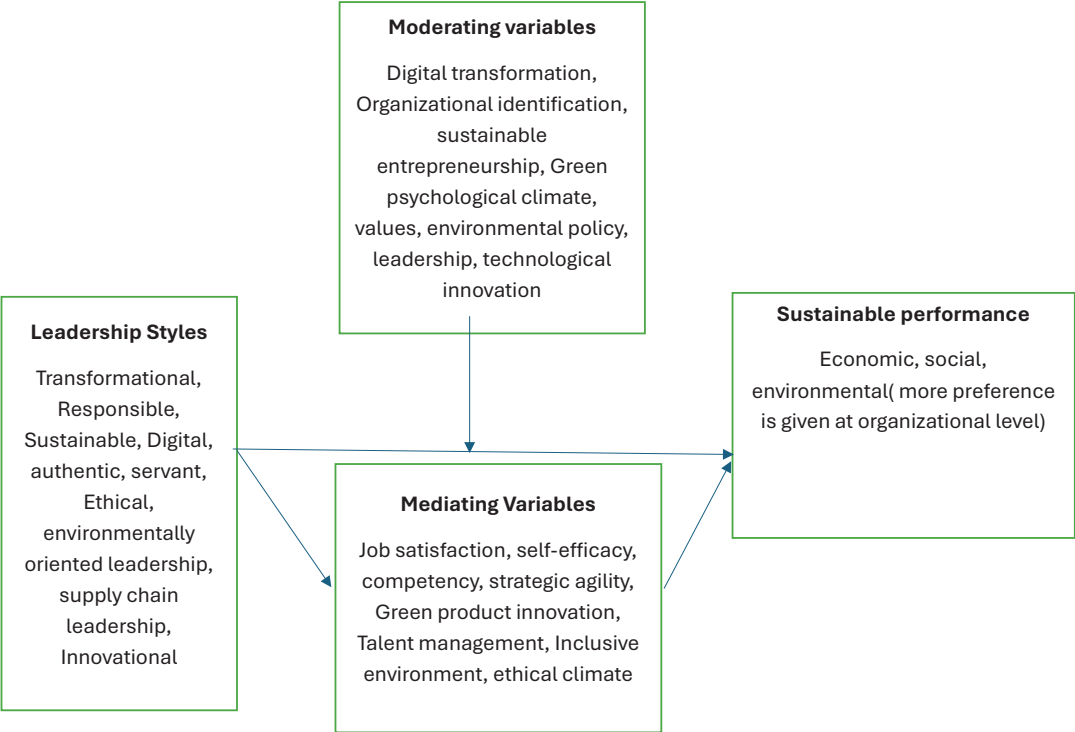
This study prioritises those themes and concepts that focus on the systematic review. Highly repeated and cited themes can serve as the base for the foundational concept. The systematic analysis found an established relationship between leadership and sustainable performance, employee engagement and green initiatives, technological innovation, as highlighted in Figure 4. Though multiple themes might relate to each other differently, among the 39 studies, most research articles showed that transformational leadership and responsible leadership have a significant relationship with sustainable performance. 6 studies showed the existence of mediation/moderation between leadership and sustainable performance as shown in Figure 4.

In the same way, the sub-theme of leadership and its study affects the performance and contributes to



implementing the methodological approach towards sustainable performance. Businesses can test the role of green innovation, competency, and job satisfaction in conjunction with leadership and business performance. Rigorous analysis revealed that past studies were entirely focused on innovation and competency through leadership. These themes were further developed with a focus on a holistic approach towards leadership and sustainable performance to fill the existing research gap. Alghfeli et al. (2024) claimed varied findings of leadership on sustainable performance. A mediating moderating role must be tested in different countries and industries (Huo et al., 2024).

**Figure 4: Relationship between leadership styles and Sustainable performance**



In the same way, previous studies mentioned and introduced mediating and moderating variables which explained the relationship between leadership and sustainable performance. Servant leadership (Siddiquei et al., 2021) and responsible leadership (Liao & Zhang, 2020) positively affect sustainable performance. Performance positively affects leadership styles (transformational, responsible, digital, sustainable, ethical, authentic and sustainable). 10 studies showed the positive effect of leadership on sustainable performance. 5 Studies highlighted that sustainable leadership identified a positive effect on sustainable development.

## Discussion

A survey of 230 publications between 2010 and 2025 revealed that leadership is an inevitable factor for sustainable performance. Not only is that not sufficient, but there is also the existence of mediating/moderating variables between the relationships, as highlighted in Figure 4. Thematic and quantitative analysis was conducted to identify the status of leadership and sustainable performance (RQ1). 39 research articles were reviewed, authored by 128 authors, and published in 33 journals. European Management Journal is a journal which was highly cited among the sample articles (as mentioned in Table 6). Szekely F received the highest citations, and Ahmad N.H. and Iqbal Q. received 112 citations with 2 published articles. Such authors are usually from Germany, Taiwan, Switzerland, etc. As mentioned in Table 4, the transformative and responsible form of leadership was most used to check upon the effect on performance



(sustainable performance, innovative, corporate) (RQ2). As mentioned in Figure 4, mediating and moderating variables exist between the relationship between leadership and sustainable performance. The relationship passes through the green innovation (Ngoc et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023), competency, strategic agility, organisational culture, and epistemic motivation (Huo et al., 2024). Transformative and responsible forms of leadership are most focused on sustainable performance, which is connected with environmental awareness.

**Table 6: Highly Cited Journals in the sample**

Journal Name	Total number of papers	Percentage of research papers in the sample	Total number of citations
Sustainability (Switzerland)	6	15.38%	86
Journal of Infrastructure Policy and Development	2	5.12%	15
European Business Review	1	2.56%	36
Journal of Management Development	1	2.56%	41

The outcomes show that leadership style itself is insufficient; people are more concerned with the effect of the leadership upon performance. Various research methods (Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed) were employed to reveal novel patterns and concepts related to the topic. This review disclosed the actual and real differences between the outcomes obtained through the results and bibliometric methods. Normally, in review methods, the mixed method approach (RQ3) would be suitable for measuring the qualitative and quantitative parts (Younas & Ali, 2021). The relationship between a responsible leadership style and business performance was studied using upper echelon theory (Amir et al., 2022). Social exchange theory was used to examine ethical and authentic (Ajayi et al., 2024) and responsible forms of leadership. (Xuecheng et al., 2022). The review's findings show a lack of universally acknowledged theory which can establish the link between leadership and SP( RQ4).

## Conclusion

This study explores the role of leadership styles in promoting sustainable performance by reviewing 39 selected articles. The analysis highlights that leadership is dynamic and essential in enhancing organisational reputation and fostering sustainable innovation. The findings indicate a growing interest among researchers and academics in the intersection of leadership and sustainable performance, with the highest number of publications observed in 2024. Two dominant theoretical frameworks, Social Exchange Theory and Upper Echelon Theory, were frequently applied to examine this relationship.

While a few studies within the sample employed a systematic literature review approach, others incorporated various methodologies, including quantitative methods using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), qualitative approaches, and mixed-method designs. The insights generated from this study can assist academics, policymakers, and regulatory bodies in integrating leadership principles into long-term sustainability strategies.

It is recommended that traditional business models evolve to link leadership practices with innovation-driven performance. This review contributes to bridging existing theoretical and practical gaps in leadership research. Furthermore, combining Social Exchange Theory with Upper Echelon Theory may enhance professional and personal relationships within organisations, ultimately leading to improved and sustained organisational performance. The results also reinforce the increasing academic interest in this area, suggesting a promising direction for future research.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The search strategy may have inadvertently overlooked high-quality articles relevant to the research topic. Moreover, one of the metrics used to assess

the strength of the leadership relationship was citation count, which may not always reflect a study's scientific value or practical impact. Relying solely on citation numbers can be problematic, as they may be influenced by factors unrelated to research quality or contribution. This may raise concerns among both academics and practitioners.

Future studies should be more inclusive by refining search parameters to avoid excluding impactful work. Researchers might also consider using additional evaluative criteria, such as journal impact factors or citation classifications, to assess the strength and influence of literature in a more balanced way. Expanding the range of databases and incorporating diverse metrics will help produce a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of the leadership–sustainable performance nexus. Researchers are encouraged to broaden the scope of data sources beyond the Scopus database by incorporating additional reputable databases such as Web of Science and the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) journal list. The inclusion criteria in this study were relatively limited, which may have led to the exclusion of relevant literature that could further validate or expand upon the relationship between leadership and sustainable performance (SP).

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