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Mapping the nexus: a bibliometric review of psychological distress and leadership research

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Abstract: Psychological distress in organisational settings is underexplored in leadership research and lacks a cohesive theoretical foundation. Leaders critically influence employee well-being, necessitating deeper insight into workplace factors that contribute to psychological distress. This study addresses this gap by examining the historical roots and evolution of psychological distress in leadership contexts. We conducted a systematic bibliometric review of 294 peer-reviewed articles published from 1992 to 2024 across 156 journals in the Web of Science Core Collection, analysing 17,340 citations to identify influential contributions, citation networks, and research themes. Citation analysis highlights key authors and keywords. Bibliographic coupling reveals four thematic clusters: 1) the bright side of leadership and positive workplace outcomes; 2) the dark side of leadership and workplace stressors; 3) the work environment and mental health; 4) personal development and well-being. This review clarifies research trends, intellectual foundations, and thematic structures, providing directions for future studies in this vital area.

Keywords: psychological distress; leadership; bibliometric analysis; network analysis; co-citation analysis; Web of Science; VOSviewer.

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1 Introduction

Psychological distress is a well-established construct in business, management, and economics literature (Khalid and Syed, 2024; Roy et al., 2025). Over the past three decades, it has attracted growing scholarly and practical attention due to its high prevalence as a mental health risk in the workplace (Anasori et al., 2023; Drapeau et al., 2012; Jiang et al., 2025). As a leading occupational health challenge worldwide, it remains one of the most thoroughly investigated distress-related phenomena in organisational behaviour and management research (Huang et al., 2021; Qiu and Zhang, 2022).

Psychological distress is typically defined as an unpleasant emotional state, characterised by symptoms of anxiety, irritability, or depression, that impairs an individual's ability to cope with specific demands (Ridner, 2004; Sellick and Edwardson, 2007). Although numerous instruments exist to measure it (e.g., K10, GHQ-12), the construct is frequently criticised for conceptual ambiguity and overlapping boundaries with related states such as burnout or strain (Drapeau et al., 2012). In organisational contexts, it emerges from excessive job demands, inadequate social support, individual vulnerabilities, counterproductive workplace behaviours, and, crucially, leadership practices (Mopkins, 2022; Zhao et al., 2020). Recent scholarship has linked a broad range of leadership styles to employee psychological distress, including exploitative (Alajhar et al., 2024), abusive (Nguyen et al., 2023), inclusive (Ahmed et al., 2020), transformational (Djourova et al., 2020), servant (Zada et al., 2022), and authentic leadership (Abousoliman and Hamed, 2024).

From an organisational standpoint, psychological distress represents a critical concern. It is associated with reduced job performance, higher absenteeism and presenteeism, increased turnover intentions, and diminished overall life satisfaction (AlMaqbali, 2024; Duong, 2023). The economic costs of psychological distress to organisations and societies are substantial, with poor mental health and associated conditions estimated to cost the global economy around US\$1 trillion annually in lost productivity and related expenditures according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024), as well as billions in employer costs due to absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover (Deloitte, 2024). Consequently, understanding and mitigating psychological distress has become a strategic imperative for sustaining both employee well-being and organisational effectiveness.

Despite these advances, the literature remains theoretically and structurally fragmented, particularly in how leadership and psychological distress are jointly conceptualised (Vogel et al., 2021; Viertiö et al., 2021). Existing studies tend to examine leadership either primarily as a risk factor (e.g., abusive or exploitative leadership) or as a protective resource (e.g., supportive or ethical leadership), yet these streams have developed largely in isolation from one another. Specifically, the 'dark-side' stream tends to operate on a stressor-strain logic, in which destructive leadership is viewed as a primary hazard that directly depletes subordinates' resources (Alajhar et al., 2024; Li

et al., 2024), whereas the ‘bright-side’ stream frequently conceptualises leadership as a contextual buffer that mitigates the impact of other workplace demands (Alajhar et al., 2025; Eva et al., 2019; Fuller et al., 2022). As a result, the field lacks an integrative understanding of how different leadership logics, assumptions, and mechanisms relate to psychological distress across contexts. Moreover, the construct of psychological distress itself continues to suffer from inconsistent conceptualisation, further complicating theoretical accumulation (Drapeau et al., 2012).

Although bibliometric techniques have become a standard tool for mapping mature research domains (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic and Čater, 2015), no previous study has applied them to systematically examine the intellectual structure of research at the specific nexus of leadership and psychological distress. While prior bibliometric and systematic reviews have examined psychological distress broadly or focused on outcomes such as burnout (Karadağ Arlı, 2025) or occupational stress (Chiang et al., 2023), these reviews do not capture how leadership theories, constructs, and research traditions are organised within this domain. By positioning leadership as a central analytical lens and mapping the intellectual structure, thematic clusters, and scholarly networks connecting leadership and psychological distress, the present study offers a theoretically integrative perspective that extends beyond existing reviews.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of publications spanning 1992–2024. To bridge the conceptual blind spots between these disconnected streams, it is necessary to systematically map how different research traditions have evolved and where theoretical integration is missing. Therefore, this study answers the following central research question: given the theoretical fragmentation between the bright side and dark side of leadership paradigms, how is the intellectual structure of psychological distress research organised, and what underlying thematic boundaries and conceptual gaps shape its current understanding? By systematically mapping publication trends, citation networks, co-authorship patterns, institutional collaborations, and thematic evolution, the study offers a cohesive, historically grounded overview of the field and identifies promising avenues for future inquiry.

This study makes four theoretically and empirically grounded contributions. First, it offers the first bibliometric review to explicitly position leadership as a central analytical lens in the psychological distress literature. In doing so, it moves beyond treating leadership merely as one variable among many and instead maps how leadership theories, constructs, and research traditions are intellectually organised within this domain. Second, by identifying and comparing core thematic clusters, the study reveals how research on psychological distress has developed along partially disconnected streams, particularly between bright-side and dark-side leadership perspectives, thereby providing a clearer understanding of the field’s underlying theoretical fragmentation. Third, the analysis highlights conceptual blind spots and underexplored linkages within and across clusters, including the limited integration between leadership traditions, the marginalisation of non-Western perspectives, and the dominance of methodologically homogeneous designs. These insights extend existing reviews by identifying not only where research has accumulated, but also where meaningful theoretical development remains constrained. Fourth, the study derives more targeted theoretical and practical implications by linking specific clusters to differentiated pathways through which leadership shapes psychological distress. This enables a more nuanced foundation for

theory building and for the design of leadership interventions aimed at improving employee well-being, rather than relying on generic prescriptions.

Given these objectives, this article departs from the structure of conventional systematic reviews. Rather than synthesising individual study findings to test hypotheses, the present study adopts a bibliometric design aimed at mapping the intellectual structure, knowledge networks, and thematic evolution of the field. Consequently, the study does not include a standalone literature review section; instead, prior research is integrated across the introduction, theoretical background, and discussion sections to contextualise the bibliometric patterns. This approach aligns with established bibliometric methodology, prioritising the systematic analysis of the field's macro-structure over a qualitative synthesis of micro-level findings.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical foundations of psychological distress from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Section 3 describes the bibliometric methodology and data retrieval process. Section 4 presents the main results and organises the literature into four central research themes. Section 5 discusses the findings and derives theoretical and practical implications. The article concludes by summarising key contributions, acknowledging limitations, and proposing directions for future research.

2 Theoretical background

Psychological distress is a well-established construct in organisational research (Foster et al., 2024). Research on psychological distress has evolved from an initial focus on general workplace stress toward more specific constructs such as burnout, strain, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. It refers to an unpleasant emotional state arising in response to work-related stressors (Ridner, 2004) and encompasses adverse experiences such as anxiety, stress, and depression that can impair cognitive functioning and physical well-being (Bashir et al., 2024; Wagner et al., 2023).

Psychological distress is conceptually related to, yet distinct from, several adjacent constructs commonly examined in occupational health psychology. Burnout, for example, refers to a work-specific syndrome characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001), whereas psychological distress represents a broader state of emotional discomfort that may arise across both work and non-work domains (Kessler et al., 2002; Ridner, 2004). Similarly, strain typically reflects the physiological or psychological response to prolonged exposure to stressors (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), while psychological distress captures the subjective experience of negative emotional states such as anxiety, sadness, and tension (Drapeau et al., 2012). Clarifying these distinctions is important, as psychological distress offers a more inclusive lens for understanding employees' overall mental well-being in organisational contexts. A major development in this area was the introduction of standardised measurement instruments, particularly the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) developed in the early 1990s (Kessler et al., 2002). This scale has contributed to greater consistency in the assessment of psychological distress across disciplines, including business and management.

Prior studies consistently link employee psychological distress to unfavourable workplace outcomes, including lower job satisfaction, reduced productivity, increased turnover intentions, and weakened organisational commitment (AlMaqbali, 2024;

Baquero, 2023; Ramaswamy et al., 2023). Despite the extensive attention given to psychological distress in organisational settings, its relationship with leadership remains insufficiently theorised. Leadership plays a critical role in shaping the work environment and influencing employees' psychological well-being (Kaluza et al., 2020); however, this relationship has not been examined systematically, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how leadership behaviours may exacerbate or alleviate distress.

Many studies have approached psychological distress primarily as an individual or organisational phenomenon, overlooking leadership as a central explanatory factor (Vogel et al., 2021). While Viertiö et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of identifying workplace factors associated with psychological distress, leadership continues to receive limited attention in this context. Moreover, the existing literature is characterised by unresolved theoretical tensions regarding the precise mechanisms through which leadership influences distress. One dominant perspective models leadership behaviours, such as abusive supervision, as direct, primary stressors that immediately trigger psychological distress (Harms et al., 2017). A competing theoretical model, however, frames leadership primarily as a contextual moderator, suggesting that leaders do not cause or prevent distress directly, but rather buffer or exacerbate the impact of other job demands, such as workload or emotional labour (Montano et al., 2017). This ongoing debate over direct versus indirect effects highlights the need for a more structured mapping of the field's underlying assumptions. Different leadership styles appear to shape employees' experiences of psychological distress in distinct ways.

However, existing findings remain scattered and lack integration into a coherent theoretical framework. The literature continues to present fragmented conceptualisations of psychological distress, offering limited clarity and consistency (Vogel et al., 2021). As a result, leadership has not yet been adequately embedded within theoretical models of distress, which constrains the development of comprehensive interventions. Drapeau et al. (2012) similarly noted the absence of a precise definition of psychological distress, while Zhao et al. (2020) argued that leadership requires closer examination as a critical determinant of employees' distress levels.

Research on psychological distress has largely progressed in parallel to, rather than in integration with, leadership scholarship (Montano et al., 2017). Historical trends indicate that although workplace stress has long been a central concern in occupational health psychology, the role of leadership, whether as a protective resource or a risk factor, has only more recently received systematic attention and remains insufficiently integrated into the broader literature (Ritter et al., 2016; Nielsen and Taris, 2019). Accordingly, this study employs a structured bibliometric approach to trace the evolution of research at the intersection of leadership and psychological distress. By systematically examining this literature, the study identifies intellectual linkages, thematic patterns, and research trends, thereby providing a foundation for future theory development and evidence-based interventions aimed at enhancing employee well-being.

3 Methodology

Bibliometric analysis is a well-established and dependable approach for reviewing and interpreting substantial bodies of scientific research (Kuzior and Sira, 2022). It is particularly useful for uncovering citation patterns and mapping the current landscape of

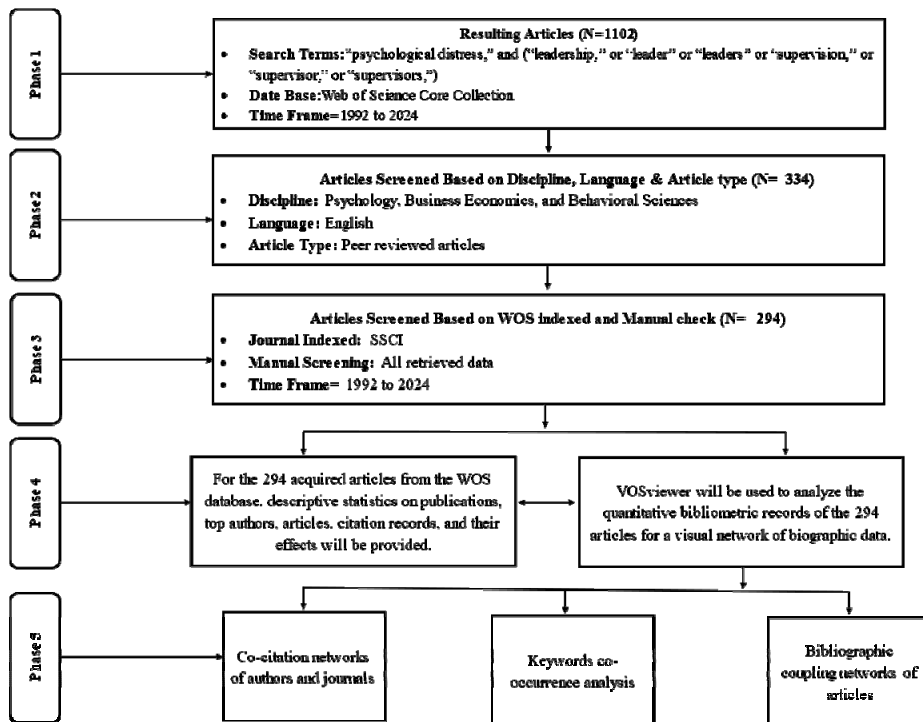
an emerging research area (Donthu et al., 2021). Guided by the aims of this study, the research topic and scope were clearly defined, focusing specifically on scholarly work addressing ‘psychological distress’ within the context of ‘leadership’. To identify relevant documents for analysis, a comprehensive review of global literature published between 1992 and 2024 was conducted using the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection database. The exclusive use of the WoS Core Collection was a deliberate epistemological choice. WoS is widely recognised for its rigorous journal selection criteria, high-quality indexing standards, and structured metadata (Seo, 2023). As Pranckutė (2021) notes, WoS provides a high level of metadata standardisation that is essential for preventing algorithmic mismatches during co-citation and bibliographic coupling, which are essential for reliable bibliometric mapping and network analysis (Ren et al., 2026). While restricting the database to WoS intentionally limits the scope by excluding grey literature, non-indexed regional journals, and applied practitioner reports, this trade-off was necessary to ensure the structural mapping relies only on peer-reviewed, high-impact scholarly dialogue. Its widespread adoption in leading bibliometric studies further enhances the comparability and robustness of the findings. The search query was created using terms associated with psychological distress. Using the proper ‘Boolean operators’, search criteria were narrowed down to locate the relevant papers. The search terms used to locate the most relevant publication included ‘psychological distress’ AND (‘leadership’ OR ‘leader’ OR ‘leaders’ OR ‘supervision’ OR ‘supervisor’ OR ‘supervisors’), which was used as the keyword in the title. The title-based search strategy was intentionally adopted to ensure conceptual precision and relevance of the dataset. By requiring that leadership and psychological distress appear explicitly in the title, the study ensures that both constructs constitute the central focus of the included publications rather than peripheral or incidental themes. In many organisational behaviour studies, psychological distress is merely included as a routine control variable or a secondary outcome within a broader mediation chain. A title-based search filters out this background noise, ensuring that the bibliometric clusters represent research in which the leadership-distress nexus is the primary theoretical phenomenon under investigation. However, a known consequence of this stringent boundary is that complex, multi-level models in which leadership or distress is central but only listed in the abstracts or keywords may be systematically excluded. This approach strengthens the dataset’s internal validity and ensures a tighter alignment between the retrieved literature and the study’s theoretical objective. Figure 1 demonstrates the approach for undertaking a search for analysis. After carefully examining the titles and abstracts of each publication, the gathered data were checked for relevance.

The data collection process involved excluding articles that were not relevant to the research topic, ultimately resulting in a final selection of 294 articles for analysis. The data was retrieved on 6 July 2024. Key bibliographic information, including the year of publication, journal, language, author(s), affiliation, title, document type, keywords, abstract, and citation count, was extracted from the WoS database and compiled into a CSV file. According to Rogers et al. (2020), bibliometric analysis is particularly recommended when analysing at least 200 publications. Thus, with a sufficient sample size and the application of keyword filtering and iterative refinement, this study met the criteria for a robust bibliometric analysis.

This dataset was then analysed using VOSviewer, a widely adopted tool in bibliometric research that facilitates the creation and visualisation of bibliometric maps. As noted by Nobanee et al. (2021), VOSviewer helps to efficiently organise literature and

uncover relationships between selected articles and related works. For this study, VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) was used to generate network visualisations based on keyword co-occurrences, co-authorship, and country affiliations, revealing thematic clusters and interrelated keywords. The selection of bibliometric techniques was guided directly by the study's research question. Specifically, co-citation analysis was employed to uncover the intellectual foundations and theoretical traditions underpinning leadership-distress research (Pan et al., 2023); bibliographic coupling was used to identify contemporary research streams and thematic proximity among studies (Vogel et al., 2021); co-authorship and institutional analyses enabled examination of collaborative structures shaping knowledge production (Pan et al., 2023); and thematic mapping facilitated the identification of dominant and emerging conceptual clusters (Caputo et al., 2021). Collectively, these techniques allow the study to move beyond descriptive mapping and toward a systematic understanding of how the field has evolved, how knowledge is structured, and where conceptual gaps remain.

Figure 1 Methodology of research



4 Bibliometric analysis and results

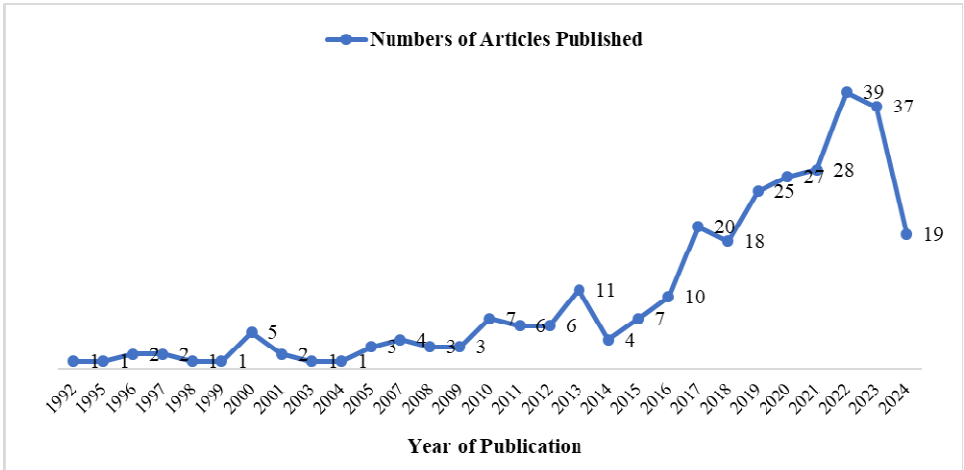
4.1 Descriptive results

The analysis began with an exploration of the chronological progression of literature addressing psychological distress within the context of leadership. As depicted in

Figure 2, there has been a clear upward trajectory in the volume of publications on this topic within the WoS database over time. The earliest identified article in this area dates back to 1992. Although the 1990s witnessed only modest growth, interest in psychological distress related to leadership began to gain momentum around the early 2000s. Notably, 2022 marked a peak, with 39 publications – the highest annual output on this subject in WoS history.

The publication trend can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase, from 1992 to 2009, was characterised by limited scholarly activity, with fewer than eight publications per year. The second phase, spanning 2010 to 2016, showed steady growth, as the number of publications increased from seven in 2010 to ten in 2016. The third and most significant phase, from 2017 to 2023, saw a sharp rise in interest, with annual publications increasing from 20 in 2017 to a peak of 39 in 2022. The apparent decline in 2024 is likely attributable to the data being collected relatively early in the year (6 July 2024), before the annual publication cycle had concluded.

Figure 2 Growth of psychological distress literature during 1992–2024 (n = 294) (see online version for colours)



The exponential growth observed in the recent period could be attributed to several reasons. First, as a developing framework, psychological distress was in its nascent stages between 1992 and 2009. Integrating the concepts of psychological distress and leadership enhances scholarly attention to both areas. This paper contributes to that intersection by exploring psychological distress within leadership literature, particularly through the use of a robust and psychometrically sound measurement scale. Such methodological rigour significantly strengthens empirical contributions. Furthermore, the field has gained momentum through recent publications in leading journals such as the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* and the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Since 2017, research has also been enriched by the emergence of related constructs, including job stress (Arble and Arnetz, 2017) and psychiatric disorders (Ford et al., 2018), further advancing the understanding of psychological distress in organisational contexts.

Table 1 The top 20 business and management journals with their number of articles and citations on psychological distress

<i>R</i>	<i>Journal</i>	<i>Number of articles</i>	<i>Number of citations</i>
1	<i>Journal of Occupational Health Psychology</i>	6	570
2	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	4	386
3	<i>Work and Stress</i>	4	243
4	<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	4	643
5	<i>Stress and Health</i>	4	308
6	<i>Journal of Organizational Behavior</i>	3	206
7	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	3	286
8	<i>Acta Psychologica</i>	2	118
9	<i>Personality and Individual Differences</i>	2	81
10	<i>Personnel Psychology</i>	2	205
11	<i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>	1	86
12	<i>Human Resource Management</i>	1	80
13	<i>Journal of Management</i>	1	76
14	<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Management</i>	1	108
15	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	1	94
16	<i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	1	158
17	<i>Personnel Review</i>	1	106
18	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	1	76
19	<i>Work and Occupations</i>	1	96
20	<i>Organization Studies</i>	1	84

4.1.1 Publications by leading journals, countries and institutions

The subsequent phase of the analysis focused on identifying the most influential journals, countries, and institutions contributing to the field of psychological distress and leadership, based on data from the WoS database. Table 1 presents the top 20 business and management journals ranked by the number of published articles and citations. Among these, the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* leads with the highest number of publications (total publications [TP]: 6), with its first contribution dating back to 2007. It is followed by the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Work and Stress* and *Stress and Health* (each with TP: 4). Other notable contributors include the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* and the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (TP: 3 each), as well as *Acta Psychologica*, *Personality and Individual Differences* and *Personnel Psychology* (TP: 2 each). The remaining journals each contributed one article to this research area. The presence of psychological distress and leadership research in prominent journals across the disciplines of management, psychology, and business reflects the growing academic interest and recognition of the topic.

In terms of geographical distribution, Figure 3 presents the research output from the top 10 contributing countries. The USA dominates the list with 117 published articles, far surpassing all other nations. England follows with 43 publications, and Australia ranks third with 36.

At the institutional level, Figure 4 showcases the top 25 contributing universities. The University of London leads with 14 publications, followed closely by the State University System of Florida with 13, and Université de Montréal with 9.

Figure 3 The ten most productive countries in terms of research output (see online version for colours)

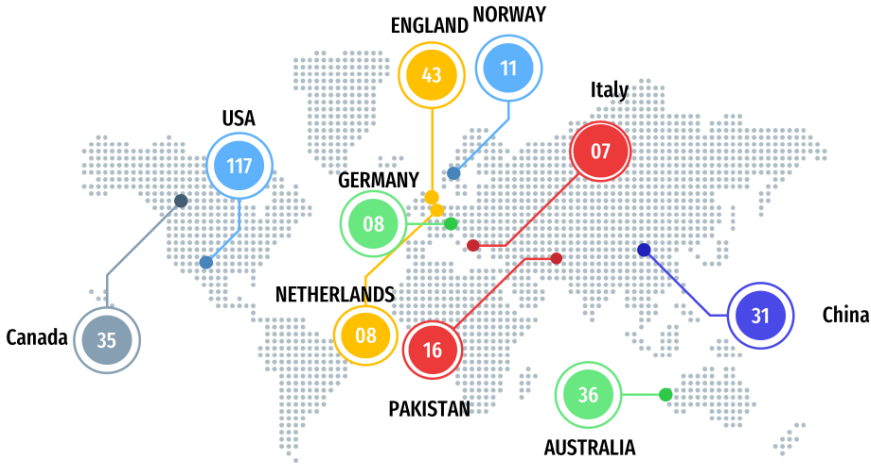


Figure 4 The 25 most productive universities based on research output (see online version for colours)



4.1.2 *The top influential publications*

Another key advantage of bibliometric analysis is its capacity to identify influential scholars and foundational publications within a specific research domain (Pan et al., 2023). Scholars and journal editors often rely on highly cited studies to gauge the relevance and impact of a topic. In the context of psychological distress and leadership, this method enables the identification of the most frequently referenced publications. Table 2 presents twenty of the most influential articles, comprising 6.80% of the total 294 publications, which have significantly shaped and advanced research on psychological distress in leadership settings between 1992 and 2024. Review articles, in particular, tend to serve as essential resources for researchers, as they synthesise existing knowledge and provide comprehensive insights into the field. Notably, three review papers, Lacerenza et al. (2017), Luchman and González-Morales (2013) and Jorgensen et al. (2024), are among these top-cited works, highlighting their pivotal role in framing the discourse around psychological distress and leadership.

The most frequently cited work in the field is 'Leadership training design, delivery, and implementation: a meta-analysis' by Lacerenza et al. (2017), with a total of 383 citations. Following closely, Luchman and González-Morales (2013) authored the second most cited article, which has been cited 185 times. Their study, grounded in the influential demands-control-support model, found that job control significantly contributes to psychological distress, manifested as cynicism and exhaustion. Third among these is the recent work by Jorgensen et al. (2024), which has garnered 158 citations. Drawing on attribution theory, conservation of resources theory, and relevant empirical studies, they developed a conceptual model linking workplace incivility to employee health and well-being.

Furthermore, >84 citations have been made to each of the top twenty publications individually. Finding the geographical regions of these most frequently referenced writers in psychological distress is also notable. The top 20 highly referenced papers are primarily from the USA ($n = 15$). Remarkably, only one is from the Netherlands, and four are from the UK.

4.2 *Document co-citation analysis*

A co-citation analysis was conducted to identify the leading journals and authors in the field of psychological distress. Bibliometric techniques, particularly document co-citation analysis, have been widely used to evaluate such data (Small, 1973). This method examines how frequently pairs of authors, journals, or documents appear together in the reference lists of review articles, providing insights into their thematic connections (Pan et al., 2023). In essence, co-citation reflects how primary sources jointly cite secondary documents, indicating underlying semantic or conceptual commonalities (Vogel et al., 2021). This approach is instrumental in uncovering the intellectual structure of a multidisciplinary field and in highlighting the relationships between referenced works (Trujillo and Long, 2018).

Table 2 Landmark publications on psychological distress

#	Year	Title	Author	Journal	Society	TC
1	2017	Leadership training design, delivery, and implementation: a meta-analysis	Lacerenza, CN; Reyes, DL; Marlow, SL; Joseph, DL; Salas, E	<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	USA	383
2	2013	Demands, control, and support: a meta-analytic review of work characteristics interrelationships	Luchman, JN; González-Morales, MG	<i>Journal of Occupational Health Psychology</i>	USA	185
3	2024	Kick me while I'm down: modeling employee differences of the impact of workplace incivility on employees' health and well-being.	Jorgensen, F; Bish, A; Sanders, K; Nguyen, P	<i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	Netherlands	158
4	2022	TMT socio-demographic traits and employee satisfaction	Agnihotri, A and Bhattacharya, S	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	UK	146
5	2024	Work injuries and mental health challenges: a meta-analysis of the bidirectional relationship	Granger, S and Turner, N	<i>Personnel Psychology</i>	USA	139
6	2023	Visionary leadership and leaders' burnout: a weekly diary analysis	Khan, AN; Mehmood, K; Le, JQ; Khan, NA	<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Management</i>	USA	108
7	2020	A latent transition analysis investigating the nature, stability, antecedents, and outcomes of occupational commitment profiles for school principals	Houle, SA; Morin, AJS; Fernet, C; Vandenberghe, C; Tóth-Király, I	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	USA	107
8	2019	I see you in me, and me in you. The moderated mediation crossover model of work passion.	Butt, HP; Tariq, H; Weng, QX; Sohail, N	<i>Personnel Review</i>	UK	106
9	2023	The moderating role of resonant leadership and workplace spirituality on the relationship between psychological distress and organizational commitment	Ramaswamy, M; Viswanathan, R; Kaniyarkuzhi, BK; Neeliyadath, S	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	UK	103
10	2024	A breath of toxic air: the relationship between appraised air pollution, abusive supervision, and laissez-faire leadership through the dual-mediating pathways of negative affect and somatic complaints	Khan, UA; Patel, C; Barnes, CM	<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	USA	103

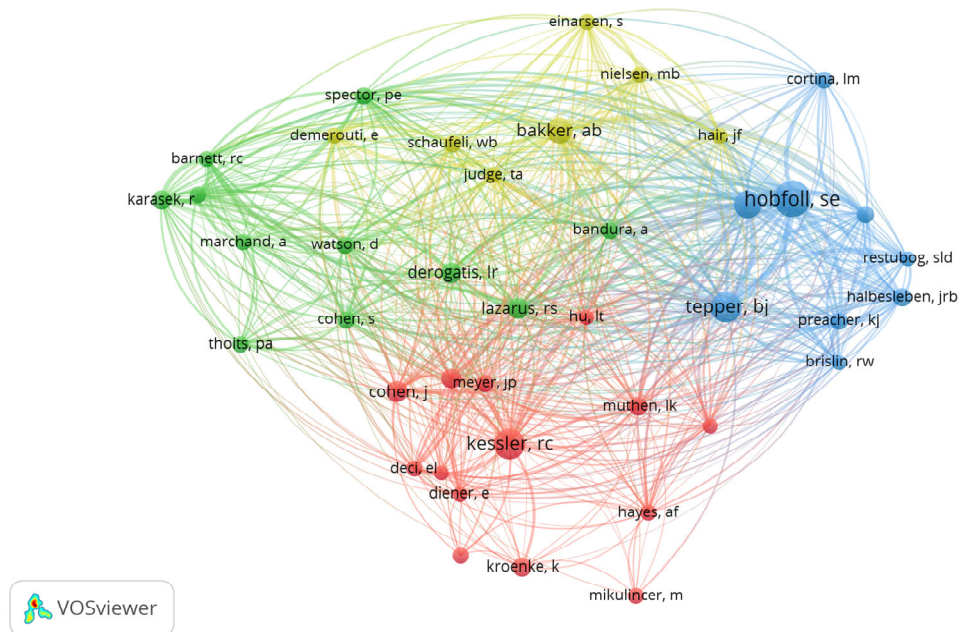
Table 2 Landmark publications on psychological distress (continued)

#	Year	Title	Author	Journal	Society	TC
11	2019	Caring for the elderly at work and home: can a randomized organizational intervention improve psychological health?	Kossek, EE; Thompson, RJ; Lawson, KM; Bodner, T; Perrigino, MB; ...; Bray, JW	<i>Journal of Occupational Health Psychology</i>	USA	100
12	2020	Work, family, work-family conflict and psychological distress: a revisited look at the gendered vulnerability pathways	Bilodeau, J; Marchand, A; Demers, A	<i>Stress and Health</i>	USA	99
13	2012	Unfair treatment in the workplace and worker well-being: the role of coworker support in a service work environment	Sloan, MM	<i>Work and Occupations</i>	USA	96
14	2021	To engage or to quit: work consequences of intimate partner aggression and the buffering role of career adaptability.	Deen, CM; Restubog, SL; Chen, YY; Garcia, PRJM; He, YQ; Cayayan, PLT	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	USA	94
15	2023	From being sacked to being unwell: a conservation of resources view on the effects of psychological contract violation on layoff victims' well-being.	Asante, EA; Oduro, F; Danquah, B; Det Mensah, R; Dartey-Baah, K; Affum-Osei, E	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	USA	94
16	2018	Held captive in the office: an investigation into long working hours among Korean employees	Zhang, L and Seo, J	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	UK	92
17	2011	When distress hits home: the role of contextual factors and psychological distress in predicting employees' responses to abusive supervision	Restubog, SLD; Scott, KL; Zagenczyk, TJ	<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	USA	88
18	2007	Leaders as attachment figures: leaders' attachment orientations predict leadership-related mental representations and followers' performance and mental health	Davidovitz, R; Mikulincer, M; Shaver, PR; Izsak, R; Popper, M	<i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>	USA	86
19	2017	Gender differences in perceptions of resources and turnover intentions of work-linked couples in masculine occupations	Huffman, AH and Olson, KJ	<i>Stress and Health</i>	USA	86
20	2017	Distressed and drained: consequences of intimate partner aggression and the buffering role of supervisor support	Garcia, PRIM; Ng, CSH; Capezio, A; Restubog, SLD; Tang, RL	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	USA	85

4.2.1 Co-citation analysis of top scholars

This study analysed co-citation relationships among 12,354 authors from a specific database. Applying a minimum threshold of 24 citations, a co-citation network comprising 41 authors was generated and is presented in Figure 5. The network reveals four distinct clusters. The red cluster, the largest with 14 authors, is anchored by prominent figures such as Kessler, Andrews, Colpe, Hiripi and Zaslavsky, who serve as central connectors within the group. The green cluster, consisting of 11 authors, is centred around Lazarus, the most frequently co-cited author in that group. The blue cluster, with nine authors, identifies Hobfoll as the key figure linking the others. Finally, the yellow cluster – the smallest – includes seven authors, with Demerouti, Bakker, Shimazu, Shimada and Kawakami emerging as the primary co-cited authors. These clusters highlight a range of topics related to psychological distress and leadership, including work-life balance, stress coping strategies, the conservation of resources framework, and job demands and resources. Collectively, the findings reinforce the idea that frequently co-cited, influential authors contribute significantly to shaping the conceptual landscape of psychological distress research in leadership contexts.

Figure 5 Co-citation network of top scholars (see online version for colours)

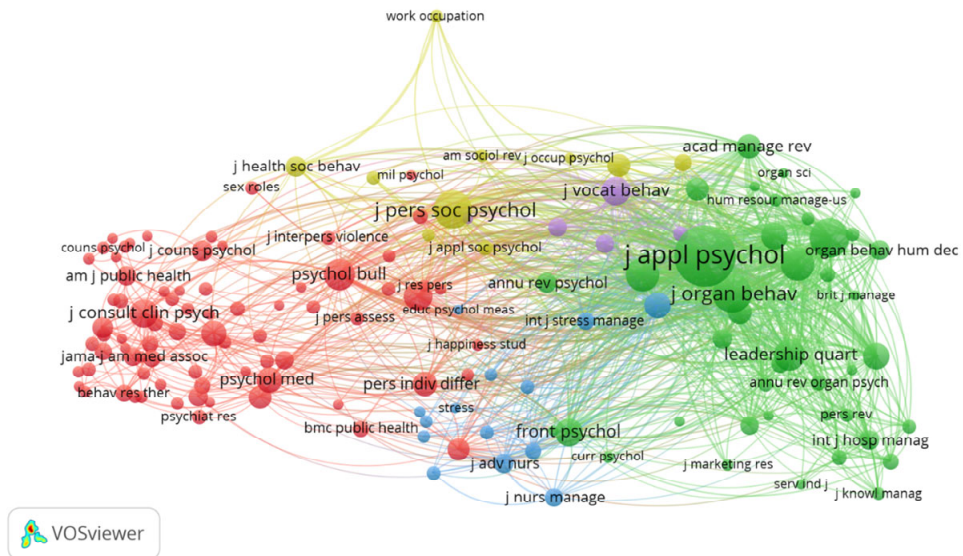


4.2.2 Co-citation analysis of journals

The co-citation network, which includes 147 journals each cited at least 21 times, is depicted in Figure 6. The analysis reveals five distinct clusters, with the red and green clusters emerging as the most prominent, comprising 76 and 41 journals, respectively. *The Psychological Bulletin* (IF: 17.3; 2023) is the most co-cited publication in the red cluster with 180 citations, followed by *American Psychologist* (IF: 12.3; 2023) with 158 citations. The *Journal of Applied Psychology* (IF: 9.4; 2023) with 681 citations, and the

Academy of Management Journal (IF: 9.5; 2023) with 283 citations are revealed by the green cluster. Within the blue cluster, *Work and Stress* (IF: 5.6; 2023) appears to be the most influential. Publications on psychological distress appear in the top psychology, business, and management journals, indicating that these journals commonly co-cite research on the topic. This implies that high-impact journals are concentrating on research on psychological distress and leadership.

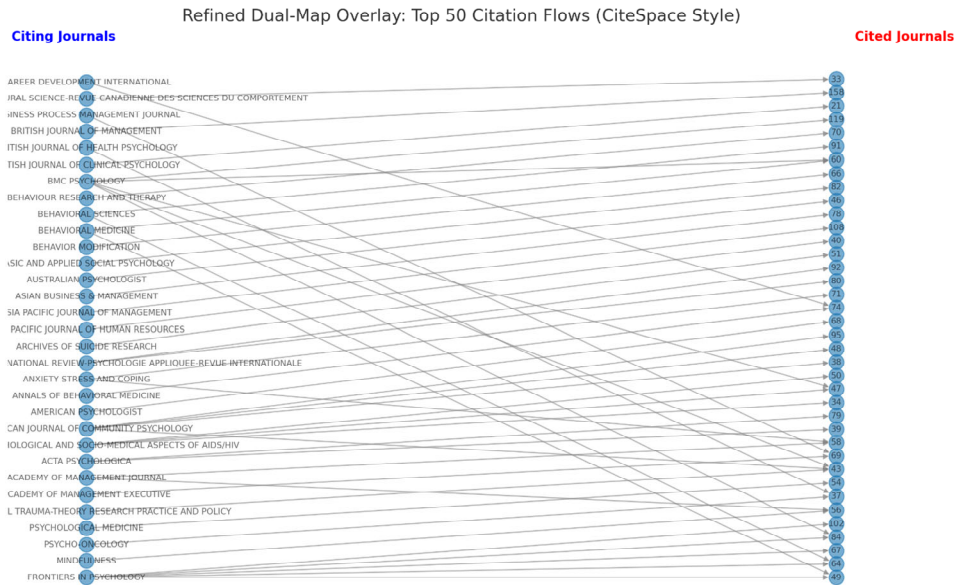
Figure 6 Co-citation network of journals (see online version for colours)



A dual-map overlay was conducted to analyse journal co-citations further. The dual-map overlay is one of the most effective visualisation techniques in bibliometric studies, illustrating citation flows between disciplines by mapping the relationships between citing and cited journals (Chen, 2006). This study uses the dual-map overlay to analyse the citation dynamics in psychological distress and leadership research, providing insights into key knowledge domains, influential journals, and emerging research trends. A dual-map overlay was constructed to visualise the top 50 citation flows, highlighting the strongest links between citing and cited journals. This method follows the CiteSpace approach, where the left is the citation map, the right is the cited map, and the lines between are citation linkages. The dual-map overlay reveals significant citation interactions between psychology, business, and health-related disciplines, as displayed in Figure 7. The top 50 citation flows demonstrate strong interdisciplinary connections, with notable influences from organisational behaviour, clinical psychology, and occupational health research. The dataset reveals that the most active citing journals are the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Health Psychology* and *Leadership Quarterly*. These publications serve as key platforms for scholarship on psychological distress and leadership, underscoring the central role of psychology and organisational behaviour in advancing this field. Additionally, the most frequently cited journals include the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (highlighting social psychological perspectives), *Psychological Medicine* (emphasising mental health

research), *Academy of Management Journal* (focusing on business and leadership studies), and the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (addressing workplace well-being). Together, these findings demonstrate that research on psychological distress and leadership spans several academic disciplines – ranging from clinical and social psychology to management science and occupational health. This interdisciplinary breadth highlights the importance of cross-disciplinary collaboration in advancing understanding and practice in this area.

Figure 7 The dual-map overlay of journals with publications (see online version for colours)



4.3 Keywords co-occurrence analysis

Ultimately, the study analysed keyword co-occurrence, enabling the identification of emerging trends within the literature on psychological distress. The paper's central themes and its clearly defined research question function as the literature's key terms effectively encapsulating the core concepts of the entire work. According to Barki et al. (1993), it gives a common terminology, defines the particular area features, and offers a mechanism for analysing how the research has developed. Consequently, analysing the keywords helps identify research hotspots. In bibliometric analysis, keyword co-occurrence analysis is a common practice that primarily examines the degree of correlation between co-occurring keywords across different studies (Dai and Xu, 2024). Its purpose is to identify the research frontier in an academic topic by analysing its internal relationships. The co-occurrence analysis's output displays the themes' network (Zupic and Čater, 2015). Keywords with larger nodes and text sizes appear more frequently and share greater similarity within the same colour group; thicker links represent stronger relationships between pairs of keywords. Therefore, this section offers a chance to define and illustrate the various terms used in psychological distress research. The study examined comprehensively by searching for 'all keywords' in the title,

author-defined keywords, and index. As a result, a total of 1,867 distinct keywords were obtained. Ninety-one co-occurring keywords with at least six frequencies were found in the network.

Figure 8 presents the keyword co-occurrence network, clearly highlighting the most prominent concepts. Using the keyword co-occurrence map data, four distinct clusters have been generated, showing significant similarity among the keywords within each cluster. These clusters' four main knowledge domains have influenced the conceptual foundation of psychological distress. The red cluster encompasses keywords tied to psychological distress, such as coping strategies, job stress, occupational stress, personality, and transformational leadership. In the green cluster, terms like burnout, abusive supervision, emotional exhaustion, and job demands emerge. The blue cluster focuses on aspects of psychological distress, featuring concepts like mental health, quality of life, and self-esteem. Lastly, the yellow cluster highlights keywords such as mindfulness, resilience, self-efficacy, and well-being. There are several publications connecting these clusters as well. The graphical visualisation highlights larger nodes representing the most frequently occurring keywords – such as psychological distress (152 mentions), abusive supervision (35), burnout (30), mental health (22), transformational leadership (15), mindfulness (12), well-being (11), and personality (10). This indicates that the repeated pairing of these terms plays a key role in forming the conceptual framework of the topic.

Figure 8 Co-occurrence network of keywords (see online version for colours)

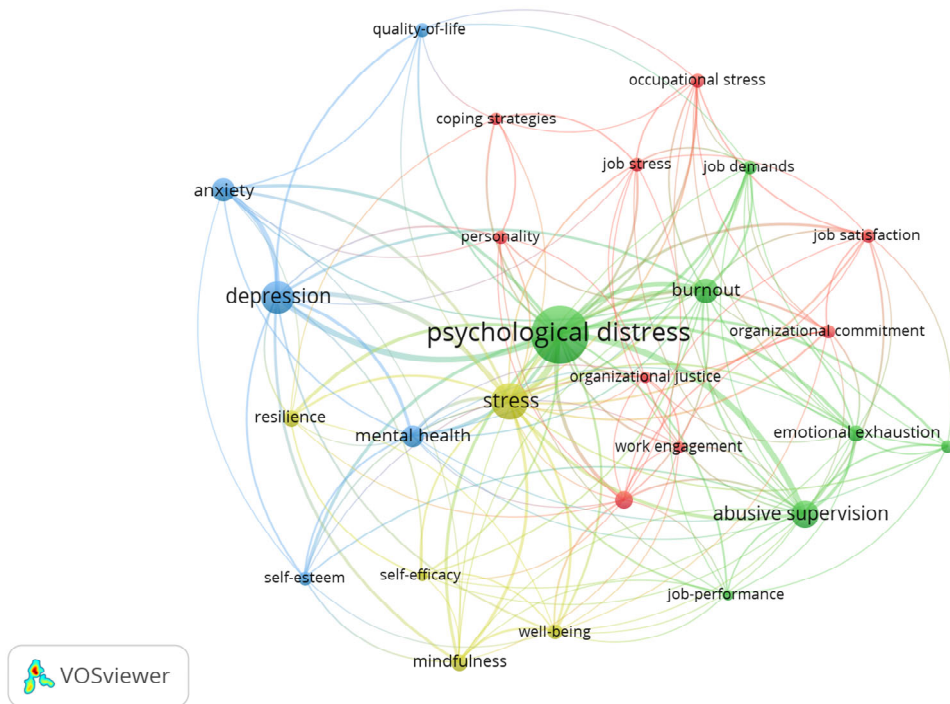


Table 3 Overview of the thematic clusters on psychological distress

Cluster	Main theme	TP	TC	Most cited articles				
				Title	Author(s)	Journal	Year	TC
1	The bright side of leadership and workplace outcomes	81	6,424	Leadership training design, delivery, and implementation: a meta-analysis	Lacerenza, CN; Reyes, DL; Marlow, SL; Joseph, DL; Salas, E	Journal of Applied Psychology	2017	383
				TMT socio-demographic traits and employee satisfaction	Agnihotri, A.; Bhattacharya, S	International Journal of Human Resource Management	2022	146
				Does servant leadership control psychological distress in crisis? Moderation and mediation mechanism	Zada, M; Zada, S; Khan, J; Saeed, I; Zhang, YJ; Vega-Muñoz, A; Salazar-Sepúlveda, G	Psychology Research and Behavior Management	2022	115
				Visionary leadership and leaders' burnout: a weekly diary analysis	Khan, AN; Mehmood, K; Le, JQ; Khan, NA	Asia Pacific Journal of Management	2023	108
2	Dark side leadership and workplace stressors	79	5,044	How and when does inclusive leadership curb psychological distress during a crisis? Evidence from the COVID-19 outbreak	Ahmed, F; Zhao, FQ; Faraz, NA	Frontiers in Psychology	2020	102
				Demands, control, and support: a meta-analytic review of work characteristics interrelationships	Luchman, JN; González-Morales, MG	Journal of Occupational Health Psychology	2013	185
				Abusive supervision and turnover intention among public servants: the roles of psychological distress and person-organization fit	Nguyen, NTH; Nguyen, D; Teo, S; Xerri, MJ	Public Management Review	2023	117
				Abusive, arrogant and exploitative? Linking despotic leadership and adaptive performance: the role of Islamic work ethics	Zia, MQ; Ramish, MS; Mushtaq, I; Fasih, ST; Naveed, M	Leadership & Organization Development Journal	2024	109
				Is abusive supervision always harmful toward creativity? Managing workplace stressors by promoting distributive and procedural justice	Akram, Z; Ahmad, S; Akram, U; Asghar, M; Jiang, T	International Journal of Conflict Management	2022	108
				Abuse as a reaction of perfectionistic leaders: a moderated mediation model of leader perfectionism, perceived control, and subordinate feedback seeking on abusive supervision	Guo, L; Chiang, JTI; Mao, JY; Chien, CJ	Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology	2020	107

Table 3 Overview of the thematic clusters on psychological distress (continued)

Cluster		Main theme	TP	TC	Title	Most cited articles		TC
						Author(s)	Journal	Year
3	Work environment and mental health	56	4,406	Factors associated with mental health status of medical residents: a model-guided study	Anagnostopoulos, F; Demerouti, E; Sykioti, P; Niakas, D; Zis, P	<i>Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings</i>	2015	121
				The moderating role of resonant leadership and workplace spirituality on the relationship between psychological distress and organizational commitment	Ramaswamy, M; Viswanathan, R; Kaniyarkuzhi, BK; Neeliyadath, S	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	2023	103
				Organizational culture and leadership behaviors: is manager's psychological health the missing piece?	Dextras-Gauthier, J; Gilbert, MH; Dima, J; Adou, LB	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	2023	100
4	Personal development and well-being	21	1,466	Work, family, work-family conflict and psychological distress: a revisited look at the gendered vulnerability pathways	Bilodeau, J; Marchand, A; Demers, A	<i>Stress and Health</i>	2020	99
				Distressed and drained: consequences of intimate partner aggression and the buffering role of supervisor support	Garcia, PRJM; Ng, CSH; Capezio, A; Restubog, SLD; Tang, RL	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	2017	85
				Kick me while I'm down: modeling employee differences of the impact of workplace incivility on employees' health and well-being.	Jorgensen, F; Bish, A; Sanders, K; Nguyen, P	<i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	2024	158
				Workplace bullying, psychological distress, job performance, and employee creativity: the moderating effect of psychological resilience	Anasori, E; De Vita, G; Kucukergin, KG	<i>Service Industries Journal</i>	2023	121
				Key predictors of psychological distress and well-being in Australian frontline healthcare workers during COVID-19 (Omicron wave)	Lee, BEC; Ling, M; Boyd, L; Olsson, CA; Sheen, J	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	2023	114
				Self-efficacy and resilience: mediating mechanisms in the relationship between the transformational leadership dimensions and well-being	Djourava, NP; Rodriguez Molina, I; Tordera Santamatilde, N; Abate, G	<i>Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies</i>	2020	109
				Unfair treatment in the workplace and worker well-being: the role of coworker support in a service work environment	Sloan, MM	<i>Work and Occupations</i>	2012	96
Total		237	17,340					

4.4 *Themes of psychological distress articles*

Bibliographic coupling occurs when two scientific research papers share one or more references in common (Kessler, 1963). Vogel et al. (2021) explained that bibliographic coupling analysis seeks to explore the relationships between papers considered ‘coupled’, focusing on whether and to what degree their bibliographies overlap. Similarly, Donthu et al. (2020) argued that greater overlap in the reference lists of two primary documents results in a stronger coupling strength or document weight, indicating that these publications tackle and advance closely related scholarly topics. Furthermore, a robust coupling proposes that the primary document is connected to the broader research landscape, often playing a significant role within a larger research cluster (Budler et al., 2021). This approach rests on the idea that the strength of the connection between two articles increases with the extent of their shared references (Caputo et al., 2021).

In the current study, bibliographic coupling was conducted using the same dataset as the other two bibliometric techniques. From the initial pool of 294 primary documents, a minimum citation threshold of five was established, narrowing the selection to 237 documents that met this criterion. Through bibliographic coupling, 81% of the works on psychological distress were found to be interconnected, allowing for their organisation into thematic clusters. These clusters revealed shared references among the articles, suggesting a cognitive linkage, as noted by Khan et al. (2021). To uncover the underlying themes, a thematic analysis was carried out by exploring the patterns and relationships within the bibliographically coupled documents. This process employed clustering techniques to group articles with strong coupling ties, followed by a qualitative content analysis to pinpoint the prevailing research focus within each group. The resulting themes were labelled according to the dominant concepts, theories, and methodologies within each cluster.

By leveraging the bibliometric approach to map similarities via bibliographic coupling, the analysis highlighted four recurring research themes: the positive dimensions of leadership and their impact on workplace outcomes (cluster 1), the negative facets of leadership and associated workplace stressors (cluster 2), the interplay between the work environment and mental health (cluster 3), and the focus on personal development and well-being (cluster 4). The top five documents for each cluster are presented in Table 3. These thematic clusters are further explored in detail below. The labelling of the four thematic clusters was guided not only by keyword frequency but also by their dominant theoretical assumptions, core constructs, and methodological orientations. Each cluster reflects a distinct way of conceptualising both leadership and psychological distress, which provides a theoretically meaningful basis for distinguishing among them rather than treating them as purely technical groupings.

4.4.1 *Cluster 1: bright side of leadership and workplace outcomes*

Representing the most extensive and influential group within the analysis, this cluster encompasses 81 interconnected articles, collectively amassing 6,424 citations. As highlighted in Table 3, it holds the top rank for impact, measured by the combined total of citations and publications. The cluster primarily explores themes such as transformational leadership, job satisfaction, occupational stress, organisational commitment, and work engagement (see Figure 9). A majority of these articles delve into

various leadership styles, including servant, transformational, visionary, and inclusive approaches.

The standout contribution in this group is Lacerenza et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis, 'Leadership training design, delivery, and implementation: a meta-analysis', which leads the cluster with 383 citations. This pivotal study underscores how well-designed leadership training programs can boost employee engagement while alleviating workplace stress. The second most cited article is Agnihotri and Bhattacharya's (2022) work, 'TMT socio-demographic traits and employee satisfaction' (146 citations), whose cross-sectional analysis shows that employee satisfaction tends to decrease as the average age and size of top management teams (TMT) increase, though functional and educational diversity within these teams positively influences satisfaction.

Ranking third, Zada et al.'s (2022) longitudinal study, 'Does servant leadership control psychological distress in crisis? Moderation and mediation mechanism', garners 115 citations. This research examines how servant leadership mitigates psychological distress, proposing that work engagement mediates this relationship while mindfulness serves as a moderating factor. Two further studies complete the high-impact set within this cluster: Khan et al. (2023) at 108 citations and Ahmed et al. (2020) at 102 citations, which together extend the cluster's coverage of positive leadership dynamics.

Figure 9 Cluster 1 (see online version for colours)



4.4.2 Cluster 2: dark side leadership and workplace stressors

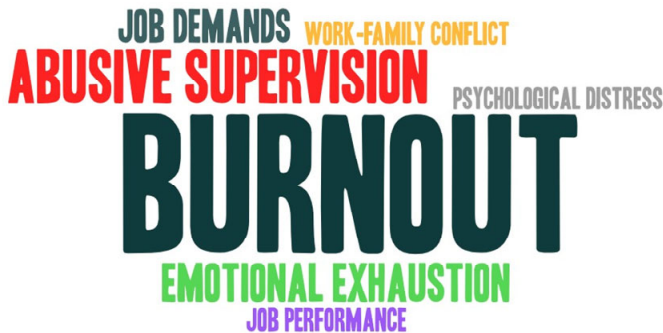
The second cluster, comprising 79 articles, has amassed a total of 5,044 citations, solidifying its position as the second most influential cluster in terms of citation impact. Its primary themes revolve around abusive supervision, job performance, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and job demands (see Figure 10). Leading this cluster is the seminal work by Luchman and González-Morales (2013), titled 'Demands, control, and support: a meta-analytic review of work characteristics interrelationships' (TC: 185). This paper enhances the field by demonstrating, through their demands-control-support model, how job control influences psychological distress, marked by fatigue and cynicism.

Ranked second is Nguyen et al. (2023), 'Abusive supervision and turnover intention among public servants: the roles of psychological distress and person-organization fit' (TC: 117). This cross-sectional study highlights how abusive supervision drives employee turnover by amplifying psychological distress and weakening

person-organisation fit. In third place, Zia et al. (2024) present a longitudinal perspective in ‘Abusive, arrogant and exploitative? Linking despotic leadership and adaptive performance: the role of Islamic work ethics’ (TC: 109). Their research uncovers a strong link between despotic leadership and employees’ adaptive performance, mediated by psychological distress.

Two additional high-impact studies anchor this cluster: Akram et al. (2022) with 108 citations and Guo et al. (2020) with 107 citations, which together broaden the empirical base on destructive supervision and its workplace consequences.

Figure 10 Cluster 2 (see online version for colours)



4.4.3 Cluster 3: workplace environment and mental health

The third cluster comprises 56 papers, collectively cited 4,406 times, and encompasses key research themes such as self-esteem, mental health, depression, and quality of life (see Figure 11). Leading this cluster is a highly influential longitudinal survey study by Anagnostopoulos et al. (2015), titled ‘Factors associated with mental health status of medical residents: a model-guided study’ (TC: 121). This research reveals that while certain job resources – like limited opportunities for professional growth and supervisor support – and job demands, such as excessive workloads, are linked to poorer mental health, the connection is indirect, mediated through emotional exhaustion.

Second in citation impact is a cross-sectional survey study by Ramaswamy et al. (2023), ‘The moderating role of resonant leadership and workplace spirituality on the relationship between psychological distress and organizational commitment’ (TC: 103). This work highlights how resonant leadership and workplace spirituality mitigate psychological distress while fostering organisational commitment, uncovering a significant negative correlation between distress and commitment through its exploratory approach.

Ranking third is another cross-sectional survey study by Dextras-Gauthier et al. (2023), ‘Organizational culture and leadership behaviors: is manager’s psychological health the missing piece?’ (TC: 100). This research demonstrates that a group-oriented organisational culture enhances psychological well-being, reduces symptoms of distress, and supports effective leadership behaviours.

Bilodeau et al. (2020) at 99 citations and Garcia et al. (2017) at 85 citations supplement these contributions, deepening the cluster’s engagement with environmental and contextual antecedents of mental health at work.

Figure 11 Cluster 3 (see online version for colours)

ANXIETY MENTAL HEALTH
SELF-ESTEEM
DEPRESSION
QUALITY OF LIFE

4.4.4 Cluster 4: personal development and well-being

The final cluster consists of 21 interconnected articles, which together have garnered 1,466 citations. This group centres on key themes such as mindfulness, resilience, self-efficacy, and well-being (see Figure 12). Leading this cluster is the highly influential conceptual study by Jorgensen et al. (2024), titled ‘Kick me while I’m down: modeling employee differences of the impact of workplace incivility on employees’ health and well-being’ (TC: 158). This work develops a conceptual framework that explores how employees’ past experiences shape their perceptions of workplace incivility and its subsequent effects on their health and well-being.

Ranking second with 121 citations is Anasori et al. (2023), ‘Workplace bullying, psychological distress, job performance, and employee creativity: the moderating effect of psychological resilience’. Drawing on JD-R theory, this cross-sectional study presents a framework examining how workplace bullying influences employee performance and creativity, highlighting psychological distress as a mediating mechanism and psychological resilience as a moderating condition.

Lee et al.’s (2023) cross-sectional study, ‘Key predictors of psychological distress and well-being in Australian frontline healthcare workers during COVID-19 (Omicron wave)’, is the third most cited study in this cluster, with 114 citations. This research identifies critical factors influencing subjective well-being and psychological distress, highlighting supervisor support and health status as vital protective elements against diminished well-being and distress.

Two additional contributions, Djourova et al. (2020) at 109 citations and Sloan (2012) at 96 citations, complete the cluster’s focus on individual psychological resources as buffers against workplace distress. Collectively, the bibliographic coupling across these four clusters reveals that the field does not operate under a single, unified theory of distress, but rather fractures into distinct methodological and conceptual silos depending on whether leadership is viewed as a stressor, a resource, an environmental artefact, or a backdrop for individual resilience.

Figure 12 Cluster 4 (see online version for colours)

WELLBEING SELF-EFFICACY
MINDFULNESS
RESILIENCE
STRESS

5 Discussion

This bibliometric review provides the first comprehensive mapping of research at the intersection of psychological distress and leadership. Drawing on 294 peer-reviewed articles published between 1992 and 2024, the analysis reveals a field that has grown exponentially since 2017 – driven by rising societal and organisational concern for workplace mental health – yet remains intellectually fragmented, geographically concentrated in Anglo-Saxon countries, and overwhelmingly reliant on cross-sectional designs.

The bibliographic coupling analysis organised the literature into four dominant thematic clusters that account for 81% of interconnected publications. The largest and most influential cluster (81 articles, more than 6,400 citations) focuses on the bright side of leadership and consistently shows that transformational, servant, and authentic leadership styles function as protective resources, reducing psychological distress chiefly by fostering work engagement, psychological safety, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment (Lacerenza et al., 2017; Zada et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2020). The second cluster (79 articles, over 5,000 citations), centred on the dark side of leadership, has expanded most rapidly since 2018 and documents how abusive, despotic, exploitative, and arrogant supervision generates distress, which in turn mediates burnout, emotional exhaustion, turnover intention, and impaired performance (Luchman and González-Morales, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2023; Zia et al., 2024). The third cluster (56 articles, 4,406 citations) links the broader work environment to mental health, highlighting excessive job demands, lack of autonomy, and unsupportive organisational cultures as distal contributors to distress, with leadership often remaining implicit rather than explicitly modelled (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2015; Dextras-Gauthier et al., 2023). The smallest but still impactful fourth cluster (21 articles, 1,466 citations) emphasises personal development and well-being, foregrounding individual resources such as resilience, mindfulness, and self-efficacy as buffers or mediators, while leadership appears primarily as a distal enabler (Jorgensen et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023; Anasori et al., 2023).

A comparative examination of the four clusters reveals important conceptual differences in their underlying theoretical assumptions about the leadership-distress nexus. Dark-side clusters tend to conceptualise leadership as a resource-depleting stressor and psychological distress as a direct negative outcome, often relying on stimulus-response logic. Bright-side clusters, in contrast, frame leadership as a resource-generating mechanism that shapes psychological distress indirectly through mediating mechanisms such as engagement, trust, or psychological safety, reflecting a social-exchange assumption (Zada et al., 2022). The remaining clusters adopt a more contextual or process-oriented view, emphasising the interaction between leadership, organisational climate, and individual vulnerability. These distinct epistemological boundaries indicate that the field does not yet operate under a unified theoretical logic but reflects multiple, partially disconnected conceptual traditions. The bibliometric patterns further suggest that leadership-distress relationships may be contingent rather than universal, shaped by cultural norms, power distance, organisational contexts, and temporal dynamics. This raises important questions about whether widely accepted assumptions, such as the uniformly harmful effects of destructive leadership or the uniformly protective effects of positive leadership, hold consistently across settings.

Co-citation networks expose two largely separate scholarly communities: one rooted in the job demands-resources framework and conservation of resources theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Hobfoll, 2011) and another anchored in positive and transformational leadership theories. This intellectual silo helps explain the relative scarcity of truly integrative theoretical models. Temporal and keyword analyses further reveal that terms such as ‘abusive supervision’, ‘burnout’ and ‘emotional exhaustion’ have surpassed ‘transformational leadership’ in frequency since 2019, signalling a broader shift from idealised to toxic-realistic portrayals of leaders. Remarkably, after more than three decades of research, psychological distress is still operationalised with at least nine different instruments, confirming the persistent conceptual and measurement ambiguity noted long ago (Drapeau et al., 2012). While these patterns broadly align with dominant frameworks such as JD-R and conservation of resources theory, the bibliometric evidence also suggests important limitations in how these theories are currently applied. Much of the literature appears to rely on these frameworks in static, confirmatory ways, using JD-R simply to categorise new leadership styles as either a demand or a resource. This static application frequently ignores the dynamic, reciprocal feedback loops central to contemporary job demands-resources theory, such as ‘loss spirals’, where distressed employees subsequently elicit more abusive supervision, or ‘gain spirals’, where transformational leadership replenishes resources over time (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). This overreliance on linear modelling may partly explain the persistence of fragmented research streams rather than the emergence of unified theories that can account for how positive and negative leadership behaviours dynamically interact over time.

Compared with existing systematic reviews and meta-analyses on leadership and employee well-being, which primarily focus on estimating effect sizes between predefined variables, the present bibliometric review offers a complementary contribution. Rather than asking whether leadership affects psychological distress, this study reveals how the field itself is intellectually structured, which theories dominate particular streams, and where conceptual blind spots and disconnections persist. This

perspective advances understanding beyond mapping relationships by exposing the underlying organisation of knowledge production within the leadership-distress domain.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The present review makes several important advances. It firmly positions leadership as a simultaneous antecedent, mediator, and moderator within the nomological network of psychological distress, thereby extending both JD-R theory and contemporary leadership theory beyond their traditional boundaries. It is important to note, however, that these roles are inferred from patterns across the accumulated literature rather than directly tested within the present study. The bibliometric evidence therefore suggests these functions as promising theoretical directions rather than definitive causal conclusions. It also uncovers a clear paradigmatic asymmetry: bright-side mechanisms are richly theorised through social exchange and self-determination lenses, whereas dark-side pathways still lean heavily on simple stressor-strain logic and rarely entertain reciprocal or reverse causation. By revealing the disconnect between occupational health psychology and leadership scholars, the study offers a concrete roadmap for theoretical integration, for example, examining how specific transformational behaviours can replenish resources depleted by abusive supervision within the same JD-R cycle. Finally, the continued proliferation of distress measures suggests that future work should either pursue standardisation or move toward dimensional (anxiety-depression-irritability) approaches that better capture the construct's multidimensional nature.

Taken together, these contributions should be interpreted as theory-enabling rather than theory-confirming, offering a structured agenda for future empirical research rather than definitive theoretical closure.

5.2 Practical and policy implications

The bibliometric patterns synthesised in this review position leadership as one of the most frequently theorised and actionable determinants of employee psychological distress within the organisational literature. Organisations serious about mental health should therefore embed validated abusive-supervision items (e.g., Tepper, 2000; Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007) into 360-degree feedback and tie results to leadership development and promotion decisions. They should also prioritise evidence-based training in servant, resonant, and transformational practices, given meta-analytic evidence of their superior effects on distress reduction and engagement (Lacerenza et al., 2017). Implementing dual early-warning systems – regular anonymous K10/K6 screening paired with confidential reporting channels for perceived toxic leadership – has been shown to outperform traditional engagement surveys in predicting absenteeism and turnover. At the policy level, occupational health regulators and professional bodies should incorporate ‘mental-health-friendly leadership’ standards into existing psychosocial risk frameworks (e.g., ISO 45003:2021 and EU-OSHA guidelines), making supportive leadership behaviours part of mandatory workplace assessments.

Importantly, the four thematic clusters identified in this review suggest that leadership interventions should be tailored rather than generic. For research located within the dark-side leadership cluster, practical priorities should focus on preventing and correcting destructive supervisory behaviours through accountability mechanisms, early identification of toxic leadership, and ethical leadership development. In contrast, the

bright-side leadership cluster supports investments in cultivating transformational, servant, and inclusive leadership behaviours to strengthen psychological safety and engagement. The contextual cluster highlights that leadership development efforts will be insufficient unless accompanied by structural interventions addressing workload, autonomy, and organisational climate. Finally, the personal development cluster suggests that leadership practices may be most effective when complemented by initiatives that build employee psychological resources, such as resilience and self-efficacy. These differentiated implications derive directly from the bibliometric patterns and offer a more nuanced foundation for intervention than generic leadership prescriptions.

5.3 Limitations and future directions

Several limitations must be acknowledged. Reliance on the WoS Core Collection and English-language journals almost certainly underrepresents scholarship from non-Anglophone and lower-income regions. Furthermore, the decision to employ a title-based search strategy to ensure conceptual centrality inherently means that studies where leadership and psychological distress function as peripheral variables, sub-dimensions, or implicit mechanisms were not captured. This constraint may have artificially sharpened the boundaries between the thematic clusters by excluding highly complex, multi-level studies that bridge these concepts in their methodology but not their titles. Future scoping or narrative reviews that relax these search criteria could determine whether the theoretical fragmentation identified here also persists in the broader, more peripheral occupational health literature. The near-total dominance of cross-sectional surveys (>90% of primary studies) limits causal inference and leaves open the possibility of reverse or reciprocal effects, as such designs cannot establish temporal precedence and therefore cannot confirm the direction of effects. Besides, the bibliometric nature of this review captures patterns, structures, and trends in the literature but does not allow for direct examination of underlying psychological mechanisms or lived experiences. Beyond limiting causal inference, this methodological homogeneity may also have broader implications for theory development within the field. The heavy reliance on cross-sectional designs encourages confirmatory testing of established relationships rather than the development of process-oriented, dynamic, or integrative theories. Over time, this pattern may contribute to theoretical stagnation by reinforcing dominant assumptions instead of challenging or extending them.

Additionally, future research could examine how different leadership styles operate across situational contexts to identify which approaches are most effective in reducing psychological distress while simultaneously enhancing employee engagement and productivity. Future research should therefore prioritise multi-wave and daily-diary designs to disentangle directionality (especially for toxic leadership-distress relationships), randomised field experiments that test leadership-training interventions against standardised distress outcomes, deliberate sampling from collectivist and high power-distance cultures to identify boundary conditions, and mixed-methods approaches that combine bibliometric insights with qualitative accounts of how employees experience bright versus dark leadership during crises or organisational change.

Further, future research directions should be derived directly from the conceptual gaps revealed across the four thematic clusters. The weak integration between bright-side and dark-side leadership streams suggests the need for studies that explicitly examine how constructive and destructive leadership behaviours may coexist, interact, or unfold sequentially within the same organisational contexts. Moreover, the marginal representation of non-Western perspectives highlights the importance of extending leadership-distress research to collectivist, high power-distance, and underrepresented cultural contexts, where prevailing theoretical assumptions may not hold. These cluster-informed directions offer greater potential to advance theory than generic calls for methodological refinement alone.

6 Conclusions

Research on psychological distress has finally begun to recognise leadership as its most actionable determinant rather than a peripheral one. The four clusters identified in this review – protective bright-side effects, destructive dark-side pathways, environmental interactions, and individual-resource buffering – collectively portray a field that is maturing, yet still constrained by theoretical silos and methodological uniformity. As remote and hybrid work arrangements, economic uncertainty, and global mental-health awareness continue to intensify, leadership's power either to prevent or to exacerbate psychological distress will only grow more salient. The intellectual map provided here offers both a historical synthesis and a forward-looking agenda for scholars and practitioners determined to build workplaces where leadership promotes human flourishing rather than fracture.

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Declarations

Because this research relies solely on secondary data and does not involve direct interaction with human subjects, formal ethical approval was not required.

Data underlying the results of this study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

All authors made equal contributions to the study's conception, methodological design, data analysis, interpretation, manuscript preparation, and revision.

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest or competing interests associated with this work.

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