



A Systematic Literature Review of Critical Leadership: Power Dynamics, Social Justice, and Transformative Practices in Organizational Contexts

Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis tentang Kepemimpinan Kritis: Dinamika Kekuasaan, Keadilan Sosial, dan Praktik Transformatif dalam Konteks Organisasi

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review critically synthesizes the expanding body of scholarship on critical leadership, focusing on power dynamics, ideological critique, social justice, and transformative practices within organizational and community contexts. Moving beyond traditional leadership paradigms that emphasize individual traits and hierarchical effectiveness, critical leadership theory interrogates leadership as a contested socio-political process embedded in structures of power and domination. This review maps key theoretical frameworks, methodological trends, and empirical applications spanning indigenous governance, educational reform, grassroots activism, and corporate sustainability. The analysis reveals enduring tensions between transformative aspirations and institutional constraints, highlighting the complex interplay of identity, discourse, and collective agency. Notably, the review identifies significant gaps in geographic representation, methodological pluralism, and thematic coverage, particularly in crisis leadership, media discourse, and intersectional minority experiences. Emerging opportunities call for integrative, context-sensitive, and interdisciplinary approaches that enhance critical leadership's capacity to address systemic inequities and foster emancipatory social change. By offering a comprehensive synthesis of conceptual, empirical, and methodological insights, this review advances theoretical clarity and practical relevance, positioning critical leadership as a vital framework for ethical and socially responsive leadership in an increasingly complex global landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership has long been recognized as a fundamental driver of organizational success and social progress. Traditional leadership studies have predominantly centered on identifying the traits, behaviors, and effectiveness of leaders within hierarchical structures. However, recent scholarly movements have increasingly questioned these conventional paradigms by adopting critical perspectives that interrogate the power dynamics, ideological underpinnings, and social justice implications inherent in leadership practices (Gordon, 2020; Levitan, 2018).

Critical leadership theory shifts the analytical lens from individual leaders' capabilities toward the broader socio-political contexts in which leadership occurs. It challenges the assumption of leadership as a neutral or universally positive force, revealing how leadership can simultaneously reproduce and contest structures of power and domination (Jimenez-Luque, 2021a; Ungirwalu et al., 2025). This perspective situates leadership as a contested site where issues of emancipation, marginalization, and social transformation intersect.

Extensive research has shown that leadership cannot be understood apart from the power relations that shape organizational and societal realities. For instance, studies of indigenous communities highlight the role of leadership in managing resource conflicts and cultural identity within asymmetrical power structures (Ungirwalu et al., 2025). In educational contexts, critical leadership has been linked to efforts aimed at deconstructing systemic inequalities and fostering inclusive policies and practices (Haag & Smith, 2002)

Social justice is a recurring theme in critical leadership scholarship. Leaders committed to social justice actively work to dismantle oppressive systems and promote equity, diversity, and inclusion within their spheres of influence (Brown et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2021). Empirical work on women leaders, especially in marginalized and postcolonial settings, illuminates how leadership acts as a vehicle for empowerment and resistance against patriarchal and colonial legacies (Gordon, 2020; Unger et al., 2010)

Despite its increasing prominence, the critical leadership field faces several challenges. Methodologically, it is dominated by qualitative research approaches such as ethnographies, discourse analyses, and case studies, which provide rich contextual insights but often lack generalizability (Macaulay, 2025; Morrissey, 1982). Additionally, critical leadership studies have been unevenly distributed geographically, with a concentration in Western and academic settings, calling for broader inclusion of voices from diverse global contexts.

Another challenge involves the integration of critical theories with more traditional leadership frameworks. While critical leadership emphasizes power and ideology, conventional leadership theories often focus on leader-follower dynamics and organizational outcomes, leading to conceptual and practical tensions (Mastio & Dovey, 2019; Raelin, 2024). Bridging these divides is essential for developing comprehensive models that address both effectiveness and ethical-social considerations.

The tension between organizational efficiency and social justice remains a central concern. Critical leadership critiques managerialism and highlights how organizational practices can entrench inequities (Raelin, 2024). It advocates for leadership that is reflexive, participatory, and oriented toward collective empowerment and emancipation, advancing the idea of leadership as a socially responsible practice rather than mere authority or control.

Furthermore, the contemporary global landscape—with challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and social polarization—demands leadership approaches that are adaptive, ethical, and transformative (Huang & Gadavani, 2025; Murphree, 2004). Critical leadership thus emerges as a praxis for addressing complex societal problems through inclusive dialogue, critical consciousness, and mobilization for social change. Systematic literature reviews are instrumental in synthesizing the fragmented and multidisciplinary nature of critical leadership research. They offer structured means to identify prevailing themes, conceptual frameworks, empirical patterns, and research gaps, guiding scholarly inquiry and practical application (Jimenez-Luque, 2021a; Wiborg, 2022).

This review specifically aims to examine how power relations, ideological critique, and emancipatory practices are articulated within critical leadership scholarship. It seeks to map the landscape of knowledge spanning organizational studies, educational leadership, community development, and social movements. The review also investigates the theoretical evolution of critical leadership, tracing its roots in critical theory and its intersections with social justice, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies. By doing so, it situates leadership within broader emancipatory projects and social struggles.

In addition, the review explores how critical leadership has been operationalized in diverse empirical settings, highlighting case studies that illustrate both challenges and successes in transformative leadership efforts. This includes analysis of grassroots leadership, indigenous leadership, and leadership in marginalized communities. The intersectionality of leadership with gender, race, class, and other social identities is another focal point. This lens deepens understanding of how power operates through and around leadership roles, influencing both opportunities and constraints for different groups (Silva et al., 2021; Unger et al., 2010).

Moreover, the review considers methodological trends, assessing the predominance of qualitative approaches and the emerging calls for methodological pluralism, including mixed methods and quantitative validation to strengthen the evidence base. It also reflects on the practical implications of critical leadership research for leaders, organizations, and policy makers, emphasizing the need for leadership development programs that cultivate critical reflexivity, ethical sensitivity, and commitment to social justice. Ultimately, this systematic literature review contributes a comprehensive synthesis of critical leadership scholarship, aiming to advance theoretical clarity, empirical depth, and actionable insights. It underscores the vital role of leadership as both an instrument of power and a catalyst for meaningful social transformation in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

To guide this systematic literature review, four key research questions have been formulated. First, the review seeks to identify the main concepts and theoretical frameworks employed in critical leadership studies within the international literature over a defined period (RQ1). Understanding these foundational theories is essential to map how critical leadership has been conceptualized and developed. Second, this review aims to examine how power dynamics and ideology are described and analyzed in various organizational and community contexts under the critical leadership lens (RQ2). Since critical leadership foregrounds issues of power and social structures, exploring these dynamics is vital to grasp the complexities of leadership practices.

Third, the review investigates the specific contexts in which critical leadership approaches have been applied, particularly their relation to social justice, inclusion, and transformative change (RQ3). This helps elucidate how critical leadership contributes to addressing inequalities and fostering equity in diverse settings. Finally, the review will identify research gaps and emerging opportunities related to emancipatory practices and social change within the field of critical leadership (RQ4). By highlighting

these areas, the review aims to inform future scholarly inquiry and practical leadership development initiatives. Together, these research questions provide a comprehensive framework to systematically explore, synthesize, and critically assess the expanding body of knowledge on critical leadership.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to rigorously identify, evaluate, and synthesize existing scholarly literature on critical leadership. SLR is a well-established research method designed to provide a transparent, reproducible, and comprehensive overview of the literature within a defined scope (Barbara Kitchenham, 2014; Tranfield et al., 2023). This approach is particularly suitable for topics like critical leadership, which span multiple disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and empirical contexts.

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database, chosen for its broad multidisciplinary coverage and high-quality indexing of peer-reviewed journals (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). To ensure relevance and focus, the search was restricted to specific subject areas, namely Social Sciences, Business, Management and Accounting, and Economics, Econometrics and Finance. These areas align closely with the interdisciplinary nature of leadership studies, encompassing organizational, social, and economic dimensions (Webster & Watson, 2002).

A comprehensive keyword strategy was developed, grounded in the conceptual framework of critical leadership. Four clusters of keywords were constructed to capture the multifaceted nature of the topic:

1. Leadership terms: (leadership OR leader OR "leadership style" OR "leadership theory" OR "leadership approach" OR "leadership development")
2. Critical theory terms: ("critical theory" OR "critical perspective" OR "critical thinking" OR "critical approach" OR emancipation OR ideology OR "power relations")
3. Contextual terms: (organization OR management OR diversity OR inclusion OR "social justice")
4. Thematic terms: ("power dynamics" OR "ideological critique" OR "emancipatory practice" OR "social change" OR "transformative leadership")

Boolean operators AND and OR were used systematically to combine these clusters, allowing for an inclusive yet focused retrieval of relevant articles (Cooper, 2010).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To enhance the validity and applicability of the review, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established following best practices in SLR (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008):

1. Inclusion criteria:
 - a. Peer-reviewed journal articles published in English
 - b. Articles published between 2010 and 2025, to emphasize contemporary scholarship and evolving perspectives
 - c. Studies explicitly focused on critical leadership theories, frameworks, or practices

- d. Publications categorized under Social Sciences, Business, Management and Accounting, or Economics, Econometrics and Finance
 - e. Articles that were final, fully published versions in academic journals
2. Exclusion criteria:
- a. Conference proceedings, book chapters, editorials, and other non-peer-reviewed or grey literature
 - b. Publications outside the specified subject areas or document types
 - c. Non-English language articles
 - d. Studies not centrally addressing critical leadership or its associated theoretical and thematic dimensions

While publication year was initially considered as a filter to focus on recent literature, it was noted that some records lacked clear publication year metadata or had inconsistencies. Therefore, the search also included articles without clear year data, which were carefully assessed during screening (Booth A et al., 2016). The systematic screening process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to enhance transparency and reproducibility (Moher et al., 2009)

The initial search returned [number] articles. Titles and abstracts were independently screened by two reviewers for relevance based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Full-text screening was subsequently performed on potentially relevant articles. Disagreements in article selection were resolved through discussion and consensus, ensuring rigor in study inclusion (Liberati et al., 2009). A flow diagram of the screening process is provided to detail article selection stages.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A standardized data extraction form was developed to systematically capture key information from each included study, comprising:

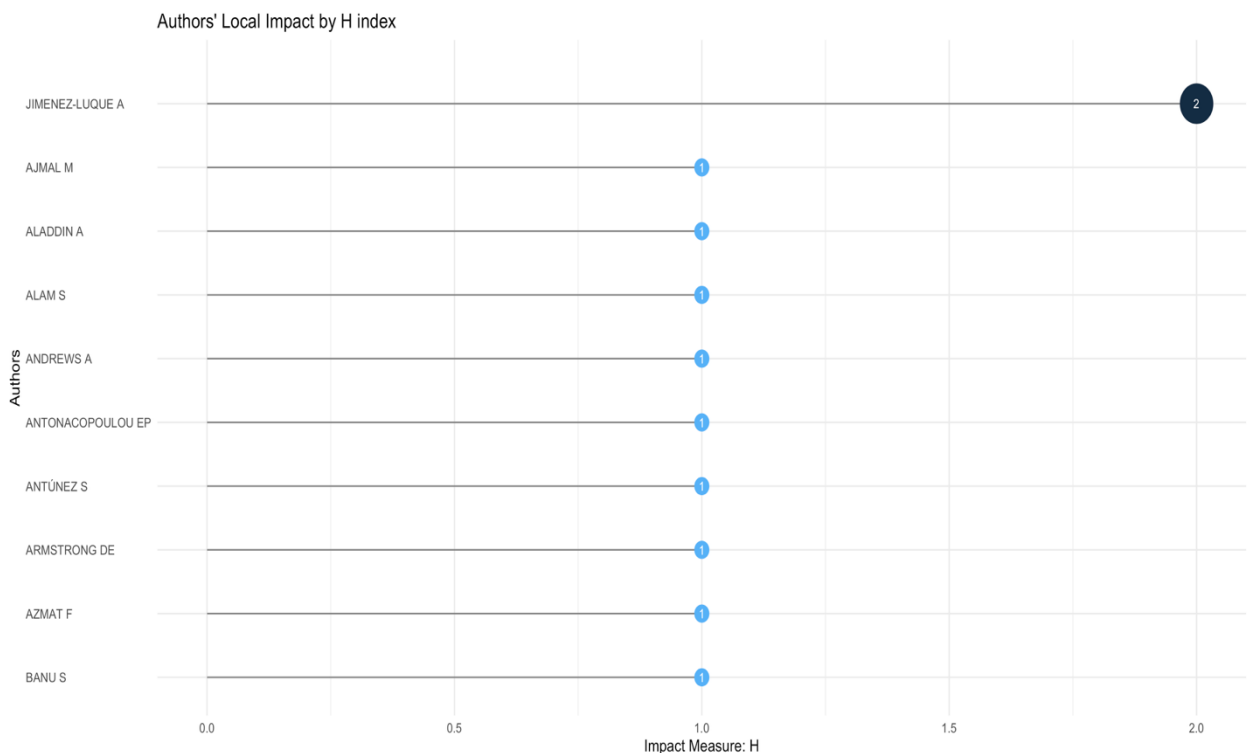
1. Bibliographic details (author(s), year, journal)
2. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks used
3. Research methodology and context (e.g., organizational, educational, community settings)
4. Major findings concerning power relations, ideology, social justice, and transformative leadership
5. Identified research gaps and suggested directions for future inquiry

The extracted data were synthesized through thematic analysis, a qualitative method effective for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled grouping studies under conceptual themes aligned with the research questions, thus providing a structured narrative of the critical leadership landscape.

RESULT

1. Author Impact Trends in Critical Leadership Scholarship

Figure 1. Authors Local Impact Index



Source:researcher-processed data source

In the interdisciplinary field of critical leadership, which addresses complex issues such as power dynamics, social justice, and transformative practices, understanding the intellectual contributions and influence of key scholars is essential for mapping the evolution of knowledge and identifying pivotal thought leaders. The provided visualization of authors' local impact measured by the H-index reveals important insights about the distribution of scholarly influence within this domain. The H-index, as a metric combining productivity and citation impact, serves as an indicator of both the quantity and quality of research contributions recognized by the academic community.

The data indicate that most authors possess an H-index of 1, signifying that their work has been cited and recognized at least once locally, reflecting emerging but significant contributions to the field. Notably, a single author, JIMENEZ-LUQUE A, stands out with an H-index of 2, demonstrating a higher degree of scholarly influence and suggesting a role as a leading contributor in shaping the critical leadership discourse. This concentration of impact among a limited number of authors aligns with broader observations in the literature regarding the uneven distribution of academic influence in critical leadership studies. The field is often characterized by a dominance of voices primarily from Western or academic-centric contexts (Macaulay, 2025; Morrissey, 1982) which poses challenges for inclusivity and representativeness. The centrality of certain authors highlights the need to broaden participation and diversify perspectives to enrich the field's theoretical and empirical foundations.

Moreover, the generally low H-index values among most authors may also reflect the methodological tendencies within critical leadership research, which predominantly employs qualitative methods such as ethnographies, discourse analyses, and case studies. While these approaches provide rich, context-specific insights essential for unpacking power relations and ideological structures, they tend

to receive fewer citations compared to quantitative or large-scale studies, potentially limiting their visibility in bibliometric analyses. This underscores the importance of encouraging methodological pluralism, including mixed methods and quantitative validation, to enhance both the rigor and reach of critical leadership research.

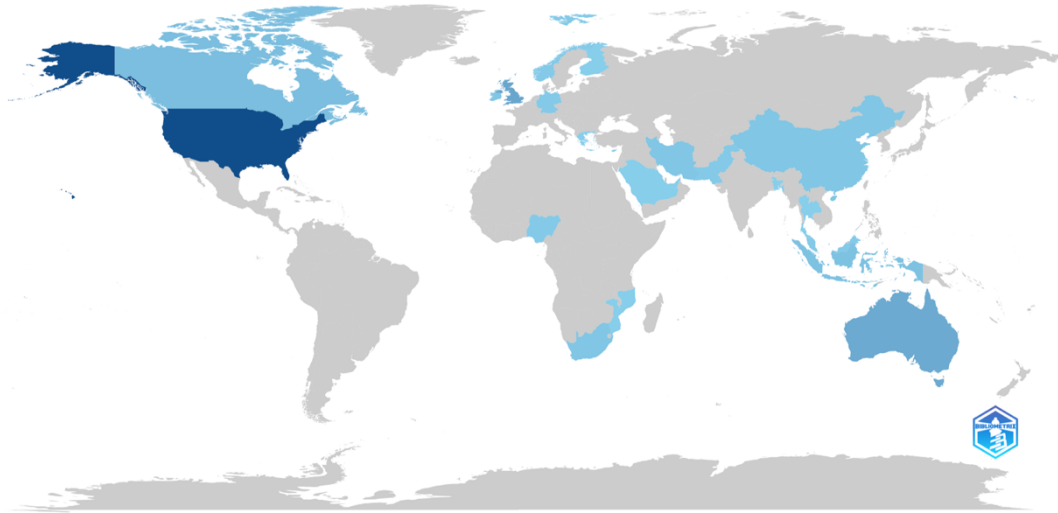
The findings regarding authors' local impact contribute valuable context for understanding current trends in critical leadership scholarship. They emphasize the significance of key thought leaders in advancing the field while simultaneously signaling opportunities for expanding scholarly networks and fostering collaborations that cross geographical, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries. Such expansion is vital to support critical leadership's capacity to address multifaceted social challenges effectively and to promote equitable and transformative leadership practices in diverse organizational and community contexts.

In conclusion, this analysis of author impact trends not only highlights the contributions of prominent scholars but also serves as a call to action for the academic community to cultivate a more inclusive and methodologically diverse research environment. Doing so will strengthen the theoretical clarity, empirical depth, and practical relevance of critical leadership studies in an increasingly complex and interconnected global landscape.

2. Geographical Distribution of Scientific Production in Critical Leadership Research

Figure 2. Country Scientific Production

Country Scientific Production



Source: researcher-processed data source

The visualization of global scientific production in critical leadership research reveals pronounced disparities in academic contributions across countries. The map highlights that countries such as the United States, several Western European nations, China, and Australia dominate the scholarly output in this field, as indicated by the darker shades of blue. This concentration of academic productivity underscores the significant allocation of research resources, institutional support, and intellectual leadership within these regions.

This pattern corroborates existing critiques within the critical leadership literature concerning the geographic and epistemic concentration of research predominantly within Western academic contexts (Macaulay, 2025; Morrissey, 1982). The dominance of Western perspectives potentially constrains the inclusivity and diversity of voices, thereby limiting the theoretical and empirical richness necessary to fully apprehend the complex socio-political dynamics embedded in leadership practices globally. The relative scarcity of scientific output from developing countries and marginalized communities, as illustrated by lighter shades or absence of coloration on the map, suggests a persistent underrepresentation of critical leadership narratives from non-Western contexts.

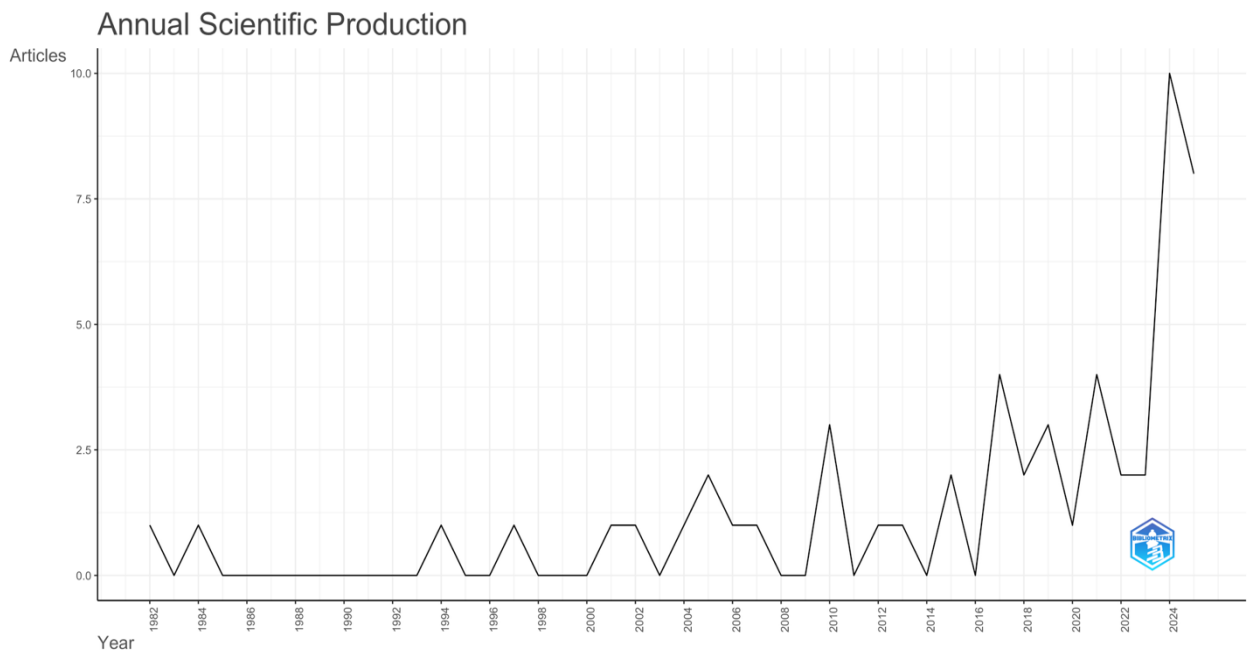
Moreover, this geographical imbalance reflects underlying methodological preferences and challenges inherent in critical leadership research. The field's predominant reliance on qualitative methodologies—such as ethnographies, discourse analyses, and case studies—often produces rich, context-specific insights but tends to receive less citation impact compared to quantitative or mixed-method studies. Consequently, scholars from underrepresented regions may face greater barriers in achieving international visibility and influence, reinforcing existing disparities in academic influence and knowledge production.

From a theoretical standpoint, the map's indication of concentrated production prompts a critical reflection on the universality of prevailing critical leadership frameworks. The risk of hegemonic epistemologies dominating the discourse raises important questions about the applicability and adaptability of these frameworks across diverse cultural, political, and organizational contexts. Expanding the geographic scope of research is essential to capture varied experiences of power, oppression, resistance, and emancipation that differ markedly across societies.

Practically, the visualization reinforces the imperative for fostering global scholarly collaboration and capacity-building initiatives aimed at amplifying marginalized and underrepresented voices in critical leadership research. Such efforts would not only enrich the theoretical landscape but also enhance the practical relevance of leadership models that promote social justice, inclusion, and transformative change in a multiplicity of organizational and community settings worldwide. In summary, the geographical distribution of scientific production underscores a critical challenge and opportunity for the field of critical leadership: to transcend traditional Western academic dominance and cultivate a more pluralistic, inclusive, and contextually nuanced research agenda. Addressing this challenge is vital for advancing leadership scholarship that is truly reflective of and responsive to the multifaceted realities of power, ideology, and social justice in a globalized world.

3. Trends in Annual Scientific Production in Critical Leadership Research

Figure 3. Annual Scientific Production



Source: researcher-processed data source

The analysis of annual scientific production in the field of critical leadership reveals a significant evolution in academic interest over recent decades. The visualization indicates that from the early 1980s through the late 2000s, the volume of publications related to critical leadership remained relatively low and sporadic, often recording zero or only one article per year. This early low publication rate likely reflects the nascent stage of critical leadership as a scholarly domain, which had not yet gained widespread traction. During this period, traditional leadership paradigms

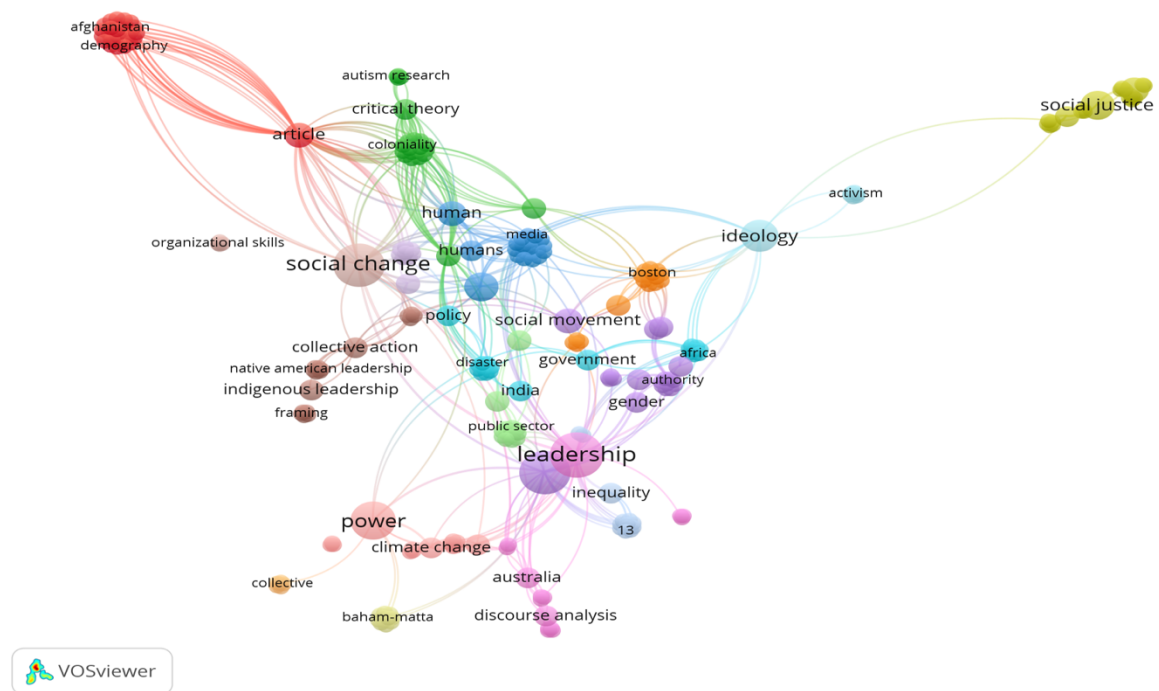
emphasizing individual traits and effectiveness within hierarchical structures largely dominated leadership studies. Additionally, methodological constraints and limited academic resources may have contributed to the relatively sparse output, alongside limited recognition of the importance of examining power relations, social justice, and transformative leadership practices.

Beginning in the 2010s, a marked increase in the number of publications becomes evident, with fluctuations but a clear upward trend overall. This growth aligns with a broader scholarly shift towards embracing critical theoretical perspectives across disciplines such as management, organizational studies, and social sciences. The expanding focus on ideology, emancipation, and power dynamics has positioned critical leadership as a vital and transformative lens challenging conventional leadership theories. Notably, the production of articles peaked sharply between 2022 and 2024, reaching the highest recorded annual output of 10 articles. This surge reflects heightened awareness of critical leadership's relevance in addressing contemporary societal challenges, including inequality, diversity, and the need for adaptive, socially responsive organizational leadership. It also corresponds with advances in methodological pluralism and increased efforts to incorporate diverse cultural and geographic perspectives in research.

Despite this encouraging increase in quantity, critical leadership research still faces challenges regarding generalizability, primarily due to the prevalence of qualitative approaches and limited geographic representation. These factors underscore the necessity for methodological innovation, including integrating quantitative and mixed-methods designs to bolster the robustness and broader applicability of critical leadership theories. Overall, the trend in scientific production underscores critical leadership's rapid growth and its promising potential to enrich leadership scholarship and practice with a focus on justice, reflexivity, and social transformation. The rising volume of research offers fertile ground for exploring new thematic areas, addressing geographical and cultural gaps, and developing comprehensive leadership models attuned to the complexities of contemporary social and political realities.

4. Key Conceptual Themes in Critical Leadership

Figure 4. Key Conceptual Themes in Critical Leadership



Source: researcher-processed data source

The bibliometric network visualization generated through VOSviewer provides a nuanced and structured representation of the conceptual landscape within critical leadership scholarship. The analysis highlights core thematic nodes—most prominently leadership, power, ideology, social justice, and social change—which dominate the intellectual discourse in this domain, as evidenced by their large node sizes and dense interconnections. This prominence underscores the centrality of power relations and ideological critique as foundational elements in critical leadership theory, affirming the shift away from traditional, trait-based leadership paradigms toward a more socio-political and emancipatory understanding of leadership phenomena.

The strong linkages observed between power and ideology with key theoretical constructs such as critical theory, emancipation, and coloniality reinforce the foundational role of critical theoretical frameworks in this body of literature. This relationship illustrates how critical leadership research interrogates the historic and structural dimensions of domination and resistance, situating leadership as a contested arena where hegemonic power structures are both reproduced and challenged. These insights align closely with extant scholarship emphasizing leadership’s potential as a vehicle for social transformation and decolonial praxis (Jimenez-Luque, 2021b; Ungirwalu et al., 2025)

Moreover, the network reveals substantive connections between leadership and themes related to social movements, policy, and collective action, indicating a pronounced scholarly focus on leadership as a catalyst for collective empowerment and systemic change beyond organizational boundaries. This suggests that critical leadership research encompasses a broad interdisciplinary scope that integrates organizational studies with social and political theory, emphasizing leadership's role in driving social justice and equity within diverse community and institutional contexts (Brown et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2021)

The visualization also foregrounds the interplay between media, discourse analysis, and ideology, highlighting methodological trends in the literature that leverage discourse analytic approaches to unravel the ways power and ideology are constructed, maintained, and contested through language and representation in leadership contexts. This methodological focus reflects the prevalence of qualitative research traditions—such as ethnographies and case studies—in critical leadership, which prioritize rich contextualization of power dynamics but face challenges related to generalizability and citation impact (Macaulay, 2025; Morrissey, 1982)

Notably, clusters associated with indigenous leadership, diversity, inclusion, and social justice signal increasing scholarly attention toward marginalized and postcolonial perspectives within critical leadership studies. This trend reflects a growing recognition of the importance of elevating voices and leadership practices from underrepresented communities, aligning with feminist and postcolonial critiques that challenge dominant Western-centric epistemologies (Gordon, 2020; Unger et al., 2010). Such attention enriches the field's theoretical pluralism and enhances its relevance to global social justice struggles.

Despite these rich thematic intersections, the network also reveals potential research gaps, particularly the relative underrepresentation of quantitative and mixed-methods approaches as well as the limited geographic diversity in study settings. These observations correspond with ongoing critiques regarding the methodological homogeneity and Western academic dominance within critical leadership research (Mastio & Dovey, 2019; Raelin, 2024). Addressing these limitations by fostering methodological pluralism and expanding empirical inquiry to encompass diverse cultural and geopolitical contexts is imperative to enhance the robustness, inclusivity, and applicability of critical leadership frameworks.

Overall, the bibliometric visualization substantiates critical leadership as a complex, multidimensional field that synthesizes analyses of power, ideology, and social justice with transformative leadership praxis across organizational and societal domains. The identified conceptual network provides a foundational scaffold for developing integrative leadership models that transcend mere managerial effectiveness to prioritize ethical responsibility, reflexivity, and collective emancipation. This orientation aligns closely with contemporary societal demands for leadership that is adaptive, equitable, and responsive to multifaceted social and political challenges (Huang & Gadavani, 2025; Murphree, 2004). By mapping the conceptual terrain and uncovering both dominant themes and areas of underexplored potential, this systematic review and bibliometric analysis offer critical insights to guide future research agendas. Emphasizing inclusivity, methodological diversity, and global representativeness will be vital to advancing critical leadership scholarship that is theoretically rigorous, empirically grounded, and practically impactful in fostering socially just and transformative organizational environments.

DISCUSSION

1. Main Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks in Critical Leadership Studies

The theoretical landscape of critical leadership studies reveals a complex, multi-dimensional evolution wherein leadership is not merely a management function but a contested social terrain deeply embedded with power asymmetries, ideology, and identity struggles. Levitan. (2018) and Gordon (2020) foreground social justice theory and transformative grassroots leadership as foundational pillars that center marginalized voices and emphasize systemic change. However, these normative-transformative approaches must be contextualized alongside structural analyses of power dynamics, as articulated by Murphree. (2004) and (Haag & Smith, 2002), who assert that power relations fundamentally shape leadership practices and outcomes.

A notable tension emerges between the more hopeful, normative frameworks of transformation and critical, structural perspectives that emphasize institutionalized power and ideological control, as explored by Macaulay (2025) and Morrissey (1982). Their work highlights how institutions and ideology not only influence behaviors but actively govern access to resources and authority, revealing a duality between aspirations for transformation and the persistence of domination that leaders and followers often overlook or underplay. Gender and identity theories are indispensable in critical leadership analyses. Wali. (1994) and Jimenez-Luque (2021) illustrate how gender and decolonial leadership theories challenge hegemonic leadership narratives that marginalize women and subordinated groups, particularly in Global South contexts. This infusion of identity politics enriches leadership studies by emphasizing symbolic and epistemic struggles for legitimacy and power, exposing leadership as not only political but also deeply cultural and symbolic.

Prasetyo et al. (2025) contribute by offering a collective and institutional leadership model within *pesantren*, opposing individualistic and neoliberal leadership paradigms. This model emphasizes sustainability and social-cultural continuity, highlighting the necessity for contextually rooted leadership theories that resist global homogenization. In contrast, Mohammadi & Zare, (2024) critique existing educational administration paradigms and call for epistemological shifts to integrate power dynamics and inclusive governance within leadership theory.

Reza & Reza (2021) complement these views with discourse analysis grounded in Laclau and Mouffe's framework, underscoring the fluid and discursive nature of power, especially in political transitions towards authoritarianism. Their approach stresses that leadership is performative and discursively constructed, making it essential to study narratives and rhetoric alongside formal power structures. Antonacopoulou et al. (2019) and Raelin (2024) shift the analytical lens from individual leaders to leadership as a practice characterized by institutional reflexivity and high agility organizing. This conceptual move aligns leadership with collaborative, reflexive learning processes, accommodating the complexity and uncertainty of contemporary workplaces. It challenges traditional top-down models and highlights leadership as dynamic, collective, and contextually embedded.

Empirical studies from educational contexts by Nixon et al., 1997; Silva et al., 2021) illustrate the changing power relations between teachers, students, and parents, emphasizing that leadership transformations must be examined in situated, real-world contexts. This underscores the need for praxis-oriented leadership research attentive to social justice and equity concerns.

Sheerin & Garavan. (2022) and Igwebuiké & Chimuanya. (2024) explore the gendered and mediated construction of leadership, particularly how female leaders negotiate identity, agency, and legitimacy

within patriarchal and media-dominated spaces. Their findings reveal the persistent tension between individual empowerment and structural constraints, affirming the importance of symbolic power and representation in critical leadership.

Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht. (2018) and Fujimoto et al. (2024) further expand the scope by integrating decolonial and inclusive leadership frameworks focused on social justice and sustainable development. These perspectives critically challenge Western-dominated leadership theories and call for redistributive power practices that address global inequities and environmental

Lastly, Stephenson. (2023) brings a pedagogical lens, advocating for transformative leadership in TESOL that emphasizes empathy, democracy, social justice, and teacher leadership, thereby responding to contemporary global educational challenges and reinforcing leadership's ethical and emancipatory dimensions.

This synthesis demonstrates that critical leadership studies operate at the intersection of social theory, political economy, culture, and organizational practice. There is an inherent tension between transformative aspirations and enduring structures of domination; between individual agency and institutional power; and between universal theoretical models and locally specific, contextual realities. Consequently, advancing critical leadership theory requires multidisciplinary and methodological pluralism, integrating theories of power, ideology, identity, reflexivity, and social practice in a dialogical and constructive manner. Only through this integrated and nuanced approach can critical leadership scholarship meaningfully address the complexities of leadership in contemporary societies.

2. How Power Dynamics and Ideology are Described and Analyzed

Power dynamics and ideology form the backbone of critical leadership analyses, revealing how leadership is embedded in complex social, cultural, and political structures that shape both agency and constraint. Studies such as Ungirwalu et al. (2025) demonstrate how power relations in indigenous communities are deeply intertwined with local social norms, kinship networks, and traditional authority. This challenges conventional top-down leadership models by showing leadership as relational and negotiated within community fabrics. The media emerges as a powerful arena where ideologies about gender, ethnicity, and leadership are constructed and perpetuated. Edam et al. (2024) uncover how Arab women's representations in media often reflect and reinforce dominant social ideologies that limit female leadership visibility and agency. This resonates with broader critical leadership perspectives that emphasize discourse as a vehicle of power, shaping identities and defining the boundaries of legitimate leadership.

Discourse analysis in crisis leadership contexts, as presented by Imran. (2025), reveals how leadership language during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, not only conveys authority but also frames social realities and public compliance. Leadership communication in such contexts performs ideological work by legitimizing certain power structures while silencing or marginalizing dissenting voices, illustrating the discursive nature of leadership power. Historical and anthropological perspectives provide vital insights into the temporal and cultural dimensions of power and social change. Liebmann et al. (2005) explore how power relations in Pueblo settlements have historically shaped social transformations, emphasizing the fluidity and contestation of leadership over time. Such perspectives urge leadership scholars to recognize power as dynamic and culturally embedded

Gendered power relations and social justice form crucial themes in leadership scholarship, as Brown et al. (2019) argue through their analysis of women's rights leadership in Africa. This research foregrounds intersectional struggles against gendered oppression, positioning leadership as a site of both power exertion and resistance. It aligns with feminist and social justice leadership frameworks that stress relational, intersectional, and contested power. Mukherje. (2024) investigation into flood risk management policy in India highlights the structural and institutional dimensions of power, where entrenched interests and asymmetric relationships hinder inclusive governance. This case underscores how ideology and power can act as barriers to effective leadership and participatory decision-making in complex socio-political contexts.

The role of technology and media in shaping ideological power is further emphasized by Huang & Gadavani. (2025), whose study on AI discourse in Chinese education reveals how narratives marginalize certain social groups, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies. This highlights the interplay between technology, ideology, and leadership, showing how power is maintained through symbolic and material means. Jimenez-Luque. (2021) contributes an important perspective by documenting indigenous leadership practices that resist hegemonic power through identity-based counter-narratives. This empirical work demonstrates how subordinated groups reclaim agency and reshape leadership frameworks in decolonial and emancipatory ways, emphasizing power as negotiated and contested.

In politically charged environments, Reza & Reza (2021) analyze power and ideology through the lens of political discourse in Iran, showing how leadership legitimacy is constructed through contested narratives. Their application of Laclau and Mouffe's theories illuminates leadership as performative, embedded in ideological struggles that define political authority and dissent. Olmos et al. (2023) critically examine the neoliberalization of education institutions and its effects on leadership discourse, revealing how market-oriented ideologies transform power relations and restrict equitable participation. This work critiques dominant leadership models that prioritize efficiency and control at the expense of democratic engagement and social justice.

Nelson (2017) ethnographic analysis of humanitarian aid distribution in Mozambique highlights the informal and often invisible power exercised through rumors and social networks, particularly in gendered community contexts. This adds depth to understanding how power circulates through everyday social practices beyond formal leadership structures. Intersectionality and minority leadership challenges are vividly portrayed in Hussain & Findlay (2025) study of ethnic minority women leaders in the UK, showing how gender, race, and religion produce overlapping constraints and modes of resistance. Their findings reinforce the importance of acknowledging complex identities and systemic biases in leadership research and practice.

Sheridan (2012) offers an innovative linkage between environmental discourse and political power, revealing how Tanzanian farmers' narratives about climate change encode deeper struggles over resources and authority. This political ecology perspective enriches leadership analysis by situating power within socio-natural relationships and environmental justice concerns.

Zeb et al. (2024) dissect Islamophobic rhetoric in Donald Trump's political speeches, demonstrating how ideological language constructs exclusionary "us versus them" identities to consolidate power. This work exemplifies how leadership discourse can mobilize fear and division as political strategies, underscoring the critical need to analyze ideology's role in sustaining hegemonic leadership.

Deng et al (2024) explore leadership and power relations in the governance of autonomous vehicle data, revealing how government actors mediate competing interests among private and public stakeholders. This case illustrates contemporary complexities of power in technological governance, where leadership legitimacy and collaborative dynamics are constantly negotiated.

At a macro level, Davis (2017) reveals how business elites in Britain maintain class consciousness and dominant ideology through institutions such as elite education, media, and professional networks. This systemic view highlights the reproduction of leadership power within global capitalism and neoliberal hegemony.

Mastio & Dovey, (2019) examine the subtle and abstract forms of power that permeate organizational change in an Australian law firm. Their findings show how ideological tensions and insufficient collective reflexivity fuel internal conflicts, demonstrating that power in leadership is often diffuse and operates through taken-for-granted organizational routines. Finally, Igwebuike & Chimuanya (2024) analyze Nigerian female politicians' social media strategies to claim and perform leadership power in highly patriarchal contexts. Their critical discourse approach uncovers how self-promotion and mediated narratives are used to contest dominant ideologies and negotiate leadership legitimacy.

Overall, these studies collectively articulate a multifaceted and deeply political understanding of power and ideology in leadership. Power is relational, constructed and reproduced through discourse, institutions, identities, and social practices. Ideology operates both as a tool for legitimizing dominant leadership models and as a contested site for resistance and emancipation. This body of literature stresses the necessity for leadership theories and practices to be critically reflexive, intersectional, and attentive to both visible and hidden power dynamics to advance social justice and inclusion across diverse organizational and community contexts.

3. Contexts of Application — Social Justice, Inclusion, and Transformative Change

Critical leadership scholarship increasingly emphasizes the practical applications of leadership theories in advancing social justice, inclusion, and transformative social change across diverse global contexts. This synthesis critically examines empirical studies that highlight how critical leadership is enacted to challenge inequities, empower marginalized groups, and foster systemic transformation within community, educational, environmental, and organizational settings. Several studies foreground the role of locally embedded leadership in addressing pressing social and environmental challenges. For example, Yee et al. (2025) illustrate how transformational and inclusive leadership practices guide community adaptation and planned relocation in Fiji, emphasizing the importance of local agency and culturally responsive leadership in climate resilience.

Similarly, Ungirwalu et al. (2025) demonstrate how indigenous leadership in forest resource management exemplifies collective empowerment and sustainable governance rooted in community values and social justice principles. These cases underscore the critical leadership tenet of centering marginalized voices and knowledge systems as catalysts for equitable change. Grassroots leadership as a vehicle for social transformation is extensively represented. Gordon, (2020) explicates transformative grassroots leadership as a conceptual and practical model that mobilizes social change at local levels, bridging theory with lived experiences of community activists. This aligns with Fisher & Shragge. (2017) exploration of how diverse funding and democratic legitimacy enable radical grassroots organizations in England and Quebec to confront hegemonic power

structures and advance social justice agendas. Tattersall (2015) analysis of the transnational spread and adaptation of Alinsky-style community organizing to Australia further illustrates how context-sensitive leadership practices sustain collective agency and political empowerment across cultural boundaries.

Gendered leadership and empowerment emerge as pivotal themes. Brown et al. (2019) and Mogadime et al. (2010) highlight women's leadership in African contexts as deeply intertwined with social justice and spiritual values, emphasizing leadership as a transformative tool for gender equity and community wellbeing. Wali (1994) work on women's roles in repatriation reinforces the intersection of gender and social transformation, showing how female leadership fosters resilience and agency within complex social processes. In more contemporary terms, Fujimoto et al. (2024) propose an inclusive corporate leadership framework aimed at sustainable development, advocating for leadership approaches that dismantle systemic inequalities by integrating marginalized stakeholders in decision-making.

Educational contexts reveal critical leadership's potential to promote inclusion and equity in increasingly diverse environments. Silva et al. (2021) document transformational leadership practices in highly complex schools with significant migrant populations, emphasizing social justice as central to leadership efficacy. This resonates with Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht (2018) call for decolonizing inclusive education in Southern Africa, challenging traditional ideologies and advocating for social justice-oriented educational policies and practices. Dantley. (2005) extends the discourse by integrating African American spirituality and prophetic pragmatism into urban educational leadership, advocating a holistic, justice-centered reform agenda that resonates deeply with community identities and histories. Stephenson (2023) similarly advocates for transformative leadership within TESOL education, linking teacher leadership to social justice, empathy, and democratic values in a globalized educational landscape.

Community-based leadership in crisis and disaster contexts further exemplifies critical leadership's role in social justice. Sherwood et al. (2024) analyze Puerto Rican community organizations navigating ongoing environmental and socio-economic crises, highlighting how grassroots leadership challenges colonial power structures and fosters collective healing and empowerment. Andrews (2010) similarly shows how transnational solidarity networks among Zapatista activists transform power dynamics and promote emancipatory social change. These accounts underscore the importance of leadership grounded in critical consciousness and collective agency to contest structural injustice.

Several studies engage with the politics of memory, identity, and legitimacy as foundational to emancipatory leadership. Jimenez-Luque(2021) articulates how indigenous leadership in the U.S. utilizes memory decolonization as a strategic resource for legitimizing alternative leadership narratives and fostering social change. This intersection of identity, history, and leadership aligns with critical leadership's broader concern with counter-hegemonic knowledge production and social justice. Furthermore, participatory and emancipatory research frameworks illuminate the role of inclusion and justice in leadership praxis. Rensburg & Weaver (2024) document how autistic adults' participation in critical research exemplifies inclusive leadership that challenges disability-related oppression and redefines notions of agency. This advances the dialogue on inclusion beyond representation toward systemic transformation of research and organizational practices.

Collectively, this body of literature reveals that critical leadership in practice is multifaceted, deeply contextualized, and rooted in the pursuit of justice, equity, and systemic transformation. It challenges dominant power structures and ideological formations by empowering marginalized actors, fostering collective agency, and promoting inclusive, socially just futures. The diversity of contexts—from indigenous governance and grassroots activism to corporate sustainability and educational reform—illustrates critical leadership's broad applicability and its potential to drive emancipatory social change globally. However, these studies also underscore challenges such as navigating entrenched power asymmetries, managing tensions between local knowledge and external influences, and sustaining inclusive leadership amidst socio-political complexities. Addressing these challenges requires ongoing reflexivity, adaptive leadership, and coalition-building, all of which are hallmarks of critical leadership scholarship. In sum, critical leadership's application within social justice, inclusion, and transformative change contexts demonstrates an evolving, dynamic interplay of theory and praxis. It reaffirms leadership as a powerful instrument for challenging oppression, redistributing power, and co-creating equitable social systems—key goals for both scholars and practitioners committed to transformative leadership in the 21st century.

4: Research Gaps and Emerging Opportunities in Critical Leadership Studies

Despite the significant growth in critical leadership scholarship, this systematic review identifies several key research gaps and emergent opportunities that require urgent scholarly attention. These gaps span theoretical, methodological, geographic, and contextual dimensions, suggesting rich avenues for advancing the field both conceptually and empirically. One prominent gap is the underexplored potential of leadership in novel and high-stakes contexts, particularly crisis situations and disruptive events. Imran (2025) work on crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the pressing need for leadership research that captures the complexities of leading under uncertainty and rapid change. This opens an opportunity to deepen understanding of adaptive leadership behaviors and communication strategies in unprecedented crises, broadening critical leadership's relevance beyond traditional organizational domains

Theoretical and methodological innovation is another identified necessity. Macaulay. (2025) stresses the limitations of existing frameworks in addressing complex power asymmetries and institutional dynamics. This calls for integrative approaches that blend institutional theory with emerging paradigms such as post-humanism, relational leadership, and intersectionality, alongside mixed methods and multi-level analyses to capture nuanced power relations more effectively.

Raelin (2024) advocacy for leadership-as-practice and post-humanistic perspectives exemplifies this trajectory, inviting more research into leadership as a dynamic, collective, and contextual practice rather than a fixed trait or position. Geographic and cultural representation remain uneven, with a marked Western bias dominating critical leadership literature. Ungirwalu et al. (2025) and Yee et al. (2025) emphasize the scarcity of research from non-Western and Global South contexts, particularly regarding indigenous leadership, local adaptation, and planned relocation. These studies expose important geographic and thematic gaps, underscoring the need for more contextually grounded, culturally sensitive investigations that respect and integrate indigenous knowledge systems, diverse epistemologies, and localized leadership practices.

Closely linked is the need for expanded methodological scope, especially the integration of discourse and media analysis. Edam et al (2024) demonstrate the significance of media representation in shaping gendered and ideological constructions of leadership, suggesting that future research

should systematically engage with media texts and social media platforms. Igwebuike & Chimuanya (2024) study on Nigerian female political leaders using critical discourse analysis reinforces this direction, highlighting how discursive strategies constitute and contest power online. This aligns with Sheerin & Garavan (2022) identification of gaps in media framing of female leaders, notably the neglect of female agency and domestic contexts, which remain ripe for investigation.

Several scholars point to ideological blind spots and pedagogical resistances that impede deeper engagement with inequality and power. Wiborg (2022) critiques the persistent avoidance of addressing systemic inequities in leadership education, advocating pedagogical renewal that confronts domination and injustice head-on. Similarly, Reza & Reza (2021) reveal political constraints within constitutional frameworks that limit social-political transformation, suggesting a fertile ground for critical political leadership research exploring authoritarianism, populism, and resistance. The interplay between ecology, culture, and power also presents an underdeveloped area. Sheridan (2012) calls for more integrative approaches that connect cultural ecologies with political power and resource management, essential for understanding leadership amid environmental crises. This ecological-political nexus intersects with emerging research on governance in technology-driven environments. Deng et al. (2024) propose the novel context of open data governance for autonomous vehicles, pointing toward multi-stakeholder collaboration and new forms of power negotiation in digital infrastructure leadership.

Organizational complexity and abstract power dynamics further require deeper exploration. Mastio & Dovey (2019) reveal how ideological tensions and latent power structures can undermine organizational transformation without collective reflexive capabilities. This underscores the imperative for research on developing collaborative and critical capacities within leadership collectives to navigate such abstract power forms constructively. Social justice-oriented leadership also demands greater attention to intersectionality and minority experiences. Hussain & Findlay (2025) highlight the multifaceted impacts of stereotypes and in-group/out-group dynamics on ethnic minority female leaders, indicating a need for more intersectional research that unpacks these layered oppressions. Likewise, Jimenez-Luque (2021b) points to the promise of decolonial leadership scholarship, emphasizing collective identity and legitimacy but acknowledging the need for expanded empirical cases and theoretical refinement.

Finally, Fujimoto et al. (2024) identify the nascent but critical opportunity to investigate how inclusive leadership can reshape corporate purpose amid global social and environmental crises. This research direction integrates sustainability with equity, pushing leadership studies toward more holistic, transformative, and societally embedded models. Coupled with Tattersall, (2015) findings on the transnational challenges of adapting community organizing, these perspectives collectively signal a growing imperative to cross disciplinary and cultural boundaries for impactful leadership research. In conclusion, the landscape of critical leadership research is ripe with opportunities for enriching theory, diversifying empirical contexts, expanding methodological rigor, and deepening the analysis of power and ideology. Future research must embrace complexity, interdisciplinarity, and inclusivity to illuminate the transformative potential of leadership for social justice, equity, and systemic change in an increasingly volatile and interconnected world.

Conclusion and Future Research

This systematic literature review offers a thorough and integrative synthesis of the rapidly evolving scholarship on critical leadership, underscoring its foundational engagement with power dynamics, ideological critique, social justice, and transformative practices within a wide range of organizational, community, and socio-political contexts. The findings affirm that critical leadership scholarship fundamentally challenges traditional leadership paradigms centered on individual traits and hierarchical authority, repositioning leadership as a deeply political, contested, and socially embedded process. Leadership, from this perspective, is understood not merely as an exercise of authority but as a dynamic arena where struggles over power, identity, and social justice unfold.

The review highlights the rich theoretical plurality informing critical leadership, drawing on critical theory, feminist and gender studies, postcolonial frameworks, intersectionality, and decolonial thought. This diverse theoretical base provides powerful lenses to interrogate how leadership both reproduces and resists systemic oppression, enabling a nuanced understanding of leadership as a site of empowerment, contestation, and symbolic negotiation. Empirical applications across indigenous governance, grassroots activism, educational reform, corporate sustainability, and crisis contexts demonstrate the practical significance of critical leadership in fostering inclusive and equitable transformation. These case studies illustrate leadership's capacity to amplify marginalized voices, challenge hegemonic structures, and promote collective agency and emancipation.

However, the review also identifies critical limitations and persistent gaps within the field. The overrepresentation of Western-centric perspectives and academic settings raises concerns about epistemic dominance and the marginalization of Global South, indigenous, and non-Western knowledges. Methodologically, critical leadership research remains heavily reliant on qualitative approaches such as ethnographies, discourse analyses, and case studies, which, while rich in contextual insight, often face challenges regarding generalizability and citation impact. Furthermore, there is a marked under-exploration of leadership in high-stakes and rapidly evolving contexts such as crises, technological governance, and digital media environments, which are increasingly relevant in today's globalized world.

Future research agendas must therefore embrace methodological innovation by expanding beyond qualitative traditions to include mixed methods and quantitative designs that enhance the robustness, replicability, and generalizability of findings. This methodological pluralism can better capture the complexity of power relations and leadership dynamics across multiple levels of analysis, from micro interactions to macro institutional processes. Geographically and culturally, there is a pressing need to broaden research scopes to include underrepresented regions, especially the Global South and indigenous communities. Integrating localized epistemologies and culturally grounded leadership models will enrich theoretical frameworks and enhance the field's relevance and applicability. Studies that attend to diverse sociopolitical realities and historical contexts will deepen understanding of how leadership intersects with colonial legacies, cultural identities, and community resilience.

Interdisciplinary approaches are also paramount. Future research should more explicitly incorporate ecological, political, technological, and economic dimensions, recognizing that leadership today operates within complex systems shaped by environmental crises, digital transformations, and global power shifts. Critical leadership education requires revitalization to confront entrenched inequalities and foster leaders equipped with reflexivity, ethical sensitivity, and a commitment to social justice.

Pedagogical innovations that challenge neoliberal and managerialist norms are urgently needed to cultivate transformative leadership capacities.

Moreover, advancing intersectional research focusing on minority leadership experiences—especially those of women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups—is vital to unpacking layered oppressions and resilience strategies. Decolonial and postcolonial leadership scholarship must continue to evolve through expanded empirical cases and theoretical refinement, contributing to emancipatory leadership paradigms that resist epistemic violence and promote collective identity and legitimacy.

A particularly emergent opportunity lies in exploring how inclusive leadership can reshape corporate and institutional missions amidst intertwined social and environmental crises. Research in this direction promises to integrate sustainability, equity, and ethical responsibility, steering leadership scholarship toward holistic models that respond to 21st-century challenges. In conclusion, critical leadership research stands at a pivotal juncture characterized by both significant advancements and unresolved challenges. Embracing complexity, interdisciplinarity, inclusivity, and methodological diversity is essential for the field to realize its transformative potential fully. Such a comprehensive approach will enable critical leadership scholarship to not only critique and expose power imbalances and injustices but also actively contribute to creating just, equitable, and sustainable societies worldwide. This vision positions critical leadership as an indispensable framework for navigating the ethical, social, and political demands of leadership in an increasingly interconnected and volatile global landscape.

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