

A systematic literature review on spiritual leadership: antecedents, mechanism, moderators and outcomes

Literature
review on
spiritual
leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to offer evidence-based knowledge of the most popular research topics in studies on spiritual leadership (SL) and the research approaches and theories in use. Another aim is to create a comprehensive research framework covering the antecedents and outcomes of SL, as well as the underlying mechanisms and conditional factors. This study also synthesizes future research avenues presented in the literature.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a systematic literature review method. The presented analysis covered both bibliometric studies and in-depth manual content analysis. In total, 274 articles indexed in the Scopus database were analyzed, with a particular focus on 126 empirical papers.

Findings – This study shows that most of the research took place in developing countries and focused on the links between SL and workplace spirituality, employee well-being and engagement. It provides a complex research framework which orders previous variables according to their levels. Future research is required that would use a multilevel research approach and determine the impact of SL on society and the leaders themselves, as well as determining the reverse impact of organizational performance on the development of SL.

Originality/value – This study takes advantages of both bibliometric and in-depth content analysis to expand the understanding of the state of the art in SL research. It demonstrates how different factors contribute to SL and how they subsequently influence outcomes. It also offers numerous future research directions which go beyond those identified so far in the literature to further develop the theory of SL.

Keywords Bibliometric analysis, Cluster analysis, Content analysis

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

The interest in spirituality issues in the context of work began in the early 1920s and has been growing since (Petchsawang and Duchon, 2009). Spirituality revolves around finding meaning, sense, interconnectedness and value in one's work. It brings numerous benefits for both employees and companies: improving employee well-being (reduces stress and burnout and stimulates quality of life); increasing employee morale, motivation, job satisfaction, commitment and job performance; and mitigating employee absenteeism and intention to quit (Pawar, 2016; Singh and Singh, 2022). A spiritual workplace culture promotes positive interactions, empathy and compassion among employees. This can create a more supportive and cohesive work environment, leading to improved teamwork and collaboration (Singh and Singh, 2022). Accordingly, the practitioners and academicians are emphasizing the use of



effective leadership styles in the context of workplace spirituality (Jain, 2022; Pawar, 2014; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021).

Although workplace spirituality has been linked to transformational leadership (Kim Quy *et al.*, 2023; Mack *et al.*, 2017) and servant leadership (Williams *et al.*, 2017), the complex implementation of spirituality into leadership theory has taken the form of spiritual leadership (SL), which was introduced by Fairholm (1996) and developed by Fry (2003). Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating followers to achieve remarkable outcomes, servant leadership aims to serve followers, while SL integrates spirituality and ethics to create a meaningful and value-driven work environment (Anderson and Sun, 2017). In particular, SL considers ethics in decision-making, presents a meaningful vision, embodies spiritual values such as integrity, honesty and humility, builds trust among different company stakeholders, and prefers the common good before individual needs (Fry and Cohen, 2009; Reave, 2005; Silingiene and Skeriene, 2016; Zsolnai and Illes, 2017). In this paper, SL is treated as an operationalized research construct that can have different predictors, outcomes, mediators and moderators operating at different levels. Since it has been the topic of many empirical research projects, it is worth synthesizing the prior research approaches and results in a systematic, transparent and reproducible manner (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). Therefore, the aim of this study is to answer the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1. What are the most popular research topics in the studies on SL?
- RQ2. Which research approaches (qualitative/quantitative, unilevel/multilevel) are the most common in such research?
- RQ3. Which theories have been used to explain how SL leads to outcomes?
- RQ4. What complex research model (covering antecedents, outcomes of SL and the mediators/moderators functioning at different levels of analysis) can be created based on the evidence from prior research?
- RQ5. Which future research directions have been proposed in previous studies?

The contribution of a systematic literature review to the development of a research field – as in this case – lies in a broad set of theoretical implications, such as organizing and categorizing knowledge, rapidly disseminating the latest knowledge among readers/future researchers, evaluating and summarizing the body of work, identifying areas of knowledge and research gaps, and thus reducing uncertainty in the field (Fisch and Block, 2018). Moreover, a good literature review is exclusive, meaning that it is unique and it synthesizes the best available evidence in a given research area (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). By answering the above RQs, this literature review contributes to the understanding of SL among researchers and practitioners and encourages researchers to further explore the phenomenon and practitioners to introduce SL principles in organizations.

At this point, it is worth emphasizing that although some literature reviews have been published on similar topics, none of them have responded to the above RQs, which highlight the existing research gaps. Some previous literature reviews have been devoted to the general notion of workplace spirituality. For example, Rocha and Pinheiro (2021), Maidl *et al.* (2022) and Singh and Singh (2022) aimed at providing a better understanding of this concept. There have also been reviews which analyzed how leadership has been linked with spirituality. For example, Dent *et al.* (2005) conducted a qualitative narrative analysis of 20 randomly selected papers on spirituality and leadership. They only mentioned the notion of SL. Anderson and Sun (2017) did not present the methodology used in their literature review, instead focusing on definitions of new leadership styles (including SL) and overlaps between them. They emphasized that empirical works on SL are sparse. Göçen and Şen (2021) examined 17 empirical articles which linked SL with organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Samul (2019)

as well as [Vedula and Agrawal \(2023\)](#) conducted solely bibliometric analyses. The former studied the link between the SL leadership style and sustainable workplaces and determined thematic clusters based on keyword analysis, whereas the latter analyzed papers on a broad definition of leaders' spirituality and determined thematic clusters based on a co-citation analysis. Finally, [Oh and Wang \(2020\)](#) considered 59 empirical studies published before 2018 (analyzing 46 quantitative studies) and provided only a basic bibliometric analysis conceptualizing this leadership style (measurement and data analysis methods), without analyzing the research directions recommended by previous researchers.

This study utilizes the Scopus database, which is extensively used by social science researchers (also in the context of workplace spirituality) because of its size and the interdisciplinarity of peer-reviewed sources ([Vedula and Agrawal, 2023](#)). The authors identified a total of 274 articles to analyze further. Moreover, the authors used both bibliometric analysis (including network analysis of keywords) and in-depth qualitative analysis following [Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal \(2023\)](#). The former allows researchers to determine general trends related to research productivity as well as the most popular research topics. It introduces quantitative rigor into this study ([Maditati et al., 2018](#)). The visual representation of how detailed topics interrelate is called science mapping ([Santana and Cobo, 2020](#)). The latter type of analysis is essential for identifying the qualitative information needed to answer the RQs. It covers the whole content of the articles in order to gain deeper insight into the findings of previous studies ([Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal, 2023](#)). Considering the above, this article methodologically evaluates the past research on SL so as to identify directions for improving future research and to make new contributions for advancing research in this area.

2. Methodology

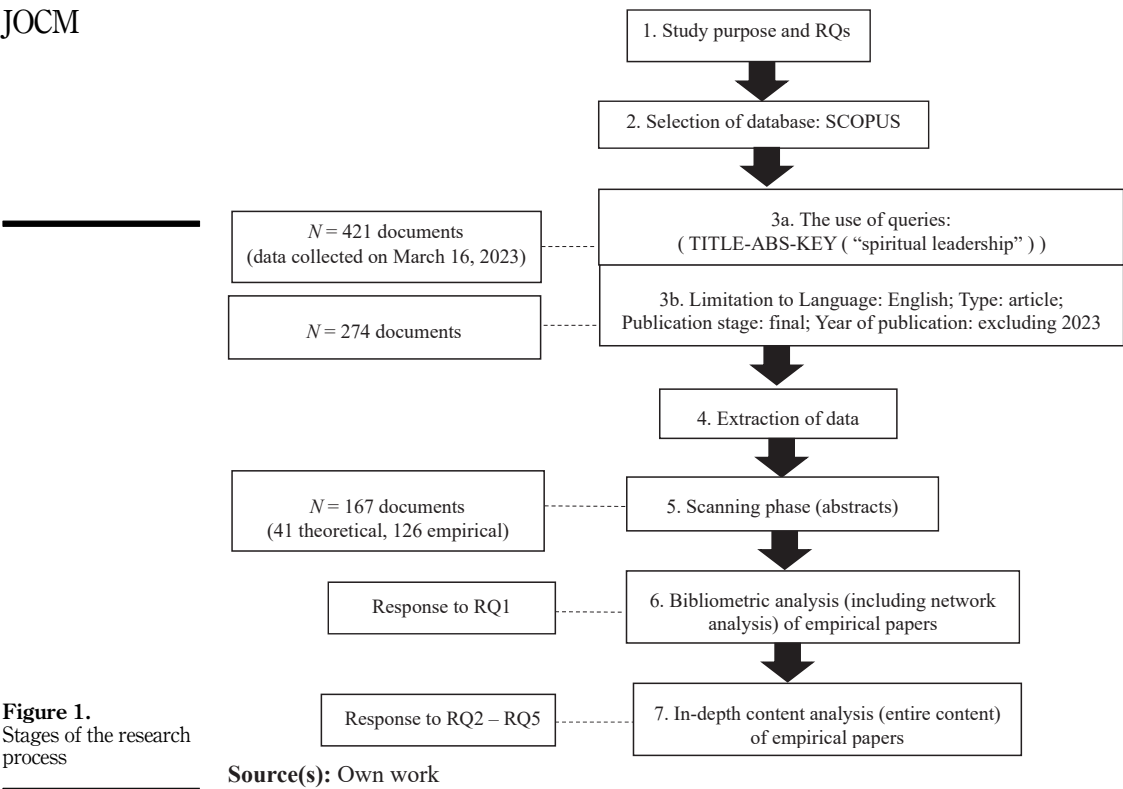
2.1 Sample and data collection

The systematic literature review process comprises a set of consecutive phases that are closely related to each other ([Denyer and Tranfield, 2009](#); [Xiao and Watson, 2019](#)) (Figure 1). First, the authors formulated RQs and defined the purpose of the study.

The second stage was using the Scopus database as a source of valuable publications in the social sciences and setting the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the initial research sample. Then, because this study focuses on leadership style treated as a measurable construct, the authors applied the search string "TITLE-ABS-KEY ("spiritual leadership")" and did not set a starting year to find the first article on the topic. Scopus found 421 documents which met this condition, starting with the year 1991. Next, the authors excluded works other than articles and those written in languages other than English; papers published in 2023 were also excluded in order to improve the reproducibility of the analysis. Since 2023 is ongoing, new documents can be indexed in the database every day. Therefore, searching in Scopus at different points in 2023 for documents published in the same year could yield different results. The authors decided not to limit the subject area to business and management because they easily found articles that were published in the field of engineering, for example, which seemed to be relevant. In the last stage of data collection, the 274 articles which remained after applying the exclusion criteria were exported in the form of a csv file.

2.2 Data analysis

Next, the authors transformed the csv file into xls format, independently scanned the titles and abstracts, compared their results and agreed on the final set of publications. They focused on the construct of SL and excluded papers that were devoted to more general issues of spirituality (e.g. related to religion). After the scanning phase, the authors obtained a set of 167 articles about SL. At this phase, the types of articles could be determined (theoretical/conceptual/



literature review vs empirical). The authors identified 41 theoretical papers and 126 empirical ones and in further stages analyzed the empirical ones.

The following step was to use the most popular bibliometric indexes (i.e. number of publications and number of citations used in bibliometric analyses ([Khan et al., 2020](#))) to prepare the general characteristics of the final sample of articles. To answer [RQ1](#), the authors applied keyword network analysis using the software program VOSViewer. This program allows researchers to identify the main research topic addressed by previous studies and to determine less explored topics, which open up avenues for future research ([Perianes-Rodriguez et al., 2016](#)). In the sample of empirical works, VOSViewer returned a total of 362 keywords. The authors purified the list of keywords (e.g. unified the American and British names of variables) with the use of VOSViewer’s thesaurus file. Then, they set the minimum number of occurrences of keywords to five, as recommended by [van Eck and Waltman \(2014\)](#). These conditions were met by 12 keywords.

Then, the entire texts of the 126 empirical articles were subjected to in-depth qualitative manual analysis in order to answer [RQ2–RQ5](#), that is, to determine the research approaches (quantitative/qualitative and unilevel/multilevel), the variables (antecedents and outcomes of SL and the mechanisms and conditional factors), and the theories used in the reports to explain the phenomena in question. The authors also searched for research directions recommended by previous researchers. They worked independently and systematically, collecting their results in an extended xls database. Finally, they compared their results and agreed on common conclusions. At the end, to enrich the discussion of the findings as well as

to propose additional future research avenues, the authors also conducted in-depth content analysis on the theoretical papers.

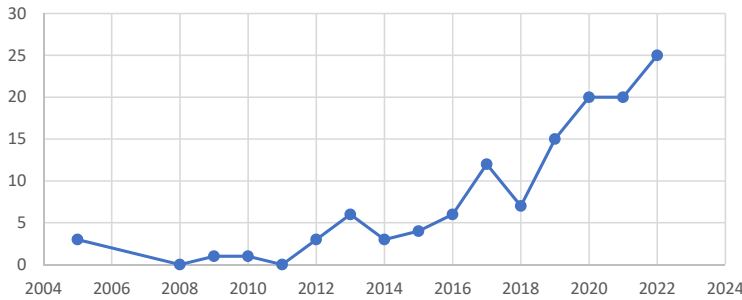
3. Results

3.1 Basic characteristics of the research sample

3.1.1 Research productivity-related information. The first empirical work was published in 2005 (Figure 2) in the journal *Leadership Quarterly* and was authored by Fry, Vitucci, and Cedillo. This paper has been cited 339 times so far, which was the most citations among empirical papers. Fry is also the author of the most cited theoretical work in the sample (publication year: 2003, 1,014 citations).

The most productive journal in terms of the number of published empirical papers was *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion* (Table 1). However, the most productive in terms of citations received per paper was *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, which published only 1 paper cited 208 times.

Overall, the empirical studies entailed 21 countries across the globe. The empirical research was most often conducted in Indonesia (n = 27), followed by China (n = 20), Turkey (n = 9), South Korea (n = 8), Pakistan (n = 7), Iran (n = 6) and India (n = 5). Four studies each were conducted in Malaysia, Taiwan, the USA and Vietnam. Three empirical studies involved



Source(s): Own work

Figure 2.
Number of empirical
papers which tested the
relationship of spiritual
leadership, by year of
publication

Journal title	Number of empirical papers (out of 126)	Number of citations received	Number of citations per paper
<i>Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion</i>	10	326	32.60
<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	7	79	11.29
<i>Leadership and Organization Development Journal</i>	6	59	9.83
<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	4	219	54.75
<i>Leadership Quarterly</i>	4	594	148.50
<i>Management Science Letters</i>	4	37	9.25
<i>Advanced Science Letters</i>	3	3	1.00
<i>International Business Management</i>	3	10	3.33
<i>International Journal of Law and Management</i>	3	50	16.67
<i>Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business</i>	3	11	3.67

Source(s): Own work

Table 1.
Ten most productive
journals in terms of the
number of
empirical works

Thailand. Two each were conducted in Belgium, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. There was one empirical paper each in the contexts of Australia, Cameroon, Cyprus, New Zealand and Sweden. It is evident that a higher number of non-Muslim countries contributed to the SL research than Muslim countries, but the numbers of papers from the former were lower. Regarding evidence in relation to a specific industry, most of the studies were conducted in educational settings (n = 22), followed by manufacturing and service (n = 15 each), health (n = 13), finance (n = 10), healthcare and Hi-tech (n = 9 in both cases) industries.

3.1.2 The most popular research topics, approaches and theories applied in prior empirical studies. The procedure for the keyword analysis described in the methodological section helped the authors answer RQ1 by identifying three main thematic clusters, which are visible in Figure 3. The first one (red) covers the papers which focus on the associations between SL and workplace spirituality, employee well-being and engagement. The second one (green) includes empirical studies which explored employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment, OCB and performance. Finally, the articles included in the third cluster (blue) addressed the issues of employee self-determination, psychological capital and innovative behaviors. The least used keywords (one each) included counterproductive work behaviors, work alienation, social innovation and firm value.

When it comes to RQ2, 106 out of 126 empirical papers used a quantitative research approach, 15 qualitative and 5 multimethod. The most popular method of collecting data – identified manually – was survey (used a total of 103 times, including four papers which used a multimethod research approach). The second most popular was interview (a total of seven times (including one multimethod paper). A multilevel research approach was used in three studies.

As far as RQ3 is concerned, 54 out of 126 empirical studies used theories to explain how SL acts. The theories which were used more than once in the sample – identified through the in-depth content analysis – were the self-determination theory (n = 15), the conservation of resources theory (n = 8), the social exchange theory (n = 5), the job-demand resource theory (n = 4), the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (n = 3), the social identity theory (n = 3), the social cognitive theory (n = 2), the path-goal theory (n = 2) and the social information processing theory (n = 2). Keywords related to the first theory are also clearly visible in Figure 3.

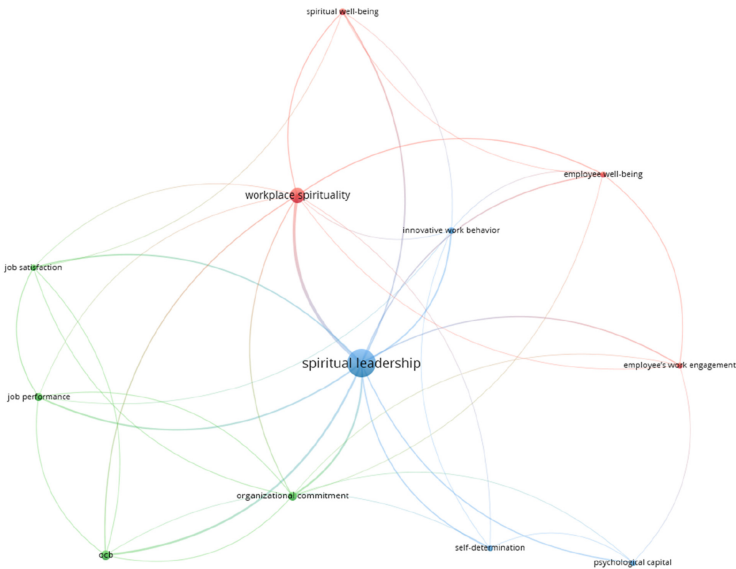


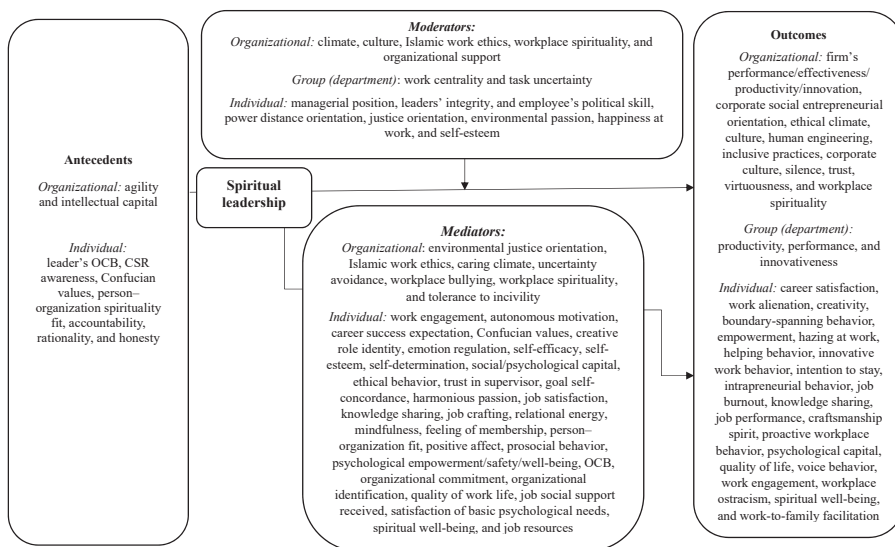
Figure 3.
Network map of
keywords

Source(s): Own work designed with the use of VOSViewer software

3.2 A complex research model derived from the analyzed empirical articles

3.2.1 Mechanism of the “spiritual leadership–outcome” relationship. To answer RQ4, the authors created a complex research model (covering the antecedents and outcomes of SL, as well as the mediators/moderators) based on the evidence from prior research. This model is shown in Figure 4. Out of 126 empirical papers, only 78 focused on the mechanism of the SL–outcome relationship. Due to the limited length of this paper, only examples of the identified relationships are elaborated below.

Regarding intervening variables, previous studies focused mostly on spiritual well-being ($n = 11$), workplace spirituality ($n = 8$), organizational commitment ($n = 6$) and followers’ psychological capital ($n = 5$). The review of the extant literature revealed that workplace spirituality mediates the positive relationship between SL and corporate social entrepreneurial orientation (Luu, 2022), customer-oriented boundary-spanning behavior (Farmanesh *et al.*, 2021), organizational commitment (Sapta *et al.*, 2021), innovative work behavior (Alfarajat and Emeagwali, 2021), subjective well-being (Zou *et al.*, 2020) and environmental passion and intrinsic motivation (Indrajaya, 2017). In the higher education context of Indonesia, organizational commitment mediated the relationship between SL and OCB (Djaelani *et al.*, 2020), but not the one between SL and employee engagement (Maryati and Astuti, 2022). Affective commitment significantly mediated the relationship between SL and happiness at work in India (Srivastava *et al.*, 2022), but not the one between SL and employee well-being in Italy (Chang and Arisanti, 2022). Past studies confirmed that spiritual well-being significantly mediated the relationship between SL and employee innovative behavior (Alfarajat and Emeagwali, 2021), OCB (Madison and Kellermanns, 2013) and engagement (Wu and Lee, 2020), but partially mediated the one between SL and job satisfaction (Indrajaya, 2017). Moreover, spiritual leaders did not indirectly affect employees’ intention to leave through spiritual well-being (Yusof *et al.*, 2016). Spiritual leaders indirectly significantly influenced alienative commitment – which measures the extent to which employees feel a lack of alternatives and of control over environmental pressure and work



Source(s): Own work

Figure 4.
Complex research
framework derived
from previous research

activities (Ali *et al.*, 2022a) – and employee engagement (Wu and Lee, 2020) through social and psychological capital, respectively.

It has been found that organization-level intervening variables such as environmental justice orientation (Anser *et al.*, 2021), Islamic work ethics (Supriyanto and Ekowati, 2020a), organizational identification (Chen *et al.*, 2019), perceived caring climate (Ali *et al.*, 2022b) and work engagement (Chang and Arisanti, 2022) significantly mediated the relationship between SL and OCB towards the environment, Islamic OCB, helping behavior, hazing behavior – which refers to unofficial, temporary practices of initiating and socializing newcomers into a working group by engaging in degrading behaviors towards them (Mawritz *et al.*, 2022) – and employee well-being, respectively. In the context of China, organizational identification and psychological safety (Chen *et al.*, 2019), as well as uncertainty avoidance and creative role identity (Yang *et al.*, 2021), were concluded to be sequential mediators on the relationship of SL with employee proactive behaviors and innovative behavior, respectively. Moreover, Sholikhah *et al.* (2019) claimed a partial mediating impact of organization-based self-esteem on the “SL–OCB” relationship in Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. Similarly, tolerance of incivility partially mediated the relationship between SL and workplace bullying in the hospitality sector in Turkey (Ghaedi *et al.*, 2021).

Individual-level variables, such as calling (Wang *et al.*, 2021), mindfulness (Mohammed *et al.*, 2022), basic need satisfaction (Yang *et al.*, 2020), psychological empowerment (Usman *et al.*, 2021), person–organization fit (Farmanesh *et al.*, 2021), perceived social support (Ali *et al.*, 2020b), psychological capital (Wu and Lee, 2020), intrinsic motivation (Afsar *et al.*, 2016) and quality of work life (Pio, 2022) significantly mediated the relationship between SL and harmonious passion, human engineering, career satisfaction, intrapreneurial behavior, customer-oriented boundary-spanning behavior, workplace ostracism, engagement, pro-environmental behavior and employee performance, respectively.

In the context of China and Indonesia, it has been proven that the “SL–innovative behavior” relationship was significantly mediated by autonomous motivation, employee engagement, job crafting and knowledge sharing (Arifin *et al.*, 2022; Supriyanto and Ekowati, 2020b; Yang *et al.*, 2021; Zhang and Yang, 2021). Quality of work life, ethical behavior and organizational commitment in Indonesia (Djaelani *et al.*, 2020; Pio and Lengkong, 2020), and employee environmental justice orientation and meaningful climate in China (Anser *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2019a), significantly mediated the relationship between SL and OCB. On the other hand, OCB and job satisfaction significantly mediated the “SL–employee performance” relationship in the banking sector of Indonesia (Supriyanto *et al.*, 2020). In addition, Yang *et al.* (2019a, b, c) reported the full mediating impact of career success expectation on the “SL–employee voice behavior” relationship. Along with this, studies also reported a partial mediating effect of autonomous motivation, satisfaction of basic psychological needs and individual Confucian values on relationship between SL and craftsmanship spirit (Zhu *et al.*, 2022), work-unit productivity, OCB (Hunsaker, 2016) and work engagement (Chen *et al.*, 2022). Chen *et al.* (2012) concluded that there was an indirect impact of SL on productivity through self-efficacy and self-esteem among employees in Taiwan and China.

3.2.2 Contextual factors: spiritual leadership and outcomes. Only 22 studies investigated the moderating effect of different variables on the relationship between SL and organizational and individual outcomes. Most of them assessed the conditional impact of power distance ($n = 3$). Each of the two studies provided empirical evidence about the contingent role of organizational support, political skills, justice orientation, corporate culture and organizational climate. Happiness at work, work centrality, environmental passion, Islamic work ethics, self-esteem, task uncertainty, workplace spirituality, managerial position and leader integrity were only examined in one study each.

In the context of Indonesia, empirical findings supported the significant moderating impact of workplace spirituality on the “SL–employee job satisfaction” relationship (Sholikhah *et al.*, 2019). Work centrality in a unit (Usman *et al.*, 2021) and corporate culture (Chen and Li, 2013) significantly moderated the relationship between SL and employees’ intrapreneurial behavior and extra-role/in-role performance, respectively. It was also found that the interaction term for SL and justice orientation significantly influenced workplace ostracism (Ali *et al.*, 2020b) and workplace hazing (Ali *et al.*, 2022b). Moreover, Zhu *et al.* (2022) provided empirical evidence about the amplifying impact of SL on employees’ autonomous motivation in the presence of a higher level of ethical climate.

There is inconsistent empirical evidence about the moderating role of political skills on the relationship between SL and outcomes. For example, Ali *et al.* (2022a, b, c) concluded that there is a positive conditional impact on the “SL–social capital” relationship, but Supriyanto and Ekowati (2020a, b) reported a nonsignificant contingent role of political skills on the relationship between SL and Islamic OCB in Indonesia. Three studies offered strong evidence of the conditional impact of power distance orientation on the relationship between SL and autonomous motivation (Zhu *et al.*, 2022), basic need satisfaction (Yang *et al.*, 2020) and workplace spirituality (Zou *et al.*, 2020).

3.3 Directions for future research recommended by previous researchers

A total of 85 empirical research papers provided future research directions, which were used to answer RQ5. Only one study suggested considering personality traits as a control variable in future research (Zakkariya and Aboobaker, 2021). Three studies recommended conducting comparative research such as family vs nonfamily businesses (Dede and Ayranci, 2014), nonreligion vs religion-based spirituality (Sapta *et al.*, 2021), servant vs SL and comparisons across different cultures and industries (Ali *et al.*, 2022b). The authors divided the recommendation into those related to outcomes, mechanisms, moderators and research design (Table 2).

4. Discussion

4.1 Main findings and their theoretical contributions

This study – by combining the strengths of bibliometric methods and in-depth content analysis – provided evidence on the most popular research topics (RQ1), research approaches (RQ2), theories (RQ3) and variables (RQ4) present in SL research. It also revealed new perspectives within the field (RQ5), thus contributing to further evolution of the SL theory.

The thematic clusters obtained from the keyword network analysis in order to answer RQ1 differ from those created by Samul (2019), who focused on the interplay between SL and workplace sustainability. That author considered organizational commitment to be an emerging theme, whereas the current study shows that it is one of the most explored topics in research on SL. In turn, Vedula and Agrawal (2023) used bibliographic coupling to distinguish the following thematic clusters: spiritual needs at work, defining workplace spirituality, SL’s traits, values and practices, and positive organizational effects of the interaction of SL and workplace spirituality (such as organizational performance or OCB). The current study enriches their findings by showing the more detailed employee-related outcomes of SL. It also demonstrates that workplace spirituality shaped by a spiritual leader is mostly linked with employee well-being (as depicted in Figure 3).

This study is the first to report – in response to RQ4 – such a complex research model based on previous 126 empirical studies. For example, Oh and Wang (2020), who analyzed 46 quantitative papers, presented in their final model only 8 moderators and 8 mediators. The current study supports their findings in terms of the scarcity of research on the antecedents of

Area	What is needed
Outcomes	Anxiety, work-life satisfaction, depression, dark-side employee behaviors (Haque <i>et al.</i> , 2022), knowledge-related outcomes (individual sharing, hiding, sabotage) (Alfarajat and Emeagwali, 2021), prohibitive voice behaviors (Zakkariya and Aboobaker, 2021), psychological contract, workaholic (Sholikhah <i>et al.</i> , 2019), work engagement (Sheikh <i>et al.</i> , 2019)
Mediators	psychological protection (Chen <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Haque <i>et al.</i> , 2022), obsessive passion (Anser <i>et al.</i> , 2021), organizational support (Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2019b), social capital (Ali <i>et al.</i> , 2020a; Jiao and Lee, 2021), personal learning (Ahmad <i>et al.</i> , 2021), meaningful work (Ali <i>et al.</i> , 2020b), psychological need satisfaction (Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2022), collective promotion focused (Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2019a), collective value fit (Srouji <i>et al.</i> , 2019), environmental passion, intrinsic motivation (Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2021)
Moderators	self-esteem and instrumental thought, (Chen <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Haque <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Usman <i>et al.</i> , 2021), cultural values (collectivism, traditionality, power distance) (Maryati and Astuti, 2022; Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Zhang and Yang, 2021), the person-environment fit perspective, demographic characteristics (Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2022), environmental awareness (Sapta <i>et al.</i> , 2021), work centrality (Usman <i>et al.</i> , 2021), organizational atmosphere (Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2020), followers' individual differences (Jiao and Lee, 2021), job autonomy, workplace exclusion (Wang <i>et al.</i> , 2021), harmonious work passion, justice orientation (Ali <i>et al.</i> , 2020b), organizational structure (Zou <i>et al.</i> , 2020), job demands (Wu and Lee, 2020), leader narcissism, motivation to lead, organizational support (Anser <i>et al.</i> , 2021), controlled and commitment-focused HR practices, team structure (Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2019a), Confucian values (Nguyen <i>et al.</i> , 2018), religiosity, emotional intelligence (Dede and Ayranci, 2014)
Research design	Longitudinal design (Luu, 2022; Zhang and Yang, 2021; Zhao <i>et al.</i> , 2022), experimental design (Ali <i>et al.</i> , 2020b; Anser <i>et al.</i> , 2021), the four-wave longitudinal design (Jiao and Lee, 2021), mixed methods (Farmanesh <i>et al.</i> , 2021), cross-cultural studies (Hunsaker, 2021), multi-criteria decision-making methods (Dinçer <i>et al.</i> , 2021), a team or organizational unit of analysis (Siswanto <i>et al.</i> , 2022), multi-group, multidivisional analyses, multi-source or secondary data sources, random sampling techniques (Alfarajat and Emeagwali, 2021), meta-analysis (Chen and Li, 2013), qualitative analysis (Srivastava <i>et al.</i> , 2022), objective measurement of performance (Fry <i>et al.</i> , 2005)
Table 2. Research recommendations	Source(s): Own work

SL. This research model clearly shows what we know about relationships between SL and numerous phenomena, whereas Göçen and Şen (2021) in their literature review focused solely on the linkage between SL and OCB. Hence, this study should discourage future researchers from examining the same relationships and instead encourage them to make a step forward to increase our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of this particular leadership style.

Another contribution of this study to theory lies in the presentation of the numerous future research directions (RQ5) postulated in the papers it analyzes (Table 2). However, the authors of this study would like to propose additional research avenues. For example, this study shows some inconsistencies in the current understanding of SL's effects and underlying mechanisms. This finding can lead to the refinement and development of theories in research on SL. It would be worth examining the mediating role of affective commitment between SL and employee positive mental states in contexts other than India (where the mediation was supported) (Srivastava *et al.*, 2022) and Italy (where the mediation was not supported) (Chang and Arisanti, 2022). At this point it is worth emphasizing that most of the analyzed research was conducted in developing Eastern countries and used the self-determination theory, as shown in response to RQ2. Leadership is highly context-dependent and various theories might be more applicable in different situations. Some theories might better explain employee behavior in specific cultures, offering more contextually relevant insights. While the self-

determination theory is a valuable framework for understanding employee motivation and behavior in research on SL, the authors would like to encourage researchers to use a variety of theories in future studies. This would allow researchers to explore SL from multiple angles, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics involved.

Furthermore, only a few studies examined the antecedents of SL. The concept of [Makkar and Singh \(2020\)](#), which was based on experts' opinions, can guide future researchers when selecting variables to analyze for their role in stimulating SL. It would be worth examining the role of a leader's connectedness, self-less action, or meaningfulness in developing SL. A leader's social/family environment can also influence the occurrence of SL ([Low and Ayoko, 2020](#)). It should also be noted that [Makkar and Singh \(2020\)](#) proposed a group-level outcome in the form of co-worker support, which was not identified in the research sample. Future research could also determine the impact of SL on society. Finally, little effort was made in the sample of articles to use a multilevel research approach, as demonstrated in response to [RQ2](#). By assigning previously examined variables to the subsequent levels in [Figure 3](#), this study helps future researchers design multilevel research models. Furthermore, in the analyzed articles, no effort was made to comprehensively examine the joint impact of SL on a set of outcomes operating at different levels to fill the micro-macro gap ([Molina-Azorín et al., 2019](#)). There was also a lack of papers which would examine this leadership style in Central or Eastern Europe. Therefore, future research is encouraged to fill these gaps.

Leader-level outcomes of SL are also missing in the sample of articles. Therefore, further research is needed to identify them because practicing SL may lead to the leader's personal growth ([Low and Ayoko, 2020](#)). Furthermore, further research on the reverse impact of, for example, organizational variables on the development of SL is needed. Most studies on leadership overlook the reverse causality between leadership style and performance, yet it can also be hypothesized that companies with high performance are better able to invest in the development of effective practices ([Boselie et al., 2005](#)). In the case of the SL style, this relationship may be even more visible, as the results of spiritual leaders' actions will justify further investments in the development of such leadership. There can also be different levels of SL (the continuum from nonspiritual to fully SL) ([Rocha and Pinheiro, 2021](#)). An examination of the changes in these levels, when introducing developmental activities and considering other factors is needed to fully understand how this leadership style develops in practice.

4.2 Practical implications

Firstly, this study has a conceptual relevance for practice ([Hamet and Maurer, 2017](#)), influencing how practitioners understand the state of the art of research on SL, including its antecedents, consequences and underlying mechanisms. A widely discussed problem with academic research is that it does not reach out to practitioners ([Hamet and Maurer, 2017](#)). The synthesis provided by this study has the potential to be better suited to managers' requirements than a large body of individual research papers and it can be treated as a reference tool ([Hoang et al., 2022](#)).

Secondly, this study has also legitimizing and instrumental value for business practice ([Hamet and Maurer, 2017](#)). Incorporating insights from this literature review into practical strategies and initiatives can help organizations foster a more holistic and meaningful approach to leadership, leading to numerous positive outcomes, as shown in this study. Organizations that would like to achieve the outcomes presented herein can incorporate SL criteria into their recruitment and selection processes (e.g. leader's corporate social responsibility (CSR) awareness, one of the antecedents of SL). They also can use insights from the literature review to design SL development programs and to develop or refine ethical guidelines and policies based on the ethical and moral principles inherent in SL. In the

external context, higher education is an important factor in changes in business practices. Therefore, it is helpful to include the results of this study into management courses.

4.3 Limitations and related future research directions

Although this review provides evidence-based insights after examining 126 empirical studies on SL and provides scholars with many new empirical research directions that were shown in the discussion section, it has some limitations. These can be addressed in future literature reviews. Firstly, the authors could have missed valuable studies written in languages other than English. Secondly, articles which are not indexed in Scopus or do not directly specify the keyword “spiritual leadership” were not included in the analysis. This study was focused on SL treated as an operationalized research construct, whereas future studies may focus on a leader’s general spirituality (Pawar, 2014). Finally, the immanent feature of literature reviews is that they synthesize the knowledge available at a given point in time. New articles are being published continually, which requires the updating of the current findings.

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