Unpacking Transformational Leadership: A Systematic Review of Conceptual, Methodological, and Contextual Trends (2019-2023)

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Abstract

Transformational leadership has proven to be effective leadership in driving positive organizational change and tackling complex challenges. Despite extensive research on transformational leadership, the majority focuses on business or school level, leaving a gap in higher education level. This research conducted a systematic literature review to explore methodological trends and conceptualizations of transformational leadership in higher education context. Scopus and Science Direct databases covering comprehensive and high-quality academic literature in education were used to identify relevant literature. The study period spanned from 2019 to 2023. Following PRISMA guidelines, the analysis of 44 selected studies showed dynamic distribution of publications over five years. Transformational leadership has gained increasing academic attention in global higher education, particularly across Asia. Investigations into this variable have employed diverse methodological approaches---qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods, with quantitative studies being the most prevalent. The conceptualization of transformational leadership in these studies largely builds on Bass's (1985) multidimensional model and Yukl's (2006) leadership theory. They highlight that transformational leadership involves inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation, focusing on stimulating and empowering subordinates to perform beyond expectations. This study may provide a valuable reference framework for researchers examining transformational leadership in educational contexts.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Systematic Literature Review, Methodological Trends, Contextual Trends, Conceptualization

Introduction

Globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) necessitate the development of Education 4.0 worldwide. Successful leadership that is impactful in advancing, leading, and

implementing change is critically needed (DeRue & Myers, 2014). Transformational leadership is regarded as an effective leadership style that inspires positive organizational change, addresses complex challenges, and facilitates subordinates' adaptation to change (Yacon & Cayaban, 2023). Transformational leaders shape subordinates' values and beliefs, strengthening their ability to embrace change (Masry & Stavissky, 2021). They guide followers toward change-oriented goals and motivate them to adopt strategies that enable adaptive performance beyond expectations (Lei et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020).

Over the past years, numerous studies on transformational leadership have rigorously investigated its conceptualization, research findings, observable patterns, practice levels, determinants, and impacts, yielding critical insights for further investigation (Christie et al., 2019; Hussein & Yesiltas, 2020). However, scholarly conceptualizations of transformational leadership have been extensively developed in business contexts, and their application in education remains understudied (Li, 2022; Sun et al., 2017; Cao et al., 2021; Liu, 2018). This gap highlights the need for a literature review on transformational leadership to inform the adaptation to ongoing educational transformations and to identify new research trajectories. Thus, this study conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) on transformational leadership to evaluate its research contexts and methodological patterns and to summarize the conceptual definitions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the higher education context. This review primarily addresses two fundamental questions:

i) What are the methodological and contextual trends in the existing research on transformational leadership?

ii) What is the conceptualization of transformational Leadership in the existing literature？

Methodology

SLR is a type of review that employs comprehensive, transparent, and rigorous approaches to systematically summarize the existing literature on a given topic, thereby answering specific research questions (Yang et al., 2020). SLR includes a detailed review plan and search strategies to comprehensively capture all potentially relevant studies beyond researchers' subject areas in a transparent and replicable manner (Williams Jr. et al., 2020). This enables researchers to add the growing number of relevant studies efficiently and provides a comprehensive overview of the evidence related to the research (Mallett et al., 2012). By systematically examining extensive literature, researchers can gain a deeper understanding, comprehensively and objectively assess, and accurately record the current state of knowledge in a given field. On the contrary, the literature searches in traditional reviews tend to be cursory. It takes no rigorous strategies to select resources representing the field (Azarian et al., 2018). Researchers make decisions according to their knowledge or adjustments. Thus, the review is not comprehensive, and the selection process tends to be subjective and biased, which may lead to subjective literature assessment and recording (Van Dinter et al., 2021).

This research adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) as a guideline to ensure a transparent, complete, and accurate review (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). According to this guideline, three main phases are involved: identification, screening, and eligibility, as shown in Figure 1.

Stage One: Identification

This phase systematically captures the broadest set of available studies from related databases on a particular topic to ensure a comprehensive review (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). Two widely used databases, Science Direct and Scopus were selected. These two databases encompass a broader range of high-quality, well-referenced, and peer-reviewed academic literature in education, as compared to the Web of Science (Baas et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in terms of bibliographic data, they also provide more comprehensive data as compared to Google Scholar (Zupic & Cater, 2015).

The researcher set the optional default function in the search engine to include article titles, abstracts, and keywords from ScienceDirect and Scopus. The phrases "transformational leadership' AND college OR 'higher education' OR university" were then input as the keywords to retrieve the relevant literature. In total, 875 papers were retrieved for screening from the two databases, comprising 819 from Scopus and 56 from Science Direct (Figure 1).
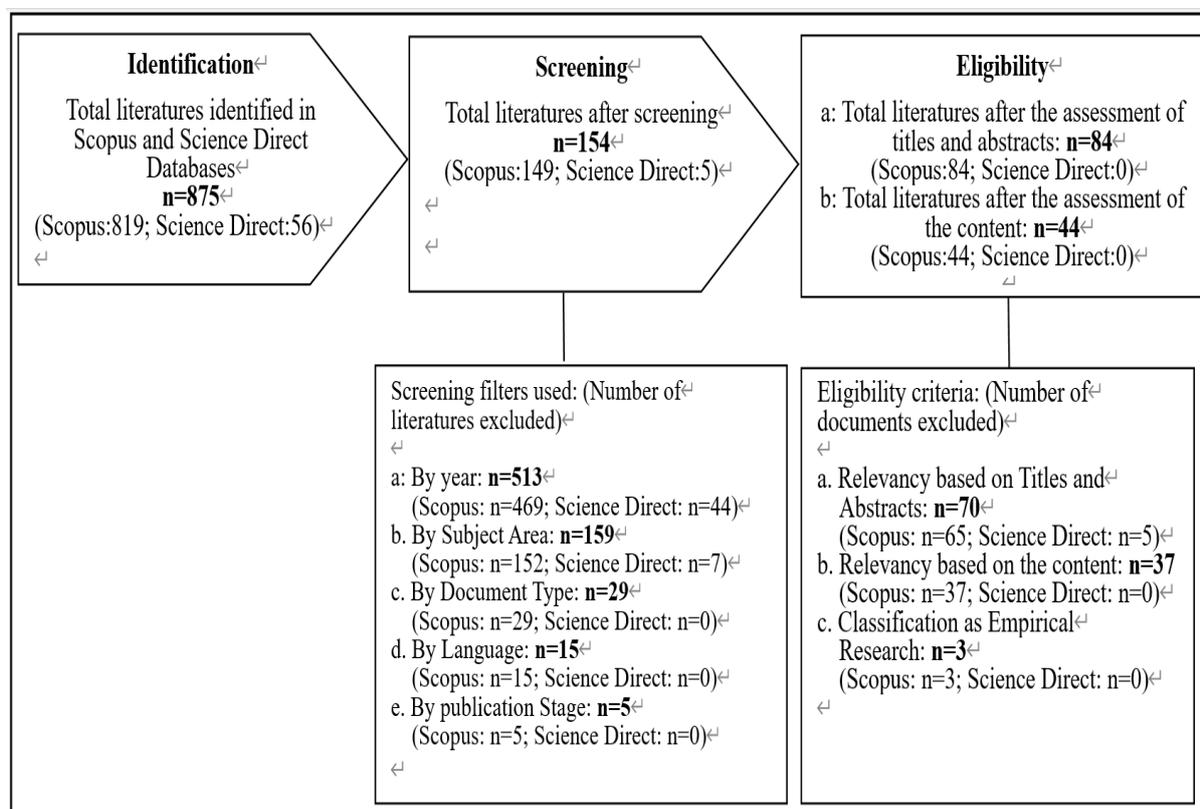

Identification
Total literatures identified in Scopus and Science Direct Databases
n=875
(Scopus:819; Science Direct:56)

Screening
Total literatures after screening
n=154
(Scopus:149; Science Direct:5)

Eligibility
a: Total literatures after the assessment of titles and abstracts: **n=84**
(Scopus:84; Science Direct:0)
b: Total literatures after the assessment of the content: **n=44**
(Scopus:44; Science Direct:0)

Screening filters used: (Number of literatures excluded)

a: By year: **n=513**
(Scopus: n=469; Science Direct: n=44)
b. By Subject Area: **n=159**
(Scopus: n=152; Science Direct: n=7)
c. By Document Type: **n=29**
(Scopus: n=29; Science Direct: n=0)
d. By Language: **n=15**
(Scopus: n=15; Science Direct: n=0)
e. By publication Stage: **n=5**
(Scopus: n=5; Science Direct: n=0)

Eligibility criteria: (Number of documents excluded)

a. Relevancy based on Titles and Abstracts: **n=70**
(Scopus: n=65; Science Direct: n=5)
b. Relevancy based on the content: **n=37**
(Scopus: n=37; Science Direct: n=0)
c. Classification as Empirical Research: **n=3**
(Scopus: n=3; Science Direct: n=0)

Figure 1: *Selection Process of the Studies for Analysis*

Stage Two: Screening

The second phase involves screening the identified articles by year, subject area, document type, language, and publication stage, respectively, to determine whether each article meets the inclusion criteria and should, therefore, be included in the review (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). To showcase the new trends in academic research on transformational leadership in higher education, considering the researcher's time and ability, the scope of the literature review was initially narrowed down to five years, from 2019 to 2023. Thus, 362 papers were obtained, including 350 from Scopus and 12 from Science Direct. The researcher then narrowed the subject areas to social science, and 203 papers remained, comprising 198 from Scopus and five from ScienceDirect. Following this, the document type was limited to articles

only, excluding conference papers, conference reviews, books, book chapters, reviews, editorials, letters, and other types; a total of 174 articles remained, comprising 169 from Scopus and five from ScienceDirect. By confining the language of the articles to English, 15 articles were excluded from Scopus, resulting in a total of 159 articles, comprising 154 from Scopus and four from ScienceDirect. Eventually, after excluding articles still in press, 154 articles were identified as eligible, comprising 149 from Scopus and five from ScienceDirect (Figure 1).

Stage Three: Eligibility

Eligibility is the third phase. By reading titles and abstracts as well as thoroughly contents review, it helps determine and include all the eligible articles based on the pre-specified eligibility criteria for the final analysis (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2020). In this phase, the titles and abstracts were first assessed to remove the irrelevant articles. The eligibility criteria include: i) articles should be directly related to transformational leadership in the context of higher education; ii) the transformational leadership should focus on university/college leaders' leadership instead of teachers' leadership; iii) samples in the studies should be limited to only teachers of higher education; iv) articles should be empirical studies. For example, the article by Pachler et al. (2019) focused on teachers' transformational leadership rather than that of school leaders' leadership, and the sample was students, which was against the inclusion criteria and thus excluded. After initial screening, out of 154 articles, only 85 were identified as relevant, with 84 from Scopus and one from Science Direct. Note that the only article remained from Science Direct duplicated with the one in Scopus; hence, it was removed. In this case, there were just 84 articles instead of 85 for the next assessment. The researchers then downloaded all the 84 articles and reviewed the content thoroughly. Eventually, by excluding 37 irrelevant articles and three non-empirical articles by the assessment of the content, 44 articles remained based on the above inclusion criteria for the final analysis (Figure 1).

Results

As mentioned above, only one article in Science Direct remained after the final assessment, however, it was a duplicate of an article found in Scopus and was therefore removed. Thus, the discussion about the distribution excluded the data from Science Direct but only focused on Scopus. The 44 selected publications in Scopus underwent systematic classification and evaluation according to publication year, research methodology, and study location.

As shown in Figure 2, from 2019 to 2023, 12 articles were published in 2019, followed by a decline to only five in 2020. The number rose to nine in 2021 but dropped again to four in 2022. In 2023, the number of articles increased significantly, reaching 14 articles. The trend illustrated in the figure shows that the number of published articles fluctuated over the five-year period. Overall, the annual output remained relatively low in each year, especially in 2020 and 2022. This suggests that research on transformational leadership in the context of higher education is still at an early stage (Cao et al., 2021). Thus, more research is needed to provide broader and deeper insights into transformational leadership in this area.
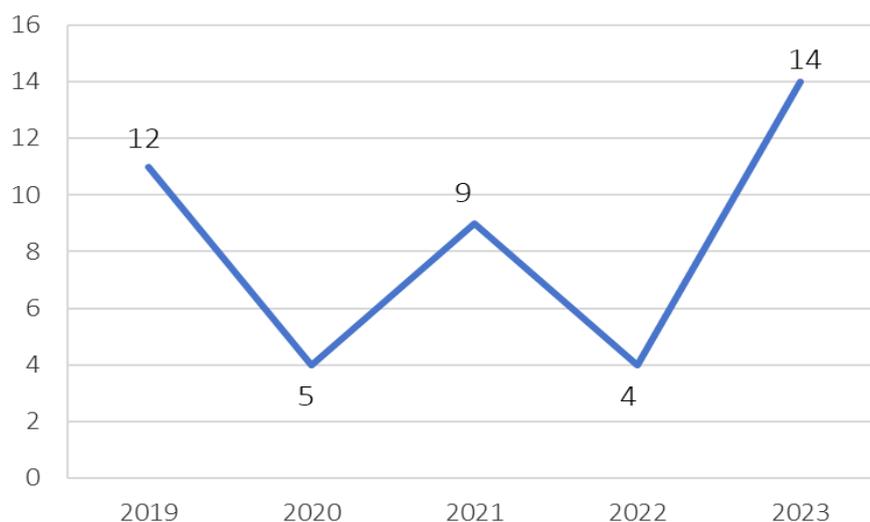
Figure 2: Distribution of Articles by Year of Publication

In terms of methodology, all empirical papers were categorized into qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. As depicted in Figure 3, out of 44 papers, only 2% adopted a mixed method (n=1), 11% (n=5) a qualitative method, and 87% (n=38) a quantitative method. Simply put, research on transformational leadership has predominantly relied on quantitative methods for data collection.
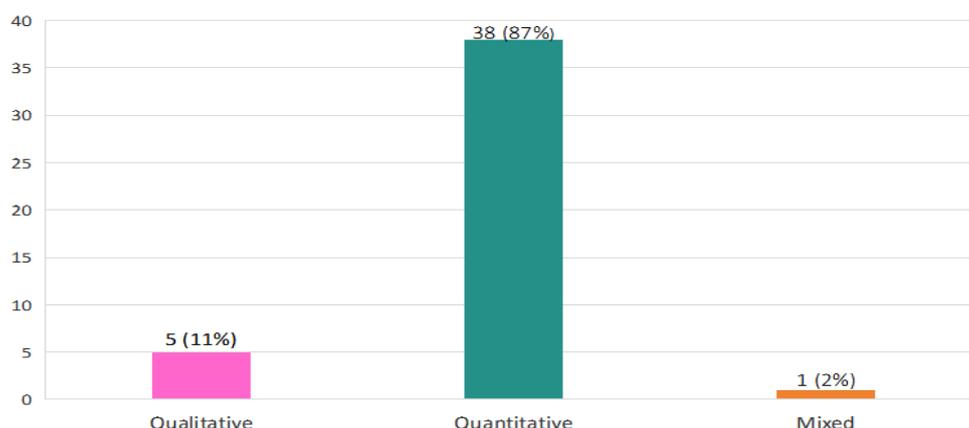

Figure 3: Distribution of Articles by Research Methods

Concerning the study location, as shown in Figure 4, out of the total 44 articles, nine were published in Indonesia. With the same number of five articles, respectively, China, Iraq and Malaysia shared the second-highest number of articles. America, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Iran each had two articles. Meanwhile, one article was from Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Tanzania, Philippines, Korea, Australia, and India respectively. As can be seen from the results, many studies on transformational leadership in higher education were found in Asian countries. To certain extent, researchers in Asian countries have acknowledged the importance of studying transformational leadership to tackle better the challenges brought about by various educational reforms in their respective nations.
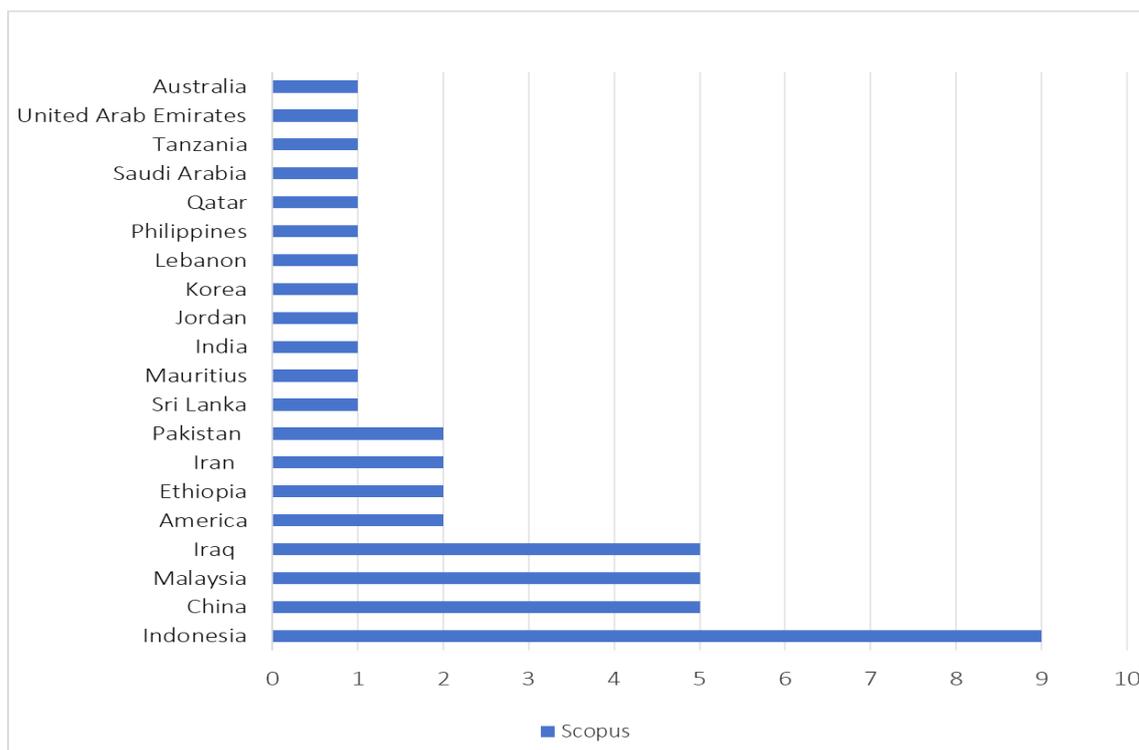
Figure 4: Distribution of Articles by Study Location

In short, the above discussions revealed that transformational leadership has attracted increasing academic attention in higher education worldwide, especially in Asian countries. Studies about this concept have been done using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, among which quantitative method plays a dominant role. This review thus offers valuable insights into recent developments and emerging trends in transformational leadership research and serves as a reference for further exploration on this concept.

Definition of Transformational Leadership

Over the past years, prior articles have delved into the conceptualization of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Leithwood et al., 1994; Worthy et al., 2020). For example, Burns (1978) defined it as a process in which leaders and followers help each other to a higher level of development. Bass (1985) refined transformational leadership as a leadership approach that seeks to stimulate and empower subordinates to perform beyond their expectations in support of organizational goals. Leithwood et al. (1994) presented transformational leadership in an educational context, highlighting the importance of inspiring and empowering the entire school community and stressing the development of a supportive school culture. Yukl (2006) conceptualized transformational leadership as a process whereby leaders elicit trust, admiration, and commitment from followers, ultimately inspiring them to exceed their anticipated initially performance levels. In China, Li and Shi (2008) proposed a model that integrates traditional Confucian values, reflecting the specific characteristics of Chinese organizational and educational settings.

However, research indicates that although transformational leadership has been widely studied, there is still no consensus on its exact definition, especially in educational settings, where clear definitions are lacking (Li, 2022; Sun et al., 2017; Cao et al., 2021; Liu, 2018). Thus, it is necessary to summarize the conceptual definitions in an educational context to

understand the concept better and identify the trends. This systematic review reveals a striking predominance of borrowed conceptualizations in transformational leadership research within educational contexts.

Of the 44 empirical studies examined, a solitary article by Dermawan and Handayani (2019) provided an original definition, characterizing it as "the process by which an individual was involved with someone else and create a relationship that increases the level of motivation and morality which is good for followers or the leader itself" (p.157). In stark contrast, the remaining studies overwhelmingly relied upon established frameworks, primarily those advanced by Bass (1985) and Yukl (2006). The Bass's (1985) conceptualization, adopted by scholars including El-Hage and Sidani (2023), Majeed and Jamshed (2023), and Xu et al. (2022), operationalizes transformational leadership through its four seminal components: inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Conversely, researchers such as Gautam (2023), Mohd Rasdi et al. (2023), and Hidayat et al. (2023) employed Yukl's (2006) relational perspective, which emphasizes the development of trust, admiration and allegiance between leaders and followers. Based on a literature review, this study summarizes four themes relevant to the definition of transformational leadership.

Firstly, transformational leaders play a crucial role as role models. It emphasized that leaders possess a natural charisma that effortlessly attracts and motivates their subordinates to imitate (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Previous literature highlights the ethical dimensions of this influence. For instance, Worthy et al. (2020) emphasize that transformational leaders lead by example, establishing high ethical standards for their followers. This form of ethical leadership cultivates a culture grounded in trust and integrity, which is crucial for fostering positive behaviors within the organization. Expanding on this notion, some literature has introduced the adaptive dimensions of influence. For instance, a study by Farrukh et al. (2019) indicated that transformational leaders exemplify adaptive and creative role models by demonstrating behaviors such as embracing new ideas, encouraging creativity, and responding effectively to change. As a result, subordinates are often inspired to learn from these leaders, drawn to their charismatic and motivational qualities. Ultimately, the impact of transformational leaders extends beyond Individual Influence, shaping an organizational culture that values ethical conduct, adaptability, and continuous improvement.

Secondly, transformational leaders are regarded as change agents. It emphasizes a transformational leader's capacity to deal with change (Sadeghi et al., 2012). In their interviews with 12 executives, Tichy and Devanna (1986) asserted that transformational leadership extends beyond mere charisma. They emphasized the need for organizations to have leaders willing to implement significant changes to remain competitive in a rapidly globalizing business environment. They outlined the essential characteristics of transformational leaders during organizational transformation: recognizing the need for change, formulating a future-oriented vision, and institutionalizing change. These characteristics are crucial for fostering significant organizational change. Further supporting this view, Waisy and Wei (2020) defined transformational leadership based on leaders' contributions to fostering subordinates' commitment to change. Collectively, these studies underscore the pivotal role that transformational leaders play in successfully implementing organizational change.

Thirdly, transformational leaders are highly effective in articulating visions with good communication while actively listening to the needs of their subordinates (Bass, 2008). They address concerns openly and ease resistance to change by providing essential information for direction and support. This communication skill is vital for guiding teams through transition periods (Bass, 2008). According to Bass and Avolio (1994), transformational leaders utilize two-way communication, which builds strong interpersonal relationships and fosters an environment of trust and respect. This enhances followers' commitment to both the leader and the organization. Aligning with this perspective, Asgari et al. (2020) highlighted that leaders who confidently convey their vision can significantly influence their subordinates' motivation and alignment with organizational goals. These studies demonstrate that effective communication is a cornerstone of transformational leadership in articulating organizational vision and providing direction essential for fostering trust and motivating teams that ultimately guiding organizations toward change and success (Bass, 2008).

The final theme emphasizes empowerment, highlighting that transformational leaders serve as empowering figures by embodying qualities such as visionary thinking, inspiration, supportiveness, facilitation, and individualized consideration. Specifically, transformational leaders grant their subordinates autonomy, resources, support, and the confidence to make decisions and act within their roles (Bass & Riggio, 2006). A considerable body of research supports the notion that transformational leaders empower their subordinates in the workplace. For instance, Cheong et al. (2016) examined the relationship between transformational leadership and employees' creative performance, revealing that such leaders foster a supportive and open environment conducive to innovation and independent thought. Similarly, Bakr and Alfayez (2021) found that transformational leaders enhance employee autonomy by reducing administrative burdens, streamlining organizational processes, and encouraging subordinates to make independent decisions regarding fulfilling their roles. Under transformational leadership, employees tend to feel more empowered, self-assured, and purposeful in their work (Bass & Ronald, 2006).

Conclusion

Drawing upon a corpus of 44 qualifying publications (2019-2023), this study analyses the methodological and contextual trends as well as the definitions of transformational leadership in recent years. Research findings demonstrate that transformational leadership has garnered growing scholarly interest within global higher education contexts, particularly across Asian contexts. Investigations into this variable have employed diverse methodological approaches---qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods, with quantitative studies being the most prevalent.

Extensive research on the definition of transformational leadership in this review highlights its broad and multidimensional nature. Bass's (1985) original "Four I's" model has become the most influential framework in transformational leadership research, forming the basis for many subsequent studies. Leithwood et al. (1998) significantly expanded upon this work by proposing an eight-dimensional model in an educational setting, thereby advancing our theoretical understanding of transformational leadership. While these models remain central to the field, other scholars have developed complementary perspectives. Together, these research efforts have deepened our understanding of transformational leadership, revealing both its complex nature and its valuable applications across different professional fields.

To conclude, this research systematically analyses 44 articles to illuminate the dynamic progression of transformational leadership studies in the context of higher education. It offers a comprehensive analysis of conceptual definitions, methodological approaches, and contextual applications of transformational leadership in higher education, uncovering the unique mechanisms and adaptability of the theory within university settings. The study also categorizes and evaluates the methodological orientations of existing research, highlighting the dominance of quantitative approaches, the relative scarcity of qualitative studies, and the inconsistent attention to contextual variables. These insights provide clear directions for future research in terms of design, focus, and theoretical integration. Moreover, the review reinforces the relevance of transformational leadership in the context of governance transformation in higher education, offering practical leadership insights for institutional leaders and policymakers. Overall, this study not only deepens the understanding of transformational leadership within the higher education sector but also provides valuable perspectives for its application in comparable contexts globally.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the studies in this review provide important insights, it also presents three key limitations stemming from its methodological approach: i) while the comprehensive search of Scopus and ScienceDirect ensured quality sources, the exclusion of other databases may have omitted relevant studies, potentially limiting the scope of our transformational leadership analysis; ii) the 2019-2023 timeframe, though providing recent data, excluded earlier research that could have offered valuable historical context and developmental insights; and iii) the focus on empirical studies may potentially overlooked valuable theoretical frameworks and conceptual analyses that might have provided complementary viewpoints on transformational leadership.

As for future research directions, the results of this study indicate that most explorations of transformational leadership have been focused on Asia. Therefore, future research should expand the scope of transformational leadership by exploring diverse analytical perspectives across different cultures. Meanwhile, while quantitative approaches dominate current research on transformational leadership, the field would benefit significantly from complementary qualitative and mixed-methods studies to uncover the complex, contextualized dimensions of transformational leadership. Furthermore, while most research highlights the positive effects of transformational leadership, there is a gap in exploring its potential negative consequences. Taken together, systematic investigation of these underexplored areas will enable researchers to develop a more nuanced conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of transformational leadership in an educational context.

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