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Mapping Destructive Leadership Research: Intellectual Foundations, Thematic Evolution, and Global Trends (1966 to 2025)

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Abstract: The Scopus-based core corpus consists of 704 English-language journal articles from 1966 to 2025, and this study analyzes the intellectual foundations, thematic evolution, and international collaboration structure of this research field. Since the records were retrieved on 22 October 2025, the 2025 data are analyzed as partial-year data rather than as a complete year. Bibliometric procedures included bibliographic description, thematic mapping, thematic evolution, document co-citation, author keyword co-occurrence, and country co-authorship networks, using association-strength normalization and performed with Biblioshiny and VOSviewer. A search-completeness test with the expanded query ("abusive supervision" and "despotic leadership") yielded 876 records, of which 695 matched the core corpus, and 181 were retained as a sensitivity set. The results reveal that publications were sparse for several decades, but after 2018 there was a significant rise in publications. Venue influence is concentrated in a small interdisciplinary core, with *The Leadership Quarterly* and *Journal of Business Ethics* providing theory and synthesis, and the *Journal of Nursing Management* and *Frontiers in Psychology* reflecting more recent applied diffusion. Document co-citation reveals a tripartite intellectual base comprising definitional accounts, exchange and justice mechanisms, and measurement or personality-trait traditions. Keyword structures identify three current fronts: abusive and exploitative mechanisms, dark-trait and ethics-oriented research, and healthcare-oriented studies of bullying, stress, and culture. Country co-authorship indicates a transatlantic and Asia-Pacific core with recent regional diversification. Overall, the field shows increasing convergence among fragmented labels while retaining important conceptual distinctions.

Keywords: Destructive Leadership, Abusive Supervision, Toxic Leadership, Bibliometric Mapping, Thematic Evolution, Co-Citation

1. Introduction

Often leadership is described as a generative social force, one that facilitates collective action, offers interpretive guidance, and helps foster an organization's ability to adapt. However, relationships with leaders are not necessarily positive. Authorities can also be corrosive when they rely on intimidation, humiliation, exploitation, and/or the neglect of harm or injury that could reasonably have been prevented. Research on destructive leadership has grown to explain this darker pattern by focusing on recurring patterns of leader actions that negatively affect the well-being of followers and/or the organization's goals, either through purposeful action or by ignoring the likely consequences (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007). Meta-analytic results also indicate that negative leadership styles are linked to psychological distress, counterproductive work behavior, intention to quit, and lower satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Mackey *et al.*, 2019).

However, the field has not yet coalesced around a stable set of terms. Petty tyranny, toxic leadership, abusive supervision, despotic leadership, exploitative leadership, narcissistic leadership, psychopathic leadership, and Machiavellian leadership all emphasize different mechanisms, levels of analysis, and normative thresholds. This diversity extends beyond mere semantics. It preserves crucial distinctions between types of organisational harm that may not be captured in a broad construct. At the same time, it makes cumulative inquiry difficult, as neighbouring empirical domains tend to be defined under labels that may carry different assumptions about intentionality and severity, different measurement referents, and different causal pathways. A bibliometric review can be useful only if



it establishes proximity among these terms without losing the boundaries of the constructs to which they belong, which are essential to their analytical value (Ashforth, 1994; Padilla *et al.*, 2007; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Schmid *et al.*, 2018).

Previous reviews have described significant aspects of destructive leadership, such as its conceptual definitions, behavioral impacts, and patterns of outcomes. Several field-level questions, however, remain less settled and call for another kind of synthesis. It is not yet established which documents have become durable intellectual anchors, which mechanisms are used to explain the phenomena, how mechanism-based explanations and personality-trait explanations have intermingled, what themes have become more or less salient over time, and how knowledge production in this field has been influenced by transnational collaboration. As research on destructive leadership has expanded into practical applications such as healthcare, education, public administration, and cross-cultural organizational research (Mackey, 2021; S. Wang *et al.*, 2023; Zhao & Strotmann, 2022), these questions have become more significant.

To address these issues, this study combines performance analysis, document co-citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence analysis, thematic evolution, and country-level co-authorship analysis. Rather than offering a merely narrative inventory of publications, the study examines the intellectual organization of destructive leadership research, the differentiation of its thematic frontiers, and the geographical diversification of collaboration. The analysis is based on four research questions. RQ1 explores the growth of destructive leadership research in terms of the number of published articles, journal concentration, and the influence of published articles on the field. RQ2 identifies the intellectual foundations that structure the field. RQ3 maps contemporary thematic frontiers and their temporal development. RQ4 examines the structure of collaboration among countries and its implications for the internationalization of destructive leadership research.

This research makes three contributions to the literature. First, it illuminates a tripartite structure of the intellectual discourse that connects definitional accounts of destructive leadership, exchange and resource-based mechanisms, and measurement and/or personality-trait traditions. Second, it distinguishes between terminological convergence and construct equivalence, thus minimizing the danger of prematurely combining semantically related but not conceptually equivalent terms. Third, it clarifies where the field appears theoretically consolidated, where methodological fragilities remain, and which future research directions require stronger designs to move scholarship from associative mapping toward mechanism-sensitive explanation.

1.1 Destructive Leadership: Conceptual Foundations

Destructive leadership research examines patterned forms of influence that generate sustained harm for followers, teams, and organizations while violating normative expectations of responsible leadership. Recurrent behaviors that have the potential to harm followers' well-being and the organization's mission effectiveness are central to the foundational accounts (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007). The toxic triangle perspective expands on this theory by incorporating destructive outcomes as the interplay among leader predispositions, follower susceptibility, and environments in which destructive behavior can be sustained (Padilla *et al.*, 2007; Akaighe & Adisa, 2025; Chen & Sun, 2021; Pelletier *et al.*, 2019). This view refocuses the analysis on the relational and structural factors that can sustain, permeate, and normalize destructive influence in organizations (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007; Emblemavag & Emblemavag, 2023a; Ghislieri, 2024).

A second line of work explains destructive leadership through exchange, justice, and resource-based mechanisms. Reciprocal obligation, perceived justice, and relational security are frequently summarized as characteristics of non-abusive supervision, and abusive supervision and related constructs are often theorized as violations of these conditions (Lawler *et al.*, 2008; Bordia *et al.*, 2017; Moore *et al.*, 2020). Such violations can produce effects beyond job dissatisfaction, including emotional exhaustion, organizational silence, knowledge hiding, deviance, and withdrawal. This is more likely to happen when followers perceive the leader's behavior as unfair, psychologically draining, and normatively inappropriate. Taken together, this mechanism-based literature provides some understanding of why the consequences of destructive leadership can extend beyond the dyadic relationship between the leader and follower (Han *et al.*, 2020; Jahanzeb *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2015; Deng *et al.*, 2018; Drory *et al.*, 2022; Kernan *et al.*, 2016; Farmanara, 2021).



The third line of work is dispositional and ethical in its emphasis. The literature on narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, along with the broader dark triad, explores the linkage between confidence, dominance, and strategic self-presentation, which can initially be interpreted as leadership potential but later emerge as signs of coercion, exploitation, or ethical decline. This is not primarily a behavioral or contextual explanation. Its usefulness lies in defining the circumstances in which leader characteristics combine with promotion systems, performance pressures, and lax accountability to create problems. These traditions are therefore treated here as analytically linked, yet not necessarily as equivalent constructs for measuring the same phenomenon (Basher, 2025a; Basher, 2025b; Boddy & Taplin, 2024; Härtel et al., 2023; Belschak et al., 2018; Manara et al., 2020; Braun et al., 2025; Meurs et al., 2013).

2. Methods

2.1 Study Design

This study employed a quantitative bibliometric science-mapping design to examine the intellectual base, thematic frontiers, and collaboration structure of destructive leadership research. The analysis integrated performance indicators, document co-citation, author keyword co-occurrence, thematic evolution, and cross-country co-authorship. This design was selected because destructive leadership research has developed through diverse and partly overlapping terminologies. In this context, bibliometric mapping enables the identification of relationships among concepts through citation patterns, keyword associations, and collaboration networks, without assuming that all conceptually adjacent labels possess fully equivalent construct meanings.

2.2 Data Source and Search Strategy

Scopus was chosen because the database covers a wide range of disciplines, provides structured citation metadata, and allows export to Biblioshiny and VOSviewer. The following search string was used for the core query:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ("destructive leadership" OR "toxic leadership" OR "abusive leadership" OR "abusive supervision" OR "despotic leadership" OR "narciss leader*" OR "psychopath* leader*" OR "machiavellian* leader*" OR "petty tyranny" OR "tyrannical leadership" OR "exploitative leadership") AND PUBYEAR > 1965 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") AND LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, "j") AND LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")*

Bibliographic records were collected on 22 October 2025, retrieved and exported with complete metadata, including title, author names, source title, year of publication, keywords, abstract, cited references, affiliations, countries, and citation counts. Since the search was completed before the end of the 2025 calendar year, it should not be interpreted as representing the whole of 2025.

2.3 Search Completeness and Overlap Test

To assess corpus completeness, an expanded retrieval test added two reviewer-identified cognate terms, "abusive supervision" and "despotic leadership." Overlap between the initial and expanded corpora was assessed using DOI matching and normalized title matching. The expanded query produced 876 records, of which 695 overlapped with the initial corpus. The remaining 181 records were retained as a sensitivity set rather than being merged automatically into the analytical corpus. This approach preserved the comparability of the original validated corpus while testing whether the findings were robust to broader terminology (Table 1).

Table 1. Search completeness and overlap between the initial and expanded queries

Corpus	Records	Unique records	Overlapping records	Overlap %
Initial query	704	704	695	98.7
Expanded query	876	181	695	79.4



A completeness test yielded 876 records, 695 of which (79.4%) overlapped with the initial corpus; a further 181 records were retained as a sensitivity set.

2.4 Eligibility Criteria and Selection Process

Qualifying documents included journal articles written in English on destructive leadership or related dark leadership constructs. Non-article document types, non-journal sources, non-English records, off-topic records identified through lexical matching, duplicates, corrections, and errata were excluded. The identification, screening, and inclusion process was designed to follow the reporting logic of PRISMA. The final corpus used in the analysis consisted of 704 unique records. The PRISMA flow diagram documents the number of records identified, duplicate records removed, records excluded by document type, source type, and language restrictions, records excluded during topical screening, and records included in the final bibliometric analysis.

2.5 Data Extraction and Preprocessing

Data preprocessing was carried out to ensure the consistency of metadata and to minimize technical bias in network mapping. Titles were normalized to check for duplicates, source titles were harmonized based on the journal nomenclature used by Scopus, and DOIs were shortened and converted to lowercase. Authors' keywords and indexed keywords were converted to lowercase; spelling variants were harmonized when the concepts remained the same; and regular plural forms were singularized with care. The thesaurus did not treat "abusive supervision" and "abusive leadership" as synonymous constructs. In contrast, only transparent lexical variants of the same expression or spelling differences were consolidated. Adjacent labels were kept separate and interpreted based on their positions in the co-occurrence graph. The thesaurus file and pre- and post-harmonization frequencies for major terms are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to Scopus licensing restrictions.

2.6 Indicators and Outcome Measures

In this study, the following descriptive indicators were analyzed: annual production, core sources, citation influence, the most productive countries, and highly cited documents. The science-mapping indicators used were document co-citation links, author keyword co-occurrence, and cross-country co-authorship ties. Abbreviations are defined as follows to assist in the interpretation of tables and maps: TC – Total citations; NP – Number of publications; h-index – Number of publications that have received h or more citations; g-index – Number of publications that have received at least g citations, given that the g-index assigns higher value to publications that have gathered more citations; m-index – Number of publications that have received at least m citations, adjusted by the number of years elapsed since the publication of the first document; PY_start – First year in which the entity is mentioned in the dataset.

2.7 Software and Science Mapping Parameters

Performance analysis, thematic mapping, and thematic evolution were performed using the R package Biblioshiny. Networks were built and association strength was normalized using VOSviewer, and clustering and visualizations were also produced with VOSviewer. In VOSviewer maps, node size indicates the weight of an item in the dataset, link thickness indicates the strength of association between two items, color indicates the assignment of a node to a cluster and/or the approximate year of publication, depending on the type of map generated, and spatial proximity indicates the relative relatedness of two items after normalization. The main thresholds were set at 5 for keyword co-occurrence nodes, 20 for document co-citation nodes, and 2 for country co-authorship nodes.

2.8 Thematic Evolution

Three time slices (1966-2010, 2011-2020, 2021-22 October 2025) were used for the thematic evolution analysis, reflecting the growth trajectory of the field. The final period was clearly identified as a partial window because the search was conducted before the end of 2025. The analysis therefore traced the processes of

consolidation, branching, and the development of new thematic clusters without treating 2025 as a complete end-of-year period.

2.9 Robustness and Sensitivity Analyses

Keyword co-occurrence maps were rerun at minimum occurrence thresholds of three, five, and eight, and document co-citation maps were rerun at minimum citation thresholds of 15, 20, and 30. The impact of keyword harmonization was tested by comparing maps before and after using the thesaurus. Cluster-stability diagnostics are reported in Tables 2 and 3, including active nodes or documents, number of clusters, cluster persistence, and modularity values under alternative threshold conditions.

Table 2. Cluster-stability diagnostics for keyword co-occurrence networks

Minimum occurrences	Active nodes	Clusters	Cluster persistence†	Modularity Q
≥ 3	114	6	0.83	0.68
≥ 5	78	6	0.87	0.70
≥ 8	45	5	0.90	0.72

Table 3. Cluster-stability diagnostics for document co-citation networks

Citation threshold	Active documents	Clusters	Cluster persistence†	Modularity Q
≥ 15	142	5	0.79	0.71
≥ 20	101	5	0.82	0.74
≥ 30	63	4	0.86	0.77

Cluster stability remained high across alternative thresholds. Keyword co-occurrence networks retained persistence values from 0.83 to 0.90, while document co-citation networks retained persistence values from 0.79 to 0.86. Modularity values also remained acceptable across specifications, indicating that the main thematic interpretation was not driven solely by a single threshold choice.

2.10 Reproducibility and Ethics

This study used publicly available bibliographic metadata and did not involve human participants, animal subjects, clinical data, or private identifiable information. Ethical approval was therefore not required. The search string, retrieval date, eligibility criteria, software, analytical parameters, preprocessing rules, overlap test, and robustness checks are reported to support reproducibility.

3. Results

3.1 RQ1 Examines Whether Destructive Leadership Research Has Remained a Marginal Topic or Developed into a Sustained and Institutionally Recognizable Field.

Annual production remained low until the mid-2000s, after which it grew irregularly and then began a significant surge from 2018 onward. The dataset contains 101 articles in 2024 and 125 articles as of the 2025 retrieval date. This latter figure should not be treated as an annualized total. Instead, it suggests that the field was still growing rapidly at the time of retrieval. The clearest contrast is between the sporadic publication pattern before 2006 and the steady, sustained publication pattern after 2018 (Figure 1).

The venue profile reveals a dual core. The Leadership Quarterly and Journal of Business Ethics hold substantial citation influence and function as central outlets for theoretical and synthetic work. Frontiers in Psychology and Journal of Nursing Management reflect a more recent layer of growth, with higher publication velocity and a stronger applied orientation. The field has therefore expanded not only in volume but also through disciplinary diffusion across leadership studies, ethics, psychology, and applied management outlets (Table 4 and Table 5).



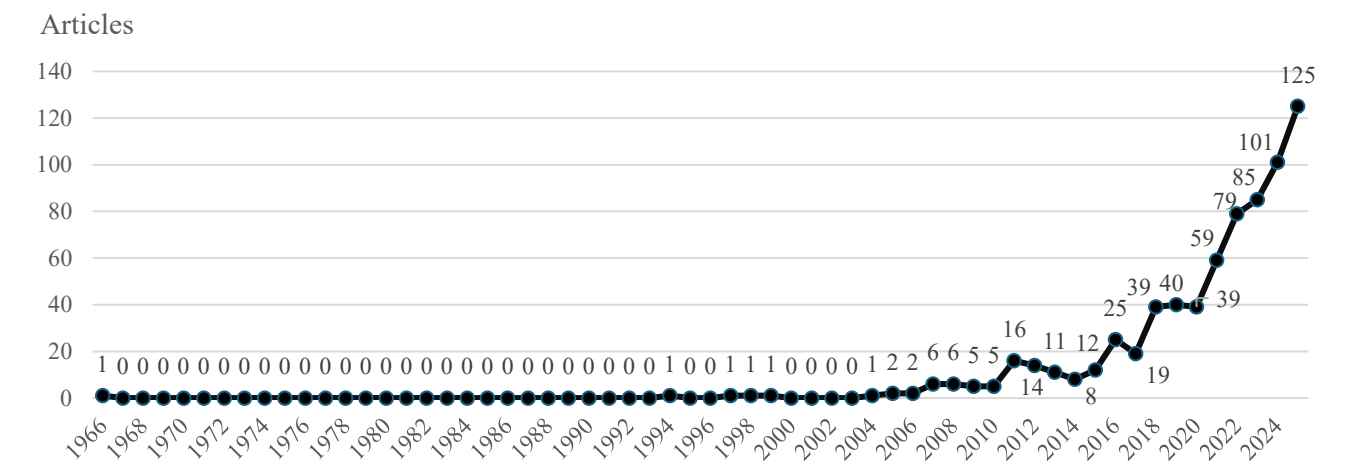


Figure 1. Annual scientific production in destructive leadership research, 1966 to 2025. The 2025 value is based on records retrieved on 22 October 2025 and is therefore interpreted as a partial-year count.

Table 4. Core journals by productivity and citation influence

Source	h-index	g-index	m-index	TC	NP	PY_start
Journal of Business Ethics	18	27	1.000	1541	27	2008
Leadership and Organization Development Journal	14	22	0.875	527	24	2010
Leadership Quarterly	13	13	0.650	3782	13	2006
Frontiers in Psychology	11	18	1.375	380	28	2018
Journal of Nursing Management	10	14	1.429	508	14	2019
Leadership	10	12	0.556	631	12	2008
Journal of Applied Psychology	8	8	0.571	1225	8	2012
Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies	8	10	0.533	488	10	2011
Journal of Managerial Psychology	6	8	0.300	263	8	2006
Personality and Individual Differences	6	7	0.333	359	7	2008

Note. TC = total citations; NP = number of publications; PY_start = first publication year in the corpus. H-index, g-index, and m-index are source-level indicators calculated within the bibliometric dataset.

Table 5 . Most-cited documents in the corpus

Paper	Total citations	TC per year	Normalized TC
Schyns, 2013, Leadership Quarterly	807	62.08	6.75
Padilla 2007, Leadership Quarterly	708	37.26	1.69
Einarsen, 2007, Leadership Quarterly	656	34.53	1.56
Rosentha, 2006, Leadership Quarterly	651	32.55	1.85
Ashforth, 1994, Human Relations	574	17.94	1.00
Skogstad, 2007, Journal of Occupational Health Psychology	553	29.11	1.32
Montano, 2017, Journal of Organizational Behavior	389	43.22	8.81
Brunell, 2008, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	382	21.22	3.07
Hauge, 2007, Work and Stress	346	18.21	0.82
Owens, 2015, Journal of Applied Psychology	323	29.36	3.34

Note. TC per year and normalized TC are reported to distinguish cumulative influence from annualized and field-normalized impact. The table title, caption, and displayed columns have been reconciled.



Direct answer to RQ1: destructive leadership research has moved from a low-volume topic into a rapidly expanding interdisciplinary field, with citation influence concentrated in leadership and ethics outlets and recent volume increasingly distributed across psychology and applied management venues.

3.2 RQ2 Identifies the Knowledge Domains that Subsequent Studies Cite Together and that Therefore Constitute the Intellectual Foundation of Destructive Leadership Scholarship

The co-citations show three interdependent fields of knowledge (Figure 2). The first cluster includes definitional and organizational-behavior foundations such as petty tyranny, destructive leadership behavior, and mainstream leadership references. This cluster serves as the conceptual vocabulary of the field. The second cluster groups exchange, justice, and organizational-behavior mechanisms that explain how destructive behavior becomes consequential for withdrawal, silence, deviance, and strain. The third cluster gathers references to traits and measures, as well as methodological approaches such as narcissism scales, diagnostic traditions, and moderation or mediation frameworks for operationalizing empirical models.

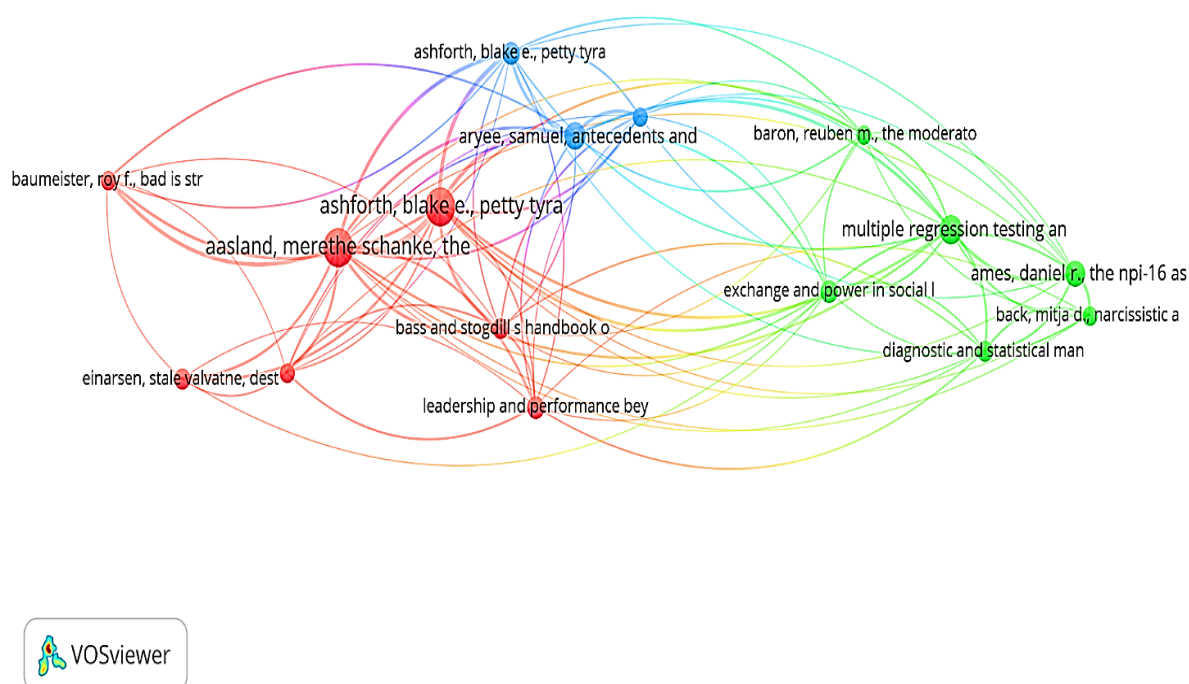


Figure 2. Document co-citation network of cited references, minimum 20 citations, association-strength normalization.

The network should not be interpreted as evidence that these domains are equivalent. Its significance lies in showing that destructive leadership scholarship has become cumulative by coupling conceptual definitions, mechanism-based explanation, and measurement conventions. This tripartite base also explains why debates about construct boundaries remain persistent: the field is unified by citation practice but differentiated by theory and measurement.

To answer RQ2, the field is grounded in three streams of intellectual tradition: definitional traditions, organizational-behavior and exchange- and justice-based mechanisms of harm transmission, and trait or methodological traditions that enable empirical standardization.

3.3 RQ3 Examines Which Terms Currently Organize the Research Front and How Those Terms Have Evolved Across Growth Periods.

The keyword co-occurrence network is structured around a small group of labels rather than a number of separate subfields. The central vocabulary consists of leadership, toxic leadership, abusive supervision, destructive leadership, and exploitative leadership. These core mechanisms link destructive leadership labels to attitudinal,

behavioral, and health-related outcomes, including social exchange theory, conservation of resources theory, trust, voice, knowledge hiding, and emotional exhaustion. A trait-and-ethics wing connects dark triad, psychopathy, corporate psychopaths, leader narcissism, ethical leadership, counterproductive work behavior, and performance (Yousif & Loukil, 2022). A sectoral arc links nursing with workplace bullying and bullying with power distance, suggesting an applied subfield focused on nurses and nurse managers, healthcare, workplace bullying, job stress, and power distance (Glaveli *et al.*, 2023; Kwak & Shim, 2017).

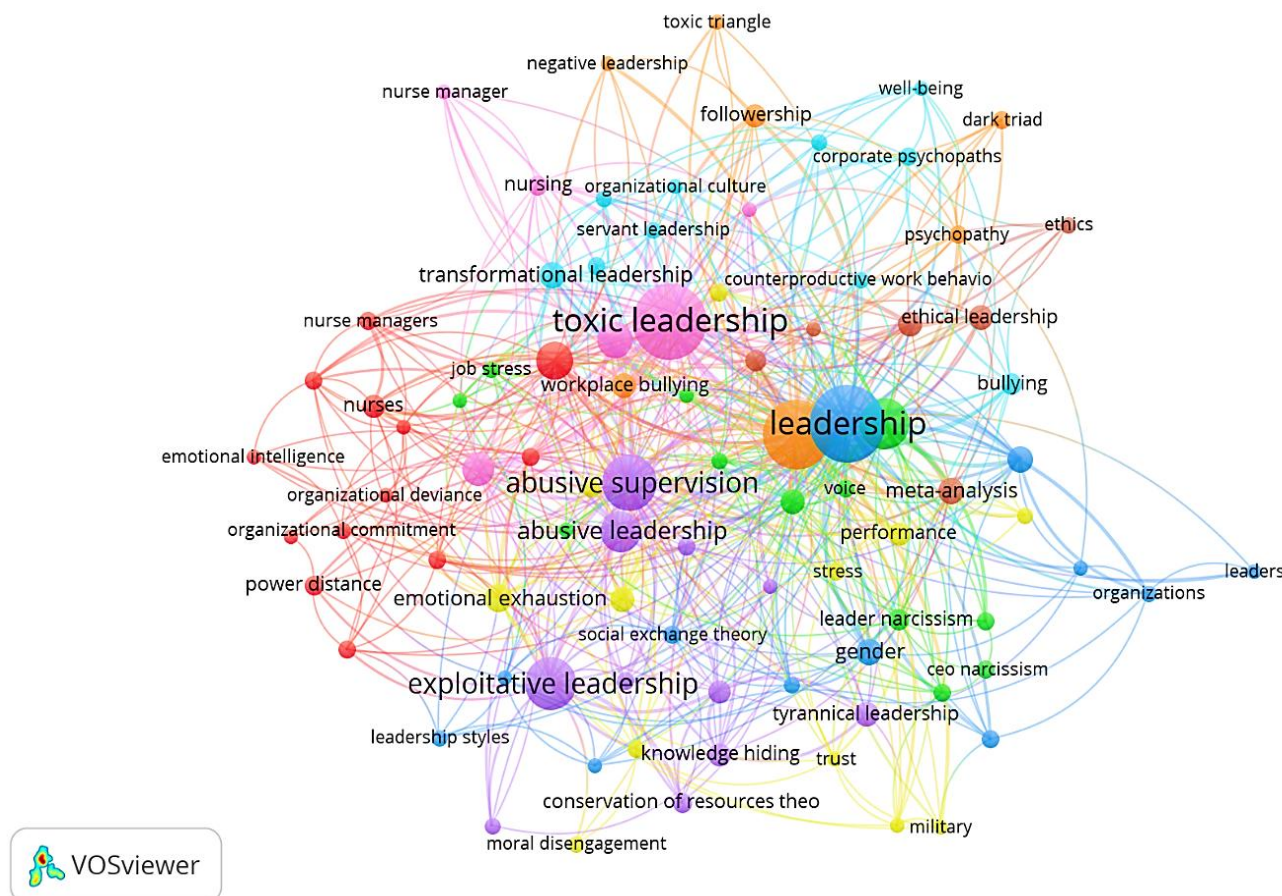


Figure 3. Author keyword co-occurrence network, minimum five occurrences, association-strength normalization. Node size represents keyword weight, link thickness represents co-occurrence strength, color indicates cluster membership, and proximity indicates relative relatedness.

The keyword co-occurrence network is structured around a small group of labels rather than a number of separate subfields (Figure 3). The central vocabulary consists of leadership, toxic leadership, abusive supervision, destructive leadership, and exploitative leadership. These core mechanisms link destructive leadership labels to attitudinal, behavioral, and health-related outcomes, including social exchange theory, conservation of resources theory, trust, voice, knowledge hiding, and emotional exhaustion. A trait-and-ethics wing connects dark triad, psychopathy, corporate psychopaths, leader narcissism, ethical leadership, counterproductive work behavior, and performance. A sectoral arc links nursing with workplace bullying and bullying with power distance, suggesting an applied subfield focused on nurses and nurse managers, healthcare, workplace bullying, job stress, and power distance.

The thematic map (Figure 4) helps in understanding the maturity of these fronts. Leadership, destructive leadership, and abusive supervision are in the basic-theme quadrant and have moderate internal development and high centrality. Toxic leadership, job satisfaction, and turnover intention seem to form a motor theme that indicates a well-established well-being and retention channel (Bublitz-Berg *et al.*, 2024; Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023; Albashiti *et al.*, 2021; Iqbal *et al.*, 2024). Other themes, such as organizational identification, moral disengagement, and organizational deviance, are more specific, whereas CEO narcissism, tyrannical leadership, and laissez-faire

leadership can be considered less central but still consolidating themes (Lee *et al.*, 2025; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; O'Reilly III *et al.*, 2024; Zhao *et al.*, 2024).

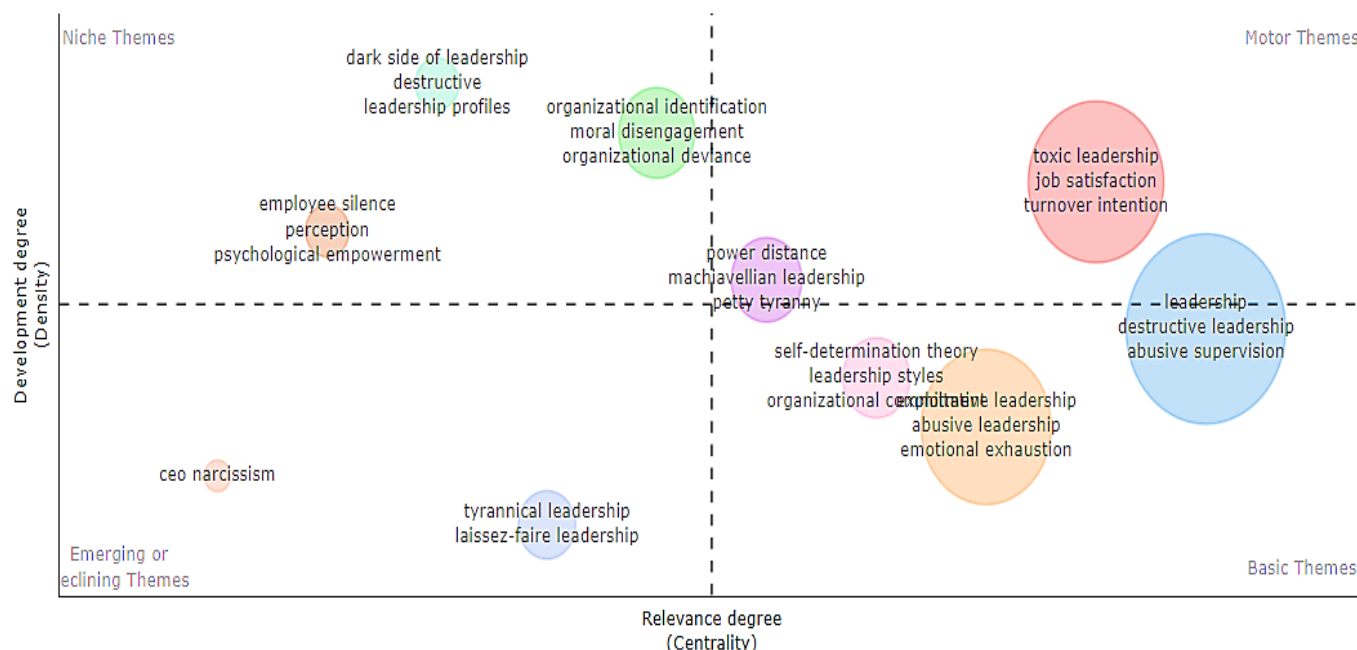


Figure 4. Thematic map of author keywords, minimum frequency five. Centrality indicates relevance to the overall field, while density indicates internal thematic development.

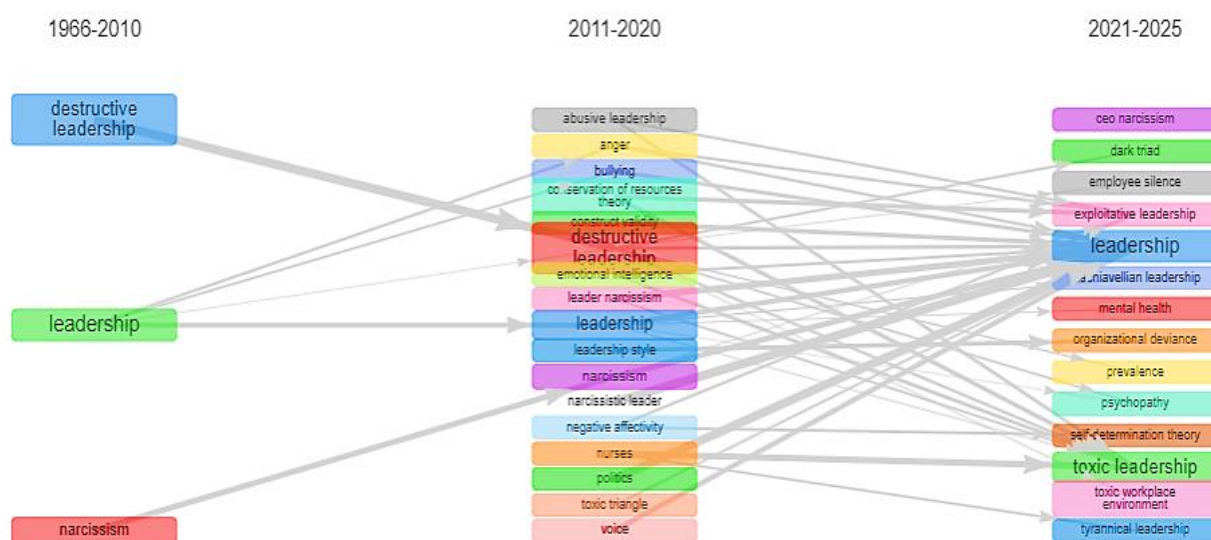


Figure 5. Thematic evolution across three periods: 1966 to 2010; 2011 to 2020; and 2021 to 22 October 2025. The final period is a partial window.

Thematic evolution (Figure 5) shows a progression from a leadership-centered vocabulary toward a more differentiated contemporary lexicon. In the earliest period, the field was anchored by broad terms such as leadership, destructive leadership, and narcissism. During 2011 to 2020, the vocabulary expanded to include abusive leadership, bullying, voice, negative affectivity, leadership style, conservation of resources theory, and the toxic triangle. In the partial 2021 to 2025 window, exploitative leadership, dark triad, psychopathy, CEO narcissism, employee silence, mental health, organizational deviance, and toxic workplace environment became more visible. The previously garbled expression involving "nurses" has been corrected and interpreted as part of a nursing-related applied healthcare stream.

The direct answer to RQ3 is that the contemporary research front is organized around three interdependent streams, namely mechanism-centered abusive/exploitative leadership research, dark-trait- and ethics-oriented

research, and health-oriented research on bullying, stress, and culture; thematically, the field has shifted from a focus on labels to differentiated mechanism, trait, and sectoral agendas.

3.4 RQ4 Maps Country-Level Collaboration and Evaluates Whether the Field is Concentrated in a Small Set of Knowledge Centers or Becoming more Internationally Distributed.

The United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and China form the backbone of the country co-authorship map. The United States occupies the most prominent position and maintains strong links with the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and China. The United Kingdom connects transatlantic, European, and Asian partners, while China and Australia function as important Asia-Pacific nodes. Participation from Gulf, South Asian, and African countries appears more recent, consistent with the field's post-2018 expansion. Country-level metrics support this visual interpretation (Figure 6). The network contained 38 countries, a total link strength of 1,925, a density of 0.18, a mean clustering coefficient of 0.43, and a Louvain modularity of 0.39, indicating four principal collaboration communities. Betweenness centrality was highest for the United States, followed by the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and China (Table 6).

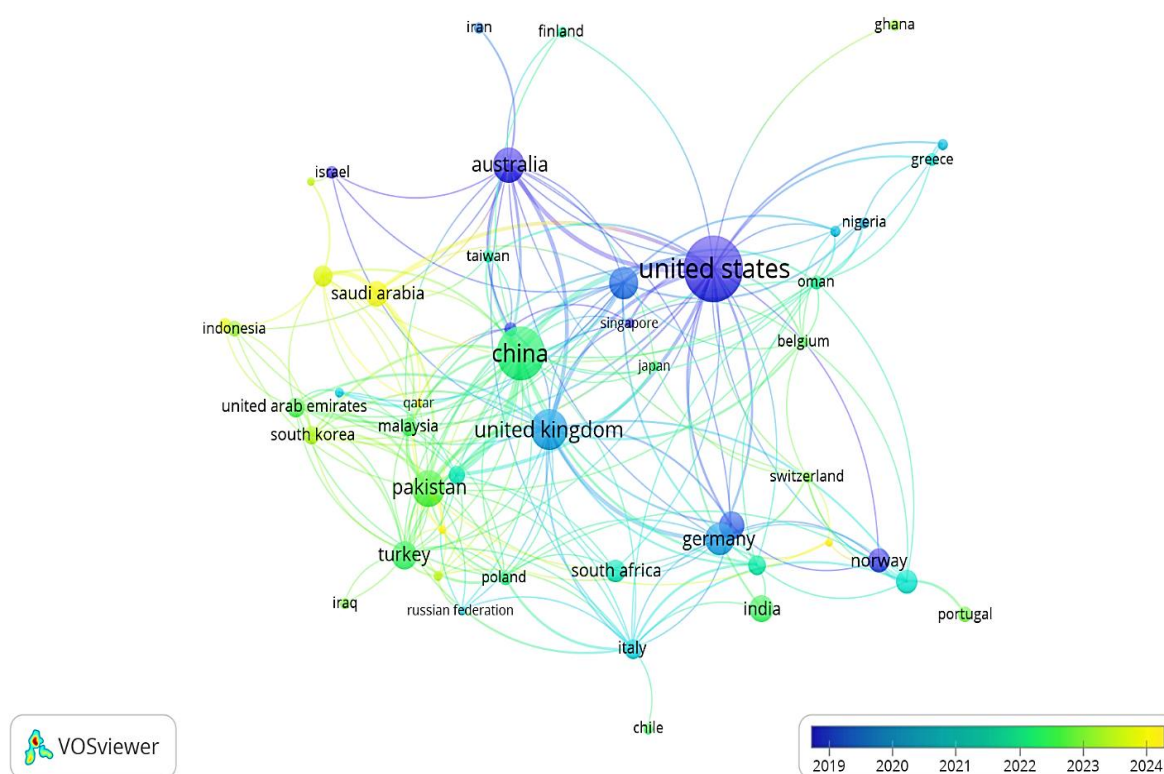


Figure 6. Country co-authorship network, minimum two documents, association-strength normalization. Node size represents publication weight, link thickness represents collaboration strength, and overlay color represents average publication year.

Table 6 . Country-level collaboration metrics and betweenness centrality

Network statistic	Value
Countries (nodes)	38
Total link strength	1 925
Network density	0.18
Mean clustering coefficient	0.43
Modularity (Louvain)	0.39 (four communities)
Country	Betweenness centrality
United States	0.34

United Kingdom	0.29
Germany	0.21
Australia	0.19
China	0.16

In answer to RQ4, country collaboration remains concentrated around transatlantic and Asia-Pacific hubs, but the network shows recent geographic diversification through contributions from Gulf, South Asian, and African countries.

4. Discussion

The revised mapping suggests that destructive leadership research is becoming cumulative not because its terminology has fully stabilized, but because related constructs increasingly share an intellectual infrastructure. The annual trajectory and venue profile show a shift from dispersed publication toward sustained interdisciplinary growth. This expansion must be interpreted with temporal caution, since the 2025 count reflects records retrieved on 22 October 2025 and therefore represents a partial-year window rather than a completed annual benchmark.

The co-citation structure provides the best description of the field's maturing process. Definitional accounts provide the conceptual grammar of harmful influence, exchange and justice traditions provide explanatory references for how harm is transmitted through relational and organizational mechanisms, and measurement or trait traditions enable empirical accumulation. The theoretical implication of the main argument is therefore not that destructive leadership, abusive supervision, toxic leadership, and dark-trait leadership should be collapsed into a single construct. Instead, the field progresses when these are seen as adjacent, but conceptually separate, explanations of harm (Ashforth, 1994; Padilla *et al.*, 2007; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Schmid *et al.*, 2018).

The keyword results confirm this interpretation. Mechanism-centered work is central because it turns general perceptions of destructive leadership into measurable processes, including resource depletion, erosion of trust, suppression of voice, knowledge hiding, emotional exhaustion, and deviance. The trait-and-ethics stream provides another explanatory layer by examining how narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism are rewarded, concealed, or constrained within leadership systems. The healthcare stream provides sector-specific examples of the consequences of harmful supervision, including the roles of hierarchy, workload, professional culture, and moral distress (Li *et al.*, 2022; Otto *et al.*, 2018; Mathieu & Babiak, 2016).

International diffusion is indicated on the country collaboration map, but epistemic decentralization is still limited. Anglophone and European centres remain prominent, and recent involvement from Asia, the Gulf, and some parts of Africa offers broader contextual coverage for the field. This is encouraging progress, but it also presents methodological challenges. If not reported transparently, cross-regional expansion can reproduce Anglophone citation visibility rather than promote theoretical diversification (Ilhan & Oguz, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

The practical implications should be regarded as tentative inferences based on bibliometric patterns rather than as evidence for interventions. The maps show that issues of voice, resources, ethics, and governance appear repeatedly in the literature, but the present study does not test causal interventions or organizational reforms. Based on these findings, future empirical studies could explore the conditions for preventing destructive influence rather than offering straightforward prescriptions for governance redesign. When practical claims are made more strongly, they require multi-source, longitudinal, experimental and/or quasi-experimental designs that connect leadership patterns to intervention outcomes (Tourish, 2018; Franken & Plimmer, 2019).

The interpretation is subject to a few limitations. First, Scopus's emphasis on indexed journal literature may have resulted in the underrepresentation of books, regional literature, practitioner literature, and non-indexed scholarship. Second, the English-language limitation may increase thematic prominence and country visibility for English-language publications while disadvantaging work published in other languages. Third, bibliometric networks are not a direct measure of intervention effectiveness, theoretical validity, or causal influence; they measure publication and citation patterns. Fourth, caution is needed when interpreting annual trends and thematic evolution in the partial 2025 window. Future studies should evaluate Scopus against other sources, such as Web of Science (WoS), Dimensions, or Crossref, and use multilingual corpora and alternative preprocessing and threshold settings (D. Zhao & Strotmann, 2022).



5. Conclusion

Destructive leadership research has developed into an interdisciplinary field with a recognizable intellectual base, expanding research fronts, and a widening collaboration network. This mapping reveals that the field is situated within three overlapping traditions: definitional accounts that explain harmful influence, exchange- and resource-based mechanisms that explain how harm spreads through organizational processes, and measurement or trait traditions that support empirical accumulation. The findings reveal growing linkages among destructive leadership labels, but not their equivalence. Abusive and exploitative leadership, dark traits and ethical safeguards, and healthcare-related concerns involving bullying, stress, culture, and managerial practice are all current focal points of research. Country collaboration remains centered in transatlantic and Asia-Pacific hubs, but recent involvement from other regions indicates some geographic diversification. Bibliometric evidence can explain intellectual proximity, thematic development, and the architecture of collaboration, but it cannot account for causality or prove interventions in organizations. Future studies should therefore aim to integrate science mapping with more robust empirical designs, particularly longitudinal, multi-source, and cross-regional studies. Progress in this area depends less on reducing labels to a single construct than on specifying the conditions under which each construct provides distinct explanatory power.

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Alum Kusumah: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, and Writing - Original Draft. Sulistyandari: Validation, Supervision, and Writing - Review & Editing. Cheng-Wen Lee: Validation, Resources, Supervision, and Writing - Review & Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Data availability

The bibliographic data were retrieved from Scopus. Because Scopus metadata are subject to database licensing restrictions, the processed search strategy, thesaurus file, robustness tables, and reproducibility notes can be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request or deposited in a permitted repository.

Ethics statement

This study used publicly available bibliographic metadata and did not involve human participants, animal subjects, clinical data, or private identifiable information. Ethical approval was therefore not required.



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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. There is also no financial interest to report. The author certifies that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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