

Taking stock of responsible leadership research: a systematic literature review and research agenda

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper systematically reviews and consolidates the latest empirical evidence on responsible leadership (RL) to provide an interdisciplinary and comprehensive synthesis. The purpose of this study is to address the fragmented and ambiguous nature of the existing literature, offering a clearer understanding of the mechanisms linking RL to its antecedents, boundary conditions and outcomes, and identifying critical areas for future research.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper uses a systematic review methodology, analyzing and synthesizing empirical evidence from various disciplines. This study focuses on studies across micro, meso and macro levels to provide a holistic perspective of RL, exploring the determinants, boundary conditions and outcomes of RL.

Findings – The review reveals five critical research gaps in the RL literature: the complex layering of RL, the boundary conditions affecting RL, a processual understanding of RL, the spatial dimensions of RL and the role of RL in the digital world. These gaps highlight the need for further research and offer multiple directions for advancing the field of RL.

Research limitations/implications – This paper highlights the need for more research on the boundary conditions and contextual factors influencing RL across different organizational settings and cultural environments.

Practical implications – The findings of this study provide practical insights for leaders seeking to implement RL strategies in their organizations, especially in addressing complex and evolving challenges in the current contexts.

Social implications – By advancing the understanding of RL, this study has implications for promoting better leadership practice, emphasizing social responsibility at multiple levels.



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Originality/value – This paper offers a unique interdisciplinary synthesis of RL literature, consolidating fragmented research across multiple levels of analysis. By identifying key research gaps and providing a roadmap for future investigation, this study contributes to the ongoing development of this rapidly growing field.

Keywords Multilevel, Responsible leadership, Systematic review, Thematic analysis

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

The 21st century has been marked by global crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed flaws in traditional leadership models and underscored the need for a more responsible, sustainable approach focused on long-term goals (Maak *et al.*, 2016; Pless *et al.*, 2021). These crises, compounded by challenges such as climate change and social inequalities, have prompted a reassessment of business practices (Zhao *et al.*, 2023). In response, international frameworks, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, advocate for a more sustainable and responsible model of development that aligns economic goals with broader social and environmental imperatives (Fallah Shayan *et al.*, 2022).

This shift is reflected in leadership research, with increasing attention given to ethics, sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Elembilassery, 2023). Leadership now extends beyond financial concerns to broader social and environmental responsibilities (Haque *et al.*, 2020). Responsible leadership (RL), in particular, has gained traction as an interdisciplinary approach emphasizing the ethical, social and environmental impacts of business decisions and prioritizing stakeholder well-being (Voegtlin, 2016). RL goes beyond legal compliance, promoting proactive stakeholder engagement and a commitment to sustainable development (Waldman and Balven, 2014).

RL is viewed as an interdisciplinary and multifaceted leadership approach that prioritizes the ethical, social and environmental consequences of business decisions, emphasizing the well-being of stakeholders, including employees, service receivers, communities and the ecosystem (Voegtlin, 2016). The multifaceted perspective of RL can be seen as a result of interaction with the inherent nature of the fast-changing global environment and broad expectations for CSR, in which leaders currently operate (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2012).

RL differs from other leadership models, such as ethical or transformational leadership, by managing complex relationships and balancing conflicting interests (Marques *et al.*, 2018). For example, ethical leadership focuses primarily on moral conduct between leaders and followers (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Conversely, RL adopts a broader scope encompassing ethical decision-making and the long-term impacts of business actions on societal and environmental well-being (Doh and Quigley, 2014). Unlike ethical leadership, which is centered on preventing unethical behaviors and promoting fairness within the organization, RL extends related practices to CSR, sustainability and stakeholder engagement (Maak, 2007). Thus, RL is characterized by its holistic approach, considering the interdependence between business operations and the broader social and environmental systems in which organizations are situated (Waldman *et al.*, 2020), a distinction crucial in understanding its role in the contemporary business landscape. As such, scholars suggest that RL is a complex, multilevel process (Stahl and De Luque, 2014; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018).

Positioning RL within the complex networks of the organizational environment connects the micro perspective of leadership with the meso- and macro-perspectives of CSR, corporate legitimacy and stakeholder engagement to address internal and external business challenges. This highlights the interdependency between the elements of the networks. It also offers a framework to interrogate how the philosophical foundation of RL is translated into a practically relevant theory (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012). A multilevel approach in leadership research is crucial,

as it facilitates a better understanding of RL as a concept and practice, its contributing factors and subsequent outcomes across different levels (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2019).

The expansion of RL scholarship over the past two decades has prompted an increasing number of reviews that seek to clarify its contours, scope and implications. Some reviews have focused on the conceptual foundations of the field, exploring definitional boundaries and overlapping constructs. For example, de Klerk and Jooste (2023) conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) to compare RL with other forms of moral leadership, such as ethical or authentic leadership. Similarly, Javed *et al.* (2025) contribute to the conceptual clarity of RL and comparisons with other moral leadership constructs. In addition, while not a review, Tsui's (2021) guidepost on responsible research is an important piece of rigor, relevance and practice applied to RL research.

Other reviews have offered domain-specific or outcome-targeted syntheses, such as Foldøy *et al.* (2021), who review RL research within the private sector; Haque *et al.* (2021), who focus on employee outcomes; or Frangieh and Yaacoub (2017), who explore challenges and practices in RL adoption in the Middle East context. While these reviews surface useful empirical patterns, they are delimited in scope and do not provide a comprehensive overview of RL across domains or levels of analysis. In opposition, some reviews have adopted descriptive and bibliometric mapping approaches (Marques *et al.*, 2018; Saeed *et al.*, 2023). While these contributions illustrate the field's intellectual structure, they remain at the level of broad-descriptive synthesis and do not theorize or model the dynamics of RL mechanisms or multilevel pathways.

Miska and Mendenhall (2018) advocate for a multilevel, stakeholder-based approach to RL and propose a conceptual structure yet stop short of empirical evidence of how RL has been operationalized in research. More closely aligned with our focus are the reviews that attempt to scope empirical research across antecedents, outcomes and levels of analysis. Javed *et al.* (2025) present a broad review of RL's empirical landscape, highlighting dominant theories, stakeholder foci and outcome domains. Pathak and Jha (2024) also propose a valuable micro–meso–macro classification and call for more multilevel theorization. Yet, these reviews remain primarily thematic and categorical and do neither engage with the internal structuring of relationships, such as mediation or moderation across levels, nor propose a full multilevel framework examining how constructs interact across levels of analysis.

Therefore, the field still lacks a comprehensive, empirically grounded and theoretically structured synthesis that organizes RL constructs according to their role (as antecedents, mediators, moderators or outcomes) and their level of analysis (micro, meso and macro) and that identifies how these elements interact. In this study, we adopt the SLR approach to consolidate the latest empirical evidence and offer a more inclusive, up-to-date, interdisciplinary and in-depth thematic analysis of the antecedents, boundary conditions and outcomes associated with RL. Analyzing 162 articles published between 2005 and 2023, this review aims to construct a framework of the RL process that considers micro-, meso- and macro-level mechanisms to better inform contemporary organizational commitment to driving changes and initiatives supporting the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. Research methodology

This paper adopts an SLR approach to examine RL mechanisms, including antecedents, moderators, mediators and outcomes at the micro, meso and macro levels. Following a structured, transparent and replicable procedure (Paul *et al.*, 2021), this method enhances the credibility of findings and supports theory development in RL research.

This paper follows the five steps of the SLR procedure (Sauer and Seuring, 2023) (Figure 1). Step 1 defines the objective of constructing an RL process across different levels. Step 2 follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method (Moher *et al.*, 2009) to guide the data analysis and presentation of findings, ensuring

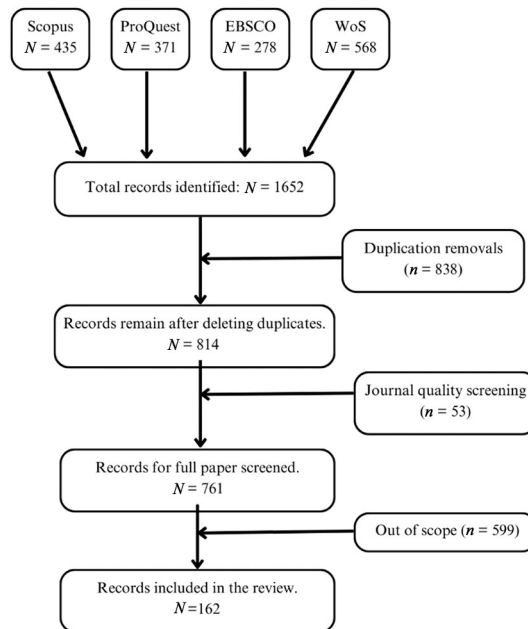
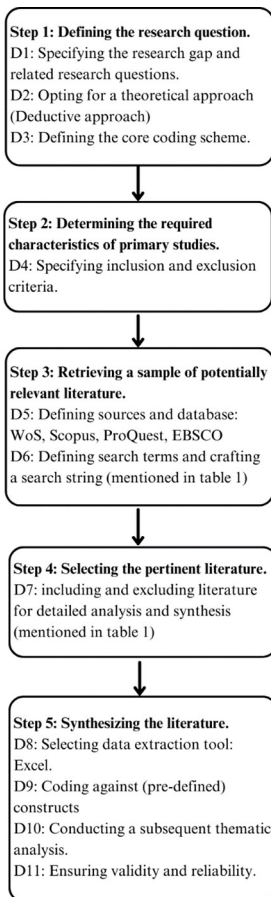


Figure 1. PRISMA methodology
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methodological rigor and relevance (Page et al., 2021). Step 3 involves selecting search terms and databases. The keywords “responsible leader*” are used for the topic search, including the title, abstract and keywords across ScienceDirect, Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest and EBSCO, up to December 31st, 2023. These databases, which are chosen for their coverage of high-ranking journals, enhance search precision (Ancillai et al., 2023).

Step 4 sets inclusion/exclusion criteria, focuses on peer-reviewed English-language business management research and excludes non-business topics such as pedagogy and environmental science. Initially, 1,652 articles were found, with 838 duplicates removed. Quality assessments of articles are crucial screening criteria for quality SLRs (Sharma and Bansal, 2023). Notably, the SCImago Journal and Country Rank is widely used to assess journal quality, focusing on prestige by considering citations and the citing journals (Butler, 2008). Journals are ranked in four quartiles (Q1–Q4), with Q1 being the most prestigious. Additionally, the ABDC list is a compilation of business journals by the Australian Business Deans Council. For this review, the authors select articles published in journals ranked from

Q1 to Q3 or listed in the ABDC list to ensure a certain level of journal quality in which the reviewed articles were published.

This process narrowed the sample to 761 articles. The full-text papers of the remaining sample were then screened to eliminate articles that were out of scope and irrelevant focus despite appearing in the initial keyword search. Papers were also excluded for the following reasons: they were out of management scope, for example, the sample consisted of student populations lacking work experience; they did not present empirical evidence; and they focused on broad leadership or CSR without a specific focus on RL. Following this step, 599 are judged out of scope. The final sample of this review was composed of 162 articles published between 2005 and 2023.

In the final step, full-text articles are screened for manual coding in terms of the level of analysis (micro, meso or macro), methodology (qualitative, quantitative or mixed approach), geographical distribution and analysis focus (antecedents, mediators, moderators or outcomes). The input-moderator-mediator-output model (Mohammed *et al.*, 2010) was used to explain RL mechanisms. This model delineates how antecedents lead to outcomes, with mediators clarifying the causal links and moderators influencing their direction/strength. One variable can be set in different groups because of the variability in research focus. For example, “CSR” can be categorized as either an outcome of RL (Wang *et al.*, 2023) or a mediator mediating the relationship between RL and organizational sustainability (Amir *et al.*, 2022). Appendix presents a detailed review protocol of the research.

3. Findings

3.1 Descriptive analysis

The first article in our sample was published in 2005 (Maak and Pless, 2005), followed by slow development (ranging from 1 to 7 publications annually) until 2019. The number of publications doubled from the previous year in 2019–2021, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of RL (Figure 2). RL research has been conducted in different disciplinary academic outlets (88 journals; Table 1), reflecting its interdisciplinary nature. Over three-fourths of the articles on RL appear in second-tier leadership journals or lower, which are seen as less prestigious than top-tier journals. This suggests that the quality of RL research has not yet reached the level required for publication in top-tier journals.

Previous reviews have shown that the USA leads in publication volume, followed by European nations such as Switzerland, Austria and Spain (Marques *et al.*, 2018; Frangieh and Yaacoub, 2017). However, our analysis reveals a significant geographical shift, with a growing concentration of empirical studies conducted in Asian contexts (Table 2) – notably China (38 articles) and Pakistan (24 articles). This trend, also noted in Saeed *et al.* (2023), reflects the increasing institutional and scholarly interest in CSR and sustainability in rapidly industrializing economies, where RL is often explored as a mechanism for navigating stakeholder demands, legitimacy pressures and ethical tensions.

Although many studies use internationally established frameworks, they are primarily grounded in local contexts, reflecting both the adaptation of RL concepts to regional settings and the influence of national research agendas. However, 12 studies adopt a broader international scope, featuring cross-national comparisons. Overall, this evolving geographical diversification suggests a gradual de-Westernization of the RL literature and a widening engagement with contextual variety.

3.2 Antecedents, boundary conditions, outcomes of responsible leadership

This subsection presents a theme-based analysis of categorized articles, examining the determinants, boundary conditions and outcomes of RL. The studies are clustered into three levels: micro level, concentrating on individuals and business leaders; meso level, focusing

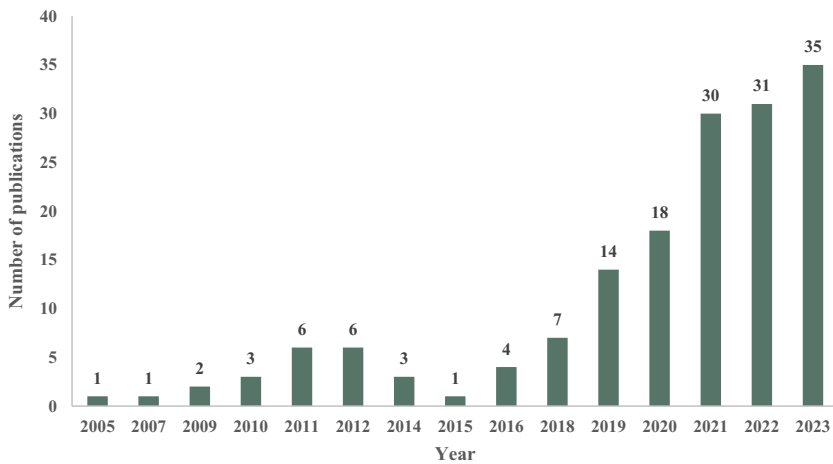


Figure 2. Distribution of publications over time
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Table 1. Distribution of journals publishing responsible leadership research

Journals	Count
<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	21
<i>Sustainability</i>	11
<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	11
<i>Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management</i>	9
<i>Leadership and Organization Development Journal</i>	8
<i>Journal of Management Development</i>	4
<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management; Social Responsibility Journal</i>	3
<i>Group and Organization Management; Frontiers in Environmental Science; Journal of Business Research; Academy of Management Perspectives; Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice; Journal of Global Responsibility; Asia Pacific Journal of Management; International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management; International Journal of Manpower; Business and Society Review; International Journal of Hospitality Management; International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health; Personnel Review</i>	2

Source(s): Table created by authors

on organizational contexts and strategies; and macro level, addressing institutions, culture and society. [Table 3](#) shows the highlights of the findings and the represented articles for each theme. We also consider cross-level analysis to explore interactions and linkages among these levels.

3.2.1 Antecedents. The antecedents of RL generally encompass social, cultural and institutional context factors at the macro level, organizational culture, policies and environment at the meso level and the personalities and demographics of leaders at the micro level. Although there has been some promising conceptual work on the antecedents of RL by [Maak and Pless \(2006\)](#) and [Stahl and De Luque \(2014\)](#), relatively few empirical studies (21 articles) have examined those variables.

Table 2. Country distribution

Country	Count
China	38
Pakistan	24
Mixed countries	12
The USA	10
Egypt	9
India	8
Australia; Portugal; Taiwan; the UK	4
South Africa; Spain; Vietnam	3
Columbia; Finland; Germany; Ghana; Indonesia; Luxembourg; Malaysia; Singapore	2

Source(s): Table created by authors

The review reveals that most variables identified as antecedents of RL are individual-level characteristics. They include personality characteristics, such as virtuousness, courage, care, justice, conscientiousness, responsibility and honesty (Cameron, 2011); perception and orientation (Maak *et al.*, 2016); intelligence, including cultural and emotional intelligence (Miska *et al.*, 2013); and motivation (Pless, 2007). Studies on other micro-level characteristics include self-regulation (Pless, 2007) and abilities, skills and behavioral dispositions, such as learning flexibility (Pless *et al.*, 2011) and global leadership skills (Miska *et al.*, 2013). Only two papers explore the impacts of dark-triad personalities (Üzüm and Özkan, 2023) and gender (Sharr, 2023) on the formation of responsible behaviors.

At the meso level, several factors, such as organizational culture, ethical climate and green human resource management, are discussed as the key drivers influencing RL (Pingali, 2016). Organizational strategy, a core element of a firm's identity, significantly influences how responsible leaders address the needs of various stakeholders locally and globally (Miska *et al.*, 2013). Conversely, business goal difficulty, managerial persona and shadow pressures lead to irresponsible leadership behaviors (Ketola, 2012; Veetikazhi *et al.*, 2022).

At the macro level, social, cultural and institutional contexts significantly influence leaders' tendencies toward responsible or irresponsible behaviors. Factors such as the ethos of the nation, power distance and community pressure shape the values and actions of responsible leaders (Koh *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, researchers (Witt and Stahl, 2016; Sharr, 2023; and Tirmizi, 2023) highlight the significance of varying laws, regulations, institutional cultures, customs and social backgrounds in shaping leaders' behaviors and priorities toward different stakeholders. Finally, the development and influence of mass media are crucial in promoting RL, encouraging leaders to minimize unethical behaviors and decisions (Zhang *et al.*, 2022).

3.2.2 Outcomes. The current RL literature reveals a dearth of research investigating the underlying mechanisms linking RL and its multilevel outcomes, except for the research of Javed *et al.* (2020a). They examine the impacts of RL on relational social capital, a firm's social performance and employees' community citizenship behaviors through the moderating effect of authenticity. Empirical research predominantly concentrates on understanding how leaders influence individual and organizational outcomes and the mechanisms underlying these dynamics.

At the micro level, RL positively contributes to various employee behavioral outcomes. Notably, the relationships between RL and organizational citizenship behaviors oriented toward the community (Rao *et al.*, 2022) and the environment (Abbas *et al.*, 2022) are

Table 3. Themes of the literature review

Level	Key areas	Details	Highlights of the findings	References
<i>Antecedents</i>				
Micro level	Personality characteristics	Virtuousness, courage; care, justice conscientiousness, responsibility; honesty; integrity; trustworthiness; dark-triad personality traits	Machiavellianism encourages irresponsible behaviors Courage and risk-taking are important for RL Positive personal characteristics are the antecedents of RL Disobeying orders could be irresponsible leader when facing unachievable tasks	Cameron (2011), Ketola (2012), Maak et al. (2016), Miska et al. (2013), Pingali (2016), Pless (2007), Pless et al. (2011), Sharr (2023), Tirmizi (2023), Uzum and Ozkan (2023), Veetkazi et al. (2022); Witt and Stahl (2016); Zhang et al. (2022)
	Perception and orientation	Moral identity, perception of moral obligations, perceived social welfare orientation, fiduciary duty	There are positive relationships between value orientations (e.g. shareholders) and RL behaviors	
	Intelligence	Emotional intelligence, systemic thinking; cultural intelligence, emotional awareness	Intercultural competence is vital for responsible leaders in the context of globalization	
	Motivation	Motivational need systems (MNS) and moral motivation.	Motivational need systems and moral, motivational drivers motivate responsible behaviors	
	Self-regulation	Personal self-actualization; self-oriented; goal setting; personal aspirations	Self-regulation factors are the driver of RL	
	Knowledge, skills, and abilities	Learning reflexivity, empowerment, innovation, vision	Learning reflexivity is essential for RL development Responsible leaders should have the vision, engage in ongoing learning process waves of innovation	
	Demographic characteristics	Gender	There are gender differences between character traits and challenges of RL in Myanmar between males and females	
Meso level	Organizational culture	Organizational systems and culture	Organizational systems and culture should be transparent for RL development	
Macro level	Business strategy and management	Business goal, HRM, organizational strategy, human resource development	Business goal difficulty encourages irresponsible behaviors Good HRM could contribute to the development of RL	
	Roles of stakeholders	mass media, local community pressure	Mass media, local pressure, policy and regulations are essential in forming the proactive and passive RL	
	Legal system	policy and regulation		
	National culture			

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Level	Key areas	Details	Highlights of the findings	References
<i>Outcomes</i>				
Micro level	Commitment	Religion; ethnic culture, national culture ethos of the nation; governance	Macro context, including national culture, governance system and religion that can influence a leader's propensity toward RL	Abbas <i>et al.</i> (2022); Akhtar <i>et al.</i> (2023); Ali <i>et al.</i> (2023); Chin <i>et al.</i> (2023); Coldwell <i>et al.</i> (2012); Doh <i>et al.</i> (2011); Javed <i>et al.</i> (2020b); Khan <i>et al.</i> (2025); Marques <i>et al.</i> (2023); Rao <i>et al.</i> (2022); Saleem and Malik (2022); Ur-Rehman <i>et al.</i> (2023); Wang <i>et al.</i> (2023)
		Employee commitment; employee psychological contract	RL positively leads to employee commitment via a direct effect or a mediating or moderating effects of several individual and organizational factors like organizational identification, CSR or employee turnover intentions	
	Attitude	Employee support; work engagement	RL positively related to work engagement through the mediating effects of knowledge sharing or CSR	
	Behaviors	Employee organizational citizenship behaviors for the environment; participative behaviors; knowledge sharing behaviors; unethical behaviors	RL positively influences good employees and negatively influences unethical behaviors RL plays a role as the moderator or mediator that contributes to several relationships between organizational factors and employee behaviors	
Meso level	Perception and orientation	Duty orientation; employee felt responsibility	RL positively related to duty orientation with the mediating effect of job satisfaction	
	Emotion, feeling and well-being	Employee well-being, work-life balance, emotional well-being	RL positively related to emotional well-being and affective well-being at work	
	Intention	Employee turnover intentions; whistleblowing intentions	RL is negatively associated with employee turnover intentions and positively related to employee whistleblowing intentions	
	Performance	Employee sustainable performance, career success, creativity, task performance	RL directly influences positive employee performance RL moderates the indirect influence of calling on employee creativity via career commitment	
	Organizational performance	Financial performance, sustainable performance, ESG performance; organizational downsizing, firm innovation, safety performance	RL directly influences the positive firm's financial performance and contributes to sustainable performance and organizational ESG	
	Corporate strategy	CSR activities	RL moderates several relationships between organizational factors and sustainable organizational performance RL is a crucial driver of CSR activities, fostering strategic agility	
Corporate reputation	Firm reputation management	RL contributes positively to the firm's reputation management during and post-crisis by providing a vision and direction for the future		

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Level	Key areas	Details	Highlights of the findings	References
	Organizational climate	Inclusive organizational climate; ethical climate	RL positively related to an inclusive organizational climate and ethical climate	
	Organizational social capital	Organizational social capital	RL generates social capital, which contributes to the corporate sustainable (environmental, social and economic) performance	
	Organization engagement	Organization's engagement in high-involvement multi-stakeholder initiatives	RL contribute to organizational engagement in high-involvement multi-stakeholder initiatives for sustainable development	
	Relationship management	Customer relationship performance; stakeholder conflict resolution	RL is positively associated with enhanced customer relationship performance and is crucial in resolving stakeholder conflict	
Macro level	Community engagement	Community engagement	RL has a positive impact on community engagement and building social capital at the macro level	
	Social capital	Relational social capital		
Mediators	Self-regulation	Self-efficacy; self-concordance; self-esteem	Leader self-regulation mediates the positive relationship between RL and good employee behaviors	Abbas <i>et al.</i> (2022); Afshari <i>et al.</i> (2023); Ali <i>et al.</i> (2023); Wang <i>et al.</i> (2023); Xuecheng <i>et al.</i> (2022); Zhu <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Micro level	Emotion, feeling and well-being	Emotional exhaustion; anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints; psychological strain; pride; satisfaction; burnout; well-being, apathy, job stress	RL reduced bad employee behaviors (e.g. employee cyberloafing) and promoted good employee behaviors by decreasing negative employee emotions, feelings and well-being (e.g. job stress)	
	Leader position	Leader position level	Low-level leaders mediate the impact of high-level leaders on unethical behaviors	
	Intention	Turnover intentions	Employee turnover intentions mediate the relationship between RL and affective commitment	
	Motivation	Motivation; empowerment	Motivation mediates the positive influence of RL on employee engagement and organizational citizenship behaviors	
	Perception and orientation	Customer-oriented perspective taking; psychological ownership; employees perceived organizational support; CSR perception.	Positive employees' perceptions and orientations mediate the positive relationship between RL and employees' pro-environmental behaviors	
	Recognition	Employee recognition	Positive leader perceptions and orientations mediate the negative relationship between RL and employee unethical behaviors	
	Attitude	Employee commitment, engagement	RL is associated with employee emotional well-being through the mediation effect of recognition for social esteem	
			Good employee attitudes mediate the positive association between RL and good employee behaviors and performance	

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Level	Key areas	Details	Highlights of the findings	References
Meso level	Behaviors	Green behaviors; knowledge sharing behaviors; leader-member exchange	Employee behaviors mediate the interactive effect of CSR, GHRM and RL on positive employee performance	Cheng <i>et al.</i> (2019); Huo <i>et al.</i> (2023); Tian and Suo (2021); Wang <i>et al.</i> (2023); Zhu <i>et al.</i> (2021)
	Organizational climate	Inclusive diversity climate; general distributive justice climate; focalism	RL positively influences good employee behaviors and attitudes through the inclusive and diverse organizational climate, while an adverse climate escalates irresponsible behaviors	
	Organizational performance	Innovation; performance; reputation	RL positively influence the triple-bottom-line performance through the mediating effect of innovation and organizational performance	
	Organizational culture	Corporate ethical culture	Organizational ethical culture will mediate the relationship between RL and firms' green innovation	
	Corporate image	Corporate image	Corporate image and ethical climate mediate the relationship between RL and employees' turnover intention	
	Corporate strategy/ policies	CSR practice, job crafting, environmental management strategy, strategic posture	RL positively influences the organization's sustainable performance and good employee behaviors/ attitudes through the mediating effect of eco-friendly strategies	
	HRM	Green HRM; employment relationship, socially responsible HRM	HRM mediates the positive relationship between RL and employee behaviors, such as innovative behaviors and employee pro-environmental behaviors	
Moderators	Organizational resilience	Organizational resilience	Organizational resilience mediates the relationship between RL and enterprise ESG performance	Cheng <i>et al.</i> (2019); Huo <i>et al.</i> (2023); Tian and Suo (2021); Wang <i>et al.</i> (2023); Zhu <i>et al.</i> (2021)
	Motivation	Self-enhancement motive	Self-enhancement motive moderates the relationship between RL and work engagement	
	Perception and orientation	Leader-employee value congruence; employee goal orientation	Perceptions and orientations of employees moderate the positive impacts of RL on employee pro-environmental behaviors	
	Relationship and authority	Leader-member exchange; supervisor-subordinate guanxi, managerial discretion, founder status	High-level leader relationships and authority strengthen the impacts of RL on employee and organizational sustainable performance	
	Personality characteristics	Individualism, conscientiousness, authenticity	Positive personality traits strengthen the relationship between RL and employee perception and employee citizenship behaviors	
	Chronic regulatory focus	Promotion/prevention focus	Promotion focus strengthens, and prevention focus weakens the relationship between RL and employee pro-environmental behaviors (EPB)	

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Level	Key areas	Details	Highlights of the findings	References
Meso level	Behaviors	Helping initiative behaviors	Helping initiative behaviors moderates the association between RL and knowledge-sharing behaviors	
	Demographic characteristics	Gender	Gender moderates the relationship between RL and emotional well-being through the mediation effect of recognition for social esteem	
	Human resources management	HRM system strength, green HRM	HRM system strength moderates the link between green HRM practices and RL, which moderates the effects of CSR on employee green behaviors and performances	
	Organizational climate	Sustainable organizational climate, relational transparency	Sustainable organizational climate moderates the relationship between RL and employee motivation, commitment and behaviors, while relational transparency moderates the relationship between RL and ethical climate	
	Corporate strategy/ policies	Company's strategy; compensation incentive, CSR practice, founder status	Corporate strategy positively regulates the indirect effect of RL on organizational sustainable performance through organizational resilience	

Source(s): Table created by authors

frequently studied. RL is also a significant determinant of a range of employee attitudinal outcomes, including employee engagement (Ali *et al.*, 2023), whistleblowing intentions (Akhtar *et al.*, 2020) and a lower level of turnover intention (Marques *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, an increasing number of studies connect RL with performance aspects such as career success (Li *et al.*, 2022) and employee sustainable performance (Chin *et al.*, 2023).

At the meso level, a substantial amount of research focuses on the impact of RL on firm performance metrics, including triple-bottom-line performance, financial performance and safety performance (Wang *et al.*, 2023). The findings indicate a positive relationship between RL and organizational triple-bottom-line performance, suggesting that RL does not necessarily lead to trade-offs between financial and environmental performance. When framing within stakeholder theory, RL is also crucial in talent management (Doh *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, the responses of responsible leaders to business crises can mitigate organizational instability and contribute to reestablishing stability, which is achievable through responsible management practices (Coldwell *et al.*, 2012). More recent studies have explored the role of RL in fostering an inclusive and ethical organizational climate, furthering organizational sustainability (Wang *et al.*, 2023).

At the macro level, few studies have examined the role of RL in community engagement (Mehta *et al.*, 2022), industry innovation (Yildiz *et al.*, 2023) and crisis management (Pounder, 2021) during turbulent times (three qualitative papers).

Finally, RL also plays a role as a mediator or moderator across different levels, highlighting its multifaceted functions. For example, RL mediates the relationships between the perceived impacts of climate change and employee commitment (Mousa *et al.*, 2019) or culture and knowledge sharing (Rao *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, both the positive and negative moderating effects of RL are discussed in 12 articles. For example, RL positively moderates the relationship between employee engagement and commitment (Bouichou *et al.*, 2022) but negatively moderates the relationship between socially responsible human resource practices and employee CSR engagement (Luu, 2022).

3.2.3 Mediators and moderators in the responsible leadership mechanism. This section delves into empirical research on the mediators and moderators involved in the RL process. The mediators and moderators affect the process of the antecedents – RL and RL outcomes (Mohammed *et al.*, 2010). Few studies have examined factors mediating or moderating antecedents, such as RL. Only Veetikazhi *et al.* (2022) discussed focalism as a mediator in the positive relationship between business goal difficulty and socially irresponsible leaders' behaviors. Conversely, empirical studies have been more prolific in investigating mediators and moderators in the RL–outcome relationship.

With respect to micro-level factors, research has underscored the multifaceted mediating and moderating roles of leaders and employees (e.g. gender, competence, values, social distance and conscientiousness), attitudes, beliefs (e.g. goal orientation, motivations, trust, commitment and individualism) in affecting RL–employee behavior (Abbas *et al.*, 2022), attitudes (Ali *et al.*, 2023) or performance outcomes (Afshari *et al.*, 2023). The trickle-down effects of RL on employee behaviors are also examined through the moderating effects of the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility (Tian and Suo, 2021) and leader–follower value congruence (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, several studies use moderated-mediation models to investigate the mediating and moderating effects on the RL–employee outcome relationships. For example, conscientiousness has been examined as a moderator and felt obligations and job stress have been examined as mediators influencing the RL–employee cyberloafing relationship (Zhu *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, research has tested factors that mediate/moderate the relationship between RL and firm performance (such as sustainable development or innovation performance). For

example, the relationship between RL and sustainable business performance is mediated by knowledge-sharing behaviors (Xuecheng *et al.*, 2022) or moderated by CEO founder status (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Concerning organizational-related factors, there has been limited research focusing solely on either their moderating or mediating role in RL–outcome relationships, with a few exceptions (Javed *et al.*, 2020b; Mousa, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2015). Finally, several papers use moderated-mediation models to investigate the conditional indirect effects on RL outcomes through various mediators and moderators across levels of analysis (Zhu *et al.*, 2021; Huo *et al.*, 2023).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to review the existing empirical literature and synthesize the determinants, mechanisms, boundary conditions and outcomes of RL to construct a framework for the RL process observed at the micro, meso and macro levels. These interconnected themes are essential for understanding and managing the complex mechanisms under which RL operates. Our analysis offers detailed insight into the complex, multilevel input-moderator-mediator-output mechanism governing RL, as shown in Figure 3.

We identify several factors that can promote the behaviors of responsible leaders in terms of antecedents. At the micro level, different characteristics and traits of leaders influencing RL are identified in this review. A more comprehensive understanding of RL necessitates systematic methodologies to investigate antecedents beyond virtues, moral values, competencies and skills. This approach should encompass an analysis of the interplay among reasoning, intuition and emotion to understand the underlying foundations of RL practice (Miska and Mendenhall,

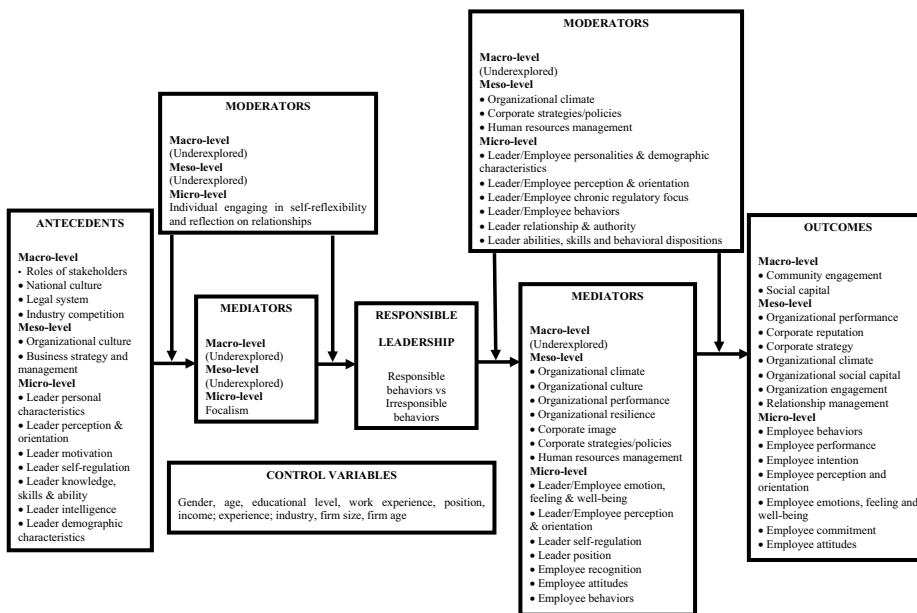


Figure 3. Main model of responsible leadership mechanism
Source: Figure created by authors

2018). Additionally, little is known about how the abovementioned micro-level antecedents can explain different RL behaviors.

Moreover, to date, few studies have explored the interactions of multiple types of traits to clarify the conditions under which a specific leader trait influences leaders to behave proactively. At the meso level, while studies have examined the connections between RL and organizational variables such as responsible management, corporate governance and HR, an integrative perspective on these factors remains limited. Another challenge multinational companies face is adapting business strategies to different regions without jeopardizing RL development, which requires an improved understanding of the macroenvironment in which they are situated. At the macro level, initial steps have been taken to comprehend the institutional and cultural antecedents of RL, yet significant gaps persist in identifying relevant antecedents at this level.

Turning to the outcomes at the micro level, we confirm that the current research has identified several effects on employee attitudes, behaviors and cognitions, including job satisfaction, motivation and task performance. This perspective corresponds only to traditional leadership tasks with limited scope. The effects on stakeholders beyond employees, particularly those external to the organization, remain largely underexplored. At the meso level, organizational performance has been examined predominantly. Nevertheless, questions about trade-offs among economic, social and environmental factors in organizational performance to understand the actual value of sustainable development remain unaddressed. Moreover, little research has focused on outcomes at the macro level, especially in quantitative studies.

With respect to the moderators and mediators in the model, this review offers insights into the boundary conditions in the antecedent–RL and RL–outcome relationships. More fruitful findings regarding the mediating and moderating factors affecting RL outcomes across levels of analysis are available. Individual-related factors such as employee commitment play multifaceted roles in the RL–outcome relationship at the micro and meso levels. On the other hand, organizational-related factors are primarily examined in the complex moderated-mediation model of the relationship between RL and organizational performance outcomes. However, the findings still depict traditional leadership performance without macro-level considerations in the mechanism.

Our comprehensive multilevel model of RL offers a structured representation of how RL unfolds within and across organizational contexts. Unlike prior reviews that remained thematic or classificatory, this model articulates the dynamic linkages between levels, capturing structural differentiation and interdependence. It serves as a not only field map but also conceptual scaffold for future research aiming to deepen understanding of the mechanisms through which RL operates and influences individual, organizational and societal outcomes. We now turn to future research avenues.

5. Moving forward: Future directions for responsible leadership research

5.1 Research Avenue 1: Complex layering of responsible leadership

This review highlights that the exploration of RL at multiple levels of analysis, from micro level to macro level, remains limited. Some scholars (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018) advocate for a cross-level framework that examines how a stakeholder-oriented RL approach can yield positive outcomes at all these levels, integrating various RL perspectives. Moreover, considering the macroenvironment without simultaneously managing the microenvironment, and vice versa, may lead to conflicts with different stakeholders (Pingali, 2016). Therefore, RL research should strategically work from the

microenvironment to the macroenvironment to effectively fulfil the requirements of RL operation.

This review highlights the need for future research to explore how RL interacts with various factors across different levels to influence work. At the micro level, the insights from [Miska and Mendenhall \(2018\)](#) remain pertinent. Research should expand to include a broader stakeholder perspective in RL, focusing on sustainable value creation and positive change. This involves examining the impacts of RL on various external stakeholders. At the meso level, understanding RL within broader business systems is crucial, incorporating a multistakeholder viewpoint and exploring how RL balances economic, social and environmental outcomes.

Empirical research on the outcomes of RL at the macro level is notably sparse. Future studies should empirically demonstrate how RL influences macro-level outcomes. Furthermore, cross-level studies, which are underexplored both empirically and theoretically, could significantly advance RL research. Investigating connections between RL antecedents and outcomes across levels will deepen our understanding of RL as a process. Some researchers suggest research directions at the intersection of responsible business leaders (micro level) and the UN Global Compact (macro level), highlighting the value of cross-level research in progressing the RL field ([Voegtlin and Pless, 2014](#)).

5.2 *Research Avenue 2: Further exploration of the boundary conditions of responsible leadership*

This review reveals a limited understanding of the boundary conditions that determine the effectiveness of RL. Current studies have focused on boundary conditions such as employees' self-efficacy ([Li et al., 2022](#)) or task interdependence ([He et al., 2021](#)). The importance of traits such as authenticity, virtuousness and charisma has been highlighted ([Cameron, 2011](#); [Muff et al., 2020](#)), underscoring a gap in our understanding of RL, particularly concerning leaders' virtues, values, competencies and skills.

Additionally, there is a notable lack of research on individual contingent conditions, including subordinates' demographics (gender and age), psychological traits (moral predispositions, personality and *locus* of control) and social factors (education, occupation and employment status). Further studies are needed to investigate the conducive conditions for RL, covering internal factors (organizational culture, justice and politics) and external elements (industry sectors, stakeholder behaviors and national culture) to understand how those factors can form responsible leaders, as suggested by [Witt and Stahl \(2016\)](#) and [Berger et al. \(2011\)](#).

Similar to prevalent leadership theories, RL research should address its gender-blind spots. A more nuanced understanding of how RL intersects with gender dynamics is crucial, especially as only one paper has considered this aspect ([Sharr, 2023](#)). This gap highlights the need for more comprehensive research to fully grasp the multifaceted nature of RL across different contexts and conditions.

5.3 *Research Avenue 3: Reconnecting responsible leadership with time*

[George and Jones \(2000\)](#) argued that time can reshape theoretical constructs and relationships, but most RL studies overlook this dimension. RL drivers require time to manifest outcomes, and the relationships between inputs and outcomes may shift over time ([Shamir, 2011](#)). RL is a dynamic process involving reciprocal interactions between leaders and stakeholders ([Pless, 2007](#)), and leader–member exchanges evolve over time ([Martin et al., 2016](#)).

Current RL research, predominantly cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (usually with no more than three waves), adheres to the a-temporal nature of RL, assuming that the

studied constructs and their relationships are static (Shamir, 2011). This is problematic because these studies assume that the antecedents, mediators, moderators and outcomes of RL, along with their relationships, remain stable over time (Fischer *et al.*, 2017). These methods fail to capture the dynamic process of RL development. For example, leaders' personalities or behaviors might change with experience or advancement within an organization. Only one article uses a biographical analysis to explore the role of changing identities and motivational drivers of responsible leaders (Pless, 2007).

Moreover, various leadership traits, including dark-triad personalities, are currently under-researched. For example, dark personality traits can positively or negatively affect leadership effectiveness outcomes depending on context and time (Mackey *et al.*, 2021). To date, only a few studies have explored the interactions and development of multiple types of traits to clarify the conditions under which a specific leader trait can gradually influence responsible leaders over time. Thus, researchers may use different approaches, such as biographical studies or historiometric research, to comprehend the progress of RL development (Mumford, 2006).

Furthermore, researchers may use methods such as ethnographic studies, longitudinal and comparative case studies, diaries and other approaches that track RL relationships as they evolve to gain a deeper understanding of RL processes. Future RL research could enhance multi-wave longitudinal studies through frequent measurements, incorporating mediators and sophisticated statistical analyses to account for reciprocal relationships. These studies should aim to cover meaningful periods, concentrating on the dynamic nature of the RL process. Additionally, the interaction between time and other contextual variables warrants consideration in future studies.

5.4 Research Avenue 4: Reconnecting responsible leadership with space

Recent RL research has expanded to developing countries such as China and Pakistan, alongside significant work from Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) nations, reflecting a broader effort to understand RL globally. However, most studies remain limited to specific national contexts, with findings often not transferable between different institutional environments, mainly Eastern and Western nations (Witt and Stahl, 2016). Comparative cross-national studies are scarce, prompting a call for more research in diverse geographical contexts, including developed Asian countries and developing Western nations, to explore the institutional and cultural antecedents of RL.

Furthermore, given the crucial role of RL in connecting stakeholders for sustainable development, there is an urgent need to understand better how RL can support the achievement of sustainable development goals for different sectors across various nations, especially in the service sector in different contexts (Amir *et al.*, 2022). For example, the tourism and hospitality industry, often referred to as "the smokeless industry," still has notable environmental and social impacts. However, research using tourism as a context for RL analysis is scarce. Another setting that could be a focus of RL research is the impact of RL on private–public partnerships.

5.5 Research Avenue 5: Responsible leadership in the digital world

The shift toward digital workplaces is a widespread and transformative trend across diverse sectors and organizational sizes (Cortellazzo *et al.*, 2019). Digitalization is a double-edged phenomenon that drives job creation and destruction, significantly altering role requirements and blurring traditional organizational boundaries (Pless *et al.*, 2021). Thus, leadership becomes vital in harnessing the advantages of digitalization, especially in talent management, and enhancing employee engagement and connectivity.

However, this transformation creates new ethical challenges for leaders, necessitating a re-evaluation of conventional leadership theories, especially in the context of RL. Some researchers pose an unaddressed question regarding the sufficiency of current leadership theories to explain the nuances of digitalization (Cortellazzo *et al.*, 2019). We require new theoretical frameworks to understand how responsible leaders adapt to these changes. Future research should explore how responsible leaders manage increased transparency demands in ICT-mediated relationships, balance followers' autonomy and privacy needs and build trust in highly virtual environments.

6. Limitations and directions for future systematic reviews

While our review is methodologically rigorous and analytically grounded, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that stem from deliberate choices regarding scope and focus. First, this study is confined to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English. As a result, we may have excluded valuable studies published in other languages, particularly in regions where RL has gained traction. At the same time, the significant representation of Asian studies – especially from China and Pakistan – suggests that non-Western perspectives are increasingly being published in international, English-language outlets. We, therefore, believe that our sample reflects this evolving scholarly landscape and remains sufficiently inclusive to support the validity of our synthesis.

Second, our search strategy focused exclusively on the term “responsible leader*.” This relatively simple query may have missed empirical work operating under adjacent or overlapping constructs. However, we viewed this as a necessary boundary to maintain conceptual clarity. Broader or more expansive search strategies risk conflating related but theoretically distinct constructs, thereby undermining the coherence of the synthesis. Our focused approach enables us to trace with greater precision how RL has been empirically studied, operationalized and theorized.

Third, our review is organized around a multilevel analytical logic – mapping constructs and relationships at micro, meso and macro levels – rather than focusing on specific industries, sectors or institutional contexts. This choice was intended to produce a transferable model of RL dynamics that could inform research across contexts. Readers interested in sector-specific insights or regionally bounded analyses may refer to reviews such as Foldøy *et al.* (2021) or Frangieh and Yaacoub (2017), which engage more directly with contextual particularities.

Finally, we take the construct of RL as conceptually defined and do not revisit foundational definitional debates or the contestation between RL and related leadership approaches. Our objective was not to refine the concept itself but to examine its empirical configuration and the mechanisms through which it operates. Readers seeking greater engagement with conceptual boundaries and definitional tensions may refer to de Klerk and Jooste (2023) or Javed *et al.* (2025).

7. Conclusion

This SLR offers a comprehensive synthesis of 162 empirical studies on RL published between 2005 and 2023. The review consolidates nearly two decades of research into an integrated multilevel process model through a structured mapping of antecedents, mediators, moderators and outcomes across micro, meso and macro levels. This model advances the field by clarifying the empirical configuration of RL and by enabling a more coherent understanding of how it operates across individual, organizational and societal domains. By delineating the internal architecture of RL research, this review provides scholars and practitioners with a clear analytical framework for situating existing findings and designing

future inquiries. In doing so, it contributes to the maturing of RL as a field of study and supports its continued development as a meaningful concept for theory and practice.

Author contributions

It is a part of Giang's PhD project. Giang NT Nguyen performed data collection and analysis. Giang NT Nguyen and Heidi Wechtler wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

Data is available upon request.

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Further reading

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Table A1. Review protocol

Steps	Criteria	Details
1	Search database	ScienceDirect, Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, EBSCO
2	Search strings	TS = (“responsible leader*”)
3	Document type	Research articles
4	Research areas	Business management, leadership and ethics only
5	Journal type	Peer-reviewed English language journal article
6	Journal ranking	Exclude SJR Q4 or non-ranked from ABDC

Source(s): Authors’ own work

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