Mapping the Research Landscape of Ethical Climate: A Bibliometric Perspective

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Abstract. Ethical climate plays a crucial role in shaping organizational behavior, influ-encing employee commitment, leadership effectiveness, and overall ethical decision-making. This study uses bibliometric analysis to map the research landscape on ethical climate with data retrieved from Scopus. Through key-word co-occurrence, citation, and co-citation analysis using VOSviewer and Biblioshiny (RStudio) software, this study identified three main clusters in this field: (1) ethical climate, ethical leadership, and organizational commit-ment, (2) morality, moral distress, health worker attitudes, and psychological stress (3) organizational culture, ethics, and ethics. The overlay visualization shows the evolution of research focus from organizational culture and busi-ness ethics towards ethical leadership, moral distress, and whistleblowing. These results confirm the need for further research to fill the gap to improve understanding of the dynamics of ethical climate across industries. This study contributes to ethical climate literature by offering a comprehensive bibliometric perspective as well as providing insights into research trends, theory development, and future research directions.

1 Introduction

In recent years, numerous ethical scandals have rocked the business world and the public sector, highlighting the urgency of ethical climate in organizations. The Volkswagen 'Diesel Dupe' scandal, for example, showed how a large company can ignore regulations and lower the moral standards of business, ultimately undermining the fundamental values of the company [1]. The Enron case shows that an unhealthy organizational culture with a primary focus on profits and executive incentives can erode social responsibility and breed irresponsible leadership [2]. Meanwhile, the Wells Fargo & Company scandal further reinforced the fact that unethical and illegal business practices not only undermine public trust, but also create widespread impacts on the stability of the financial industry[3]. These cases show that a weak ethical climate in an organization not only impacts on the company's reputation but also affects public trust and business sustainability in the long run. Therefore,

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understanding how an ethical climate is formed and influences organizational behavior is becoming increasingly important.

Within organizations, employees typically form a shared understanding of what is considered ethical and unethical behavior. The concept of ethical climate was first introduced by [4] and has since become a key framework in understanding how organizations build ethical perceptions among their members. Ethical climate not only serves as a guide in making moral decisions, but also plays a role in shaping individual behavior as well as the overall organizational culture. Based on the model developed by Victor and Cullen, there are five main categories of ethical climate: caring, law and code, rules, instrumental, and independence, each of which reflects a different approach to setting ethical standards in organizations [5]. Thus, an ethical climate plays an important role in creating a more transparent work environment, reducing the risk of unethical practices, and increasing trust from various stakeholders.

Previous studies have explored the concept of ethical climate in a variety of contexts, including its impact on job satisfaction, organizational performance, and compliance with business regulations [6]. Systematic studies and meta-analyses have provided valuable insights into the organizational factors that influence ethical climate. However, while past research has contributed to understanding this aspect, there are still gaps in mapping research patterns, key trends and interrelationships between topics in this field. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach is needed to identify research developments, directions of academic study, and collaboration among researchers in the field of ethical climate.

The bibliometric approach is relevant in this context because it can provide a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of ethical climate research. This method enables a more systematic and quantitative analysis of publication trends, academic collaboration maps, and concept linkages in scientific literature. By utilizing techniques such as citation analysis, co-citation and keyword analysis, bibliometric approaches can reveal research patterns that are not always visible in traditional literature reviews. Therefore, this analysis can help academics and practitioners understand the ethical climate research landscape more objectively and deeply.

Our research is different from previous studies. To the best of our knowledge, previous studies examined the development of ethics research with bibliometric analysis through the Web of Science database such as leadership ethics, ethical climate, ethical behavior with context differences [7]. However, bibliometric research that specifically discusses the ethical climate ecosystem using the Scopus database is still very limited. In addition, research on the development of research involving multidimensionality by collaborating in the fields of Business, Management and Accounting, Social Sciences, Economics, Econometrics and Finance, and Psychology is also limited. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by providing a broader and more comprehensive perspective based on data from Scopus.

Unlike previous studies that focused more on systematic approaches or meta-analysis, this research uses a bibliometric approach to map research patterns in the field of ethical climate. By utilizing software such as VOSviewer and Biblioshiny, this study can visualize research networks more accurately, reveal key trends, and analyze shifts in study focus on recent decades. Therefore, this study is expected to provide new insights into the dynamics of ethical climate research and help identify future research directions.

This study aims to map the research landscape related to ethical climate through a bibliometric approach. Specifically, it seeks to identify key trends, especially topics in emerging themes in literature. In addition, this analysis aims to reveal the relationships between articles based on citation, co-citation and keyword analysis techniques, to provide recommendations for academics and practitioners in understanding the development of ethical climate studies and potential future research directions.

We used a bibliometric analysis approach by integrating quantitative and qualitative methods [8]. The research used the keyword ethical climate adopted by [9]. Ethical climate is a crucial element in organizational culture that influences various factors related to work as well as the results achieved by the organization [10]. This aspect has a significant impact on individual behavior and collectivity in organizations, so it is a major concern in future research development [5] . The articles were obtained from Scopus on February 26, 2025, which is one of the leading and most widely used databases of scientific publications, including thousands of articles of high quality [11].

The search was conducted using the PRISMA model approach. The PRISMA model ensures a systematic and transparent process of identifying, filtering and selecting relevant literature, as well as maintaining consistency and reproducibility in bibliometric studies [12]. The initial screening obtained 1,290 documents. The search was narrowed down based on subject areas including Business, Management and Accounting, Social Sciences, Economics, Econometrics and Finance, and Psychology resulting in 940 documents. Next, filtering was done based on document type focusing on research articles and conference papers in Scopus, resulting in the collection of 823 documents. Further filtering was done based on language, with a focus on English, resulting in a collection of 797 documents. Finally, screening was conducted based on relevant titles and abstracts, resulting in the collection of 792 documents.

2 Data Characteristics

As a result of the bibliometric analysis conducted, 792 documents out of 1,290 documents related to the topic of ethical climate were identified in the period 1989 to 2025. Table 1 provides an overview of the annual distribution of articles published over the last three decades. The data shows that the number of publications has increased significantly with an annual growth rate of 4.27%. At the beginning of the period (1989), publications were still limited, but this number grew steadily, with an average of 37.87 citations per document. Temporarily, there were relatively few publications in the beginning, but the number increased significantly in the following decades. The average age of the documents was 9.73 years, indicating that although many documents were published a long time ago, they remain highly relevant today. The number of authors involved in this publication reached 1,879, indicating broad participation from various parties in this topic.

Table 1. Data Characteristics.

Description	Results
Timespan	1989:2025
Total number of documents	1290
Total sample documents	792
Annual Growth Rate %	4.27
Document Average Age	9.73
Average citations per doc	37.87
Authors	1879

3 Growth in the Number of Publications and Citations of Ethical Climate

Based on bibliometric analysis, 792 documents related to the topic under study were identified from 1989 to 2025. Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of the number of publications on the topic under study, with a significant upward trend in the number of publications, especially in 2024, which recorded 71 publications. In the period 1989-2005, publications were still limited with average citations ranging from 1.06 to 7.16, with a peak in 1998 (7.16). In the 2006-2015 period, the number of publications continued to increase, with average citations stabilizing between 3.00 to 6.16. However, in the period 2016-2025, despite the increasing number of publications, the average citations per document declined sharply, recording only 0.93 in 2024 and 0.11 in 2025. This shows that while publications are increasing, the influence of citations is decreasing over time. This decline may be due to the fact that publications in recent years are still relatively new, so they have not had enough time to be widely cited by subsequent studies.

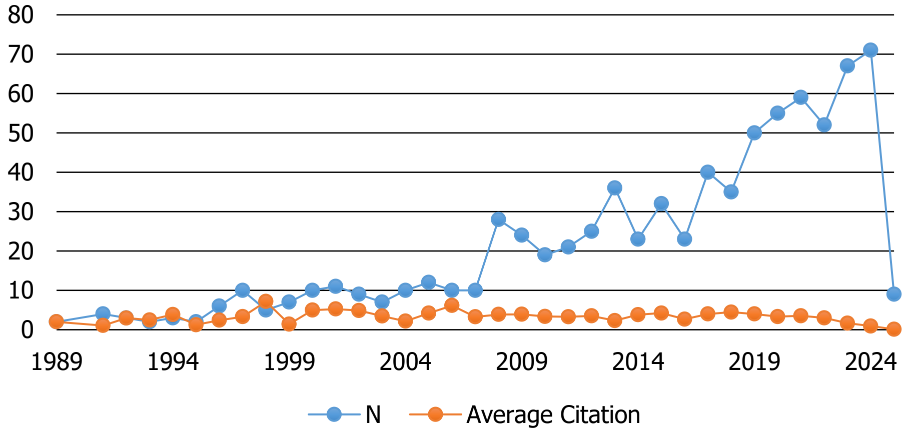

Fig. 1. Number of scientific articles and average citations on ethical climate per yea.

4 Keyword Co-occurrences Analysis

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted to understand the conceptual structure in *ethical climate* studies using VOSviewer software. From 2,612 keywords in the academic literature, 105 keywords with a minimum frequency of occurrence of seven times were selected. The visualization results showed four main clusters, each representing a dominant research theme in this field. The first cluster (red) highlights the close relationship between *ethical climate*, *ethical leadership*, and *organizational commitment*. A strong ethical climate, when supported by values-based leadership, can create a conducive work environment and increase employees' loyalty and emotional attachment to the organization. In addition to acting as a reinforcement of moral values, the ethical climate is also a defense mechanism against the development of an instrumental climate that is oriented towards personal interests.

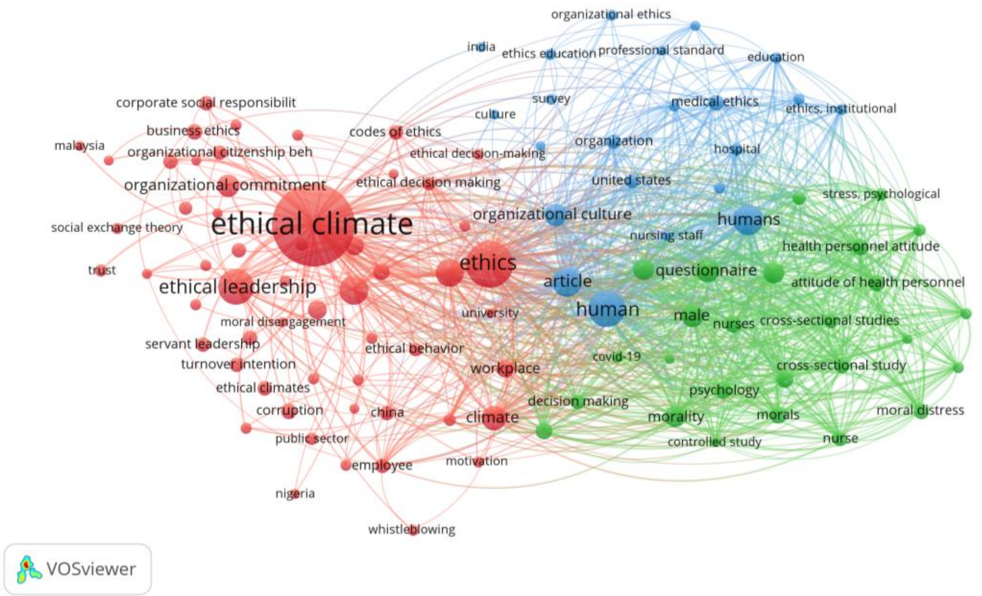

Fig. 2. Keyword co-occurrences

The second cluster (green) focuses on the issue of *moral distress*, especially in the health sector. This phenomenon reflects the psychological distress experienced by medical personnel when facing complex ethical dilemmas, role conflicts, and limited resources. The literature suggests that moral distress is a serious problem that demands deeper conceptual understanding and systematic interventions to protect the well-being of healthcare workers [14]. Meanwhile, the third cluster (blue) underscores the role of organizational culture, ethics, and institutions in shaping a work environment based on moral values. An ethical organizational culture, if supported by leadership with integrity and a supportive institutional structure, can encourage professional behavior, increase accountability, and strengthen the reputation and competitiveness of the organization in a sustainable manner. Therefore, future research needs to be developed by integrating the concept of an ethical climate that can adapt to the dynamics of modern organizational environments[15].

In the context of digital transformation, for example, new challenges have emerged related to data privacy, algorithm transparency, and corporate social responsibility in technology implementation. In the realm of artificial intelligence (AI) governance, the concept of ethical climate can be developed to explain how organizations are able to balance the efficiency of automation with human values and the principles of algorithmic justice. Meanwhile, in evolving organizational forms such as virtual organizations, platform-based firms, and the gig economy, ethical climate theory needs to be adapted to understand how moral values and integrity can be maintained in increasingly flexible, dynamic, and decentralized work structures. More details can be seen in Figure 2.

5 Overlay Visualization

Overlay visualization shows that research on *ethical climate* has undergone significant development over time. Initially, many studies highlighted the role of organizational culture in shaping ethical norms and employee behavior. Over time, the focus shifted to issues of corruption, corporate social responsibility, and value fit between individuals and organizations. Studies showed that a strong ethical culture can encourage prosocial behavior, although the effect tends to decline without a sustainability strategy. Furthermore, academic attention has focused on the role of *ethical leadership* and socio-cultural context in shaping the ethical climate, especially in developing countries such as Nigeria, South Africa and China.

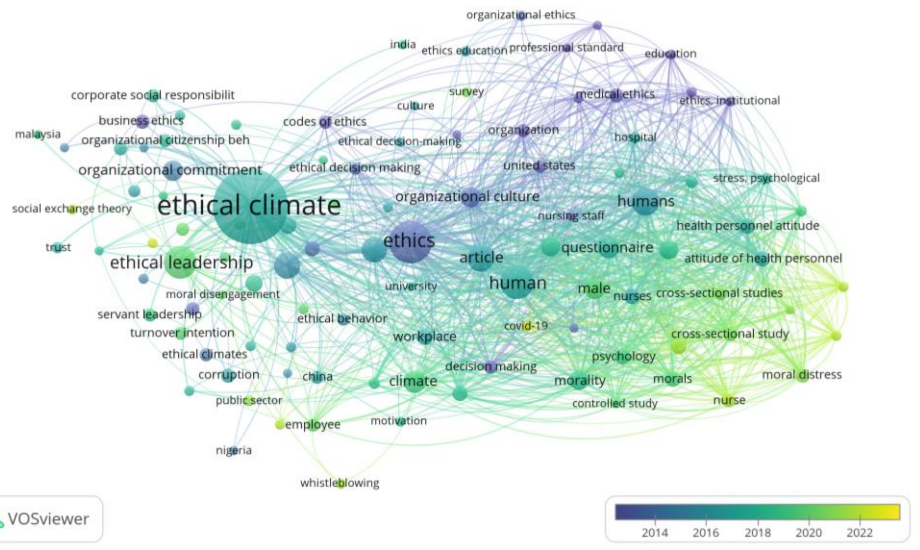

Fig. 3. Overlay Visualization

In general, the mapping results reveal a consistent pattern of publication growth over time, indicating an increasing academic focus on ethical issues within the organizational context. This increase confirms that organizational ethics studies are no longer viewed as complementary discourse, but have become a central aspect in understanding the legitimacy, reputation, and performance of organizations in various sectors. Analysis of the main thematic clusters reveals that research in this field primarily focuses on three key areas: moral distress, particularly in the healthcare sector, organizational culture rooted in moral values, and ethical governance, which emphasizes the importance of institutional integrity and accountability. These three themes demonstrate that the dimension of organizational ethics involves a close interaction between individual psychological aspects and institutional structures that support ethical behavior in the workplace.

In addition, the evolution of the research focus reveals an interesting shift in the direction of study, from discussions about organizational culture to ethical leadership and then to the issue of whistleblowing. This development highlights the increasingly complex dynamics of organizational ethics, where the courage of individuals to expose violations is significantly influenced by the ethical climate, organizational identification, and psychological safety. Thus, this research evolution confirms that the creation of an ethical and responsible work environment is the result of synergy between moral values, leadership with integrity, and institutions that support sustainable ethical practices. Further details can be seen in Figure 3of moral distress and societal moral degradation also began to be linked to organizational legitimacy and performance. More recently, studies have increasingly focused on *whistleblowing* behavior in both the private and public sectors, emphasizing the importance of ethical climate, organizational identification, and psychological safety as mediating factors. Overall, this evolution of research reflects the increasing complexity of organizational ethics dynamics, where the interaction between values, leadership, institutions and individuals is key in creating an ethical and responsible work environment. More details can be seen in Figure 3.

6 Conclusion

This study presents a bibliometric analysis to map the intellectual structure and developmental trends of ethical climate studies. The results indicate a shift in focus from organizational culture and general ethics to more specific topics, including ethical leadership, moral distress, and whistleblowing. Keyword co-occurrence analysis identified four main clusters that reflect the interrelationships between leadership, employee commitment, organizational culture, and psychological distress in the workplace. Practically, the findings confirm the importance of building an ethical climate to increase employee engagement and prevent deviant behavior. The research also highlights the need to explore moral distress in sectors other than healthcare, as well as to strengthen safe whistleblowing mechanisms. Despite making meaningful contributions, this study has limitations in terms of data sources, analytical approach, and industry context. Future research is therefore recommended to expand the database, integrate qualitative methods, and explore specific sectors to deepen the understanding of ethical dynamics in organizational environments.

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