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Uncover the White and Black Box of Laissez-Faire Leadership for Organizational Sustainability: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Modern workplaces are in need of a nuanced understanding of diverse leadership styles to effectively address their unique challenges and opportunities. This implies that the study of laissez-faire leadership holds significant value as it provides a comprehensive insight into leadership styles, practical applications, and impact on individuals, teams, and organizations. Leaders well-versed in the hands-off approach can strategically use the approach to harmonize with the goals and characteristics of team members and organizations. Therefore, this research aimed to provide a systematic and thorough analysis of global trends in leadership, specifically focusing on the laissez-faire leadership style, through a bibliometric approach. The Scopus database was adopted to analyze and categorize all open-access English literature published from 1993 to 2023. VOSviewer software was also used for the graphical mapping of the scientific landscape. Out of 552 documents from the Scopus database related to laissez-faire leadership, 85 were selected for in-depth bibliometric analysis to comprehensively assess the current state and anticipate future trends. The results showed a significant upward trajectory in the literature, indicating that laissez-faire leadership had profound effects on organizations and their members. On one hand, the hands-off approach enhanced job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement, motivation, rewards, and employee well-being. Laissez-faire leadership could also lead to significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion, job stress, burnout, and workplace bullying.

Keywords: Bibliometric Analysis; Organizational Effectiveness; Laissez-Faire Leadership Style; VOSviewer.

1. Introduction

Modern organizations are experiencing substantial evolution [1–3] in response to a range of economic, technological, and cultural shifts. Successful leaders in recent dynamic business environments show adaptability [4, 5], data-driven decision-making [6, 7], inclusivity [8, 9], and an unwavering commitment to both personal and organizational growth. However, leadership is confined solely to those occupying the highest rungs of the organizational hierarchy. Effective leaders can exist at all levels and are defined by the ability to flexibly adapt [10–12] to changing circumstances, leverage technology, and prioritize the well-being of employees while propelling the organization toward its objectives. These leaders lead with purpose and a profound understanding of the broader social and environmental context in which the organizations operate.

Laissez-faire leadership, also known as delegation [13] or the hands-off approach, represents a leadership style where leaders grant the team members a high degree of autonomy to make decisions and manage their work. In the

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modern era, the hands-off approach encounters multiple challenges that can impede its effectiveness in certain organizational contexts. This is primarily due to the fast-paced, interconnected, and complex nature of the recent business environment. The landscape of modern organizations, characterized by global competition, rapid technological advancements, and dynamic market conditions, demands leaders who possess the capability to adapt swiftly [14–17], providing the necessary direction to keep pace with changes effectively. The hands-off approach may result in delayed or inadequate responses to existing challenges, potentially leading to employee frustration [18] and hindrances in the cohesive pursuit of organizational goals.

Recent research by Rehman et al. [19] and Abasilim et al. [20] underscores the significance of the laissez-faire leadership style in organizational development. It is a hands-off approach in which leaders delegate authority to subordinates [21], allowing a high degree of autonomy and decision-making power [22]. The term "laissez-faire" derives from the French phrase meaning "leave it alone" or "let it be." By offering minimal direction and guidance, leaders empower employees to make autonomous decisions [23] and take responsibility for their work within organizations [24].

Rather than prescribing decisions, laissez-faire leadership has a range of potential impacts, including both advantages and disadvantages when integrated into organizational settings. The positive aspects, for instance, serve as a catalyst for creativity and innovation within organizations [25]. When employees are granted the autonomy to seek solutions, they often generate inventive and unique ideas. Furthermore, by bestowing autonomy, laissez-faire leaders empower employees to work independently and take ownership of their tasks. The leaders also frequently place their trust in the capabilities [26], leading to enhanced decision-making, particularly among highly skilled and experienced team members. However, laissez-faire leadership has certain drawbacks. For instance, it provides limited direct guidance to employees [27, 28]. The absence of clear leadership directives can leave some team members unsure of their roles and responsibilities. Some may lack the confidence to take initiative [29], leading to procrastination and diminished productivity. In the absence of strong leadership, coordination and communication among employees may suffer [30], resulting in confusion, duplicated efforts, and lower total performance. Laissez-faire leadership may also inadvertently steer teams in different directions without a unified vision, hindering organizational alignment and professional growth [31]. Additionally, the hands-off approach can contribute to role ambiguity and conflicts among coworkers [32].

Research has explored the connection between laissez-faire leadership and employee attitudes within organizations, such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Boye [33] and Donkor & Zhou [34] have identified a significant impact of the hands-off approach on the continuance and affective commitment of team members. Employees perceive strong support from their laissez-faire leaders, increasing the perceived cost of leaving the organization. Consequently, employees are more inclined to stay committed to their leaders and the organizations, resulting in higher continuance commitment. Laissez-faire leadership positively influences affective commitment, as those who perceive their leaders to be supportive tend to develop a deep emotional connection with the organizations, founded on mutual respect and trust to provide a positive work environment. Furthermore, Alqahtani et al. [35], as well as Budiasih et al. [36], report a significant correlation between laissez-faire leadership and job satisfaction. The hands-off effectively empowers employees with a high degree of decision-making authority in specific contexts, a crucial element for growth and job satisfaction.

Recent results acknowledged a negative relationship between laissez-faire leadership and organizational commitment [37, 38], as well as job satisfaction [39, 40]. Leaders often provide minimal to no guidance to the employees. The absence of clear goals and guidance can leave team members feeling adrift and unsupported, leading to a decline in their commitment to the organization. Additionally, laissez-faire leaders frequently fail to provide regular feedback on the efforts of employees. The lack of feedback or recognition can leave employees feeling undervalued, ultimately resulting in reduced job satisfaction.

Based on the existing gaps, this research aims to systematically synthesize the current literature on laissez-faire leadership and contribute insights into existing trends through a concept map outlining the outcomes and future directions. Specifically, the analysis aims to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What characterizes the research landscape of laissez-faire leadership within the field of business management literature?

RQ2. Which authors, journals, institutions, and countries have the most substantial influence in the field of laissez-faire leadership?

RQ3. What key knowledge gaps are evident within the current laissez-faire leadership literature?

RQ4. What are the predominant topics investigated concerning laissez-faire leadership?

RQ5. What future research avenues offer opportunities to advance the academic discourse surrounding laissez-faire leadership?

2. Research Methods

This research used the Scopus database to systematically analyze and categorize all open-access literature written in English between 1993 and 2023. The Scopus database resulted in a total of 552 documents related to laissez-faire leadership, as shown in Figure 1. After a rigorous selection process, 85 articles were selected for comprehensive bibliometric analysis to provide insights into the current state and future trends. From the 85 selected documents, a significant majority, 83 (97.65%), were sourced from reputable journals. In terms of document types, articles constituted the vast majority at 94.12%, followed by conference papers at 3.53%, and review papers at 2.35%.

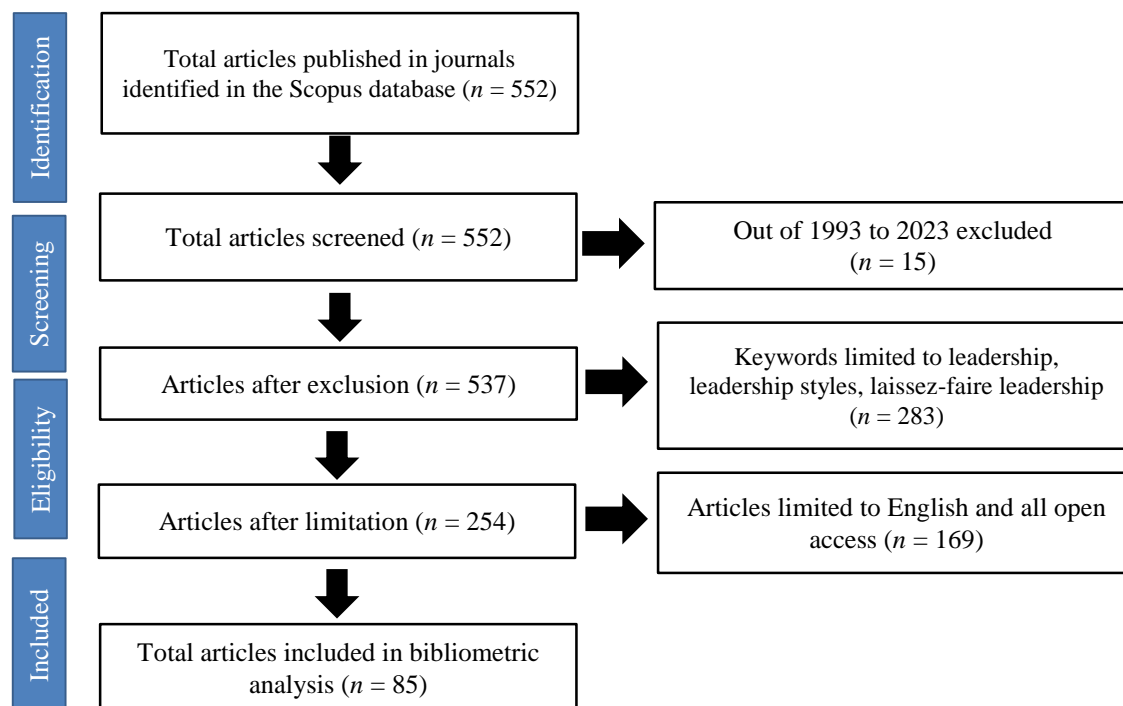


Figure 1. Steps in the identification and screening of sources

This research further used the power of VOSviewer software to visually map and analyze the scientific landscape. VOSviewer, a valuable and freely available bibliometric tool [41], was used to dissect co-citation patterns and keyword co-occurrences [42], delivering comprehensive insights into the current state and future trends. The bibliometric tool facilitated the identification of key topics, authors, and collaborative efforts in this analysis.

3. Results and Discussions

In this research, VOSviewer software was used to provide visual insights into various aspects, including the number of scientific articles, co-authorship, open access status, document types, and organizational affiliations. The analysis also incorporated co-citation to identify the top journals with the highest reputation [43].

Table 1 shows Anders Binzer Skogstad from Universitetet i Bergen as the most prolific author, contributing the highest number of publications (5; 5.88%). Following closely were Ståle Valvatne Einarsen from Universitetet i Bergen, Carlos Ferro-Soto from Universidade de Vigo, Analía López-Carballera from Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, and Kari Wik Ågotnes from Universitetet i Bergen, each with 3 (3.53%) documents, respectively.

Table 1. Top 5 authors related to laissez-faire leadership study

Ranking	Author	Affiliation	H-index	Citations	Publications	Percentage
1	Anders Binzer Skogstad	Universitetet i Bergen	26	3,423	5	5.88
2	Ståle Valvatne Einarsen	Universitetet i Bergen	50	11,211	3	3.53
3	Carlos Ferro-Soto	Universidade de Vigo	14	631	3	3.53
4	Analía López-Carballera	Universidad de Santiago de Compostela	3	43	3	3.53
5	Kari Wik Ågotnes	Universitetet i Bergen	2	55	3	3.53

Table 2 shows that “Journal of Nursing Management,” an open-access journal under Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd., published 4 (4.71%) documents. Additionally, “The Journal of Leadership and Organizational Analysis,” “BMC Health Services Research,” “Plos One,” and “International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health” each published 3 (3.53%) documents indicating bibliographic coupling.

Table 2. Top 5 journals related to laissez-faire leadership study

Ranking	Journal	Publisher	SJR (2022)	CiteScore (2022)	Publications	Percentage
1	Journal of Nursing Management	Wiley-Blackwell	1.341	6.8	4	4.71
2	Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies	Sage	1.096	6.9	3	3.53
3	BMC Health Services Research	Springer Nature	0.964	4.0	3	3.53
4	Plos One	Public Library of Science	0.885	6.0	3	3.53
5	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute	0.828	5.4	3	3.53

Table 3 identifies Universitetet i Bergen, a Norwegian institution, as the most productive contributor (6; 7.06%) in producing documents related to laissez-faire leadership. Universidad de Santiago de Compostela (Spain) followed closely, with 4 (4.71%) documents. Handelshøyskolen BI (Norway), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Netherlands), and Universidade de Vigo (Spain) each published 3 (3.53%) documents.

Table 3. Top 5 institutions related to laissez-faire leadership study

Ranking	Institute	Country	Publications	Percentage
1	Universitetet i Bergen	Norway	6	7.06
2	Universidad de Santiago de Compostela	Spain	4	4.71
3	Handelshøyskolen BI	Norway	3	3.53
4	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	Netherlands	3	3.53
5	Universidade de Vigo	Spain	3	3.53

Table 4 presented the top 5 countries related to laissez-faire leadership literature. The United States (12; 14.12%) and Spain (9; 10.59%) became the most prolific countries in generating literature, surpassing others such as Norway (8; 9.41%), the United Kingdom (8; 9.41%), and the Netherlands (7; 8.24%).

Table 4. Top 5 countries related to laissez-faire leadership study

Ranking	Country	Publication	Percentage
1	United States	12	14.12
2	Spain	9	10.59
3	Norway	8	9.41
4	United Kingdom	8	9.41
5	Netherlands	7	8.24

Figure 2 shows network visualization for 18 keywords grouped into 5 clusters. In Cluster 1 (red), keywords such as bullying, health personnel attitude, job satisfaction, occupational health, and organizational culture were observed. The terms “job satisfaction” and “bullying” were prominently represented by larger nodes, indicating their higher popularity [44] in comparison to other themes. Furthermore, Clusters 2 (green) and 3 (blue) each contained 4 items with “laissez-faire leadership” standing out. Cluster 4 (yellow) contained 3 items, including motivation, reward, and working conditions. Finally, Cluster 5 (purple) covered 2 items, comprising burnout and interpersonal relations.

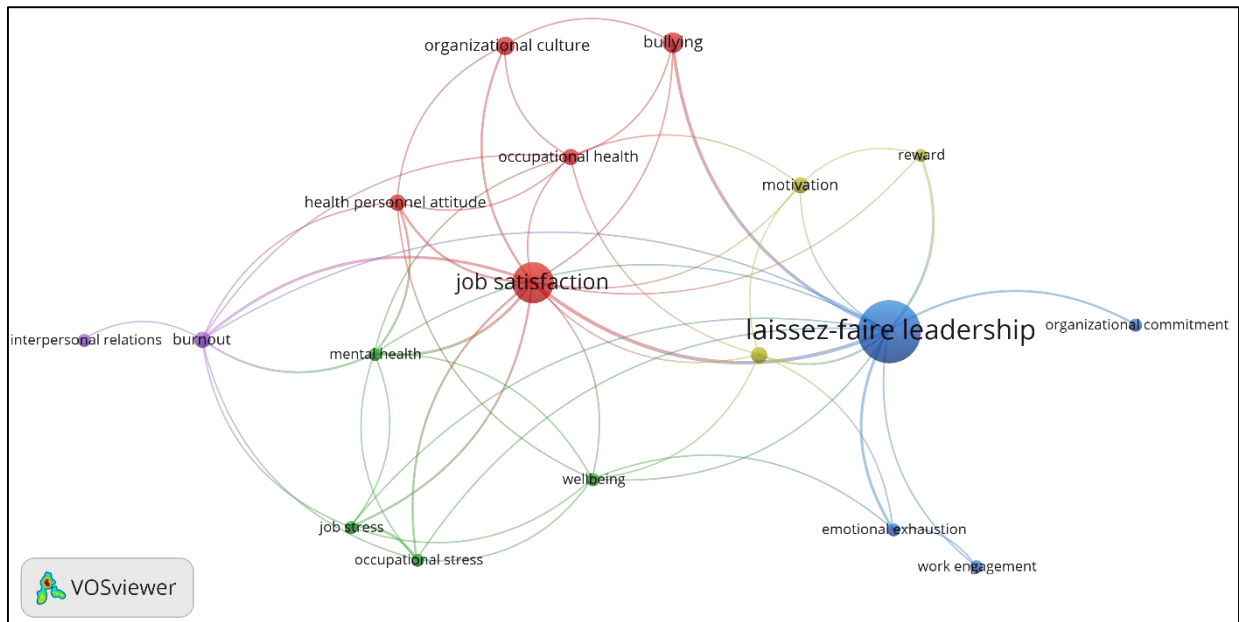


Figure 2. Network visualization of laissez-faire leadership

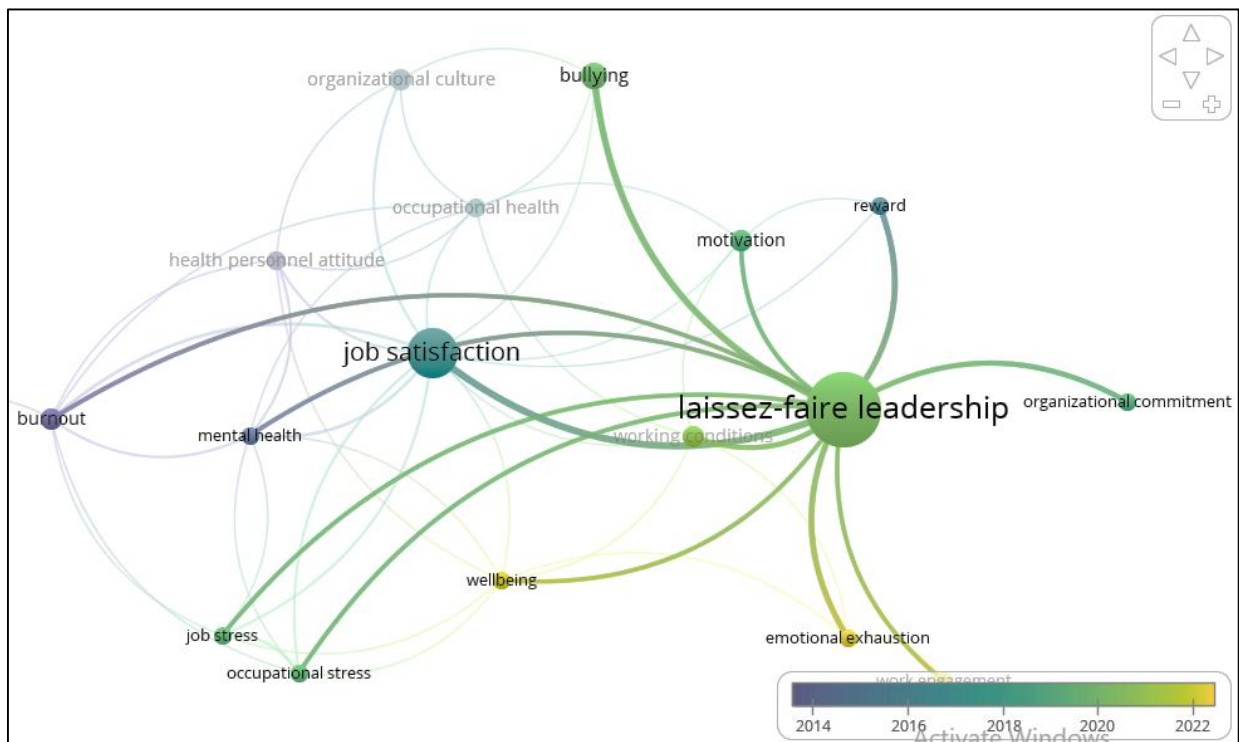


Figure 3. Density visualization of laissez-faire leadership

The results in Figures 2 and 3 showed a discernible upward trend in laissez-faire leadership literature, suggesting profound effects on the organizations and their members, both positive and negative dimensions. On one hand, laissez-faire leadership was correlated with increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement, motivation, reward, and employee well-being. The hands-off approach could lead to elevated emotional exhaustion, job stress, burnout, and incidents of workplace bullying.

3.1. Laissez-Faire Leadership on Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment, and Work Engagement

Laissez-faire leadership provided employees with a high degree of autonomy in decision-making and problem-solving. This empowerment granted employees the freedom to explore creative solutions and innovative ideas independently, without constant supervision. Empowerment was linked to enhanced job satisfaction, particularly among self-motivated and highly skilled individuals. Moreover, under laissez-faire leadership, those with strong self-motivation and a profound sense of responsibility often thrived, finding autonomy and freedom appealing. These

employees could remain committed to the organizations despite the lack of clear guidance from their leaders [45, 46]. Additionally, minimal direction and guidance from laissez-faire leaders could ignite employee enthusiasm for finding solutions that promote work [47] and organizational success.

3.2. Laissez-Faire Leadership on Motivation, Reward, and Employee Well-Being

Laissez-faire leadership was particularly effective with self-motivated and highly skilled employees who preferred autonomy and ownership of their tasks. The hands-off approach fostered motivation by allowing team members to explore new ideas and solutions with minimal supervision [48-50]. When employees were given the freedom to lead the work, they often acquired valuable skills and knowledge. This could be highly motivating, particularly when employees perceive such skills as beneficial for their career growth. The behavior drove employees' motivation to engage wholeheartedly in their work tasks and created a productive work environment. Furthermore, leaders who actively promoted a positive work environment acknowledged the contributions of team members and established effective reward systems to enhance their well-being and productivity.

3.3. Laissez-Faire Leadership on Emotional Exhaustion and Job Stress

Laissez-faire leadership significantly influences emotional exhaustion and job stress among team members. The absence of a supportive leader could leave employees feeling isolated, contributing to emotional exhaustion and stress [51, 52]. Employees might have felt uncertain about their roles and responsibilities when striving to meet unclear or shifting expectations. This resulting ambiguity generated stress and anxiety as team members were uncertain about how to fulfill their job requirements. Tafvelin & Lundmark [53] observed that the ambiguity surrounding roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority could be a source of stress. Employees might not have known where to turn for guidance, resulting in higher levels of frustration and anxiety.

3.4. Laissez-Faire Leadership on Burnout and Bullying in the Workplace

Laissez-faire leaders consistently provided minimal guidance to their team members. The absence of direction and resources left employees feeling unsupported and uncertain about their responsibilities, which needed to be managed independently. Laissez-faire leadership did not prioritize resource allocation, leading employees to face a shortage of necessary tools. The shortfall increased work demands and contributed to burnout [54, 55]. When team members were uncertain about what was expected of them, this resulted in heightened stress, ultimately leading to burnout. Laissez-faire leaders often refrained from active intervention when conflicts arose among their employees. The hands-off approach frequently failed to establish clear standards for acceptable behavior in the workplace. In the absence of established guidelines, employees felt empowered to engage in bullying behaviors [56] without apprehension of consequences. Employees who experienced bullying felt unheard under laissez-faire leadership, intensifying feelings of isolation and helplessness among victims.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis results showed a significant increase in the literature focused on laissez-faire leadership. The results indicated that laissez-faire leadership positively and negatively affected the organizations and their members. On one hand, the hands-off approach was positively associated with increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement, motivation, reward, and employee well-being. Laissez-faire leadership, on the other hand, may have led to elevated emotional exhaustion, job stress, burnout, and incidents of workplace bullying.

The practical implications of this research underscored that the laissez-faire leadership style could be effective in some situations and with certain types of employees, particularly those who were highly skilled and self-motivated and required minimal supervision. However, leaders needed to strike a delicate balance between providing autonomy and guidance to ensure the effective pursuit of organizational goals while maintaining employees' motivation.

Although this analysis offered valuable insights and visualization capabilities within the academic field of laissez-faire leadership, it did present certain limitations. First, the research focused exclusively on laissez-faire leadership, acknowledging that the singular focus covered some considerations and limitations. To address such issues, future reviews could adopt a more holistic approach, exploring a range of leadership styles and their interactions with situational factors. This broader perspective could provide a more nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics within organizations. Second, the analysis using VOSviewer predominantly relied on data from specific databases, such as Scopus, which might not cover all research areas of publications. Third, the visualizations generated by VOSviewer required interpretation, and different users might have interpreted the results subjectively. The clustering and mapping of terms relied on algorithms, with the choice of clusters and their labels open to interpretation. Therefore, future reviews with specific analysis needs might require additional software or methods to complement the capabilities of VOSviewer, potentially by expanding bibliographic databases, including Web of Science, PubMed, IEEE Xplore, and Google Scholar.

5. Declarations

5.1. Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

5.2. Funding

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5.3. Acknowledgements

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5.4. Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

5.5. Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

5.6. Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the author.

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