



ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF BUSINESS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP
AND SMES
(AIJBES)

www.gaexcellence.com/aijbcs



AN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE ON LEADERSHIP STYLE IN WAQF MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 23.04.2026

Revised date: 05.05.2026

Accepted date: 31.05.2026

Published date: 11.06.2026

To cite this document:

Nizam, M. F., Parasuraman, B., & Hasan, H. (2026). An Academic Discourse on Leadership Style in Waqf Management in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study. *Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SMEs*, 8(28), 256-269.

Abstract:

The growing lack of public funds and rising operational pressures has seen increased interest in Waqf as a viable source of income for higher education. However, most previous studies have focused on legal, financial and governance aspects, while the role of leadership in shaping waqf management practices has not yet been given due attention. Based on a qualitative multi-case study approach, this study examines how leadership interacts with sustainable operational practices in influencing organizational performance in higher education waqf institutions. Findings indicate that leadership plays an important role in guiding the implementation of operational practices, strengthening governance and building stakeholder trust. Transformational, transactional, service-oriented and Islamic leadership styles are found to complement each other in supporting institutional sustainability and organizational effectiveness. This study also emphasizes that contextual factors such as governance structure and socio-cultural environment greatly influence the way leadership is implemented.

DOI: 10.35631/AJBES.828017 **Keywords:**

Leadership Style; Waqf Management; Higher Education;
Sustainable Operations Practices; Organisational Performance;
Islamic Leadership; Governance



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Introduction

Leadership is often considered one of the most important determinants of an organisation's effectiveness and sustainability, especially in institutions that operate in complex and value-based contexts. The idea of leadership has moved beyond the idea of administrative authority in recent years. Leadership today is commonly understood as a process of influencing, building trust, considering ethics, and leading an organisation according to its needs and circumstances (Bans-Akutey, 2021). This is particularly the case in higher education institutions where university leaders face financial challenges, growing stakeholder expectations and the need to maintain institutional development in the long term. With the growing restrictions of public funding and the growing operational requirements, universities have begun to seek alternative financial resources. Waqf is one of the approaches that has attracted increasing attention.

Waqf has played a role in the development of Muslim societies in the fields of education, health care and social welfare. The main feature of endowment is its perpetuity which enables the benefits from the endowed assets to continue to serve the community over time (Kahf, 2003). As such, waqf is increasingly recognized as a potential financial resource to fulfill university needs such as scholarships, research activities, infrastructure development and other areas in higher education (Purnomo & Hidayati, 2025). Previous studies have identified the challenges to be structural issues such as poor governance, low transparency, bureaucratic obstacles and lack of public knowledge of waqf practices (Mohaiyadin et al., 2022).

Waqf is now increasingly seen as a potential financial resource to meet university needs such as scholarships, research activities, infrastructure development and other areas in higher education (Purnomo & Hidayati, 2025). Previous studies have attributed these challenges to structural issues such as poor governance, low transparency, bureaucratic obstacles and lack of public knowledge of waqf practices (Mohaiyadin et al., 2022). However, the use of waqf in universities remains uneven. Many institutions still find it challenging to manage waqf in a systematic, sustainable manner that can produce long-term impact.

These problems are tied to structural issues such as poor governance, low transparency, bureaucratic obstacles, and lack of public awareness of waqf practices (Aziz & Darus, 2025). Although these issues are important, they do not fully explain the reasons for the success of some institutions in developing waqf initiatives. This is why internal organisational factors,

and especially leadership, have played an increasingly important role in the focus of research. Leadership influences the institution's understanding of waqf, the planning of strategies and the development of confidence and trust among stakeholders. Role of leaders is also important to ensure that waqf is not considered an administrative responsibility only but is part of a larger effort to support institutional sustainability and long-term development.

However, there has been relatively little empirical study into the role of leadership in waqf management. Much of the current research has been focused on the legal, financial and governance issues and less on the effect of leadership styles on implementation and results. Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative and context-sensitive research on how leadership operates in different institutional and socio-cultural settings. Contingency perspectives suggest that leadership effectiveness is highly related to the context, and that there is no one size fits all approach (Bwalya, 2023).

In this context, a review of the leadership perspective in the administration of waqf is a useful approach to deepen the understanding of the theory and practice. There are different roles that different styles of leadership can play. Transformational leadership is useful in creating vision and innovation, transactional leadership is useful in creating structure and accountability and servant leadership is useful in creating ethical responsibility and stakeholder engagement (Ramshaw, 2025). These approaches are further grounded in values similar to the principles of waqf such as trust, justice and accountability in the context of Islamic institutions.

Therefore, this study explores the effect of leadership practices on waqf management in higher education institutions. In particular, it investigates the link between leadership and operational practices, and how this influences organisational outcomes. By focusing on this intersection, the study aims to provide a more appropriate understanding of leadership in waqf management while providing possibly relevant insights for institutional leaders, policy makers and practitioners.

Research Problems

In the past several years, awareness of the role of waqf in higher educational institutions has also increased especially as universities continue to experience financial difficulties. Due to the reduction in governmental assistance, increasing running costs and escalating performance targets on behalf of the teachers, they are forced to seek other and more sustainable types of funding. In such a situation, waqf is often seen as a pragmatic means to support long-term institutional development. Waqf has a long history and a well-recognized potential contribution to education, but its application in higher education institutions remains inconsistent and in many cases limited (Thaker, 2023).

Previous studies tend to see these problems as structural and institutional. The common problems discussed are weak governance, low transparency, complicated administrative procedures and low public awareness on waqf management (Aziz & Darus, 2025). For example, in Malaysia the waqf administration is closely linked with the State Islamic Religious Councils that may sometimes cause procedural difficulties and reduce institutional flexibility in managing waqf initiatives (Ismail & Maryanti, 2022). Other contexts have also been found to be affected by similar issues e.g., poor reporting practices, lack of expertise and limited engagement from the community (Zulkifli et al., 2022)

Such factors are important, but most discussions tend to focus on external challenges, with less attention paid to what happens within the institution itself. One thing that is still not much explored is leadership. Leadership is not only a matter of administrative issues but also a matter of institutional direction, setting priorities and establishing relations with stakeholders (Purnamasari, 2023). Leadership in the context of waqf is closely related to the concept of trust or trust as the management of waqf assets carries responsibility, integrity and accountability both to the donors and beneficiaries.

Empirical studies on leadership in waqf management are limited but relevant. Most of the studies still focus on legal, financial and governance issues with relatively little attention to the influence of leadership styles on implementation and outcomes (Kamaruzaman & Ishak, 2023). This gap is especially evident in understanding the influence of leadership on operational practices and subsequently organisational performance. Until a better understanding of this relationship evolved, the waqf initiatives are expected to remain at the procedural level rather than becoming meaningful development instruments.

The matter is more complicated in the context of higher education institutions where the management of waqf involves multiple parties such as the university leadership, religious authorities, donors and the community at large. These groups often have different expectations and need leadership approaches that are not only effective but also flexible and sensitive to context. However, little research has been done to understand how leadership functions in such a multi-layered context. Furthermore, most of the extant literature is restricted to single country contexts, which constrains our understanding of the influence of certain variations in institutional and socio-cultural contexts on leadership practices. Perspectives from cross-country contexts such as Malaysia versus Southern Thailand are still missing. This constrains the development of a broader and more nuanced understanding of leadership in waqf management (Bwalya, 2023).

Methodologically, prior studies tend to be very quantitative in terms of measurable outcomes, but much less so in terms of lived experiences and organizational realities. As a result, leadership in waqf institutions is not investigated in terms of actual practices and interpretations. Thus, there is a need for approaches that can allow for a more profound and contextually sensitive understanding of leadership. Therefore, there is a need for approaches that can allow for a more profound and contextually sensitive understanding of leadership. In light of these gaps, this study investigates the influence of leadership on the effectiveness of waqf management in higher education institutions. This study is specifically to examine the organizational leadership style in operational practices and its impact on the organization. The issue is important not only from an academic perspective, but also for the improvement of waqf management and sustainability through a more consistent and systematic classification approach.

Research Objectives

The gaps identified in prior studies provided the major rationale for the current research to develop a more profound and contextually relevant understanding on the impact of leadership styles on the management of waqf in higher education institutions. This paper extensively discussed several key issues related to the administration and effectiveness of waqf management:

- To determine the impact of leadership style on the implementation of sustainable operating practices (SOP) in waqf management.
- To study the impact of these operational practices on organisational performance in higher education waqf institutions.
- To ascertain the direct impact of leadership style on organizational performance.
- To explore the role of leadership in the application of sustainable operational practices (SOP) for improving organisational performance.
- To explore the influence of contextual elements such as organizational culture, governance structure, and institutional environment in determining the relationship between leadership, operational practices, and organizational performance.

Research Questions

The following research questions are in line with the research aims and guide this study:

- What is the impact of different leadership styles on the implementation of sustainable operational practices (SOP) in waqf management?
- How do sustainable operational practices relate to organisational performance in higher education institutions?
- What is the direct influence of leadership style on the performance of an organisation in the context of waqf management?
- What is the role of sustainable operational practices as a mediator between leadership style and organisational performance?
- How do contextual factors like organisational culture, governance structures and institutional environment influence the connection between leadership, operational practices and performance?

Literature Review

Leadership Theory and Organizational Performance

Leadership is a core concept in organisational studies and especially in understanding how institutions attain and sustain performance. Leadership is now generally considered to be a process that is built through the interactions between leaders, followers and the wider organisational context and not a fixed set of traits (Purnamasari, 2023). Leadership theory has developed over the years from the trait-based perspective to a practice-oriented perspective that includes transformational, transactional and servant leadership among others. Transformational leadership is often associated with the ability to develop a clear vision, inspire the followers and stimulate innovation (Pitichat & Riggio, 2025). The approach is associated with higher levels of organizational performance, employee engagement and innovative behaviour (Li et al., 2023). Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is more concerned with structure, clear roles and reward systems, which are important for maintaining stability and ensuring that processes in an organization work as intended (Bwalya, 2023). Waqf in Higher Education Historically, waqf has played an important role in the development of education in Muslim societies, and waqf has been a main source of financing the operation and long-term development of many classical Islamic institutions (Karimah et al., 2022). In the current higher education landscape, waqf is increasingly being seen as a potential mechanism to enhance financial sustainability, especially as universities continue to face ongoing funding constraints.

However, there are several challenges faced in the management of waqf in higher education institutions. The literature is more concerned about the issues of governance, transparency and administrative efficiency (Yap et al., 2023). Many institutions have not fully realized the potential of waqf as a strategic financial resource (Mohaiyadin et al., 2022). This suggests that the challenges are not only structural but also organizational, implementation and leadership of waqf in institutional contexts

Sustainable Operations Practices (SOP)

Sustainable operations practices are the ways in which organisations manage their activities to be effective in the long term, in particular through consistent governance, transparency and efficient use of resources. Such techniques are commonly applied to areas such as financial reporting, accountability measures and the administration of endowed assets for waqf institutions.

Previous studies have shown that such behaviours are often linked to better organisational performance. (Ng et al., 2025). But this association does not occur automatically. That is often a function of internal variables, particularly the culture and leadership of the firm. Operational processes without strong or consistent leadership may be procedural only and may not yield real benefits.

Leadership Style as a Moderating Variable

Leadership Style as a Moderating Variable From a contingency viewpoint, the efficacy of leadership is strongly tied to how suitable a certain leadership style is for the organisational situation (Bwalya, 2023). In the present study, leadership style is considered as a moderating variable that moderates the association between Sustainable Operational Practices (SOP) and Organisational Performance and not as an independent variable.

The association between management style and this relation seems to be variably affected. Transformational leadership can foster commitment and willingness to change and this can assist in the adoption of SOPs (Bwalya, 2023). In this research, leadership style is not an independent variable but a moderating variable that moderates the relationship between sustainable operational practices (SOP) and organizational performance.

The relationship between management style and this relationship appears to be differentially affected. Transformational leadership will increase commitment, openness to change and this will support the implementation of SOP. Transactional leadership tends to be more about structure and consistency that can help ensure that these practices are implemented as intended. Meanwhile, servant leadership and Islamic leadership styles emphasize trust, ethical responsibility and social accountability, elements that are very important in the context of waqf institutions.

Research Gap

While existing studies have considered waqf and leadership as separate areas of inquiry, little attention has been given to how these two dimensions interact in practice. In particular, there is a lack of research that examines leadership style as a factor shaping the relationship between sustainable operational practices and organisational performance. Consequently, the role of

leadership in shaping how these practices are enacted and translated into outcomes remains inadequately understood.

The legal, financial and governance issues of the management of waqf have been extensively studied, but there has been limited empirical and conceptual focus on the role of leadership in influencing the effectiveness of waqf operational practices in higher education institutions (Salsabila & Hidayat, 2024). The existing literature tends to focus on structural and administrative issues, while the role of leadership in shaping the implementation processes, stakeholder engagement, and organizational outcomes remains under-investigated (Mohaiyadin et al., 2022). The gap is more evident in understanding the interaction between different leadership styles and sustainable operational practices (SOP) in influencing institutional performance in different socio-cultural and governance contexts (Bwalya, 2023).

Moreover, empirical work on the relationship between sustainable operational practices (SOP) and performance in waqf institutions is still relatively sparse. Most of the existing literature tends to focus on governance and financial aspects, without exploring the operational practices of the day-to-day that contribute to wider institutional outcomes.

Another limitation is the context of the studies. The higher education sector has some specific features, such as its governance structure, regulatory environment and the demands of a diverse range of stakeholders. However, research on waqf has rarely specifically targeted higher education institutions. These features imply that findings from other contexts may not be directly transferable.

The data was then coded and grouped into a number of themes, based on the recurring patterns and ideas. They were not pre-selected themes; rather, they were developed from the responses of the participants in order to ensure that the findings were more reflective of the actual experiences and perspectives of the participants.

Altogether, these gaps suggest the need for a more integrated and context-sensitive approach. Thus, this study aims to investigate the relationship between leadership style, sustainable operational practices and organisational performance in higher education waqf institutions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to understand the practice of leadership in waqf management in higher education institutions. The study used qualitative method as the focus is to understand the experiences, views and practices from the viewpoint of those directly involved in the management of waqf. The study does not aim at quantifying leadership with numbers or statistics, but rather to investigate how leadership occurs in the real institutional setting, especially, in matters of trust, responsibility, ethics and stakeholder relationships (Salsabila & Hidayat, 2024).

The case study design was selected as it gives the researcher an opportunity to have a better understanding of the leadership practices in their real organisational setting (Schlunegger et al., 2024). Case studies were chosen from two higher education institutions because they function in different administrative and socio-cultural environments. This provided the opportunity to compare leadership practice in different contexts. The use of two cases also helped the

researcher to find out similarities and differences of leadership approaches across institutions (Adams et al., 2022).

The main data for the study were gathered through semi-structured interviews. This method allows respondents to share their experiences and views more freely, yet it keeps the discussion within the parameters of the study's objectives (Kenzie et al., 2024). The respondents in this study consisted of university administrators, waqf officers and individuals directly involved in decision-making related to waqf management. They were selected through sampling to ensure that each respondent had relevant practical knowledge and experience in the field being studied. In several cases, the snowball sampling approach was also applied, where existing participants recommended other individuals who were considered suitable and knowledgeable to contribute to the study (Patton, 2022).

Document analysis was also conducted in tandem to the interviews to support the findings. Institutional reports, waqf policies and governance-related material were reviewed to provide additional information and corroborate matters discussed during the interviews. Furthermore, the use of more than one source of data was useful in enhancing the credibility of the study through triangulation (Christofi et al., 2024).

Thematic analysis was conducted based on the approach introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process started with several readings of the interview transcripts and other documents to get understanding of the data. The data was then coded and categorized into a number of themes, based on the recurring patterns and ideas. The themes were drawn from the participants' responses, rather than being pre-determined, so that the findings would better reflect the actual experiences and perspectives of the participants.

To ensure the quality of research, several steps were taken. Credibility was enhanced through ongoing interaction with the participants and triangulation of the data gathered from multiple sources. An audit trail of the research process and data analysis ensured dependability. The researcher also participated in continuous reflection throughout the study in order to minimize personal bias in the interpretation of findings (Enworo, 2023). Ethical aspects of the study were given careful attention throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, protecting the confidentiality of the information shared, and ensuring that participants' identities remained anonymous.

In addition to the interviews, the study also reviewed the existing literature on leadership, sustainable operational practices and organisational performance in waqf institutions (Snyder, 2024). Searches for articles were carried out from the Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar databases using keywords associated with waqf management, leadership style and higher education. Searches for articles were conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar databases using keywords related to waqf management, leadership style and higher education. The chosen studies were thematically reviewed to aid development of the conceptual understanding of the study (Byrne, 2022).

In general, the methodological approach adopted in this study aims to contribute to a clearer and more practical understanding of the concept of leadership in managing waqf. The actual institutional experience of this study is more rooted in explaining how leadership is practiced and how it impacts the management of waqf in higher education institutions.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study show the important role of leadership in waqf management in higher education institutions. The evidence collected from the case studies of Universiti Putra Malaysia and Fatoni University showed that the leadership practices are not restricted to one style. Instead, leaders often adopt different approaches, depending on the needs, challenges and environment of the institution. The study found that the four leadership styles (transformational, transactional, servant and Islamic leadership) were all being practiced simultaneously, playing differing roles in relation to the institution's direction, operations management and ethical responsibility.

The two institutions exhibited transformational leadership, with leaders positioning waqf beyond its traditional charitable function. Waqf was not just a source of donation, but a strategic resource that could provide for institutional growth and sustainability in the long term. Many respondents pointed out the importance of having a clear vision in inviting stakeholder participation and expanding the role of waqf in the university. We found that leaders who were able to communicate this vision well appeared more able to build support and confidence among stakeholders. This is consistent with previous research that has found a relationship between transformational leadership and innovation and long term organisational development (Pitichat & Riggio, 2025).

However, at the same time, the study also found that vision alone was not enough to ensure the effectiveness of the management of waqf. In either case elements of transactional leadership could also be identified, in particular with regard to governance, accountability and organisational procedures. At Universiti Putra Malaysia, there is a lot of emphasis on structured work processes, reporting systems and compliance with regulations. The respondents of Fatoni University also commented that to ensure the continuity and consistency of waqf operations, administrative procedures should be clarified. The results suggest that transactional leadership still matters in the maintenance of organisational order and stability, particularly in institutions that deal with public trust and financial resources (Bwalya, 2023).

The study also noted the importance of relational dimensions of leadership especially those connected to servant leadership. Several participants mentioned trust, close connection with stakeholders and a strong feeling of responsibility to the community as key. The values were found to be significant in sustaining the trust of the donors and assuring their continuing support to the waqf programs. Public confidence is very crucial in waqf management and leadership is strongly associated with the ability of a leader to develop and sustain credibility over time.

The study also found the great influence of Islamic leadership values such as trust, justice and accountability. These principles affect decision making, leaders' engagement with stakeholders and the execution of responsibilities in the organization. Leadership in the case of waqf extends beyond holding a position or managing administration. It also means moral conduct and ethical duty. Some respondents also viewed leadership in waqf as having a spiritual dimension, especially as it entails the protection of public confidence and prudent management of endowed assets.

Another important finding of this study is the use of a sustainable operational approach to improve waqf management. In general, more consistent and beneficial impacts were achieved by institutions with transparent governance and good resource management. This is reflected

in higher levels of stakeholder confidence and stronger waqf contributions to institutional growth and development. But this study also shows that effective systems are not enough. This level of success depends largely on the quality of its implementation and the level of leadership guiding the institution. Operational management is in place but without capable and committed leadership, long-term and meaningful impact may not be achieved.

The differences found between Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Fatoni also suggest the importance of the institutional and socio-cultural environment on leadership approaches. The regulatory environment in Malaysia is often formal and regulated, which encourages a leadership style that is driven by compliance, responsibility and correct procedures. The leadership style in Southern Thailand is more flexible and driven by good relationships. These characteristics serve to explain that leadership performance is inherently tied to the institutional context and social environment in which it is located.

Theoretically, the findings of this study show that leadership in waqf management cannot be explained by a single leadership paradigm. Instead, leadership appears to be the result of a variety of strategies tailored to the needs and circumstances of the organization. This study also emphasizes the need for values-based leadership, especially in business where public trust and ethical responsibility are important components.

Practically, the findings suggest that a more balanced approach to leadership may benefit higher education institutions. This includes principles such as trust, ethics and responsibility in addition to operational effectiveness and strategic planning. Therefore, initiatives for leadership development should focus on increasing interpersonal, communicative and ethical awareness as well as technical and managerial abilities. The ability of current governance structures to promote leadership strategies that reflect the real difficulties faced by higher education institutions must also be questioned by policymakers. This study generally highlights leadership in waqf management. Its influence goes beyond administrative coordination and is essential in enabling institutions to address problems, maintain stakeholder trust and continue waqf operations over time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate how leadership affects waqf management and administration in higher education institutions. The study's findings imply that leadership has a big impact on waqf programs' long-term administration, planning, and sustainability. As universities continue to face financial challenges, Waqf is increasingly being considered as a valuable alternative source of support. However, the success of the management of waqf is very much dependent upon the leadership and management of the leaders of the institution.

The study found that leadership in waqf management is not dependent on one leadership style. In practice, leaders tend to use a mixture of approaches, depending on the needs and circumstances of the institution. There are some aspects of transformational leadership where leaders view waqf not only as a charitable donation but also as a strategic resource that may develop long-term institutional development.

At the same time, transactional leadership is reflected in the emphasis on proper procedures, governance, accountability and compliance with the institutional requirements. The study also found strong elements of servant leadership particularly in the aspects of building trust,

maintaining good relationship with its stakeholders and showing responsibility to the community. Furthermore, the strong association of Islamic values of trust, justice and accountability with the management of waqf further reinforced the leadership practices.

The conclusion of this study also highlights the importance of openness, strong governance and efficient resource management to improve institutional performance and enhance stakeholder trust. But systems and practices alone are not enough. Their implementation, monitoring and maintenance by institutional leaders have a significant impact on their effectiveness. This shows that setting direction is only one aspect of leadership, namely, to ensure that organizational procedures are followed correctly, consistently and responsibly.

Therefore, how institutional rules influence leadership behavior is given by the differences between Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Fatoni. The way leadership is practiced in each organization is influenced by variations in governance structures, legal frameworks and socio-cultural contexts. The governance environment in Malaysia is typically more formal and emphasizes structure, rules and compliance. In contrast, Southern Thailand appears to have a more adaptable and relationship-focused leadership style. This diversity suggests that the institutional environment and the surrounding social context are closely related to leadership effectiveness.

This study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of leadership in waqf management by bringing together different leadership perspectives within a value-based framework. The findings also add to the little literature on leadership and waqf management in higher education institutions. The study concludes that from a pragmatic point of view colleges may benefit from a more balanced approach to leadership, merging strategic planning, operational discipline and ethical ideals. The development of leadership competences should therefore focus on technical and management skills, as well as interpersonal skills, ethical awareness and value-based leadership.

The present study has some limitations. The research was conducted in few institutions and qualitative methods were used. Thus, the findings may not be representative of all higher education institutions. Future research may include more institutions or mixed research methods to reach a broader conclusion. Furthermore, there is an opportunity for future studies to explore the role of digital technology and innovation to enhance the management and leadership practices of waqf.

This study shows in general that the leadership in waqf management is not limited only in administrative affairs. Good leadership is balancing the needs of the organisation and ethical responsibility in response to changing institutional challenges. Thus, the sustainability of waqf in higher education is not only contingent upon systems and policies but also on how leadership is practised within the institution.

Acknowledgements	The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) for the support and encouragement provided throughout this study. The authors also extend their gratitude to all participants and individuals who contributed valuable insights and assistance during the completion of this research.
Funding Statement	This study did not receive any specific grants from funding agencies in the public, commercial or non-profit sectors.
Conflict of Interest Statement	The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial, financial, or personal relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.
Ethics Statement	This study was conducted in accordance with accepted academic research and publication ethics standards. As the study is based on a conceptual and literature review approach and does not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data, formal ethical approval was not required. The authors confirm that all sources used in this study have been appropriately acknowledged and cited.
Author Contribution Statement	All authors contributed significantly to the development and completion of this manuscript. The first author was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, literature review, and manuscript drafting. The second author contributed to the research design, analysis, and interpretation of findings. The third author provided critical revisions, academic supervision, and final editing of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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