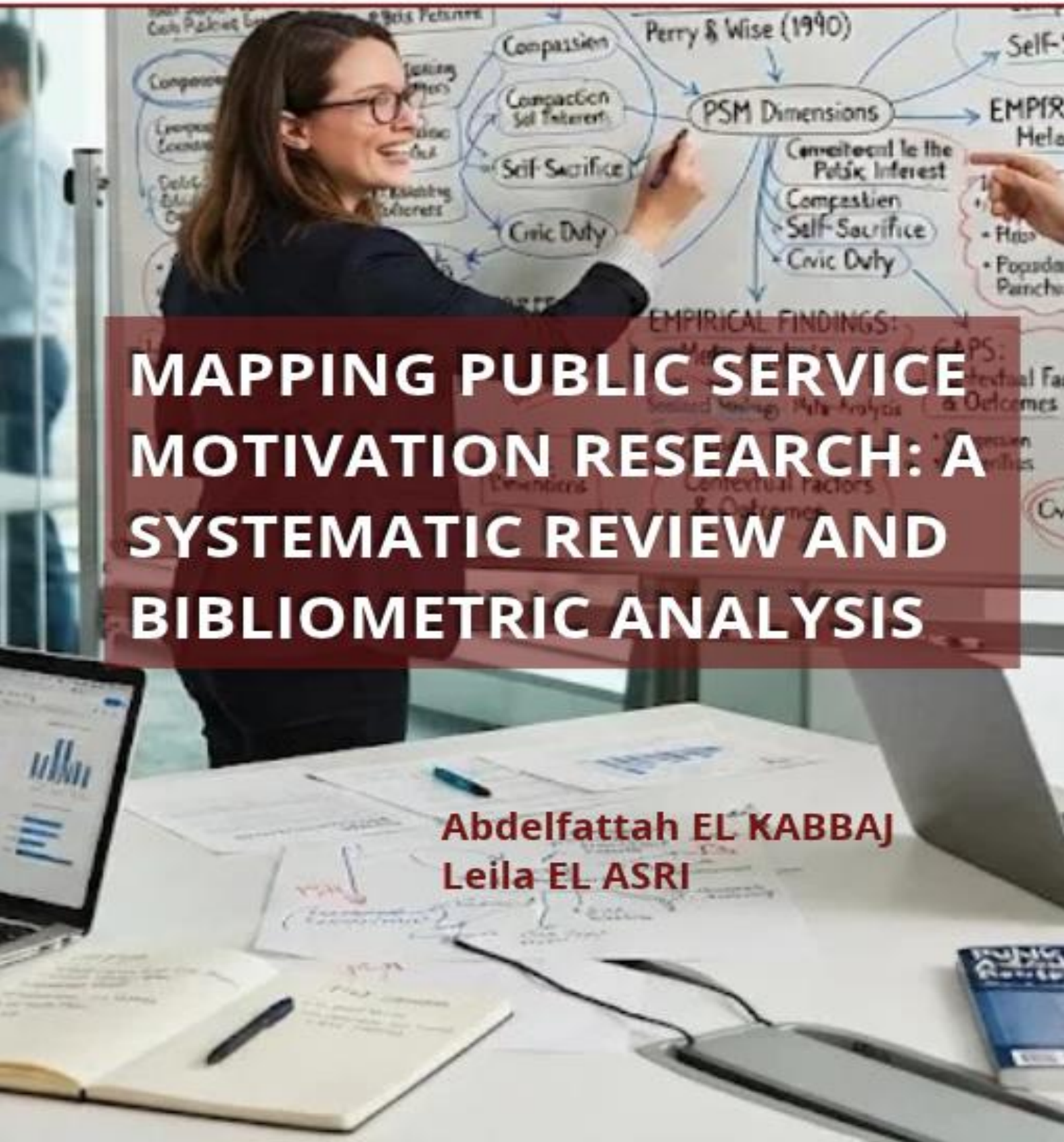
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MAPPING PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION RESEARCH: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

Abdelfattah EL KABBAJ
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CARTOGRAPHIE DE LA RECHERCHE SUR LA MOTIVATION DE SERVICE PUBLIC : REVUE SYSTEMATIQUE ET ANALYSE BIBLIOMETRIQUE

Abdelfattah EL KABBAJ
Doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences, Mohammed V University of Rabat
Research Laboratory on Organizational Management, Business Law and Sustainable Development
Af.elkabbaj@gmail.com

Leila EL ASRI
Research Professor at the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences of Tetouan, Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Morocco
leelasri@uae.ac.ma

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MAPPING PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION RESEARCH: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS



Abstract

Public Service Motivation (PSM) is a core construct in public administration research, widely used to explain public employees' commitment, attitudes, and behaviors. Despite the rapid expansion of this literature, concerns remain regarding its conceptual fragmentation, thematic concentration, and limited integration of contemporary public sector transformations. This article provides a systematic and integrative assessment of PSM research, with the objective of identifying structural theoretical gaps and future research directions.

Abdelfattah El Kabbaj
PhD Student
Mohammed V University of Rabat,
Morocco

Leila EL ASRI
Research Professor
Abdelmalek Essaâdi University,
Tetouan, Morocco

The study combines a systematic literature review following the PRISMA 2020 protocol with a bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed journal articles. Based on a corpus of 862 publications, keyword co-occurrence networks were analyzed using VOSviewer to map the intellectual structure of the field and detect dominant and peripheral thematic clusters.

The findings reveal a highly consolidated theoretical core centered on classical motivational and attitudinal frameworks, alongside persistent gaps related to human resource practices, digital transformation, multilevel analysis, and institutional contexts. The article contributes by offering an evidence-based diagnosis of the field and proposing avenues for theoretical renewal in contemporary public administration.

These findings also provide practical implications for public managers and policy designers seeking to strengthen motivational frameworks in contemporary public organizations.

Keywords : ***Public Service Motivation; Bibliometric Analysis; Systematic Literature Review; Public Administration; Theoretical Gaps***

CARTOGRAPHIE DE LA RECHERCHE SUR LA MOTIVATION DE SERVICE PUBLIC : REVUE SYSTEMATIQUE ET ANALYSE BIBLIOMETRIQUE

Abdelfattah El Kabbaj
Doctorant
Université Mohammed V, Rabat, Maroc

Leila EL ASRI
Enseignante chercheure
Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi, Tétouan, Maroc .

Résumé

La motivation de service public (MSP) constitue un concept central dans la recherche en administration publique. Elle est largement mobilisée pour expliquer l'engagement, les attitudes et les comportements des agents publics. Malgré l'expansion rapide de cette littérature, des interrogations persistent quant à sa fragmentation conceptuelle, à sa concentration thématique et à sa prise en compte encore limitée des transformations contemporaines du secteur public. Cet article propose une évaluation systématique et intégrative de la recherche sur la MSP afin d'identifier les lacunes théoriques structurelles et les perspectives de recherche futures.

L'étude associe une revue systématique de la littérature conforme au protocole PRISMA 2020 à une analyse bibliométrique d'articles scientifiques indexés dans Scopus. À partir d'un corpus de 862 publications, les réseaux de cooccurrence des mots-clés sont analysés à l'aide du logiciel VOSviewer afin de cartographier la structure intellectuelle du domaine et de distinguer les pôles thématiques dominants des thèmes périphériques.

Les résultats mettent en évidence un noyau théorique fortement consolidé, centré sur les cadres motivationnels et attitudinaux classiques, ainsi que des lacunes persistantes concernant les pratiques de gestion des ressources humaines, la transformation numérique, l'analyse multiniveaux et les contextes institutionnels. L'article contribue ainsi à un diagnostic fondé sur les données du champ de recherche et propose des pistes de renouvellement théorique adaptées aux administrations publiques contemporaines. Il dégage également des implications pratiques à l'intention des responsables publics et des concepteurs de politiques soucieux de renforcer la motivation au sein des organisations publiques.

Mots-clés : Motivation de service public ; Analyse bibliométrique ; Revue systématique de la littérature ; Administration publique ; Lacunes théoriques.

1. Introduction

Contemporary public administrations are undergoing profound transformations that reshape their purposes, modes of action, and forms of employee engagement (OECD, 2019; Aristovnik et al., 2022; Kitsios et al., 2023). State modernization reforms, the diffusion of managerial doctrines inspired by New Public Management, the rise of collaborative governance models, and the increasing penetration of digital technologies have progressively redefined societal and institutional expectations toward public service (Hood, 1991; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Boruvka & Perry, 2020; Torfing et al., 2020). In this rapidly evolving context, understanding the motivational mechanisms that underpin public employees' behavior has become a central concern for both public administration scholarship and public policy practitioners (Pandey et al., 2017; Honig, 2021; Vandenabeele et al., 2014).

Among the concepts that have most deeply structured this field of research, Public Service Motivation (PSM) occupies a foundational position. Since the seminal contribution of Perry and Wise (1990), PSM has been conceptualized as a set of prosocial dispositions and value orientations that lead individuals to pursue the public interest, commit to collective goals, and act beyond narrow self-interest. Subsequent theoretical developments have consolidated PSM as a distinctive motivational construct rooted in public values, civic duty, and normative commitments specific to public sector employment (Perry, 1996; Vandenabeele, 2007; Perry et al., 2010).

Over the past three decades, the scholarly literature on PSM has expanded considerably, becoming a cornerstone of research on public sector organizational behavior (Boyd, 2023; Pandey et al., 2017). Empirical studies have documented robust relationships between PSM and a wide range of outcomes, including job performance, organizational commitment, work engagement, job satisfaction, ethical behavior, service quality, institutional trust, and professional identity (Bright, 2008; Wright & Pandey, 2008; Ritz, 2009; Van Loon et al., 2015). As a result, PSM is now widely mobilized across public management, sociology of work, organizational psychology, and political science, reflecting both its conceptual versatility and its explanatory power (Kim & Vandenabeele, 2010; Vandenabeele et al., 2014).

Beyond individual attitudes, PSM has increasingly been used to analyze broader transformations in public governance, the evolving meaning of public service, and the challenges faced by public organizations operating in diverse institutional environments (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Andersen et al., 2013; Torfing et al., 2020). This expansion confirms the central role of PSM as a structuring framework for understanding public sector behavior in times of institutional change.

However, this scientific vitality has also generated a growing fragmentation of the field. The multiplication of theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, disciplinary traditions, and empirical contexts has contributed to a dispersion of concepts that complicates the development of a coherent and integrated view of the PSM literature (Ritz et al., 2016; Vandenabeele et al., 2017). Certain dimensions of PSM have been extensively examined, while others remain marginal or under-theorized. Similarly, specific geographical, institutional, and socio-political contexts remain largely absent from the literature, despite their relevance for understanding contemporary public sector transformations (Giauque et al., 2011; van der Wal et al., 2021; Azhar & Steen, 2022).

This heterogeneity raises a critical question: what theoretical gaps, underexplored areas, missing conceptual linkages, or blind spots persist within the PSM literature? Addressing this question is essential for guiding future research, strengthening theoretical integration, and aligning PSM scholarship with the evolving realities of public administration (Pandey et al., 2017; Vandenabeele et al., 2014).

Identifying such gaps requires a systematic and rigorous methodological approach capable of capturing the structure, maturation, and internal dynamics of the research domain. In this respect, a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021), combined with an in-depth bibliometric analysis based on the Scopus database and the VOSviewer software (van Eck & Waltman, 2010), offers a particularly robust analytical framework. The PRISMA methodology ensures transparency and reproducibility in the processes of identification, screening, and inclusion of scientific publications, thereby enhancing the reliability of the resulting corpus (Liberati et al., 2009).

Bibliometric techniques—such as keyword co-occurrence analysis, author co-citation analysis, and conceptual network visualization—constitute powerful tools for uncovering the intellectual structure of a research field (Zupic & Čater, 2015; Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021). Through the use of VOSviewer, these techniques enable the visualization of thematic clusters, conceptual proximities, densely explored areas, and peripheral or weakly connected themes that may signal unresolved theoretical tensions or neglected research avenues (van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Waltman et al., 2014; Boyack & Klavans, 2010).

The scientific value of this combined methodological approach is twofold. First, it allows for a comprehensive mapping of the existing PSM literature by identifying dominant trends, influential authors, seminal contributions, and emerging research streams (Zupic & Čater, 2015; Donthu et al., 2021). Second, it facilitates a fine-grained detection of theoretical gaps by revealing absent or isolated concepts, weak or missing theoretical articulations, neglected institutional or geographical contexts, and unresolved intellectual tensions (Müller-Bloch & Kranz, 2015; Kraus et al., 2022).

This analytical effort is particularly timely given the profound transformations currently affecting public administrations, including digitalization, the rise of algorithmic governance, increasing performance pressures, and growing crises of public trust (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013; Meijer & Wessels, 2019; Wirtz et al., 2021). These developments directly challenge the nature, dynamics, and foundations of Public Service Motivation. Yet, despite these changes, much of the existing literature continues to rely on relatively traditional theoretical frameworks, often without fully integrating contemporary issues related to digital transformation, institutional complexity, or unstable politico-administrative contexts (O'Flynn, 2007; Bryson et al., 2014; Gofen et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop, the present study pursues three main objectives. First, it seeks to analyze the historical evolution and descriptive structure of the PSM literature in order to identify key regularities and transformations since the early 1990s. Second, it aims to map the thematic clusters, conceptual networks, and intellectual dynamics structuring the field through a bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed publications. Third, it endeavors to uncover persistent theoretical gaps by examining underexplored areas, conceptual tensions, missing linkages, and insufficiently developed theoretical perspectives (Ritz et al., 2016; Vandenabeele et al., 2018).

These objectives are addressed through the following research questions:

RQ1: How has the literature on Public Service Motivation developed descriptively and conceptually over the past three decades?
RQ2: What are the main thematic clusters, theoretical networks, and research poles revealed by bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer?
RQ3: What theoretical gaps emerge from this mapping, and how can these gaps inform future research directions in public administration?

By combining the methodological rigor of the PRISMA protocol with the analytical power of bibliometric tools, this study aims not only to provide a structured synthesis of existing knowledge, but also to offer a critical reading that highlights the theoretical lacunae hindering the consolidation of the field. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of Public Service Motivation and proposes avenues for the conceptual renewal of a domain that lies at the heart of contemporary transformations in public action.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1. Conceptual Foundations of Public Service Motivation

Public Service Motivation (PSM) has become one of the most influential theoretical constructs in public administration research over the past three decades. Initially conceptualized by Perry and Wise (1990), PSM refers to an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and public values. This foundational definition established PSM as a distinct form of motivation, differentiated from private-sector incentives by its normative, altruistic, and civic orientation.

Subsequent conceptual developments have refined and operationalized PSM, most notably through the multidimensional framework proposed by Perry (1996). This framework identifies four core dimensions—attraction to public participation, commitment to the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice—which have served as the dominant measurement structure in empirical research. The widespread adoption of this scale has contributed to the standardization and cumulative development of the field, enabling cross-national comparisons and meta-analytical syntheses (Kim & Vandenabeele, 2010; Perry et al., 2010).

Beyond its measurement properties, PSM has increasingly been framed as a value-based construct embedded in public service ethos and civic norms. Vandenabeele (2007) emphasized the institutional and cultural embeddedness of PSM, arguing that it reflects internalized public values shaped by socialization processes within political and administrative systems. This perspective positions PSM not merely as an individual trait, but as a phenomenon emerging from the interaction between personal values and institutional environments.

These conceptual foundations provide the basis for the diverse theoretical perspectives that have subsequently enriched PSM research.

2.2. Major Theoretical Perspectives Mobilized in PSM Research

Building upon these foundations, scholars progressively mobilized theoretical perspectives from adjacent disciplines.

As the literature has expanded, PSM research has progressively incorporated theoretical perspectives drawn from adjacent disciplines. One prominent stream connects PSM to broader motivational theories, particularly Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Scholars have explored the extent to which PSM aligns with intrinsic motivation and internalized forms of regulation, highlighting conceptual overlaps related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van Loon et al., 2015). However, despite this theoretical proximity, the integration between SDT and PSM remains partial and uneven, with limited cumulative theorization.

Another influential stream situates PSM within organizational behavior and human resource management frameworks. Research has consistently examined PSM as a predictor of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement, and performance-related outcomes (Bright, 2008; Wright & Pandey, 2008; Ritz, 2009). This body of work has reinforced the managerial relevance of PSM, particularly in discussions concerning recruitment, retention, and person–organization fit in public organizations.

In parallel, governance-oriented perspectives have extended PSM beyond individual-level outcomes. Scholars have linked PSM to public values, ethical decision-making, and collaborative governance arrangements, emphasizing its role in sustaining legitimacy and trust in public institutions (Andersen et al., 2013; Torfing et al., 2020). These studies highlight how PSM operates at the intersection of individual motivation and collective governance dynamics, especially in contexts characterized by complexity and inter-organizational collaboration.

Despite these theoretical extensions, the literature remains characterized by a strong dominance of psychological and attitudinal approaches. Structural, institutional, and macro-level perspectives—such as administrative traditions, political regimes, or systemic reforms—are comparatively underrepresented, limiting the explanatory scope of PSM research in rapidly transforming public sectors.

2.3. Fragmentation and Emerging Theoretical Gaps in the Literature

While the PSM literature is both extensive and methodologically sophisticated, several limitations have been repeatedly identified. Comprehensive reviews have pointed to a growing fragmentation of the field, driven by the proliferation of empirical studies without corresponding advances in integrative theory building (Ritz et al., 2016; Vandenabeele et al., 2017). The continued reliance on Perry's original dimensions, although analytically useful, raises concerns regarding the capacity of existing frameworks to capture contemporary transformations in public service work.

One major gap concerns contextual diversity. Empirical research on PSM remains heavily concentrated in Western administrative systems, with limited attention to developing countries, hybrid governance arrangements, or unstable institutional environments (Giauque et al., 2011; van der Wal et al., 2021). This imbalance constrains the generalizability of theoretical insights and obscures the role of context in shaping motivational dynamics.

A second gap relates to the weak integration of PSM with emerging public sector transformations. Despite increasing attention to digitalization, algorithmic governance, and data-driven administration, these dynamics remain marginal in PSM theorization (Meijer & Wessels, 2019; Wirtz et al., 2021). Similarly, concrete human resource practices—such as

welfare policies, social benefits, and collective support mechanisms—are rarely examined as institutional drivers of public service motivation.

Finally, the literature exhibits a limited articulation between levels of analysis. PSM is predominantly studied as an individual-level construct, while organizational, institutional, and governance-level influences are often treated as background variables rather than integrated theoretical components. This limitation hampers the development of multi-level explanatory models capable of capturing the complexity of motivation in contemporary public administration.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review combined with a bibliometric analysis to examine the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and theoretical gaps within Public Service Motivation (PSM) research. This research design is particularly appropriate for a rapidly expanding and conceptually heterogeneous field, as it combines the methodological rigor of systematic review procedures with the analytical power of bibliometric mapping techniques (Zupic & Čater, 2015; Donthu et al., 2021).

The methodological approach integrates two complementary components. First, a systematic review guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol ensures transparency, reproducibility, and consistency in the identification and selection of relevant publications. Second, a bibliometric analysis based on keyword co-occurrence networks enables the visualization of thematic structures, conceptual proximities, and underexplored research areas within the PSM literature.

3.2. Data Source and Search Strategy

Bibliographic data were retrieved exclusively from the Scopus database. Scopus was selected because it provides one of the most comprehensive databases of peer-reviewed literature in the social sciences and public administration. It ensures high-quality metadata, standardized indexing, and strong coverage of leading journals in the field. Nevertheless, relying on a single database may limit coverage of certain regional publications or non-indexed journals.

The initial search strategy was deliberately designed to ensure maximum exhaustiveness. The following query was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ("public service motivation" OR "PSM")

This broad query returned 26,660 documents, reflecting the widespread use of the acronym “PSM” across multiple disciplinary contexts.

To enhance disciplinary relevance, the search was subsequently restricted to publications indexed within the Scopus subject areas Social Sciences and Business, Management and Accounting, which reduced the dataset to 3,780 documents.

A further refinement was conducted through keyword-based filtering, focusing on terms directly related to the theoretical core of Public Service Motivation. After applying these

restrictions, the dataset was reduced to 1,161 documents, which constituted the preliminary corpus exported for further screening and cleaning.

Only peer-reviewed journal articles written in English were retained. Conference papers, book chapters, editorials, and non-academic documents were excluded.

3.3. Data Collection and Selection Process (PRISMA-Based Method)

The selection process followed the four stages recommended by the PRISMA 2020 framework: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

- Identification

The identification phase resulted in a preliminary dataset of 1,161 publications potentially related to Public Service Motivation. These records were exported from Scopus for further processing.

- Screening

During the screening phase, a systematic cleaning procedure was applied to eliminate duplicate records and publications unrelated to the conceptual domain of PSM. Duplicates were identified primarily on the basis of article titles, complemented by authorship and metadata when necessary.

In parallel, titles and abstracts were screened to exclude publications in which the acronym *PSM* referred to unrelated concepts or where motivation was discussed outside the context of public service, public administration, or public sector employment.

- Eligibility

The eligibility assessment focused on ensuring the thematic centrality of Public Service Motivation. Automated content-based filtering was applied to titles, abstracts, author keywords, and indexed keywords. Only publications containing explicit references to *public service motivation* or clearly situating *PSM* within a public sector context were retained.

This step led to the exclusion of articles in which PSM appeared only incidentally or without theoretical relevance, thereby strengthening the conceptual coherence of the corpus.

- Inclusion and Final Corpus

After thematic screening and de-duplication, the final corpus consisted of 862 unique peer-reviewed journal articles, which formed the empirical basis for the bibliometric analysis conducted using VOSviewer.

3.4. Bibliometric Analysis and Analytical Procedures

The bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer, a software specifically designed for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). VOSviewer enables the identification of structural patterns within scientific fields through network-based techniques.

Three main analytical procedures were employed:

1. Keyword co-occurrence analysis, based on author keywords and indexed keywords, to identify dominant research themes and emerging topics;
2. Co-citation analysis, to detect influential authors and foundational works shaping the theoretical development of PSM research;
3. Cluster analysis, using VOSviewer's clustering algorithm, to group related concepts into coherent thematic clusters.

The co-occurrence analysis focuses on the frequency with which keywords appear together within publications, providing insights into conceptual proximity and thematic density. Clusters characterized by high internal connectivity represent well-established research streams, while sparsely connected or peripheral clusters indicate potential theoretical gaps.

3.5. Identification of Theoretical Gaps

The identification of theoretical gaps is based on the structural properties of the bibliometric networks. Following established guidelines in bibliometric research, gaps are inferred from:

- concepts with low connectivity despite theoretical relevance;
- themes located at the periphery of the network;
- weak or absent links between major theoretical perspectives;
- underrepresentation of certain contexts or levels of analysis.

This approach allows for a systematic and data-driven identification of underexplored areas, avoiding subjective or impressionistic assessments. By linking these gaps to the conceptual foundations discussed in the literature review, the study provides a theoretically grounded agenda for future research in Public Service Motivation.

4. Results of the Co-occurrence Analysis

4.1. Overall Structure of the Co-occurrence Network

The co-occurrence analysis conducted on the cleaned Scopus-based corpus (n = 862 relevant publications) reveals a robust and well-structured configuration of the Public Service Motivation (PSM) research field. Author keywords and indexed keywords were jointly used to generate a conceptual map of relationships within the domain. The resulting network displays a high density of connections, a characteristic feature of a mature and consolidated scientific field organized around a relatively limited set of core concepts.

The global network visualization shows a central positioning of the term *public service motivation*, which constitutes the most highly connected node in the network. Its centrality reflects its structuring and integrative role across the body of published research. Surrounding this core concept, several distinct conceptual aggregates emerge, indicating the main trajectories of theoretical development within the PSM literature.

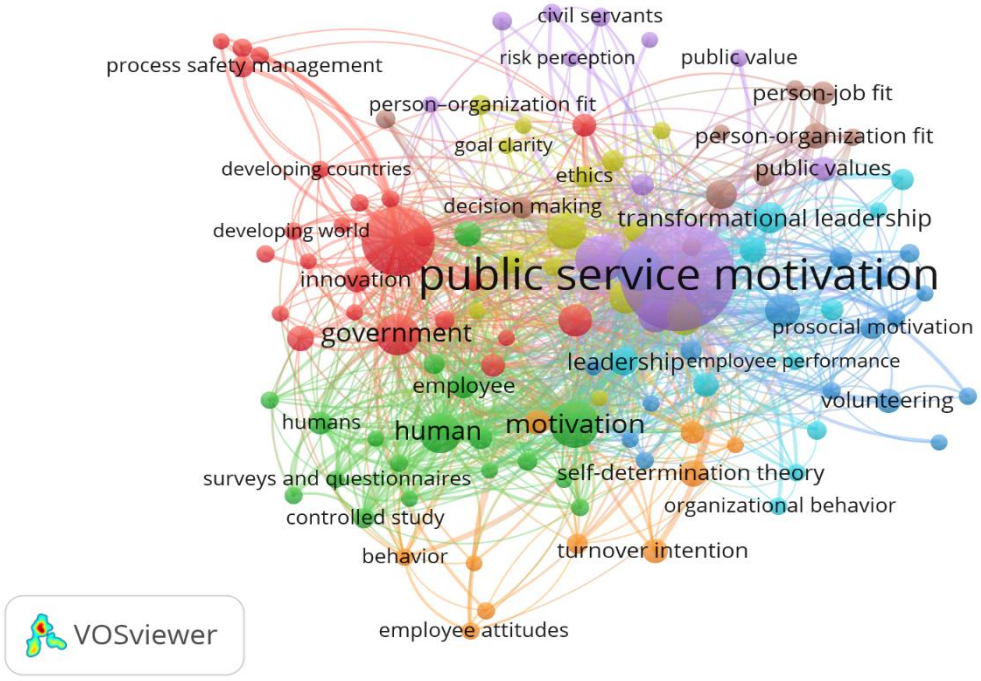


Figure 2. Overall co-occurrence network of keywords in Public Service Motivation research

4.2. Main Thematic Clusters

The clustering algorithm implemented in VOSviewer identifies several stable and coherent conceptual clusters, highlighting the thematic areas most frequently explored by the scientific community. These clusters constitute semantically and methodologically consistent units within the literature.

Central conceptual cluster: Theoretical foundations of PSM

The first cluster occupies the densely connected core of the network. It brings together concepts that define the theoretical structure of the field, such as *public service motivation*, *job satisfaction*, *work engagement*, *intrinsic motivation*, *organizational behavior*, and *self-determination theory*. This cluster represents the space in which motivational theories and research on work engagement in the public sector converge.

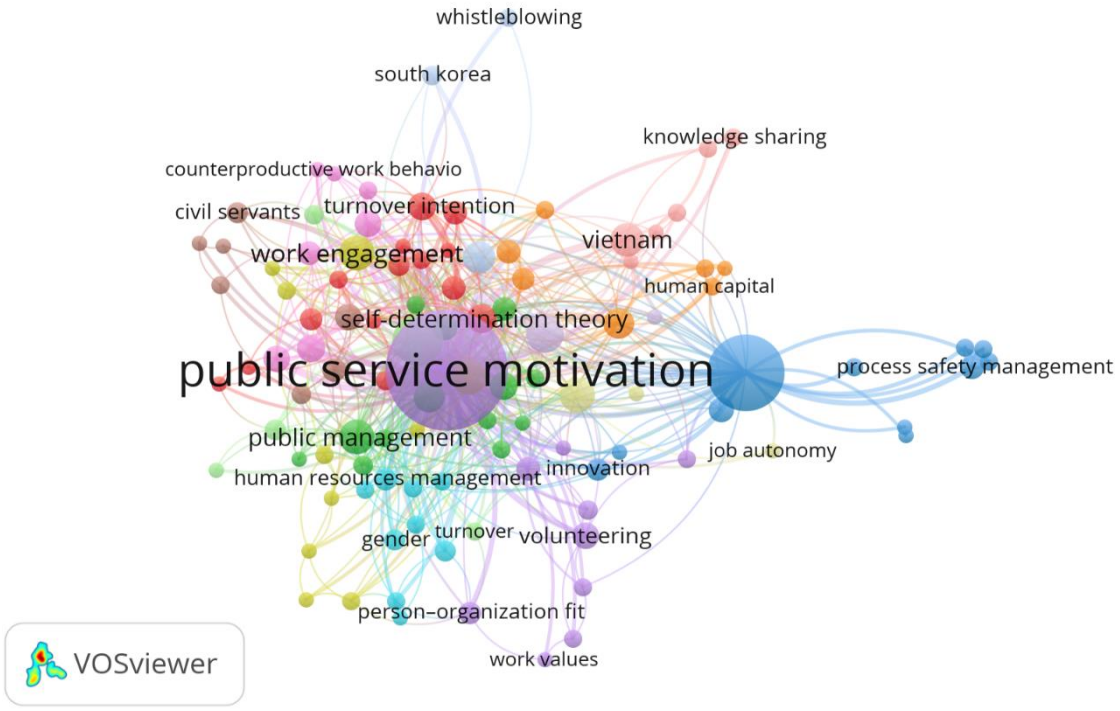


Figure 3. Core thematic cluster: Theoretical foundations of Public Service Motivation

- Leadership and prosocial behavior cluster

The second cluster groups terms related to leadership and interpersonal influence dynamics, including *leadership*, *transformational leadership*, *servant leadership*, *prosocial motivation*, *knowledge sharing*, and *volunteering*. This cluster highlights how PSM is mobilized to analyze the capacity of public organizations to foster other-oriented behaviors and to strengthen internal cooperation.

- Person–organization fit cluster

A third cluster brings together concepts associated with the alignment between individual values and public organizational missions, such as *person–organization fit*, *person–job fit*, *goal clarity*, and *organizational commitment*. This cluster reflects a substantial segment of the empirical literature focused on mechanisms of alignment between individual preferences, professional expectations, and public values.

- Work attitudes and behavioral outcomes cluster

An additional cluster encompasses terms related to the behavioral consequences of PSM, including *turnover intention*, *employee performance*, *work values*, and *employee attitudes*. This analytical space captures studies in which PSM is examined as an explanatory factor of professional decisions, performance levels, and organizational behaviors.

- Governance and public administration cluster

At the periphery of the network, another cluster connects PSM to broader public governance themes, such as *public management*, *public service*, *public value*, *ethics*, and *decision making*. The presence of these terms indicates that PSM serves as an anchoring concept for analyzing wider issues in public management and administrative governance.

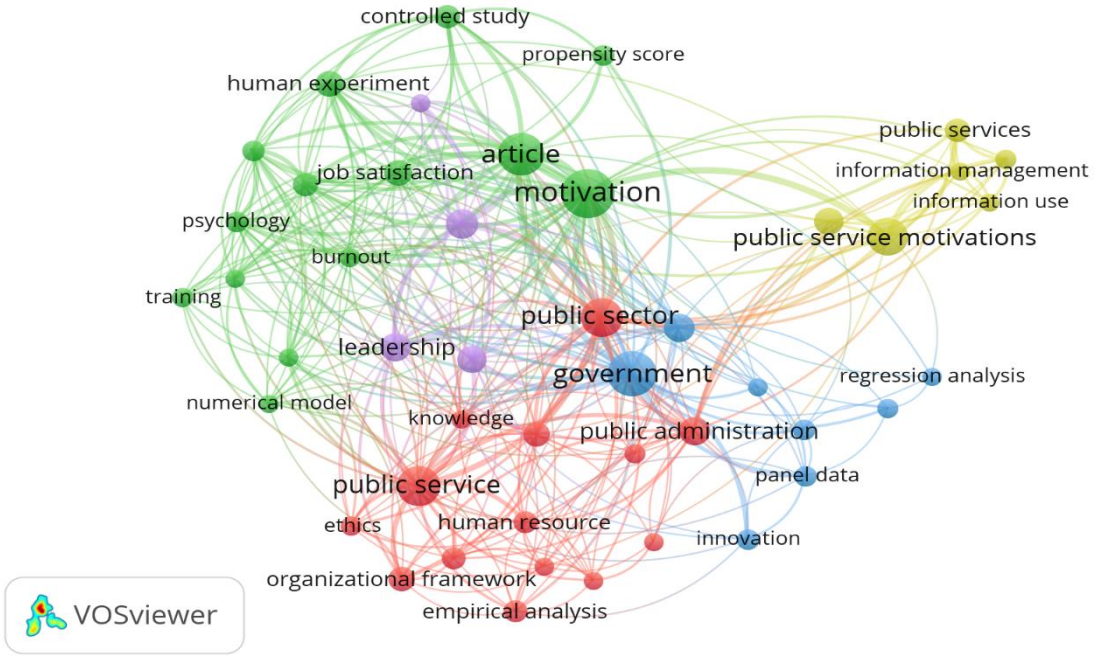


Figure 4. Thematic clusters derived from the keyword co-occurrence analysis

Overall, these clusters illustrate the dominant thematic orientations structuring contemporary Public Service Motivation research.

4.3. Interpretative Analysis of the Network Structure

The overall organization of the network confirms that Public Service Motivation functions as a pivotal concept, enabling the articulation of research streams focused on professional attitudes, performance, prosocial behaviors, and organizational engagement. The strong presence of leadership-related and organizational behavior concepts reflects an increasing integration of psychological and managerial perspectives into PSM research.

The observed links between *self-determination theory* and behavioral variables suggest a growing tendency to mobilize broader motivational frameworks to analyze PSM, although this integration has thus far remained largely exploratory rather than theoretically consolidated. Similarly, the prominent positioning of *person–organization fit* and *person–job fit* indicates a sustained interest in normative and motivational alignment mechanisms within public organizations.

Finally, concepts located at the periphery of the network—while still fragmented—signal a progressive diversification of research objects. This peripheral zone includes terms related to public innovation, knowledge circulation, governance, and emotional dimensions of work. Their presence points to thematic areas that remain weakly connected to the core conceptual structure but are likely to gain increasing prominence in future research trajectories.

Taken together, the structure of the network highlights both the theoretical consolidation of the field and the emergence of peripheral themes that may represent future directions for research.

5. Discussion

The co-occurrence analysis conducted on the cleaned Scopus-based corpus and the visual maps generated by VOSviewer provides a rich set of insights into the conceptual architecture, internal dynamics, and blind spots of Public Service Motivation (PSM) research. Overall, the network configuration confirms the existence of a strong and stable theoretical core, largely inherited from the seminal contributions of Perry and Wise, while simultaneously revealing structural asymmetries that constrain the field's capacity to fully account for contemporary transformations in public administration.

Taken together, the findings suggest that PSM research has reached a stage of theoretical consolidation, yet one that is accompanied by conceptual inertia. This tension between maturity and stagnation constitutes the central interpretative axis of the discussion.

5.1. Consolidation and Path Dependence of the Core PSM Framework

The pronounced centrality of the concept *public service motivation* across all network visualizations confirms its enduring role as the organizing principle of the field. The dense interconnections linking PSM to *job satisfaction*, *work engagement*, *organizational commitment*, and *leadership* indicate that the literature remains primarily oriented toward explaining individual attitudes and behaviors at work. This configuration reflects a cumulative research trajectory in which the explanatory power of PSM for key organizational outcomes has been repeatedly validated.

However, this consolidation also reveals a form of path dependence. The persistent reliance on a relatively narrow set of outcome variables suggests that the field has privileged incremental empirical extensions over broader theoretical innovation. While such coherence is often interpreted as a sign of scientific maturity, it may also limit the field's ability to respond to emerging challenges facing public organizations.

In this respect, the network structure points to a paradox: the very success of PSM as a unifying framework may have contributed to a theoretical closure, in which alternative conceptualizations struggle to gain visibility and legitimacy.

5.2. Partial Integration of Contemporary Motivational Theories

The presence of concepts such as *intrinsic motivation* and *self-determination theory* (SDT) within the core cluster indicates a growing awareness of the need to situate PSM within broader motivational frameworks. This convergence suggests an implicit recognition that PSM cannot be fully understood in isolation from general theories of human motivation.

Nevertheless, the relatively weak density surrounding these nodes reveals that this integration remains conceptually underdeveloped. SDT-related concepts appear more as complementary references than as fully articulated theoretical foundations within PSM research. This pattern points to a selective appropriation of psychological theories, where elements compatible with existing PSM assumptions are incorporated, while more challenging implications—such as the role of autonomy-supportive organizational contexts or motivational crowding effects—remain insufficiently explored.

As a result, the field risks reproducing a fragmented theoretical landscape, in which motivational theories coexist without being systematically integrated.

5.3. Emerging Themes at the Periphery: Signals of Theoretical Renewal

The identification of peripheral clusters related to leadership styles, prosocial behavior, innovation, and knowledge sharing highlights the gradual diversification of research interests. These themes reflect growing attention to relational, collective, and dynamic dimensions of public sector work.

However, their peripheral positioning indicates that they remain weakly connected to the core conceptual structure of PSM research. Rather than transforming the theoretical foundations of the field, these themes are often mobilized as contextual variables or secondary extensions. This limits their capacity to challenge dominant assumptions or to generate integrative theoretical advances.

From a theoretical standpoint, the peripheral status of these themes should not be interpreted as marginality, but rather as early signals of potential paradigm extension. Their limited connectivity suggests that the field has yet to fully theorize how leadership, innovation, and collective learning processes interact with motivational orientations toward public service.

5.4. The Neglect of Concrete Human Resource Practices as a Structural Blind Spot

One of the most striking findings of the co-occurrence analysis is the absence of operational HR-related concepts, such as social benefits, welfare mechanisms, well-being policies, or non-monetary recognition systems. This absence reveals a deep-seated theoretical bias within the PSM literature toward attitudinal and normative explanations, often detached from material and institutional arrangements.

This omission is particularly problematic in public sector contexts, where HR practices are frequently shaped by legal frameworks, collective arrangements, and social policies rather than individual managerial discretion. By overlooking these dimensions, the literature implicitly assumes that PSM operates independently of organizational support structures, an assumption that is increasingly difficult to sustain.

The lack of integration between PSM and concrete HR practices thus constitutes a structural blind spot, limiting the explanatory reach of the field and constraining its relevance for public management reforms.

5.5. Disconnect Between PSM and Contemporary Public Sector Transformations

The weak representation of concepts related to digitalization, artificial intelligence, emotional labor, and algorithmic governance underscores a significant gap between PSM research and the realities of contemporary public administration. As public organizations increasingly rely on digital systems, data-driven decision-making, and automated procedures, the motivational foundations of public service are likely to be profoundly reshaped.

Yet, the network reveals that these transformations remain largely external to the core PSM discourse. This disconnect suggests that PSM research has not yet fully engaged with the implications of technological and organizational change for public service values, identity, and motivation.

Addressing this gap requires moving beyond static conceptions of motivation and toward dynamic, context-sensitive frameworks capable of capturing how technological infrastructures reshape the meaning and experience of public service work.

5.6. Toward a Multilevel and Interdisciplinary Research Agenda

Finally, the limited articulation between individual, organizational, and institutional levels of analysis emerges as a persistent theoretical limitation. Although concepts such as *public value* and *governance* appear in the network, their failure to form a coherent cluster indicates that multilevel theorization remains embryonic.

This fragmentation constrains the field's ability to explain how institutional norms, administrative traditions, and governance arrangements shape individual motivational orientations. Without such integration, PSM risks being reduced to a psychological trait, detached from the political and institutional contexts that give public service its distinctive meaning.

Future research would therefore benefit from adopting explicitly multilevel and interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on public administration theory, organizational sociology, and political science to reconnect motivation with governance structures.

5.7. Summary of Theoretical Implications

In synthesis, the co-occurrence analysis reveals a field that is theoretically robust yet unevenly developed. Its main characteristics include:

- a highly consolidated core centered on classical motivational models;
- a selective and partial integration of contemporary psychological theories;
- a systematic neglect of concrete HR and welfare practices;
- a weak engagement with digital and organizational transformations;
- an underdeveloped multilevel conceptual structure.

These findings suggest that, despite its empirical richness, PSM research remains anchored in analytical frameworks that insufficiently reflect the evolving complexity of public sector work. The bibliometric evidence thus points to significant opportunities for theoretical renewal, encouraging future research to bridge existing divides and to reembed motivation within the institutional and organizational realities of contemporary public administration.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive assessment of the intellectual structure and theoretical evolution of Public Service Motivation (PSM) research. By combining a systematic literature review following the PRISMA protocol with a bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed publications using VOSviewer, the study mapped the dominant research trajectories and identified structural gaps within the field.

The findings reveal that PSM research has achieved a high level of theoretical consolidation around a relatively stable core composed of motivational theories, work attitudes, and organizational behavior variables. At the same time, the bibliometric analysis highlights several underexplored areas, including the role of human resource practices, the impact of digital transformation, and the articulation between individual motivation and broader institutional contexts.

These results suggest that while the PSM literature has developed a strong empirical foundation, significant opportunities remain for theoretical renewal. Future research would benefit from integrating multilevel analytical perspectives, exploring diverse institutional environments, and incorporating contemporary transformations affecting public sector work.

From a practical perspective, the study also provides useful insights for public managers and policy designers seeking to strengthen motivational dynamics within public organizations. Understanding the structural gaps in the literature may contribute to designing more supportive organizational environments capable of sustaining commitment to public service values.

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