

# **Organizational Moral Imagination**

*Rethinking Sustainability, Technology, and Learning*

Edited By

**Gulcimen Yurtsever  
and  
Gitanjaly Chhabra**

Organizational Moral Imagination: Rethinking Sustainability,  
Technology, and Learning

Edited by Gulcimen Yurtsever and Gitanjali Chhabra

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# Table of Contents

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| <b>List of Tables and Figures.....</b>   | <b>ix</b>    |
| <b>Acknowledgments .....</b>   | <b>xi</b>    |
| <b>Preface by the Editors.....</b>   | <b>xiv</b>   |
| <b>About the Editors .....</b>   | <b>xviii</b> |
| <b>Chapter 1: Moral Imagination in Organizations: A<br/>Systematic Literature Review .....</b>   | <b>1</b>     |
| <i>Gulcimen Yurtsever, Zafer Cakmak</i>  |              |
| <b>Chapter 2: Organizational Moral Imagination: Emotional<br/>Climate of Organization and Moral Emotion.....</b>   | <b>37</b>    |
| <i>Gulcimen Yurtsever</i>  |              |
| <b>Chapter 3: Moral Imagination: Misconceptions About<br/>Generation-Z.....</b>  | <b>73</b>    |
| <i>Yucel Ertekin</i>   |              |
| <b>Chapter 4: Collective Moral Imagination: Humans and<br/>Machines.....</b>   | <b>96</b>    |
| <i>Gitanjaly Chhabra</i>   |              |
| <b>Chapter 5: Rethinking Organizational Sustainability<br/>Through Moral Imagination .....</b>   | <b>128</b>   |
| <i>Zafer Cakmak</i>  |              |
| <b>Chapter 6: Visionary Entrepreneurial Choices through<br/>the Lens of Moral Imagination: A Systematic Literature<br/>Review and Thematic Analysis.....</b> | <b>162</b>   |
| <i>Prihana Vasishtha</i>   |              |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Chapter 7: Moral Imagination in Education and Pedagogy:</b> |            |
| <b>An Essential Pedagogical Imperative for Successful</b>      |            |
| <b>Ethical Engagement .....</b>                                | <b>196</b> |

*Noor Rizvi*

# List of Tables and Figures

## Tables

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Table 1.1</b> Document search protocol.....   | 9   |
| <b>Table 1.2</b> Inclusion and exclusion criteria .....  | 11  |
| <b>Table 1.3</b> Journals by number of publications .....  | 15  |
| <b>Table 1.4</b> Most cited articles .....   | 16  |
| <b>Table 1.5</b> Authors and number of publications .....  | 17  |
| <b>Table 1.6</b> Keyword analysis results.....   | 20  |
| <b>Table 1.7</b> Co-occurrence matrix of thematic codes .....  | 23  |
| <b>Table 4.1</b> Collective moral imagination of humans and machines in organizations .....                          | 101 |
| <b>Table 4.2</b> Relevance of collective moral imagination.....  | 112 |
| <b>Table 4.3</b> Application of UNESCO's (2024) principles to ethics of AI in the context of moral imagination ..... | 114 |
| <b>Table 6.1</b> Future research directions .....  | 187 |
| <b>Table 7.1</b> The practical application of moral imagination in real-life scenarios.....                          | 207 |
| <b>Table 7.2</b> Integrative ethical education.....  | 219 |

## Figures

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Figure 1.1</b> PRISMA flow diagram .....   | 12 |
| <b>Figure 1.2</b> Annual distribution of publications on moral imagination in organizational contexts ..... | 14 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Figure 1.3</b> Author networks.....                         | 18  |
| <b>Figure 1.4</b> Keyword network analysis .....               | 22  |
| <b>Figure 1.5</b> Word cloud of most frequent terms .....      | 24  |
| <b>Figure 4.1</b> Collective moral imagination .....           | 110 |
| <b>Figure 6.1</b> Search strategy for review.....              | 168 |
| <b>Figure 6.2</b> Key themes.....                              | 169 |
| <b>Figure 6.3</b> Co-occurrence network cluster analysis ..... | 174 |
| <b>Figure 6.4</b> WordCloud analysis .....                     | 178 |

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## About the Contributors

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## Preface by the Editors

In recent years, the concept of moral imagination has gained growing attention for its potential to guide ethical decision-making and strategic transformation in organizational settings. As organizations face increasingly complex environments marked by rapid technological change, global crises, and social expectations for responsible conduct, the need for moral and ethical responsiveness has become more pronounced. Traditional ethical frameworks have provided valuable foundations for analysing ethical concerns at the workplace. However, these models often fall short when confronted with real-world complexities that demand creativity, empathy, and systemic thinking.

In this rapidly evolving universe, our emotions must certainly be an integral part of this transformation. The decline of moral imagination, devoid of specific emotions, is imminent. Corporate moral imagination is an important asset to address specific ethical issues and facilitate a resolution process. Corporate sustainability requires the development of harmonious relationships both within the organization and with the environment. Such an attitude creates both sustainability and the dynamics of transformation between generations.

This book focuses on moral imagination in the current digital contemporary society. The book lays the foundation of moral imagination by providing scholars and practitioners with a structured understanding of how moral imagination can serve as a bridge between ethical theory and organizational practice.

Additionally, it offers comprehensive insights on the emotional climate of organizations and moral emotions, Generation Z's understanding of moral imagination, collective moral imagination of humans and machines, understandings of moral imagination and sustainability which is beyond compliance and performance metrics. This book also serves as a roadmap for promoting collaboration across various disciplines of Artificial Intelligence (AI), sustainability, education and pedagogy, leading to opportunities in developing and enhancing critical perspectives on moral imagination in various fields to redefine human life.

Ethical theories provide frameworks which augment organizations to make decisions. However, bridging the gap between theory and practical applications showcases that the decisions are principled and pragmatic. Practical applications create a pathway to manage real-world challenges such as environmental sustainability, AI development and deployment, and learning with moral imagination. Additionally, incorporating emotional climate and moral emotions offers a deeper understanding of organizational ethics. It shifts ethical practice beyond compliance toward a relational and emotional approach.

With the transformation in generations, the need to understand the current workforce of Generation Z also becomes imperative. As Generation Z are the ethical futures it is important to note their understanding of moral imagination to form a more dynamic, relational, and deeply attuned systemic change. Additionally, currently we are also witnessing hyper accelerated pace of growth in technology and AI, therefore, a collective moral imagination of humans and machines is not a distant speculation. It is an urgent and evolving task. It calls on us to redefine moral agency, design ethical systems, and co-imagine futures where technology serves

human dignity, planetary health, and ethical systems. This is not just a technical challenge, but a profound ethical and creative endeavour which demands new alliances between philosophy, engineering, and lived experiences. To manage planetary health, moral imagination invites us to reimagine sustainability as a deeply ethical, relational, and transformative practice, one that moves beyond technical repairs and governmental reporting to consider how we live, relate, and take responsibility for the current and future times.

Therefore, this book focuses on the essentiality of moral imagination in today's rapidly evolving world, particularly at the intersection of sustainability, humans and machines, Generation Z, and education. As we face global ecological crises, advancing technologies, and shifting generational values, moral imagination enables us to envision ethical alternatives beyond mere compliance or efficiency. In sustainability, it encourages organizations and individuals to act not just to meet targets, but to care for future generations and non-human life. In the realm of AI and automation, moral imagination helps us critically assess how machines shape human relationships and agency. For Generation Z, who are digital natives, it offers a way to enhance empathy and creativity into meaningful outcomes. In education, fostering moral imagination cultivates not only critical thinking but also the courage and ethical sensitivity to reimagine systems, relationships, and futures. Together, these contexts demand a shared moral vision, one that is grounded in responsibility, expanded by imagination, and committed to a transformative positive action.

This book also emphasizes that moral imagination is important to create new and alternative future visions that can guide environmental, technological, and social change. These visions inspire

innovative solutions and encourage organizational morale among diverse communities. By fostering a sense of shared responsibility, we can effectively address the complex challenges facing our planet today.

Overall, the book urges the readers, policy makers, and people of vested interest in the growing field of ethical organizational behaviours. As the book is multidisciplinary, with its focus on moral imagination, it amalgamates research by various academics, researchers, philosophers, and industry experts rendering a platform for the readers to enhance their knowledge and critique the latest trends in AI, sustainable development goals, digital transformation, transformative leadership, organizational change, environmental engagements, and moral and ethical issues in the current times shaping the society.

## About the Editors

**Dr. Gulcimen Yurtsever** is an academic, scientist, and author. Her current research work focuses on ethics, emotion, and negotiation. She has published in prestigious journals and authored books. She also serves as a referee and editor in prestigious journals and works as a principal investigator in international projects in Europe. She is currently conducting research on sustainability and ethics in Canada.

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## **Chapter One**

# **Moral Imagination in Organizations: A Systematic Literature Review**

**Gulcimen Yurtsever, Zafer Cakmak**

### **Abstract**

Through a systematic survey of existing academic literature, this chapter traces the developmental path of moral imagination in organizational studies. To fulfill these objectives, a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology was adopted, adhering to a structured protocol based on PRISMA (2020) guidelines. Sixty articles, carefully chosen from the Web of Science and Scopus databases, underwent both bibliometric and content analysis. The findings indicate a consistent upturn in academic engagement with this topic, particularly from 2008 onwards, with a significant concentration of publications appearing in ethics-focused journals. Key emergent themes encompass moral sensitivity, systems thinking, and ethical leadership, coupled with a significant emphasis on how organizations can effectively harmonize internal values with external demands. Moreover, this review sheds light on a distinct, albeit compact, and evolving network of researchers focused on this area, while also pinpointing critical conceptual and methodological deficiencies in the current literature. By synthesizing diverse scholarly insights on moral imagination into a cohesive analytical framework, this chapter offers a distinct contribution. In doing so, it furnishes both academics and practitioners with a structured

comprehension of moral imagination's potential to bridge the gap between ethical theory and practical organizational application.

**Keywords:** Moral Imagination; systematic literature review; organizational ethics

## Introduction

Ethical decision-making in organizational contexts has long been a focal point in management and business ethics research (Jackson et al 2013, Marabelli et al 2021). As organizations face increasingly complex environments marked by rapid technological change, global crises, and social expectations for responsible conduct, the need for moral and ethical responsiveness has become more pronounced. Traditional ethical frameworks—such as deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics—have provided valuable foundations for understanding ethical behavior (DeTienne et al 2021). However, these models often fall short when confronted with real-world complexities that demand creativity, empathy, and systemic thinking.

Within this broader ethical discourse, the concept of moral imagination has emerged as a critical and dynamic lens for interpreting and navigating ethical challenges (Moberg & Seabright 2000). Moral imagination refers to the ability to perceive ethically significant situations, envision alternative responses, and reframe problems beyond prevailing assumptions (Godwin 2015). Scholars have highlighted its relevance in shaping leadership practices, guiding organizational strategy, and fostering inclusive decision-making processes (Roca 2010). Despite its conceptual richness and interdisciplinary appeal—spanning philosophy, organizational studies, psychology, and management—the literature on moral imagina-

tion in organizational settings remains fragmented, with varying definitions, methodologies, and thematic emphases.

Although existing research has provided valuable insights into how individuals and organizations exercise moral imagination (Mnisri & Wasieleski 2020, Vidaver-Cohen 1998, Whitaker & Godwin 2013), several important questions remain unresolved. Specifically, there is limited understanding of how the concept has evolved over time, how it has been applied in empirical and theoretical studies, and what key themes, frameworks, or methodological trends characterize the existing body of knowledge. Moreover, the connections between moral imagination and organizational phenomena—such as leadership, systems thinking, ethical culture, and decision-making—have yet to be systematically explored.

In this chapter, we conduct a systematic literature review to examine how moral imagination has been conceptualized and studied within organizational contexts. Drawing on articles retrieved from the Web of Science and Scopus databases, we employ bibliometric and content analysis to trace publication trends, identify key contributors, and uncover dominant themes and research gaps. This review not only maps the intellectual structure of the field but also lays the groundwork for future inquiry by highlighting underexplored dimensions of moral imagination and their significance for contemporary organizational practice.

## **Conceptual framework**

Moral imagination can be defined as the capacity to discern ethical dilemmas and to envision innovative, alternative courses of action that transcend conventional norms (Moberg & Seabright 2000, Samuelson 2007). It operates not only at the individual cogni-

tive-affective level but also across organizational and systemic domains, enabling both personal ethical growth and collective strategic transformation (Vidaver-Cohen 1998). At its core, moral imagination involves the ability to detect morally significant issues within complex contexts and to generate creative solutions that reconcile conflicting values. For instance, within work environments that are stigmatized or labelled as “dirty,” moral imagination can empower employees to reconstruct adverse occupational self-views and navigate innate moral tensions; such a process may reduce stigma and cultivate a greater sense of personal efficacy (Roca 2010). On a broader scale, moral imagination is understood as a type of prosocial, forward-looking cognitive ability that equips decision-makers to critically assess prevailing mental frameworks and to formulate novel ethical alternatives (Werhane 2002, Rindova & Martins 2023).

Established ethical theories, such as deontology and virtue ethics, offer the standard criteria for assessing actions (Baumane et al 2016, Roby 2018). Yet, moral imagination moves beyond these conventional frameworks by actively promoting an adaptable and fluid understanding of ethical tenets when confronted by the intricacies of specific situations (Narvaez & Mrkva 2014). Such a viewpoint aligns with pragmatic philosophy, which embeds moral investigation within tangible, real-world engagement rather than abstract, detached rules. From a cognitive viewpoint, moral imagination involves the dual capabilities of engaging in careful self-reflection and being able to deviate from deeply ingrained thought patterns (Johnson & Werner 1995). The incorporation of systems thinking significantly deepens this perspective by placing individual ethical assessments into the context of an organization’s interconnected and mutually dependent components. This approach

not only highlights the limits of individual reasoning in isolation but also underscores the need for systemic interventions to overcome “intractable” moral dilemmas (Beran 2022, Werhane 2002). Within organizations, moral imagination is instrumental in linking internal values to strategic action. An “inside-out” perspective on corporate purpose suggests that by harnessing moral imagination, organizations can develop a dynamic, value-based strategic purpose—what has been termed “the collective desirable.” This emergent theory of value integrates a firm’s internal aspirations with external stakeholder demands, thereby fostering ethical leadership and sustained competitive advantage (Rindova & Martins 2023).

Moral imagination can be evaluated within different components or variables. In this context, key components for evaluation include moral sensitivity, moral reasoning, and moral implementation, with systems integration also being a critical factor, especially in organizational assessments (Moberg & Seabright 2000, Werhane 2002). Moral sensitivity, or moral awareness, represents the initial stage in the ethical decision-making process. It involves the ability to recognize the moral dimensions embedded within a situation (Miller et al 2014, Reynolds & Miller 2015). This heightened sensitivity is especially important in work environments that are socially stigmatized or ethically ambiguous. In such contexts, individuals with strong moral sensitivity are better equipped to perceive ethical dilemmas and potential conflicts that might otherwise go unnoticed. By identifying these issues early on, they lay the groundwork for thoughtful and responsible ethical reasoning (Roca 2010). Once ethical issues are recognized, individuals engage in moral reasoning, an evaluative process that combines rational analysis with creative exploration. This particular stage encompasses more

than just evaluating conflicting ethical options; it also necessitates a rethinking of the fundamental cognitive frameworks that guide decision-making processes (Werhane 2002). The concluding phase, termed moral implementation, centers on the practical conversion of ethical understanding into tangible actions. Within an organizational context, this aspect becomes evident through strategic initiatives aimed at harmonizing a company's internal values with the interests of its stakeholders. Organizations can cultivate a robust ethical foundation by establishing formal procedures that encourage reflective moral dialogue and innovative approaches to resolving problems (Rindova & Martins 2023). Systems integration serves as a vital complementary element to the dimensions previously discussed. Given that ethical predicaments frequently arise from the intricate interactions among diverse organizational elements, the application of moral imagination within a comprehensive, systemic framework becomes crucial. Such a holistic methodology prompts managers to tackle complex issues, exemplified by those brought to the fore during crises like COVID-19, by not only adjusting individual conduct but also reshaping the wider organizational and economic structures at play (Beran 2022).

A vibrant, reciprocal relationship between moral sensitivity, reasoning, and implementation establishes a cyclical process that fortifies ethical decision-making within organizations. From a practical standpoint, nurturing moral imagination holds the capacity to reshape organizational cultures through several key avenues:

- Empowering stigmatized or ethically challenged groups to redefine their professional identities (Roca 2010).
- Enabling top management to articulate a firm-specific, dynamic purpose that integrates internal values with external demands (Rindova & Martins 2023).

- Promoting a systems-based approach that mitigates the limitations of individual decision-making in the face of complex, interconnected challenges (Beran 2022, Werhane 2002).

## Methodology

A systematic literature review signifies an exhaustive inquiry, meticulously structured around precise research questions that target a particular subject area (Rother 2007). Throughout this undertaking, current scholarly work undergoes thorough scrutiny, guided by a clearly established protocol (Kitchenham et al 2009). Such reviews aim to furnish readers with an expansive understanding of the collective scholarly knowledge concerning the topic being explored (Xiao & Watson 2019).

For the current investigation, we adopted the systematic literature review method to enable a deep and comprehensive exploration of this book chapter's central theme – moral imagination within organizations – and to construct a cohesive synthesis from the examined literature. Our approach adhered to the procedural framework detailed by Kitchenham (2004), encompassing the subsequent key stages:

- Development of the review protocol
- Conducting searches in the identified databases
- Selection of primary studies
- Data extraction and analysis
- Integration of analyzed data
- Reporting of the analysis

Additionally, during the reporting phase of this study, the principles outlined in the PRISMA statement (Page et al 2021), which is widely used and accepted in academic research, were taken into consideration.

## **Research questions**

The aim of this study is to comprehensively evaluate the literature on moral imagination within organizations and to identify key research trends in this field. Additionally, key research objectives include investigating the evolution of the concept of organizational moral imagination, its treatment in the literature, the primary contributors to the field, and the variables most frequently studied in conjunction with it. To achieve these aims, the following research questions were formulated:

- How is the concept of organizational moral imagination defined in the literature, and in which contexts is it addressed?
- How have studies on organizational moral imagination evolved over time?
- Which authors, institutions, and countries have contributed the most to this field?
- What theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches have been used in studies on organizational moral imagination?
- Which variables are most frequently examined alongside organizational moral imagination, and how are these relationships interpreted?

- What are the main research gaps identified in the literature regarding organizational moral imagination, and what areas are suggested for future research?

These research questions are designed to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the topic by highlighting existing trends, gaps, and potential directions for further investigation.

### Development of the document search protocol

In systematic literature reviews, developing a search protocol is a crucial step that significantly affects the quality of the study (Okoli & Schabram 2015). Before initiating the document search process, it is essential to define the boundaries of the search through a well-structured protocol. Accordingly, for this study, a detailed search protocol was established (see Table 1), and the search process adhered to it.

| Database                 | Year | Language | Subject Area | Document Type | Keywords for Searching  |
|--------------------------|------|----------|--------------|---------------|---|
| Web of Science<br>Scopus | -    | English  | All          | All types     | Moral imagination, organizational moral imagination, moral imagination in organizations |

**Table 1.1** *Document search protocol*

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The development of inclusion and exclusion criteria is essential in systematic literature reviews to ensure the selection of high-quality and relevant documents (Nightingale 2009). These predetermined criteria ensure that the selected documents contain sufficient relevant data for the investigation. Additionally, they guarantee the repeatability of the review process. The inclusion and exclusion criteria established within the scope of this study are presented in Table 1.2.

| Inclusion Criteria                                   |  | Exclusion Criteria  |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <b>IC1-Language of Study</b>                         | The study must be written in English.  | <b>EC1-Language of Study</b>  | The study is written in a language other than English.                                 |
| <b>IC2- Publication status</b>                       | The study should be in the form of any document.   | <b>EC2-Non-Article Publication Types</b>                            | -  |
| <b>IC3-Peer-Reviewed</b>                             | The article has undergone a peer-review process.   | <b>EC3-Lack of Peer Review</b>                                      | The study is published in a journal that does not employ peer review.                  |
| <b>IC4-Database Listing</b>                          | The study must be listed in one of the specified two databases (Web of Science, Scopus). | <b>EC4-Outside Publication Period</b>                               | -  |
| <b>IC5-Publication - Period</b>                      | -  | <b>EC5-Restricted Access</b>  | The study is not openly accessible.  |
| <b>IC6-Access Availability:</b>                      | The study must be openly accessible.   | <b>EC6- Not Clearly Focused on Organizational Moral Imagination</b> | Articles that do not clearly focus on the concept of organizational moral imagination. |
| <b>IC7-Types of Studies</b>                          | The study should be either theoretical or empirical.                                     | <b>EC7-Title or Abstract</b>  | -  |
| <b>IC8-Title or Abstract</b>                         | The study should include themes of moral imagination and organization                    | <b>EC8- Insufficient Focus on Organizational Moral Imagination</b>  | Studies that do not adequately concentrate on organizational moral imagination.        |
| <b>IC9-Focus on Organizational Moral Imagination</b> | The study should primarily focus on the concept of organizational moral imagination.     | <b>EC9- Unpublished Studies</b>                                     | Studies that have not been officially published.                                       |
|  |  | <b>EC10-Gray Literature</b>   | This includes corporate white papers and similar types of gray literature.             |

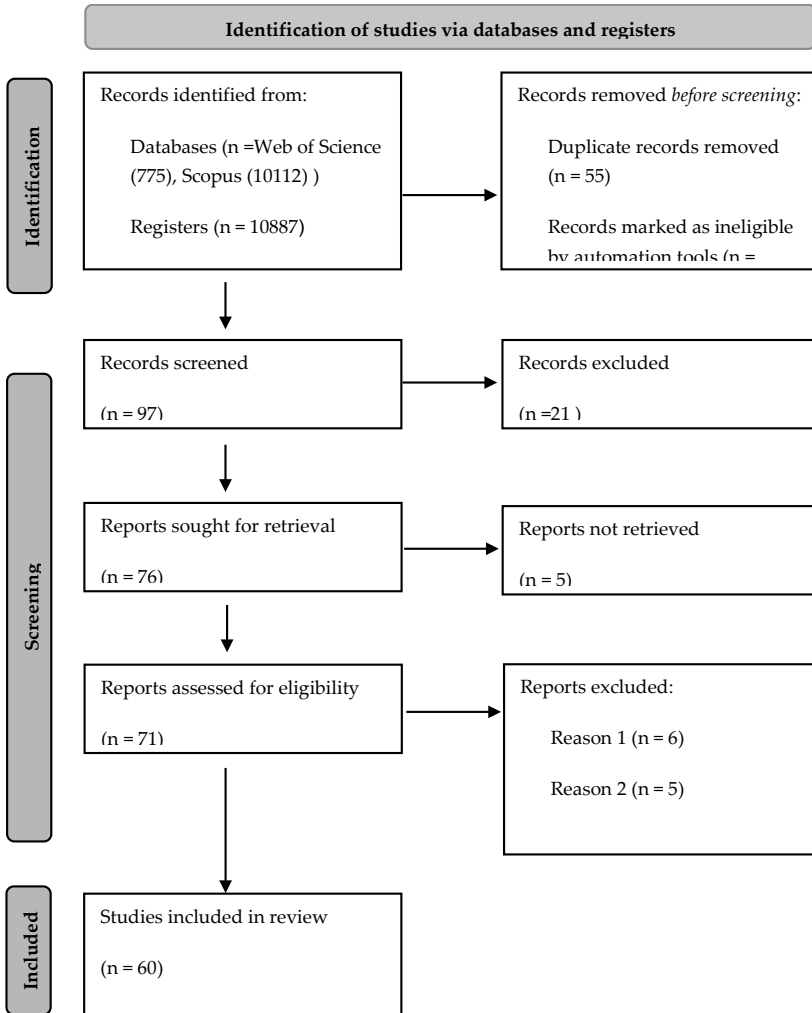
Table 1.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

## Document identification

To systematically explore the concept of moral imagination within organizational contexts, a structured document identification process was conducted. The initial step involved selecting relevant academic databases known for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the fields of management, ethics, and organizational studies. For this study, the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases were utilized due to their comprehensive and multidisciplinary nature.

The search strategy was developed through the identification of key terms and Boolean operators to ensure a focused yet inclusive retrieval of documents. The primary keywords used in the search process included “moral imagination” and “organizational moral imagination”. These terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine and broaden the search scope as necessary.

Following the application of this **search strategy**, a total of 10887 (WoS: 775 Scopus: 10112) documents were identified for initial review. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts, 60 documents were retained for full-text analysis. These selected studies form the foundation for the subsequent bibliometric and content analysis presented in the following sections. To ensure a systematic approach to the screening and reporting process, the PRISMA (2020) guidelines were followed, and the flow diagram recommended in the framework was applied (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1** *PRISMA flow diagram*

## **Findings**

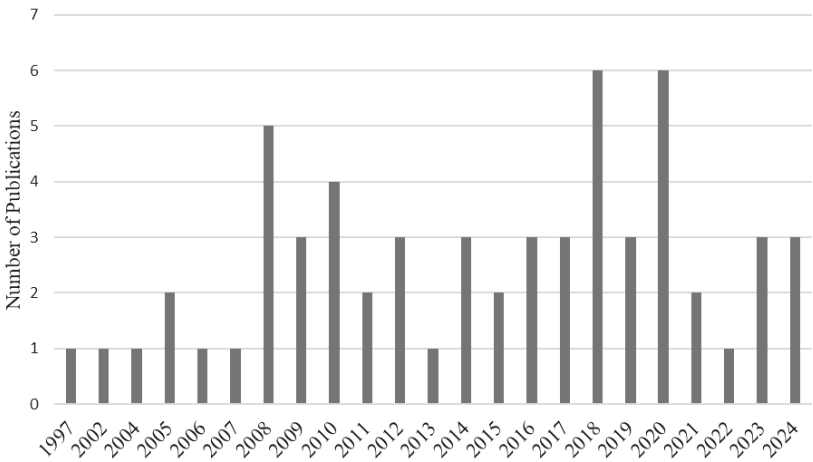
### **Bibliometric analysis**

Our dual-component analytical framework commenced with a bibliometric examination of the curated scholarly articles. The primary goal of employing this quantitative technique was to delineate the intellectual architecture and trace the evolutionary path of scholarly inquiry into moral imagination as it applies to organizational settings (Donthu et al., 2021). This process entailed a detailed identification of several key facets: emergent publication patterns, principal authors who have shaped the discourse, leading academic journals, the global distribution of research efforts, the most frequently referenced studies, and commonly appearing keywords. Collectively, the data gathered from this initial stage offers an extensive panorama of the field's maturation and its academic resonance, which in turn provides a valuable foundation for the detailed qualitative content investigation that followed.

### **Publication numbers and trends**

The analysis of publication trends reveals the temporal evolution of academic interest in the concept of moral imagination within organizational contexts. The earliest identified study in the dataset dates back to 1997. Following sporadic contributions in the early 2000s, there was a gradual increase in publication frequency, particularly from 2008 onwards. Notable surges occurred during the late 2000s and early 2020s, suggesting a growing recognition of the relevance of moral imagination in addressing ethical challenges in organizations. The rise in publications may be attributed to heightened interest in organizational ethics, corporate social

responsibility, and sustainable business practices in response to global socio-economic changes. These findings reflect an evolving and dynamic research agenda, positioning moral imagination as a significant construct in contemporary organizational studies. A detailed breakdown of the annual publication counts is presented in Figure 1.2.



**Figure 1.2** Annual distribution of publications on moral imagination in organizational contexts

**Journal distribution and most cited articles**

The bibliometric analysis reveals that scholarly interest in moral imagination within organizational contexts has been disseminated across a variety of academic journals, with certain publications serving as central outlets for this discourse. As shown in Table 1.3, the *Journal of Business Ethics* leads with the highest number of contributions (13 articles), underlining its role as a primary venue for ethical and philosophical debates in business studies. Following closely is *Issues in Business Ethics* with 11 articles, indicating

a focused and thematic interest in the intersection of ethics and organizational decision-making. Other journals such as *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Social Behavior and Personality*, and *Business and Society Review* also host multiple relevant publications, reflecting a cross-disciplinary appeal. This distribution demonstrates that the concept of moral imagination is not only of philosophical interest but is also gaining traction across broader fields concerned with behavioural, social, and organizational research. The presence of this topic in diverse journals highlights its relevance to both theoretical development and practical application in contemporary organizational studies.

| Journal                         | Number of Publications |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Journal of Business Ethics      | 13                     |
| Issues in Business Ethics       | 11                     |
| Business Ethics Quarterly       | 3                      |
| Social Behavior and Personality | 2                      |
| Business and Society Review     | 2                      |

**Table 1.3** *Journals by number of publications*

Studies on moral imagination within organizations that have achieved the highest citation figures are widely regarded as pivotal contributions, having fundamentally sculpted the academic dialogue in this field. Given their profound effect on the direction of later research, these highly influential articles underwent more intensive scrutiny in our review. Since our analysis draws upon articles from both the Web of Science and Scopus databases, citation numbers were chiefly extracted from these two platforms. To achieve a more encompassing view, we also integrated citation information from Google Scholar, acknowledging its extensive

reach across diverse publication types and scholarly sources. The five articles accumulating the most substantial citation counts are detailed in Table 1.4, thereby highlighting the most pervasively referenced and consequential studies within this research domain. For comparative assessment, citation metrics from both Google Scholar and Web of Science accompany these key listings.

| Title of Article   | Authors                                  | Year | Journal                    | Citation<br>Google<br>Scholar-<br>WoS |
|--|--|------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Moral imagination and systems thinking   | Werhane, P. H                            | 2002 | Journal of Business Ethics | 374-172                               |
| An exploratory investigation of the effect of ethical culture in activating moral imagination                                  | Moberg, D., & Caldwell, D. F.            | 2007 | Journal of Business Ethics | 183-62                                |
| Exploring and exposing values in management education: Problematizing final vocabularies in order to enhance moral imagination | Fougère, M., Solitander, N., & Young, S. | 2014 | Journal of Business Ethics | 80-39                                 |
| The exercise of moral imagination in stigmatized work groups.  | Roca, E.                                 | 2010 | Journal of Business Ethics | 75-22                                 |
| Adam Smith's philosophy of science: Economics as moral imagination   | Hühn, M. P.                              | 2019 | Journal of Business Ethics | 56-21                                 |

**Table 1.4** *Most cited articles*

**Author collaborations and networks**

To achieve a richer comprehension of the social dynamics and intellectual framework within the academic field of moral imagination, this segment of our study delves into author collabora-