

Conceptualizing Islamic work ethic: A systematic review of definitions, dimensions and frameworks

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review aims to collate empirical evidence regarding the conceptualization of Islamic Work Ethic (IWE) in management research from 2010 to 2026, specifically in terms of its definition, dimensionality, and theoretical underpinnings. A Scopus search was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, resulting in 476 records being found, which were then screened using three stages to arrive at 50 peer-reviewed empirical studies. The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies was used to evaluate the quality of the studies, and the findings were analysed using inductive thematic coding by two independent reviewers. Five definitional clusters were identified: spiritual-moral obligation, task-focused diligence, collectivist duty, relational integrity, and value-based stewardship. The majority of studies viewed IWE as a unidimensional construct, with adaptations of an early scale validated in Arabic, and theoretical underpinning was generally lacking. In cases where theory was applied, social exchange, conservation of resources, and resource-based perspectives were most prevalent. IWE was most commonly studied as an antecedent variable, but few studies considered potential confounding variables. From these results, a preliminary Tawhīdic-Contextual conceptual model is proposed which connects each definitional cluster to the underlying psychological mechanisms and to the relevant mid-range theories. The evidence indicates that IWE positively impacts on ethical leadership outcomes and reduces the impact of destructive leadership in HRM practice, especially in Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. Multidimensional measurement, cross-national invariance testing, longitudinal and experimental designs, and wider geographical coverage should be the focus of future research.

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1. Introduction

Work ethics, defined as the norms, values, and work-related attitudes and dispositions that people bring into the workplace, are a core part of organisational scholarship. The Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) is a theory developed by Weber (1958) in the Western tradition, associating industriousness, self-discipline, and individual achievement with larger economic and social systems. Over the years, cross-cultural studies have used PWE scales with non-Western groups or looked for cultural proxies.

The Islamic Work Ethic (IWE) was introduced as a distinct scholarly construct in the late 1980s through the pioneering efforts of Ali (1988, 1992), who created the first psychometric scale and situated IWE within Islamic theological principles. Whereas the PWE is focused on individual success and the sanctity of earthly vocation, IWE is grounded in the Quran, Hadith, and Sunnah, and combines spiritual obligation with professional conduct so that work becomes an act of worship ('ibāda) and a matter of moral accountability (amānah). Throughout this review, the abbreviation IWE is used after this first full statement of the term, and other acronyms are likewise spelled out at first mention (e.g., human resource management, HRM; Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, PRISMA; Joanna Briggs Institute, JBI).

In the following decades, IWE has been the subject of considerable empirical research, and links have been established between IWE and job satisfaction, organisational commitment, citizenship behaviour, knowledge sharing, creativity, and ethical behaviour. However, the construct remains conceptually immature and operationally incongruous. Researchers use divergent definitions, non-equivalent theoretical frameworks, and non-comparable measurement instruments, raising questions about construct validity, measurement equivalence, and cumulative knowledge synthesis.

This review is motivated by three structural gaps. First, no published systematic review has systematically mapped the definitional landscape of IWE using explicit and replicable inclusion criteria across a multi-disciplinary corpus. Second, although narrative reviews and content analyses have been conducted (Ali & Al-Owaidan, 2008; Kalemci & Kalemci Tuzun, 2019; Usman et al., 2015), none is PRISMA 2020-compliant or focused on the 2010–2026 period, during which the empirical output on IWE has grown most rapidly. Third, the dimensionality of IWE remains debated — unidimensional, bidimensional, or multidimensional operationalisations coexist, capturing similar but not identical underlying constructs. Throughout this paper, a study is described as atheoretical when its authors neither name nor describe an explanatory theory in the introduction, hypothesis development, or methods sections; this is distinct from a study that draws on an implicit theoretical assumption without formal citation, a weaker and more pervasive form of the same problem discussed further in Section 2.4.

Three research questions guide the review: (RQ1) What is the definition of IWE in the empirical literature (2010–2026)? (RQ2) What are the identified and operationalised dimensional structures? (RQ3) What are the theoretical frameworks that have grounded IWE research? The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature and identifies the gaps this review addresses; Section 3 describes the methodology; Section 4 reports descriptive and thematic findings; Section 5 discusses theoretical, measurement, and managerial implications, including a preliminary conceptual model, geographic concentration, and limitations; and Section 6 concludes with a future research agenda.

2. Literature Review

All figures should be numbered with Arabic numerals (1,2,...n). All photographs, schemas, graphs and diagrams are to be referred to as figures. Line drawings should be good quality scans or true electronic output. Low-quality scans are not acceptable. Figures must be both embedded into the text and all images should meet the minimum requirement of 500 x 500 pixels. Lettering and symbols should be clearly defined either in the caption or in a legend provided as part of the figure. Figures should be placed at the top or bottom of a page wherever possible, as close as possible to the first reference to them in the paper.

2.1 *Islamic Work Ethic: Foundations and Conceptual Development*

Ali (1992, p. 507) described IWE as an expression of the Islamic conviction that work is a virtue in light of man's needs and a responsibility toward community and society, family, and self. Three aspects are highlighted: the spiritual justification of work as virtue; communal orientation as social obligation; and integration across personal, familial, and societal levels. Later elaborations (Ali & Al-Owaidan, 2008) added the rejection of idleness and the valorisation of effort (*juhd*) as religious imperatives.

IWE's normative authority derives from the Quran, Hadith, and Sunnah, synthesising spiritual obligation with professional conduct so that work becomes an inseparable part of worship (*'ibāda*) and moral responsibility (*amānah*). Unlike the Protestant Work Ethic, IWE emphasises communal responsibility and divine judgment, situating individual work ethic within a broader theological and social context.

2.2 *Comparative Conceptualisation of IWE Across Contexts*

A critical, comparative analysis of the corpus (not a descriptive analysis) reveals that IWE is not a fixed entity that has been transported across contexts. In the South Asian context (mainly Pakistan), IWE is primarily theorised as a buffer against destructive supervisory behaviour and is operationalised close to Ali's (1988) original spiritual-moral items, and analysed using moderation designs (e.g., Islam et al., 2021a; Khalid et al., 2018; Maqbool et al., 2024). This tradition has resulted in the most consistent evidence of effect size in the field but has not often questioned whether the meaning of the Yousef (2001) instrument is the same for Pakistani respondents as it is for Arab respondents, which is a construct-validity question that will be explored in Section 5.3.

In the Malaysian and Indonesian corpus, by contrast, IWE is more frequently used as a mediator or antecedent of citizenship and performance outcomes in collectivist or relational-integrity framings, and more likely to be based on the multidimensional instrument developed by Mohammad et al. (2018). This sub-corpus adds conceptual richness (explicit references to *amānah* and *shūrā* as relational norms) but has smaller, single-sector samples that do not allow for generalisability within the region itself.

The Gulf Arab corpus (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates) is closest to Ali's (1992) original theological formulation and most often uses value-based stewardship (*khalīfa*) and organisational identification to frame IWE, reflecting the validation context of the scale, which is predominantly Arab-population. This alignment is a strength in terms of face and content validity in the region, but it is also a weakness in terms of the evidence provided for the performance of IWE in the context of its originating cultural-linguistic setting.

They are strengths and weaknesses, and they are contradictions: they demonstrate that the same instrument is being used in very different institutional and linguistic settings, without formal equivalence testing (Section 5.3); they show that the theoretical framing is as much geographical as it is content-based; and they show that the empirical richness of the field has outstripped its conceptual consolidation — the five-cluster framework and preliminary conceptual model (Section 5.2) that this review aims to address.

Table 1. Comparative Conceptualisation of IWE Across Geographic-Institutional Contexts

Context	Dominant definitional cluster(s)	Dominant theoretical lens	Key contribution	Key limitation
Pakistan (South Asia)	Spiritual-Moral Obligation; Task-Focused Diligence	Social Exchange Theory; Conservation of Resources	Robust moderation evidence on leadership-deviance pathways	Arab-validated scale applied without invariance testing
Malaysia / Indonesia	Collectivist Duty; Relational Integrity	Resource-Based View; largely atheoretical	Multidimensional instrument use; relational-norm detail	Small, single-sector samples; limited within-region generalisability
Gulf Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE)	Value-Based Stewardship; Spiritual-Moral Obligation	Largely atheoretical; occasional Social Identity Theory	Closest alignment to original Ali (1992) theological formulation	Weakest evidence on cross-cultural portability
Underrepresented regions (Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, Western Muslim-minority contexts)	Not yet mapped	Not yet mapped	None identified in current corpus	Complete absence from the evidence base (Section 5.5)

**Note: Compiled from the 50 included studies; cluster and theory assignments reflect the modal pattern within each regional sub-corpus, not a unanimous finding.*

2.3 Dimensional Structures in IWE Research

The conceptualisation of IWE is most technically debated in terms of its dimensional structure. Sixty percent of studies regard IWE as unidimensional, mainly using the Yousef/Ali scale. This approach is parsimonious but hides theoretically important within-construct variation: high scores on spiritual commitment may co-occur with low scores on social responsibility, a divergence with different implications for prosocial versus performance outcomes.

The bidimensional decomposition into individual and social dimensions (Chanzanagh & Akbarnejad, 2011) has gained acceptance without being formally tested for measurement invariance across cultures. The instrument developed by Mohammad et al. (2018) is the most structurally developed scale in the corpus and is used in 16% of the studies — too small a share to establish it as a field standard.

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks in IWE Research

Where theory is clearly expressed, Social Exchange Theory (SET) prevails, treating IWE as a reciprocity norm shaping social exchange relationships. Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) views IWE as a personal resource that helps maintain psychological health under stress. The Resource-Based View (RBV) treats IWE as a valuable and inimitable human-capital resource that provides a sustained performance advantage.

These three lenses are not the only theoretical vocabulary that can be used in the field. IWE could also be incorporated into mainstream organisational behaviour (OB) and human resource management (HRM) scholarship, as a values-based fit construct; into virtue-ethics and deontological traditions in business ethics, as a template for character-based (as opposed to consequentialist) accounts of ethical conduct at work; and into strategic HRM's "best-fit" perspective, in which IWE-congruent practices are context-contingent rather than universally applicable. This review does not claim to be able to fill this gap, but it is clear from the fact that so little of the reviewed corpus makes these connections, that this field is isolated from neighbouring OB, ethics and HRM theorising.

The 74% atheoretical empiricism rate reflects a tradition of testing IWE associations without formally situating findings within an explanatory theoretical system, restricting the field to correlational discovery rather than causal explanation. As defined in Section 1, this figure counts only studies with no named theory at all; it therefore understates the deeper problem, since several of the theoretically "grounded" studies apply SET, COR, or RBV as a post-hoc label rather than deriving hypotheses from the theory's causal logic.

The development of an indigenous Islamic management theory that seriously engages the theological-philosophical foundation of IWE remains a high-priority agenda item, elaborated as a preliminary model in Section 5.2.

2.5 *Synthesis and Research Gaps*

The literature is not a list but rather a set of three gaps that this review can fill. First, the field lacks a single, auditable map that connects the meaning of IWE to the outcomes that researchers test, due to atheoretical tendencies (Section 2.4) and the fragmentation of definitional language (Section 2.1) that are reported in this review (Sections 4.6 and 5.2). Second, in the field, there is no empirical challenge to the construct-validity threat of measurement inconsistency, because unidimensional, bidimensional, and multidimensional operationalisations of a scale were validated in the same Arab population and exported without invariance testing (Section 2.3). Third, the geographic focus of the evidence base in Pakistan and Malaysia (Section 2.2; elaborated in Section 5.5) restricts the external validity of any conclusion about IWE's universality. These gaps are followed throughout the rest of the paper to a specific finding, table or figure instead of being left as a general observation.

3. Research Method

3.1 *Search Strategy and Database*

This review used Scopus as the sole database, selected for its comprehensive coverage of social sciences, business, management, economics, and humanities literature. The search was conducted in January 2026, restricted to 2010–2026 to capture contemporary empirical IWE literature. The following Boolean string was applied to the TITLE, ABSTRACT, and KEYWORDS fields: (“Islamic work ethic*” OR “Islamic work ethic” OR “Islamic work ethics” OR “IWE”) AND (Islamic OR Muslim).

The initial search returned 476 records. Supplementary reference-list searching identified no additional eligible studies beyond those already captured by Scopus.

3.2 *Eligibility Criteria*

Studies were included if they met four conditions: the study was a peer-reviewed empirical article — quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods — that operationalised IWE as a primary construct; it was published in English; it appeared between 2010 and 2026; and it was indexed in Scopus. Studies were excluded if they were conference papers, book chapters, editorials, or opinion pieces; if they were theoretical manuscripts without empirical data; if IWE appeared only as a cited construct without operationalisation; if they were not published in English; or if the full text remained unavailable after a reasonable retrieval effort. Grey literature — including dissertations, theses, working papers, and unpublished institutional reports — was excluded a priori by the peer-reviewed, Scopus-indexed article restriction and never entered the identification pool; this exclusion is reflected explicitly in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1, Section 3.3).

3.3 *Screening and Study Selection*

Screening proceeded through three sequential stages. Stage 1 (title/keyword screening) excluded 256 records, advancing 220. Stage 2 (abstract screening) excluded 70 records in which IWE was not operationalised, advancing 150. Stage 3 (full-text screening) excluded 100 records (35 not primarily empirical; 28 single-item IWE measures; 22 full texts unavailable; 15 duplicate samples), leaving a final corpus of 50 studies. Figure 1 presents the complete PRISMA 2020 flow diagram, mapping these sequential exclusions onto the standard Identification-Screening-Included structure and making the exclusion rationale at each stage explicit.

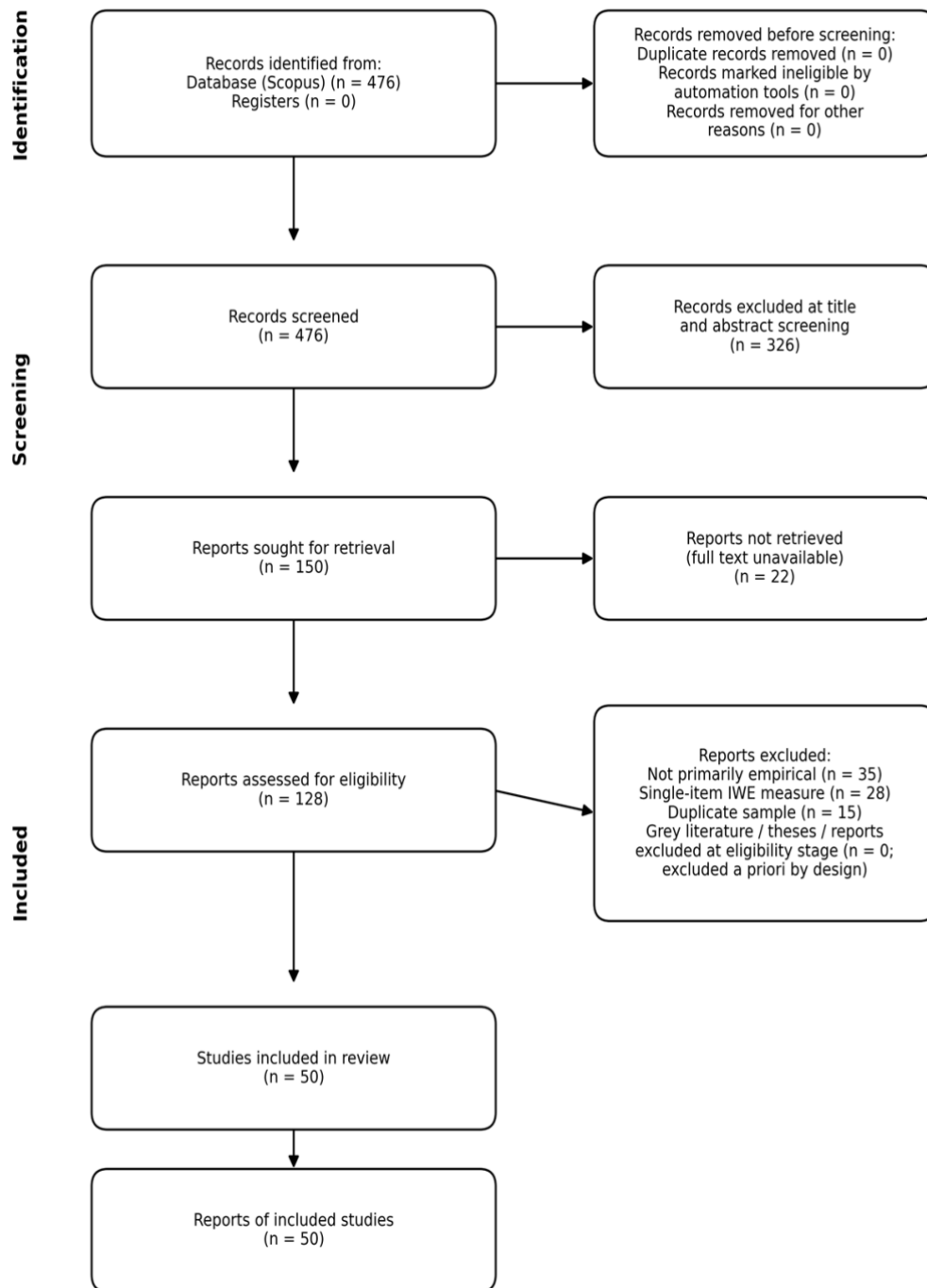


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Identification, Screening, and Inclusion.

Note. Adapted from Page et al. (2021). Grey literature was excluded a priori by the eligibility criteria (Section 3.2) and therefore never entered the identification pool.

Table 2 reports the same sequential flow in tabular form as a cross-check against Figure 1, while Table 3 summarizes the compositional characteristics of the original 476-record corpus.

Table 2. PRISMA 2020 Study Selection Flow and Corpus Composition

Stage	Action	Records (n)
Database identification	Scopus search	476
Deduplication	Identical records removed	0
Title screening	256 excluded (IWE absent, not empirical, false-positive acronym)	220 forward
Abstract screening	70 excluded (IWE not operationalised)	150 forward
Full-text screening	100 excluded (35 not empirical; 28 single-item; 22 unavailable; 15 duplicate sample)	50 included
Final corpus	Empirical studies included in synthesis	50

*Note: Table 2 follows the PRISMA 2020 sequential flow (Page et al., 2021) and corresponds to Figure 1.

Table 3. Compositional Characteristics of the 476-Record Corpus

Characteristic	n of 476	%
Publication year 2010–2026	397	83.4%
English language	229	48.1%
Document type: Article	233	49.0%
Subject areas: Business/Management/Accounting; Social Sciences; Arts & Humanities; Economics	274	57.6%

*Note: Table 3 describes the composition of the original corpus; these are independent characteristics, not sequential filters. The 50 included studies satisfy all inclusion criteria simultaneously.

3.4 Data Extraction

A structured extraction matrix was developed and piloted on five randomly selected studies. For each study, the following were extracted: bibliographic metadata; sample country (coded from the methods section, not author affiliation); occupational sector; sample size and analytical method; IWE measurement scale and dimensional structure; theoretical frameworks explicitly named by authors; the structural role of IWE; and primary outcome variables.

3.5 Quality Appraisal

Quality was assessed using the JBI Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies (Moola et al., 2020), comprising eight yes/no criteria applied by two independent raters. Studies were retained regardless of JBI score; scores were used for sensitivity analysis and to characterise methodological strengths and weaknesses across the corpus.

Table 4. JBI Checklist — Item Endorsement Across 50 Included Studies

Item	Description	Yes (n)	Yes (%)
J1	Were the criteria for inclusion in the sample clearly defined?	50	100%
J2	Were the study subjects and the setting described in detail?	50	100%
J3	Was the IWE exposure measured in a valid and reliable way?	46	92%
J4	Were objective, standard criteria used for measuring the condition?	30	60%
J5	Were confounding factors identified?	25	50%
J6	Were strategies to deal with confounding factors stated?	2	4%
J7	Were outcomes measured in a valid and reliable way?	2	4%
J8	Was appropriate statistical analysis used?	41	82%

*Note: Overall JBI scores: mean = 4.92, SD = 1.01, range 3–7. Note. J3: Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$ or composite reliability reported. J4: validated IWE scale used. J5: demographic controls or confounders identified. J6: common method variance (CMV) tests employed. J7: average variance extracted (AVE), heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT), or construct validity indices reported. J8: structural equation modelling (SEM), regression, or inferential techniques applied appropriately.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Temporal Distribution

The 50 included studies span 2010 to 2026, with a marked increase from 2019 onward. The 2010–2018 sub-period contains 14 studies (28%), while 2019–2026 accounts for 36 studies (72%). Since 2019, the number of empirical IWE studies has more than doubled, indicating growing interest in Islamic management research and the increasing accessibility of user-friendly Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) software for cross-sectional quantitative research in academic institutions across Muslim-majority countries.

Table 5. Temporal Distribution of Included Studies (n = 50)

Period	n	%
2010–2012	3	6%
2013–2015	3	6%
2016–2018	8	16%
2019–2021	13	26%
2022–2024	17	34%
2025–2026	6	12%
Total	50	100%

4.2 Geographic Distribution

Country was coded for each study from the methodology section rather than lead-author affiliation. Pakistan accounts for 14 studies (28%) and Malaysia for 10 (20%), together making up 48% of the corpus. Indonesia (n = 7; 14%), Jordan (n = 4; 8%), Saudi Arabia (n = 4; 8%), and Morocco (n = 2; 4%) follow. This concentration reflects demographic dominance and institutional incentives for locally based Islamic management research in these two countries and constitutes a critical constraint on the generalisability of IWE findings, discussed further in Section 5.5.

Table 6. Sample Country Distribution — Coded from Methodology Section (n = 50)

Country / Region	n	%	Coding Note
Pakistan	14	28%	4 studies had Malaysian co-authors; country coded from sample location
Malaysia	10	20%	
Indonesia	7	14%	3 studies had Jordanian/UAE co-authors
Jordan	4	8%	
Saudi Arabia	4	8%	1 study: Pakistani co-author
Morocco	2	4%	
Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, UAE, China, Tunisia (1 each)	6	12%	Full texts confirmed Malaysia (n=2), multiple countries (n=1)
Multiple / Not determinable	3	6%	
Total	50	100%	

*Note: Country coded from majority-respondent location as reported in the study's methods section.

4.3 Methodological Characteristics

Forty-eight studies (96%) use a cross-sectional survey design, one uses a qualitative phenomenological design, and one includes a limited longitudinal element. PLS-SEM and Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) together account for 66% of analytical methods. IWE functions as a predictor/independent variable in 35 studies (70%), a moderator in 11 (22%), and a mediator in 4 (8%). Sixty percent of studies used the Yousef (2001) adaptation of Ali (1988), 16% used the multidimensional instrument developed by Mohammad et al. (2018), and 24% used purpose-built or other adapted instruments.

Table 7. Methodological Characteristics of Included Studies (n = 50)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Research design	Cross-sectional survey	48	96%
	Qualitative (phenomenological)	1	2%
	Cross-sectional with longitudinal element	1	2%
Analytical method	PLS-SEM	17	34%
	CB-SEM / AMOS	16	32%
	Regression analysis	6	12%
	Descriptive / general survey	10	20%
	Qualitative thematic analysis	1	2%
IWE role in model	Predictor / Independent variable	35	70%
	Moderator	11	22%
	Mediator	4	8%
Primary IWE scale	Yousef (2001) / Ali (1988) adaptation	30	60%
	Mohammad et al. (2018) multidimensional	8	16%
	Purpose-built / other adaptation	12	24%

*Note: Research design and analytical method are classified independently. IWE role was coded from the structural model described in each study.

4.4 Journal Distribution

The 50 studies appear across 28 journals. The International Journal of Ethics and Systems, Leadership and Organization Development Journal, and International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management each contribute three studies (6%). Personnel Review contributes 2%. The remaining 24 journals each include one or two IWE studies, underscoring the interdisciplinary nature of IWE scholarship and the absence of a dedicated IWE publication venue.

4.5 Definitional Clusters

The most significant finding of this review is the definitional diversity of IWE across the 50 included studies. Although Ali (1988, 1992) is cited as the seminal source of the definition, researchers have substantially altered, expanded, or implicitly redefined the original definition, complicating cross-study comparison. Ali (1992, p. 507) defined IWE as an expression of the Islamic conviction that work is a virtue in light of man's needs and a duty to community and society, family, and self. Thematic coding was conducted inductively on the definitional statements, yielding five clusters (Table 8).

Table 8. Five Definitional Clusters from Inductive Thematic Coding (n = 50; $\kappa = 0.82$)

Cluster	n	Distinguishing Criterion	Primary Islamic Referents	Representative Studies
Spiritual-Moral Obligation	17	Work as divinely ordained duty; theological intent primary	Niyyah, tawakkul, 'ibāda, ḥalāl/ḥarām	Al-Ghamdi (2010); Hassan & Ahmad (2021); Hamid & Sattarov (2025)
Task-Focused Diligence	13	Effort, quality, avoidance of idleness; theological language secondary	Juhd, itqān, time-efficiency, iḥsān	Kumar & Rose (2010); Zahrah et al. (2016); Hussain et al. (2023)
Collectivist Duty	9	Work as obligation to community, family, or umma	Maṣlaḥa, umma solidarity, ṣadaqa, communal responsibility	Al-Douri et al. (2020); Halim (2022); Rokhman et al. (2011)
Relational Integrity	7	Fairness, trust, justice in horizontal interpersonal relations	Amānah, 'adl, shūrā, mīzān	Mohammad et al. (2018); Badar et al. (2024); El-Kot & Burke (2014)
Value-Based Stewardship	4	Responsible use of position as vertical trust (person-to-God/society)	Khalīfa, divine accountability, CSR alignment	Almasradi (2024); Alturaysi (2025); Kamaruddin et al. (2021)

*Note: Primary cluster only; 12 studies show secondary orientation. Relational Integrity vs Value-Based Stewardship distinguished by direction of accountability — horizontal (mu'āmalāt) vs vertical (khalīfa). $\kappa = 0.82$ before consensus resolution.

4.6 Dimensional Structures

Sixty percent of studies ($n = 30$) conceptualise IWE as unidimensional, mostly with the Yousef/Ali scale. This is parsimonious but hides theoretically significant within-construct variation. The bidimensional decomposition into individual and social dimensions has gained momentum but has not been formally tested for measurement invariance across cultural contexts in any reviewed study. No reviewed study demonstrates cross-national configural, metric, and scalar equivalence for any IWE scale.

Table 9. Dimensional Structures Operationalised Across Included Studies ($n = 50$)

Structure	n	%	Dimensions	Primary Scale
Unidimensional	30	60%	Single composite IWE score	Yousef (2001) / Ali (1988)
Bidimensional	12	24%	Individual work orientation; Social-collectivist duty	Adapted Ali (1988) or partial Mohammad et al. (2018)
Tridimensional	5	10%	Spiritual commitment; Moral conduct; Social responsibility	Purpose-built (Indonesian studies)
Multidimensional (4+ factors)	3	6%	Effort; Justice; Trust; Community; Accountability; Consultation	Mohammad et al. (2018) full subscales

4.7 Theoretical Frameworks

Theory was coded as explicitly stated only when authors named and described the theory in their introduction, hypotheses, or methods. By this criterion, 37 studies (74%) do not explicitly state a theoretical framework. Among the 13 studies with explicit theoretical grounding, SET is cited in 8, COR in 3, RBV in 3, and Social Identity Theory (SIT) in 1. Three studies cite both SET and COR, yielding 15 theory-citations from 13 theoretically grounded studies.

Table 10. Theoretical Frameworks — Explicit Citations Across Included Studies ($n = 13$ of 50)

Theory	Studies Citing	Theory Citations	Role of IWE in Framework	Example Studies
Social Exchange Theory (SET)	8	8	IWE as reciprocity norm shaping exchange quality	Islam et al. (2021a, 2021b); Khalid et al. (2018); Raza et al. (2022)
Conservation of Resources Theory (COR)	3	3	IWE as personal resource buffering resource-depletion spirals	Maqbool et al. (2024); Hameed et al. (2020); Zia et al. (2024)
Resource-Based View (RBV)	3	3	IWE as valuable, inimitable human/organisational resource	Kumar & Rose (2010); Badar et al. (2024); Kareem et al. (2025)
Social Identity Theory (SIT)	1	1	IWE as ingroup identity marker shaping organisational identification	Hassan & Ahmad (2021)
No explicit theory named	37	—	Implicit in model structure; not formally declared in text	Majority of reviewed studies

Note. Three studies cite both SET and COR. 'Studies citing' = unique study count; 'theory citations' = citation occurrences.

4.8 Key Outcome Variables and Effect Directions

The most commonly investigated outcomes are job satisfaction (18 studies), organisational commitment (16 studies), task or adaptive performance (14 studies), organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (12 studies), and knowledge sharing (9 studies). Deviant and counterproductive work behaviours appear in 8 studies, all reporting negative associations. All reviewed studies report a positive direction for IWE's association with prosocial outcomes and a negative direction for its association with deviant outcomes. The range of effect sizes (standardised β coefficients) runs from 0.19 to 0.63, with a modal range of 0.25–0.45 for direct effects. These are descriptive summaries of reported statistics rather than pooled estimates; no meta-analysis was performed.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications of the Five-Cluster Framework

The five definitional clusters show that IWE is better understood as a family of related constructs sharing a common Islamic theological genealogy than as a single psychological construct. Distinct psychological mechanisms are activated across clusters: theological identity and divine accountability; self-regulatory commitment to quality; social identity and communal belonging; interpersonal trust norms; and moral self-regulation and accountability to God and community.

This pluralism has direct implications for theory positioning. The relational integrity and collectivist duty clusters stand out when IWE is theorised through SET. Theorised through COR, the spiritual-moral obligation and task-focused diligence clusters prevail — IWE serving as a theological and motivational resource. RBV-based theorising is most relevant for the value-based stewardship and task-focused diligence clusters. The reviewed literature shows inconsistency here: the theoretical framework selected is not always aligned with the operationalised IWE cluster.

The 74% of studies that do not explicitly reference a theory raise a more fundamental concern: many IWE studies cannot be meaningfully connected to a cumulative theory of IWE because the mechanisms through which IWE operates are not explicitly described. Several scholars argue convincingly that IWE cannot be fully theorised through Western frameworks and their secular ontologies, which differ fundamentally from the tawhīdic ontology underlying IWE (Mohammad & Quoquab, 2016; Aldulaimi, 2016). Developing an indigenous Islamic management theory is therefore a high-priority research agenda item, and Section 5.2 offers a preliminary step in that direction.

5.2 Toward an Indigenous Conceptual Model

In response to the atheoretical tendency documented in Section 5.1, this review proposes a preliminary Tawhīdic-Contextual conceptual model (Figure 2) that maps each of the five definitional clusters onto a candidate psychological mechanism, a compatible mid-range organisational theory, and a set of contextual moderators, converging on the workplace outcomes most frequently studied in this corpus (Section 4.8).

The model is descriptive and integrative rather than a new empirical finding: it organises the associations already documented across the 50 included studies into a single, auditable structure, and it is offered as a roadmap for future empirical testing rather than as a confirmed causal account.

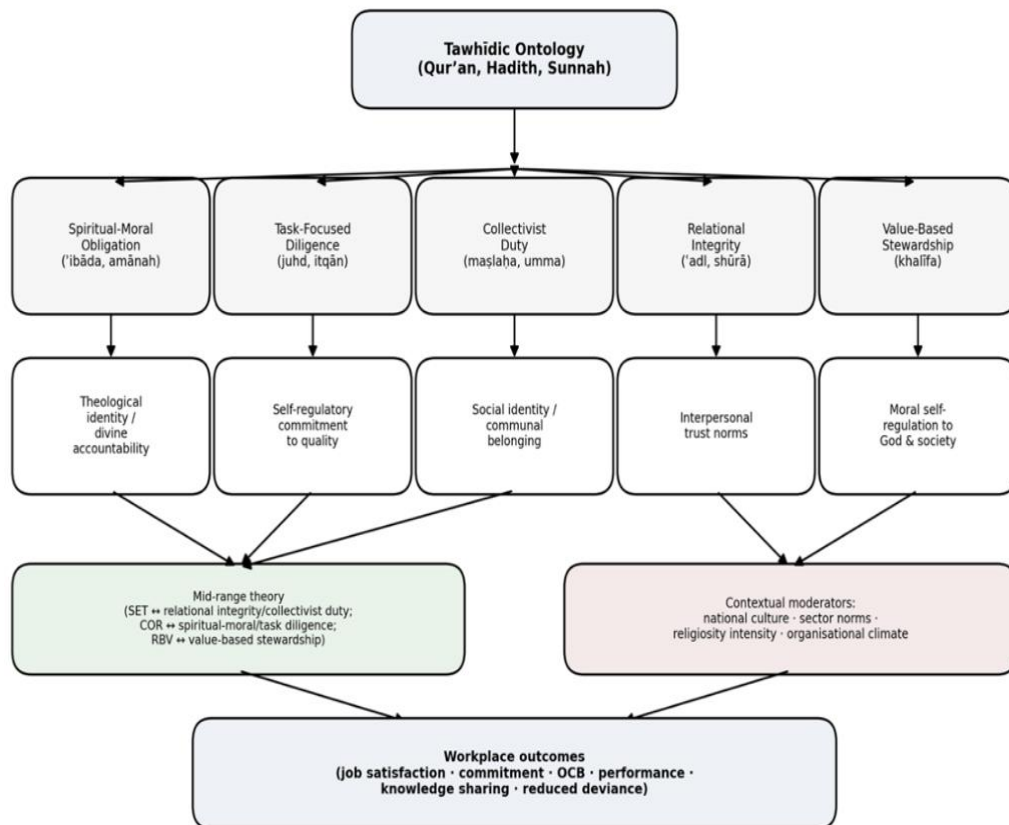


Figure 2. Preliminary Tawhīdic-Contextual Conceptual Model of Islamic Work Ethic (300 dpi).

Note. Dashed integration of mid-range theory with outcomes and the listed moderators are propositions for future empirical testing, not relationships tested within this review.

The model provides three concrete directions for future empirical testing that operationalise the gaps identified in Section 2.5. First, it predicts that the strength and even the sign of contextual moderation (national culture, sector norms, religiosity intensity, organisational climate) should differ systematically by cluster — a testable multi-group hypothesis rather than a single pooled moderation term, directly addressing the atheoretical-tendency gap. Second, it predicts that mid-range theory fit (SET, COR, RBV) is cluster-specific rather than universal, so that comparing model fit across clusters within a single sample would provide a direct empirical test of the theoretical mapping proposed here. Third, because the model separates “cluster” from “mechanism” from “theory” as distinct layers, it gives researchers a template for reporting which layer a new study is contributing to, addressing the measurement-inconsistency gap discussed in Section 5.3 by making explicit which cluster a given scale operationalises before invariance testing is attempted.

5.3 Measurement Implications

The JBI appraisal reveals a significant measurement gap across the field: only 50% of studies met J5 (confounders identified) and only 4% met J6 (strategies to address confounders). Most reviewed IWE studies are not specifically attentive to potential confounders (e.g., general religiosity, cultural collectivism, sector-level norms, and job characteristics), and almost none uses statistical or design approaches to control them. This is not merely a reporting omission; it is a threat to validity.

A construct-validity gap follows from the majority of cross-national research (60%) using the Yousef (2001) scale without measurement-invariance testing. The scale was developed and validated on an Arab population, and its use in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Turkey rests on an untested assumption of psychometric equivalence. No reviewed study has tested configural, metric, and scalar invariance across cultural groups — a fundamental requirement for any claim of cross-national generalisability, and the single most important methodological priority identified by this review for future primary research, consistent with the multidimensional-scale and cross-national-validation agenda specified in Section 6.

5.4 Managerial Implications in the South East Asian Context

The review yields three HRM propositions grounded in evidence from Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia and beyond.

First, IWE consistently buffers against the negative effects of dark-side leadership. In Pakistani, Turkish, Indonesian, and Moroccan samples, high-IWE employees exhibit lower deviance, lower turnover intention, and greater resilience to abusive or despotic leadership (Islam et al., 2021a; Khalid et al., 2018; Maqbool et al., 2024; Zia et al., 2024). Where rapid leadership development is not feasible, IWE-affirming recruitment, socialisation, and recognition practices could serve as complementary interventions to build resilience.

Second, IWE enhances the positive impact of ethical leadership. Hayati and Caniago (2025) and Udin (2024) find synergistic benefits — ethical leadership combined with high-IWE employees produces performance and OCB outcomes greater than the sum of their individual parts.

Third, the cultural specificity of IWE's dimensions casts doubt on the uniformity of cross-national HRM applications. The relative importance of spiritual, collectivist, and relational aspects varies across Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Gulf, and interventions should therefore be adapted to local contexts rather than transplanted wholesale. In designing development interventions, HRM professionals in Southeast Asian organisations should identify which definitional cluster (Table 8) is most salient to their workforce before selecting an intervention.

5.5 Geographic Concentration and Generalisability

The 48% concentration of the corpus in Pakistan and Malaysia (Section 4.2; Table 6) is not a neutral descriptive fact, but rather it has implications for what the field can currently claim to know. The theoretical (Section 2.2), definitional-cluster (Table 8), and scale-choice patterns reported throughout this review also reflect the two national contexts, making any conclusion about the structure, mechanisms, or outcomes of IWE at this time a conclusion about IWE in a Pakistani-Malaysian institutional and cultural setting, rather than a universal construct. This concentration may be due to a mix of factors, including the demographic weight of the two countries (which together account for a significant proportion of the Muslim workforce studied in management journals), the availability of training and doctoral supervision in the two countries, and citation-network effects whereby early studies on PLS-SEM in Pakistan and Malaysia became the template for later replication in the two countries.

The corollary is that there is little evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and Muslim minority Western contexts (Table 1) despite the fact that there are significant Muslim populations and active labour markets in each. Testing the model outside the Pakistan-Malaysia axis is not simply a question of geographic completeness because the conceptual-model propositions in Section 5.2 predict cluster-specific contextual moderation.

5.6 Limitations of This Review

Four limitations should be recognised. First, the single-database search (Scopus) probably under-represents IWE research published in regional databases, Arabic-language journals, and grey literature (explicitly excluded a priori; Section 3.2). Second, the English-language restriction excludes potentially important Arabic, Malay, Urdu, and Turkish IWE scholarship. Third, because nearly all included studies use cross-sectional, self-report survey designs, causal inferences generally cannot be drawn; the single qualitative study and the study with a limited longitudinal element do not materially alter this limitation. Fourth, the five-cluster definitional framework is a product of inductive coding and may yield different clusters under alternative coding schemes, particularly at the boundary between Relational Integrity and Value-Based Stewardship.

6. Conclusion and Future Research Agenda

This PRISMA 2020-compliant systematic review of 50 empirical studies on IWE (2010–2026) delivers four substantive contributions. First, JBI quality appraisal reveals a systematic field-wide methodological weakness — confounders are rarely identified or addressed — that previous narrative reviews had not surfaced. Second, inductive thematic coding ($\kappa = 0.82$) identified five distinct definitional clusters with clear distinguishing criteria, providing the first transparent, auditable conceptual map of the IWE definitional landscape. Third, the near absence of explicit theoretical grounding (74% atheoretical) is documented and explained, identifying the lack of indigenous Islamic management theory as the field's most significant structural gap. Fourth, building directly on that gap, the review proposes a preliminary Tawhīdic-Contextual conceptual model (Figure 2, Section 5.2) linking each definitional cluster to a candidate mechanism and mid-range theory, offered as a roadmap — not a final answer — for future empirical testing.

IWE is a theoretically significant, empirically robust, and practically consequential construct in Muslim-majority organisational contexts, consistently associated with prosocial work behaviours and buffering against adverse leadership conditions. Realising its full scholarly potential requires a generation of research that prioritises construct development, longitudinal design, multi-level analysis, and geographic expansion beyond the Pakistan-Malaysia axis that currently dominates the literature.

The gaps identified in the review in Sections 5.2, 5.3, and 5.5 lead to the following four future research directions: (1) Multi-level designs examining team-level IWE composition and organisational-level IWE climate effects; (2) Cross-national measurement-invariance testing (configural, metric, and scalar) of existing IWE scales, as well as experience-sampling and longitudinal panel studies to determine whether IWE is a stable trait or a contextually activated state, given the corpus's near-total reliance (96%) on cross-sectional designs; (3) Geographic extension of the existing literature to Muslim-minority Western contexts, Sub-Saharan African Muslim economies (Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya), and Central Asian Muslim-majority countries not yet covered in the literature, to test the generalisability of the five-cluster framework and the conceptual model in Figure 2 beyond the Pakistan-Malaysia axis; and (4) Development and validation of a multidimensional IWE scale reflecting all five clusters, tested for configural, metric, and scalar invariance across at least three geographically distinct Muslim-majority samples.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

233 **Ethics statement**

234 This study is a systematic literature review of previously published, publicly available academic sources. It
 235 did not involve human or animal subjects, primary data collection, or any procedure requiring institutional
 236 ethics board approval.

237 **Declaration of generative AI**

During the preparation of this work, the authors used generative AI solely to assist with language editing and to improve grammar and clarity. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

Data availability

The bibliographic dataset (Scopus export) and the coding matrix underlying the thematic analysis reported in this review are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Authors Contribution

Muhammed Taofeek Olowookere: Conceptualisation, methodology design, Scopus search and screening, thematic coding, quality appraisal, writing — original draft, writing — review and editing, and development of the conceptual model presented in Figure 2.

Zainab Olaide Kareem: Independent second-coder for thematic analysis and JBI quality appraisal, validation of the definitional cluster framework, writing — review and editing.



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