Revisiting Goal-Setting Theory in the Contemporary Era: A Systematic Literature Review of Conceptual Evolution and Empirical Applications (2022-2025)

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Abstract

This study aims to systematically review the conceptual development and empirical application of Goal-Setting Theory (GST) in the context of business, management, and accounting during the period 2022-2025. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach following the PRISMA protocol, this study analyzed 56 Scopus-indexed journal articles that met the criteria. The analysis shows that publications related to GST have been quite significant over the past four years, dominated by Western European and English-speaking countries. GST is no longer limited to the context of individual motivation but has evolved into a framework used to explain innovation, sustainability, and organizational digital systems. Most studies are empirical with a quantitative approach, using GST alongside other theories such as Self-Determination Theory and Social Cognitive Theory. Overall, this study confirms that GST remains relevant to the complexity of modern organizations and provides directions for future research regarding the integration of goal setting, adaptive behavior, and AI-based technologies.

Key Words: Goal-Setting Theory; motivation; organizational performance; systematic literature; management theory; digitalization; sustainability; PRIMA

I. Introduction

Goal-Setting Theory (GST) has become one of the most influential motivational theories in organizational psychology and performance behavior. This theory asserts that specific and challenging goals can enhance individual or group performance. However, modern business and organizational contexts are experiencing rapid movement and change. Digitalization, automation, and social dynamics present new challenges to traditional understandings of GST.

Recent research shows that GST is not only used in the context of individual or group motivation, but is also linked to various other disciplines and theories. For example, GST is used to explain the effectiveness of algorithm-based leadership and digital job design (Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2022), innovative and creative behavior in organizations (Chak et al., 2023; Alhasnawi et al., 2024), and the balance between efficiency and sustainability in organizations (Garrett & Grabs, 2025; Shankar et al., 2022). In a social and ethical context, GST also serves as a conceptual framework for understanding moral behavior and commitment in paradoxical situations (Alosi et al., 2025).

Research is also being conducted in new areas, such as AI-assisted performance management (Richins, 2025), adaptive team performance (Steegh et al., 2025), and self-regulation and well-being in the remote era (Uhlig et al., 2023; Mueller et al., 2025). This trend shows that GST is now not only a

psychological framework but can also serve as a foundation for managing modern organizations, including sustainability, governance, and strategic alignment (Ngilisho et al., 2022; Gede & Huluka, 2023). Furthermore, GST is often combined with other theories, such as Self-Efficacy Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Paradox Theory (Alosi et al., 2025).

Research on GST continues to evolve over time. However, it still faces several gaps. Most previous reviews have focused on the pre-digital era, resulting in limited research examining how GST adapts to contemporary organizational dynamics influenced by technology, work complexity, and global sustainability pressures. Against this backdrop, this study aims to conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of all Scopus-indexed Goal-Setting Theory-based academic publications published between 2022 and 2025, focusing on the fields of Business, Management, and Accounting. To achieve this objective, the following six research questions (RQs) are formulated:

RQ1: In what contexts has Goal-Setting Theory been applied in business, management, and accounting research during the 2022-2025 period?

RQ2: What are the conceptual and methodological trends in GST-based research over the past four years, including the shift from classical to modern paradigms?

RQ3: What theories or models are most frequently combined with GST in the current

literature, and how does this integration expand the theory's basic assumptions?

RQ4: What methodological approaches are dominant in GST studies?

RQ5: What are the main findings regarding the effectiveness of GST implementation on individual, group, and organizational performance under complex and digitalized work environments?

RQ6: What research gaps remain in GST studies, and what are potential directions for future research?

This SLR paper is structured as follows. Section II presents an overview of the D&M model. Section III describes the research methodology used. Section IV illustrates the descriptive results and findings related to the RQs. Section V discusses the limitations of this review and presents the implications of the SLR findings and conclusions.

II. Theoretical Background and Development of Goal-Setting Theory

Goal-Setting Theory (GST) was first introduced by Locke (1968) and further refined by Locke and Latham (1990; 2002). Goal-Setting Theory (GST) has become one of the most influential and widely applied

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theories to explain organizational behavior. The core principle underlying GST is that specific, challenging goals accompanied by feedback will improve performance through four psychological mechanisms: direction, effort, persistence, and strategy.

As modern literature has shown, GST is now understood not only as an individual psychological process, but has evolved as a complex social and technological system, where humans and machines interact to set, monitor, and evaluate goals. Research during the period 2022-2025 shows a significant shift from the traditional focus on improving individual performance to the integration of GST in strategic management systems, sustainability governance, and artificial intelligence-based learning (Alosi et al., 2025; Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2022).

Recent research has summarized four main pillars that represent the direction of modern GST development: cognitive foundation, social context, technological mediation, and sustainability orientation. These four dimensions interact to form "Modern Goal-Setting Effectiveness," illustrating GST's shift from traditional motivational theory to an adaptive approach to the complexities of today's organizations
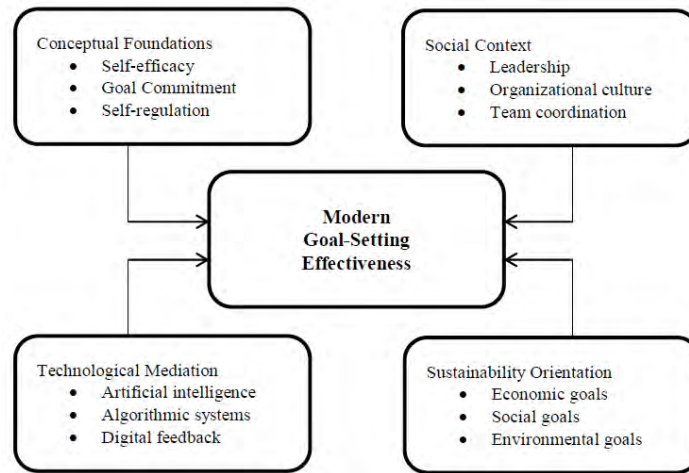
Gambar 2.1 Conceptual model of the modern evolution of Goal-Setting Theory (2022–2025)

(Source: Adapted from the synthesis of 56 Scopus-indexed articles, 2022–2025)

III. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize the development of Goal-Setting Theory (GST) in the Business, Management, and Accounting literature from 2022 to 2025. This process follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and methodological consistency.

3.2 Search Strategy

3.2.1 Database and Time Frame

All data were obtained from Scopus, which was selected because it covers internationally reputable journals and provides comprehensive bibliographic metadata. The search was conducted between August and October 2025.

3.2.2 Search String

The search strategy used the primary keyword "Goal-Setting Theory" in the Scopus database. Then, several filters were applied, including subject area limited to Business, Management, and Accounting; written in English; journal article type; open access; and a year range of 2022-2025.

Tabel 3.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for This Study

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Topic	Studies applying or extending GST in organizational, managerial, or motivational context.	Papers mentioning GST without conceptual or empirical elaboration.
Period	2022-2025	Before 2022
Language	English	Non-English

Discipline	Business, Management, and Accounting	Other fields
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Books, theses, conference papers, etc.
Conceptual Relevance	Studies involving variables like goal clarity, goal challenge, goal commitment, etc.	Studies lacking direct linkage to GST constructs.

3.3 PRISMA Flow and Selection Process

The selection process was conducted based on the PRISMA guidelines, which includes four main stages: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion. During the identification stage, 2.942 articles were obtained from Scopus, then filtered using filters based on subject area, language, document type, and open access, leaving 119 relevant articles. During the screening stage, full-text availability was checked, and during the eligibility stage, a comprehensive review was conducted to ensure relevance. Finally, during the inclusion stage, 56 articles were confirmed to meet all criteria and were used for analysis in this study.

3.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data from each article, including author, year, objectives, variables, theory, method, results, and research context, were systematically extracted. Descriptive analysis was then conducted to map publication trends, theories used, key variables, and research methods. This was followed by analysis to explore the direction of GST development, relationships between concepts, and research gaps that could potentially inform future studies.

IV. Finding and Discussion

4.1 Overview of The Included Studies

The results of the Scopus Analyzer analysis of 119 initial article documents show a trend in the distribution of publications per year, namely 17 articles in 2022, 37 articles in 2023, 26 articles in 2024, and peaking with 39 articles in 2025.
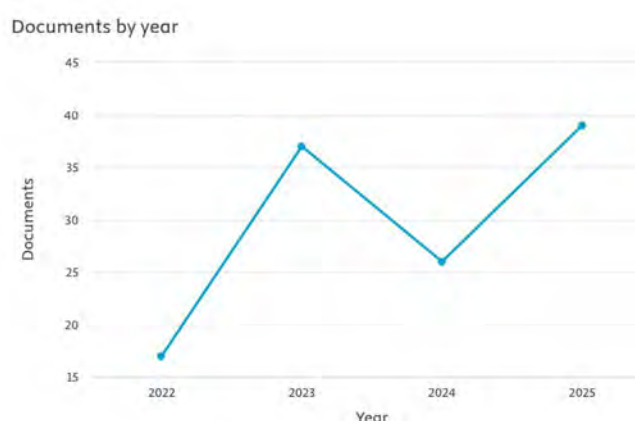

Figure 4.1 Distribution of Publications by Year

(Source: Scopus 2025)

Based on the PRISMA selection process, 56 articles were found to be truly relevant. Publication distribution in 2022 was dominated by issues of clarity of purpose, public organization performance, and organizational behavior. In 2023, there was an increase in themes of innovation, creativity, and digital work behavior. In 2024, the focus shifted to tourism, food waste reduction, ESG, and environmentally friendly technology. In 2025, publications expanded on the use of AI, digital platforms, adaptive team performance, and paradoxical goals. This increasing trend indicates the high academic interest in the application of Goal-Setting Theory (GST) in various contemporary contexts such as digitalization, public sector performance, organizational innovation, and sustainability.

4.2 Descriptive Analysis

The geographic distribution of research shows that GST-related studies are dominated by developed countries, particularly the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Australia, and the Netherlands. Several other countries, such as Italy, France, Spain, Sweden, and China, also contributed, demonstrating the strong presence of research on psychological theories in Western Europe and English-speaking countries on organizations and motivation.
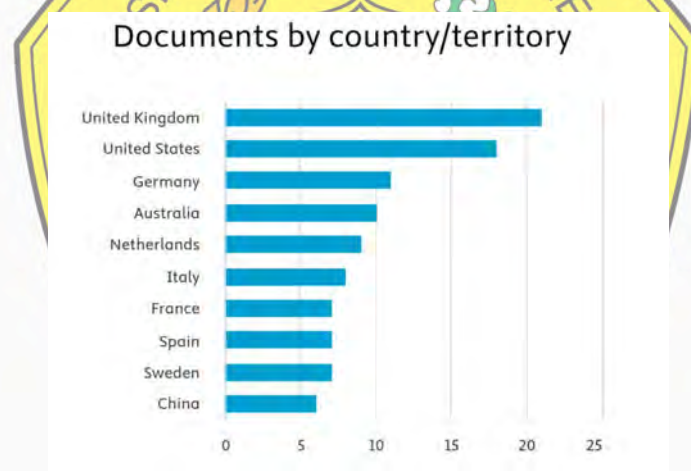

Figure 4.2 Distribution of Publications by Country

(Source: Scopus 2025)

GST research remains scattered and not concentrated in any one particular research group. Names such as Carminati L., Ma Q., Abualbasal A., Chak C.M., Cheung S.O., and Korunka C. appear among the most prolific authors, but the majority of researchers have only a few publications in this area. This suggests that GST is used across disciplines and contexts, not just by a few leading experts.
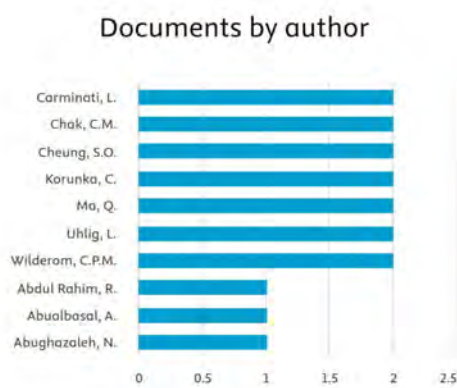
Figure 4.3 Distribution of Publications by Author

(Source: Scopus 2025)

4.3 Subject Distribution

The distribution of research fields shows that Goal-Setting Theory is most widely used in Business, Management, and Accounting (45.1%), followed by Social Sciences (12.9%), Economics (8.7%), Decision Sciences (8.0%), Psychology (6.8%), and Engineering (5.35%). This indicates significant development in the use of Goal-Setting Theory in business and organizational areas, such as decision-making, technological innovation, and organizational sustainability strategies.
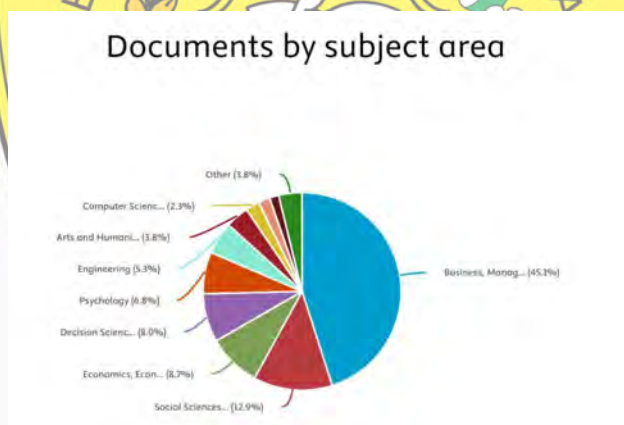

Figure 4.4 Distribution of Publications by Research Field

(Sumber: Scopus 2025)

The research subjects in 56 articles show that GST no longer focuses solely on individual performance. The themes of goal clarity, goal challenge, and goal commitment remain the main foundation (Ngilisho et al., 2022; Appuhami et al., 2024), but GST is now applied to innovation (Abualbasal & Alfaez, 2025), sustainability and ESG (Jibril et al., 2024; Garrett & Grabs, 2025), AI-based work behavior (George et al., 2025; Prentice et al., 2023), adaptive performance (Steegh et al., 2025), and even governance and fraud detection (Indrijawati & Bandang, 2023). This confirms that GST has evolved into a multi-level theory that explains broader organizational phenomena.

4.4 Discussion Based on Research Questions

RQ1 – Context of GST Applications

Based on the 56 articles analyzed, the application of Goal-Setting Theory (GST) is most commonly found in the context of performance management, organizational behavior, innovation, and sustainability. Studies such as Chak et al. (2023), Steegh et al. (2025), and Appuhami et al. (2024) use GST to explain the relationship between goal setting, motivation, and organizational performance. Furthermore, GST is also used in sustainability and ESG studies, such as Jibril et al. (2024) and Garrett & Grabs (2025), as well as in the context of professional learning and self-motivation (Dahal et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). The application of GST is also seen in technology- and AI-based contexts (George et al., 2025; Richins, 2025), which extends the scope of this theory to the fields of digitalization and innovation.

RQ2 – Types of GST Models Used

Most studies still adopt the classic model of Locke and Latham (1990; 2022), but with more modern modifications. Some studies develop models that combine the concepts of goals, feedback, and performance strategies (Appuhami et al., 2024). Others utilize experimental approaches with technology-based goal-behavior models, such as eco-feedback (Pereira-Doel et al., 2025). Several other studies adapt GST in the context of digital systems and hybrid organizations (Prentice et al., 2023).

RQ3 – Primary Research Focus

The main focus of research in 56 articles is the variables of goal clarity, goal challenge, and goal commitment and their influence on individual and organizational performance. For example, Appuhami et al. (2024) and Ngilisho et al. (2022) assert that goal clarity increases accountability and performance effectiveness, while goal challenge contributes to organizational creativity and innovation (Chak et al., 2023; Pascucci et al., 2024). Goal commitment has been shown to be a key factor mediating the relationship between goals and performance (Abualbasal & Alfaez, 2025).

RQ4 - Integration with Other Theories

The integration of GST with other theories is increasingly found in the context of organizations, digitalization, and sustainability. For example, Richins (2025) combined GST with AI-based technology in accounting research, while Alosi et al. (2025) combined it with Paradox Theory to explain dual motivations in organizations. Several other studies link GST with Self-Determination Theory (Zhang et al., 2025) and Social Cognitive Theory (Abualbasal & Alfaez, 2025) to understand motivation and self-regulation processes in the modern work environment.

RQ5 – Research Design and Methods

Most researchers use quantitative empirical approaches, particularly surveys and statistical analysis. Only a small number of studies are conceptual and use qualitative approaches to develop new theoretical models.

RQ6 – Knowledge Gaps and Future Opportunities

Existing research still leaves several gaps, necessitating further research on the potential use of GST. Three key gaps in current research are identified: the limited number of studies examining GST implementation in developing countries, particularly in Southeast Asia; the lack of long-term research examining changes over time; and the potential for deeper integration between GST and digital technology, particularly in the current era of AI-based technology development.

V. Implication, Limitations, and Conclusion

5.1 Theoritical dan Practical Implications

A systematic literature review of 56 articles on Goal-Setting Theory (GST) from 2022 to 2025 shows that this theory remains a key foundation for understanding the mechanisms of motivation and work behavior in various organizational contexts. Theoretically, the combination of GST with other theories such as Self-Determination Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Paradox Theory strengthens GST's position as an adaptive and flexible theory addressing the complexities of modern organizations. These findings broaden the scope of GST from the individual level to the organizational and systems levels. Practically, the study's findings provide guidance for managers and policymakers in designing management systems with measurable, participatory, and adaptive goals to environmental changes. In today's digital era, GST can also be implemented through technologies such as AI-driven goal tracking systems and digital performance dashboards to increase engagement, accountability, and alignment between individual and organizational goals.

5.2 Limitations

This study still has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the data comes only from Scopus and is limited to the 2022-2025 timeframe, so the results are limited and do not capture long-term trends. Second, the screening process only reached the text screening stage and did not include detailed methodological analysis. Third, the analysis only allows for quantitative interpretation, without an in-depth assessment of the quality and contribution of each article.

5.3 Conclusion

This systematic literature review confirms that GST continues to evolve conceptually and methodologically. A significant number of publications were published between 2022 and 2025, particularly in Western Europe. Overall, GST has proven to be adaptive and remains relevant to modern management transformations in the current digital and AI era. This research contributes by providing an up-to-date empirical overview of the direction of GST development and a conceptual and practical foundation for future studies. Future research should broaden the geographic and methodological context to deepen understanding of GST's role in shaping the performance and collaboration of modern organizations.

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