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Exploring the Nexus Between Knowledge-Oriented Leadership and Employees' Innovative Behaviour in SMEs: The Moderating Role of Organisational Learning Culture

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Abstract

Recent research has focused on employees' innovative behaviour and the effects of various leadership styles in fostering innovation in organisations. However, little attention has been paid to examining the direct effect of knowledge-based leadership (KOL) on employee innovative behaviour (EIB). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to conduct an empirical investigation into the relationship between knowledge-oriented leadership and employee innovative behaviour, as well as the moderating role of an organisational learning culture (OLC). Furthermore, this study proposes that an organisational learning culture is crucial to moderating the relationship between leaders and employees, whilst aiming to provide a better understanding of the importance of moderating the relationship between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour. The responses of 289 employees in Jordanian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were collected from an online survey, and then the study's data was analysed by using structural equation modelling. The findings deduced by the data ultimately demonstrated that knowledge-oriented leadership has a direct and positive effect on employee innovative behaviour in Jordanian SMEs. Also, the results confirm that an organizational learning culture moderated the influence of knowledge-oriented leadership on employee innovative behaviour. The findings provide fresh and deeper insights into the direct influence that knowledge-oriented leadership has on employees' innovative behaviour in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Keywords: Employee Innovative Behaviour, Knowledge-Oriented Leadership, Organisational Learning Culture, SMEs.

Introduction

Innovation has become an increasingly crucial element when considering and determining the survival and growth of businesses in today's challenging economic climate (Guo, Peng, and Zhu, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2022). Over the last decade or so, developing innovative behaviour among employees has become more crucial for organisations as it has been founded that this behaviour is a key driver of organisational innovation (Amankwaa *et al.*,

2022; Nguyen, 2022; Pian *et al.*, 2019). The importance of leadership and its ability to foster employee innovation in today's knowledge-based workplace has been widely acknowledged, and practitioners and researchers are both paying close attention to this topic (Iqbal *et al.*, 2020). The innovative behaviour of employees possesses the power to maintain a competitive advantage and edge, whilst simultaneously preserving organisational stability (AlEsa and Durugbo, 2021; Hunsaker and Ding, 2022). In this vein, the term 'innovative behaviour' refers to the actions taken by employees to attain a competitive advantage, including the generation and execution of fresh and beneficial ideas contributing toward the improvement of products, services, processes, and management (Scott and Bruce, 1994). However, previous studies have found that the most important predictor of innovative behaviour is leadership (Jung *et al.*, 2008). However, the majority of the studies that have been carried out have been associated with different leadership styles (e.g., transformational leadership, ethical leadership, humble leadership, and authoritarian leadership) in relation to employees' innovative behaviour (Choi *et al.*, 2016; Ye *et al.*, 2022; Zhou and Wu, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Ergo, the direct effects of knowledge-oriented leadership on employees' innovative behaviour still requires more attention (Gurlek and Cemberci, 2020; Rehman and Iqbal, 2020). It is apparent that leadership is one of the most important aspects of developing a strong learning culture; a leader possesses the ability to influence employee behaviour by encouraging participation in learning activities, which, in turn, results in enhanced organisational efficiency (Kim and Donna, 2012). Thus, when an organisation has a strong learning culture, employees have a greater chance of learning new information, absorbing new technologies, and being more innovative (Reardon, 2010; Tian *et al.*, 2018).

In both developed and developing countries, small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) have long been considered a vital driving force for economic growth and promoting competitiveness (Ali *et al.*, 2020). Economic changes and the rapid rise of entrepreneurs in the global economy have necessitated a new focus on the role of entrepreneurial activity in emerging economies (Hamdan *et al.*, 2022). Although Jordan, alongside other countries with emerging economies, has not reached the same degree of economic development as industrialised nations, they have nonetheless accomplished a certain level of both growth and income (Alhaddad *et al.*, 2022; Al-edenat, 2022; Aljuwaiber, 2021). According to recent studies, it has become increasingly apparent that emerging economies are becoming production centres for established markets and suppliers of expertise in innovative manufacturing technologies and business processes (Arya *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, recent studies have also begun to assert that there is still little attention to innovative behaviour at an individual level despite the growing interest in innovation at an organisational level (Mutonyi *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, this study intends to identify and fill some of the knowledge gaps present by studying the direct and indirect effects of knowledge-oriented leadership on employees' innovative behaviour in a highly competitive service sector in an emerging economy.

This research will contribute to the body of present knowledge in multiple ways. Firstly, the present study is one of the few that has been conducted on KOL as a new research area that requires more attention (Gurlek and Cemberci, 2020; Jiang *et al.*, 2021; Shamim *et al.*, 2019). Ergo, the study will address that there is a significant gap in the search for leadership qualities that foster innovation among employees. Secondly, this is the first study to examine the direct effect of KOL on employees' innovative behaviour in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in an emerging economy such as Jordan. Thirdly, this study will investigate up-to-date

evidence regarding the moderating effect of organisational learning culture on the relationship between KOL and employees' innovative behaviour.

Fundamentally, this study aims to fill present knowledge gaps by investigating the relationship between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour by exploring the moderate effect of organisational learning culture on this relationship, and more specifically, by answering the following questions.

RQ1: How does knowledge-oriented leadership influence employees' innovation behaviour?

RQ2: Does organisational learning culture moderate the effects of knowledge-oriented leadership on employees' innovation behaviour?

The remaining sections of this study are arranged as follows: the following section covers the theoretical foundation and creation of hypotheses; the third section addresses the research methodology; the fourth section presents the data analysis and results, and the fifth section presents the discussion. The final section will demonstrate the study's limitations, whilst providing suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Employees' Innovative Behaviour and Knowledge-Oriented Leadership

Organisations have become increasingly reliant upon innovative behaviour in order to adapt to the fast-changing and ever-evolving business environment, as innovation allows for businesses to gain a competitive advantage in the competitive market (Eid and Agag, 2020). According to a wealth of scholarly literature, innovative behaviour is a multifaceted behaviour that is composed of the development and introduction of new ideas, alongside the actualisation or implementation of these ideas, as well as other actions (Hakimian *et al.*, 2016). In the context of the workplace, a person's deliberate action to introduce or use new concepts and ideas, products, processes, and procedures is defined as 'individual innovative behaviour' (West and Farr, 1989). There is a growing body of research on innovative behaviour that highlights how crucial it is to an organisation's performance (Mutonyi *et al.*, 2020; Ye *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). However, one of the most difficult tasks that managers have, particularly those in human resources, is encouraging and developing innovative behaviour among their employees (Eid and Agag, 2020). Therefore, to obtain a competitive advantage, organisations must engage their workers in innovative activities (Hughes *et al.*, 2018).

Employee creativity and employee innovation are both discussed in the research based on innovation as they are both directly connected (Robinson and Beesley, 2010). Employees' creativity focuses on generating new and beneficial solutions, while innovation is an application-oriented term that incorporates both the conception and successful execution of new ideas (Anderson *et al.*, 2014). However, one of the most important factors that influences employee behaviour is leadership style (De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007). According to contingency theories and situational theories of leadership, leaders can improve employee behaviour by modifying effective leadership behaviours in accordance with the circumstances and desired results (Zia, 2020). Traditional styles of leadership, such as transformational and transactional leadership, play a significant role in achieving a variety of results at both individual and organisational levels (Alrowwad *et al.*, 2020; Choi *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, in a knowledge work environment, organisational leaders must exhibit distinctive behaviours and lead with a knowledge lens (Ribiere and Sitar, 2003). In other words, for successful and efficient knowledge management inside an organisation, leaders are required to utilise a combination of various leadership styles (Donate and de Pablo, 2015). Recently, the term

knowledge leadership has been introduced (Shamim *et al.*, 2019), however, the term knowledge-oriented leadership (KOL) continues to preside. The term KOL refers to an attitude or action that promotes the production, exchange of new information, and application of new information in a way that results in a shift in collective outcomes (Naqshbandi and Jasimuddin, 2018). Furthermore, KOL refers to the processes of knowledge-sharing and creative learning, which is based on personal knowledge literacy and learning capacity, promoting knowledge-sharing and innovative learning by offering example KM behaviours that build a positive organisational learning atmosphere and culture (Jiang *et al.*, 2021). Essentially, a knowledge-oriented leader should serve as an example; they should encourage learning by intellectually inspiring and empowering followers, institutionalising learning through the provision of incentives and training, developing a learning culture that tolerates errors, fostering discipline, and developing knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, and knowledge application mechanisms (Latif *et al.*, 2021; Naqshbandi and Jasimuddin, 2018).

Recently, Shamim *et al.* (2019) continued to build on the KOL concept by drawing upon new leadership behaviours such as mentoring, facilitating, consulting, supporting, delegating, and fostering knowledge diffusion. Essentially, assistance with ordinary tasks, time and effort spent on training, and regular knowledge and experience exchange are all elements of mentoring (Shamim *et al.*, 2019); providing resources, such as time and money, is referred to as facilitating; consultative behaviour guarantees that employees' suggestions are taken into consideration and that the opinion of superiors is given weight when making important choices (De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007); fulfilling followers' needs and fostering a welcoming environment are examples of supportive behaviour (Shamim *et al.*, 2019); delegating is the act of transferring power and duty (Zia, 2020); and finally, when communication becomes more open, transparent, and supportive, knowledge dispersion is encouraged (De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007). When considered collectively, each of these elements led the study to propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Knowledge-oriented leadership has a direct and positive impact on employees' innovative behaviour in Jordanian SMEs.

Organisational Learning Culture

Organisational culture is defined as the shared values, precepts, and assumptions of the workforces inside an organisation (Miron *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, a person's values, beliefs, and assumptions have a direct impact on their behaviour, which either promoted the organisational learning process or obstructs it (Deshpande and Webster, 1989). The learning process is an essential component of the creative process as the organisational learning culture is made up of three different constructs: the acquisition of information, the interpretation of information, and changes in behavioural and cognitive patterns (Skerlavaj *et al.*, 2010). Each of these structures provides support for in-depth and methodical techniques that are targeted at accomplishing high-level organisational learning (Cerne *et al.*, 2012). As a consequence, optimal learning and knowledge transfer climates are created, which promote and facilitate innovation. An organisational learning culture is a process that involves the acquisition of knowledge, the interpretation of information, and the changes in behaviour and cognition that arise from this process. These changes should, in turn, influence innovativeness (Skerlavaj *et al.*, 2007).

The concept of organisational learning culture refers to the situation in which a company views learning as essential to the success of its operations (Schmitz *et al.*, 2014). In addition to this, organisational learning cultures provide a set of standards that define the desired

learning outcomes in order to steer and inspire members' actions in the direction of lifelong learning and knowledge integration (Gemmano *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the employer and employee share a commitment to learning and trusting one another, the employer offers formal and informal learning opportunities for its staff, and the staff is dedicated to their professional growth and the growth of the organisation (Gil and Mataveli, 2016).

The impact of innovation on culture has been acknowledged as a crucial aspect of international management and organisational development due to its significant role in contributing to business and economic growth (Tian *et al.*, 2018). Prior research also indicates that an organisational learning culture positively influences organisational innovation (Choi, 2020; Kalyar and Rafi, 2013; Ugurluoglu *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, an organisational learning culture moderates the association between transformational leadership and group innovation (Phipps *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, a strong learning culture enables an organisation not only to preserve and share existing knowledge, but to also gain new insights into how to respond to a variety of demands, and this is essential to creating an environment that fosters growth and innovation (Joo and Shim, 2010).

Accordingly, this study argues that organisational learning culture positively moderates the relationship between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour, as evidenced by the following hypothesis:

H2: Organisational learning culture positively moderates the relationship between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour in Jordanian SMEs.

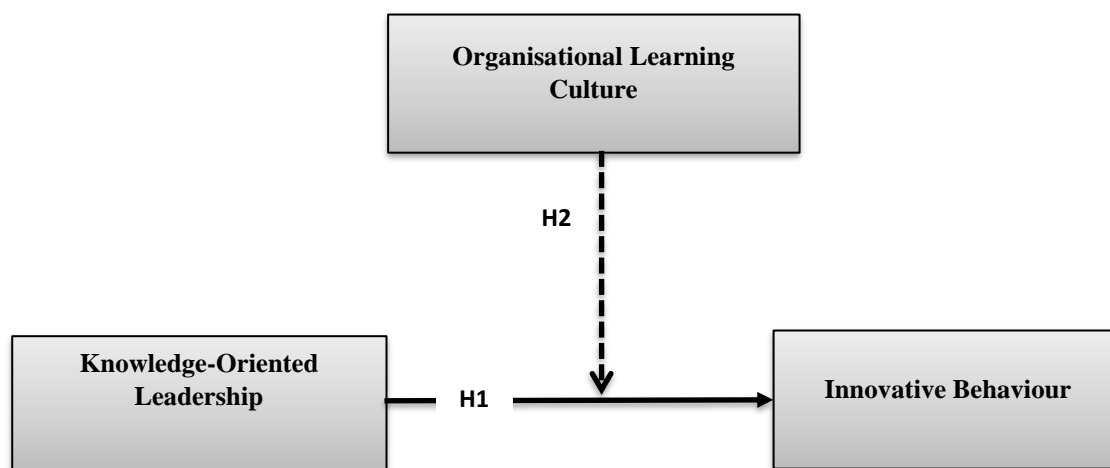


Figure 1. Research Model

Research Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

Innovative behaviour in Jordan's SMEs has become critical to the country's economic progress due to its growing status and the difficulties it faces with regard to introducing new company ideas that would result in new products or services that generate revenue and new job possibilities (Qandah *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, most of the research on innovative behaviour has only been carried out in developed countries, indicating a lack of empirical research on innovative behaviour in developing countries and emerging economies (Mehtap *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this study has used a sample of Jordanian SMEs to test the study's hypotheses.

The quantitative method of data collection was utilised to accomplish the aims of this research. The study used data from earlier research and current study subjects and the

suggested research model was evaluated by using survey data collecting and convenience sampling. From 23 Jordanian SMEs, 289 employees responded to the survey's questions. Each participant completed an online survey issued by the organisation's human resources department.

The findings of the respondents' demographic features are shown in Table 1; a total of 360 replies were collected, of which 289 were useful. Out of the complete usable sample, 182 were men (63 %) and 107 were women (37 %). The participants' ages ranged from 20 and over; 22 per cent were in the 20 to 29-years-old age range, 38% were in the 30 to 39-years-old range, 28% were in their 40 to 49-years-old range, and 12% were in the 50-years-old and over range. Furthermore, 14% of the useful respondents had a master's degree, while the majority 54% had a bachelor's degree, and 32% were below the graduate level.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	No. of Responses	(%)
Gender:		
Male	182	63
Female	107	37
Age:		
20-29	64	22
30-39	110	38
40-49	81	28
50 and Over	34	12
Experience:		
< 4	69	24
4-10 years	122	42
> 10years	98	34
Working Positions:		
Manger	66	23
Employee	223	77
Education Level:		
Diploma	93	32
Bachelor's Degree	156	54
Master's Degree	40	14
Sector of Activity:		
Industry	133	46
Service	156	54

Measurement

In order to design the questionnaire items and to ensure the validity of the scales employed, this study relied on measuring scales from the body of existing literature. Ergo, each item was created based on prior related studies. This study used a seven-point Likert scale for the measurement of variables, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The independent variable, knowledge-oriented leadership (KOL), consisted of six items adapted from (Donate and de Pablo, 2015). The sample items included 'managers behave as

advisers, and controls are just an assessment of the accomplishment of objectives'. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this adapted scale is 0.84.

By using the six-item scale created by Scott and Bruce (1994), this study examined the dependent variables on the employees' innovative behaviour (EIB), as the employees were requested to report on their innovative conduct. The sample items included 'I develop creative ideas at work'. Here, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this adapted scale is 0.79.

The moderating variable, organisational learning culture (OLC), was measured by using a short form with a seven-item scale developed by (Yang *et al.*, 2004). The sample items included 'Employees are encouraged for continuous learning'. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this adapted scale is 0.82.

Data Analysis and Results

The Smart-PLS 3 software was utilised to test the research hypotheses and structural model by using the partial least squares (PLS-SEM) technique, which has gained significant prominence in the field of business and knowledge management research (Cepeda-Carrion *et al.*, 2019; Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020; Wong, 2013). Also, the Smart-PLS is being utilised in this study because of its effectiveness, even when dealing with small sampling sizes (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

The validity of the constructs' convergent and discriminant components was the initial step in our investigation. Therefore, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were employed to determine the constructs' convergent and discriminant validity. Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs were above 0.70, which is over the acceptable threshold (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, evaluating a reflective measurement model assists with examining the indicator loadings; as shown in Table 2, all item loadings ranged between 0.72 and 0.88 and exceeded the threshold value indicated. According to Hair *et al.* (2019), loadings greater than 0.708 are recommended, as they imply that the construct explains more than fifty per cent of the indicator's variation, which ensures satisfactory item reliability.

Correspondingly, this study employed bootstrapping to determine convergent validity. Thus, the average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded Fornell and Larcker's (1981) recommended cut-off value of 0.5 as shown in Table 2, which suggests a robust convergent validity.

Table 2
Convergent Validity and Reliability

Construct	Item	Loading	CR	AVE	C α
Knowledge-Oriented Leadership (KOL)	KOL1	0.84****	0.85	0.68	0.84
	KOL2	0.75****			
	KOL3	0.79****			
	KOL4	0.82****			
	KOL5	0.74****			
	KOL6	0.76****			
Employees' Innovative Behaviour (EIB)	EIB1	0.85****	0.79	0.71	0.79
	EIB2	0.83****			
	EIB3	0.86****			
	EIB4	0.79****			
	EIB5	0.74****			
	EIB6	0.82****			
Organisational Learning Culture (OLC)	OLC1	0.84****	0.81	0.64	0.82
	OLC2	0.72****			
	OLC3	0.77****			
	OLC4	0.88****			
	OLC5	0.76****			
	OLC6	0.81****			
	OLC7	0.83****			

Moreover, this study used Fornell and Larcker's (1981) measurement of the AVE to test the discriminant validity; as shown in Table 3, the square root of AVE for each construct (diagonal elements in italics) is greater than the correlations between the constructs in the model, proving that discriminant validity was confirmed.

Table 3
Discriminant Validity

	KOL	EIB	OLC
KOL	<i>0.82</i>		
EIB	0.71	<i>0.84</i>	
OLC	0.67	0.73	<i>0.80</i>

Notes: KOL: Knowledge-oriented leadership; EIB: Employees' innovative behaviour; OLC: Organisational learning culture.

The R-squared value is used in PLS-SEM to evaluate the structural model. This coefficient reflects the predictive ability of the model and is derived as the squared correlation between

the actual and expected values of an endogenous variable. Although the optimum R2 value varies depending on the research environment, Hair *et al.* (2019) recommended a minimum acceptable level of 0.10. The R2 score for employees' innovative behaviour in the study was 0.516, indicating that the model had an acceptable level of predictive ability within the sample.

A test was run on the structural model at the second stage of the research process to examine the link between the constructs. The findings of the analysis of the data are presented in Table 4, and they reveal that hypotheses H1 and H2 were acceptable.

Table 4
Result of Path Model

Relationships	β	Standard Error	T Value	Sig. Level	Hypothesis Testing
KOL ->EIB	0.543	0.039	5.653	P< 0.01	H1 Accepted
KOL*LOC-> EIB	0.091	0.027	2.887	P< 0.01	H2 Accepted

Notes: KOL: Knowledge-oriented leadership; EIB: Employees' innovative behaviour; OLC: Organisational learning culture.

Based on these findings, leadership plays an essential role in enhancing employee innovation, as was predicted (H1: $\beta = 0.543$; $t = 5.653$, $P < 0.01$). The findings of the current study suggest that knowledge-oriented leadership has a positive influence on the innovative behaviour of employees. This shows that employees engage in innovative activity within the firm, which is facilitated by knowledge-oriented leadership.

Additionally, this study has shown that the relationship between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour was moderated by an organisational learning culture (H2: $\beta = 0.091$; $t = 2.887$, $P < 0.01$). Ergo, this suggests that the association between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour was positively moderated by an organisational learning culture.

Discussion

Individuals are the driving force behind all innovation, and their attitudes and behaviours are crucial to the continuity of competition and inventiveness of organisations (Aboobaker and KA, 2021). Recent research has explored the indirect links between knowledge-oriented leadership and innovation (Donate *et al.*, 2022; Jiang *et al.*, 2021; Shehzad *et al.*, 2021) and the link between organisational learning culture and organisational innovation (Cui *et al.*, 2022; Khan *et al.*, 2021). However, the direct link between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour has not yet been examined (Latif *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, this study provides numerous theoretical contributions by examining the potential direct impact of knowledge-oriented leadership on employees' innovative behaviour and the moderating effect of the organisational learning culture.

Also, this study has examined a new moderating function of organisational learning culture in the relationship between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour, whilst investigating the contextual factors that contribute towards practical performances such as innovative behaviour. Accordingly, learning culture was viewed as a crucial moderator of this relationship because it embodies a set of values, ideas, and attitudes towards learning that were developed by the business, disseminated among its members, and solidified by employees' innovative behaviour (Gemmano *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, positive employee behaviour in organisations relates to leadership styles according to this study's findings. This is similar to the findings in earlier research which have highlighted the connection between leadership and innovative employee behaviour in organisations (Amankwaa *et al.*, 2022; Iqbal *et al.*, 2020; Nguyen, 2022; Pian, Jin, and Li, 2019;). Also, the results of this study provide credence to the conclusions of earlier research which concluded that a knowledge-oriented leadership style had a positive effect on innovative performance (Donate and de Pablo, 2015; Naqshbandi and Jasimuddin, 2018, Zia, 2020). However, the result of this study established that in Jordanian SMEs, knowledge-oriented leadership had a significant and direct impact on the employees' innovative behaviour. Knowledge-oriented leadership had a major impact on employee members' innovative behaviour when organisational learning culture was at its best. Additionally, this finding is in line with a study carried out by Donate *et al* (2022) which suggests that the positive contexts created by knowledge-oriented leadership positively influence innovation capabilities.

The study's most significant application is its confirmation of the moderating role played by organisational learning culture in the association between knowledge-oriented leadership and employees' innovative behaviour. An organisational learning culture is underpinned by contextual elements, is connected to institutions, and emphasises the importance of institutional initiatives to change the organisational learning culture to support employees' innovative behaviour.

Furthermore, due to their significance in output, exports, and employment, Jordanian SMEs significantly impact the country's economic structure (Al-edenat, 2022). Therefore, management must foster an organisational learning culture to support employees' innovative behaviour.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

This study offers novel insights into the direct effect of knowledge-oriented leadership on the innovative behaviour of employees working in Jordanian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), however, the study still possesses certain limitations. First and foremost, this research was carried out in Jordan, which is a developing country; consequently, the generalisability of the results may limit the study's credibility. Nevertheless, the control of cultural and industrial variations was considered in the analysis due to the context in which the research was carried out. Secondly, most of the questionnaires utilised in this study contained self-reported data, which may indicate response bias on the part of each responder. Therefore, to gain more trustworthy results in the future, the research should utilise a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups. In conclusion, the methodology behind this study was cross-sectional, therefore, if additional research on the causal linkages between variables is required, a longitudinal study that has repeated surveys throughout time should be utilised as the method of investigation.

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