

The emergence of e-learning and online-based training during the COVID-19 crisis: an exploratory investigation from Bangladesh

Emergence of
e-learning

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Abstract

Purpose – The extreme measures that have been taken by governments across the globe to minimize the spread of COVID-19 have had significant impacts on almost all the public sectors, especially on the economy and education. This study aims to address the approaches and prospective of online-based training and e-learning for employee learning and development during this COVID-19 crisis.

Design/methodology/approach – With an emphasis on the qualitative approach and considering the complex COVID-19 emergency, required data were collected from in-depth interviews to interpret the experiences of the respondents.

Findings – The findings suggested that the digital learning ecosystem offered flexibility of time, place and pace, which provided essential convenience during the COVID-19 crisis. From the human resource (HR) perspective, the e-learning culture has enabled the organizations to quickly adopt the new normal, secure sustainable continuity of organizational development and ensure decent work and growth within and across organizations. The adoption of e-learning and flexible working conditions following the setback has enabled the organizations to quickly cope up with the new normal, causing a significant paradigm shift in the organizational culture and corporate sector of Bangladesh.

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Research limitations/implications – The study will assist the HR of any organization to contemplate e-learning systems as effective alternative training methods. Also, the study will be suggestive to traverse new dimensions and skillsets for the pedagogues.

Originality/value – This study offers new evidential scenarios regarding the emergence of effective e-learning initiatives and online-based learning programs for developing the workforce to be efficient and productive even in distressful and inconvenient COVID-19 situations.

Keywords COVID-19, Pandemic, Online training, Employee development, E-learning, Digital learning ecosystem, Physical distance, Developing country

Paper type Research paper

1. Background of the study

Bangladesh, a developing country, is facing a sudden upsurge in coronavirus detection also decided to enforce public holidays or nationwide unofficial lockdown throughout the country from the last of March 2020 to the last of May 2020. Later on, when the situation got better like in other countries, it also lifted the lockdown and allowed to reopening of all sectors with some health guidelines and general restrictions. In a primary response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the organizations across the country had to continue their business activities to a limited extent with “work from home” or “online-based remote work” facilities. Organizations had to adopt some critical changes and innovations in their job role very quickly as there were no other options. Undoubtedly, post-COVID-19 corporate world is going to experience a transformation in functional and strategic job roles to ensure efficiency and productivity in the organization.

To protect the interests of their employees and society, organizations are heading to revise their strategies and prepare their workforces for such extreme situations as the COVID-19 pandemic. As face-to-face or classroom-based direct training cannot be arranged at this time, therefore, organizations considered online-based training or e-learning as the key tool to develop their workforce during the pandemic situation. Digital transformation has indeed revolutionized the learning and development (L&D) ecosystem of Bangladesh, significantly facilitating executive education across the organizations as well as the enthusiastic learners beyond. As this pandemic has brought some fundamental changes in global education and mode of learning (Maqsood *et al.*, 2021), global massive open online course (MOOC) platforms like Coursera, Edx, Udemy, etc. made thousands of fundamental skills courses completely free of cost during this tough time and also provided financial aid to the learners.

In this study, the authors attempted to discover employee L&D practices through online-based training and e-learning during the COVID-19 crisis.

2. Purpose of the study

The coronavirus pandemic even has presented the workforce environment with a major setback and most of the organizations are trying to handle it through alternative and contingency plans. The ongoing coronavirus outbreak is challenging companies to rethink their approach to training and development of the employees in this situation. Although the economic impact of this global health crisis is yet to be seen, its effect on the corporate L&D functions has already shifted in very recent months. The importance of sustainable L&D has risen to such an extent that it now provides the essential tools and technics to the employees for formulating their drives to maximize individual efficiencies and organizational goals. That is the reason, in this COVID-19 situation, L&D policies can help to increase employee efficiency and commitment toward the organization and boost employee morale to achieve measurable outcomes.

This study aims to explore the approaches, use, effectiveness and prospective of online-based training and e-learning for employee L&D during a pandemic situation like the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of a developing country, Bangladesh.

3. Research methodology

According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is more suitable for developing an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, then again Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996) mentioned that qualitative research is essentially useful for a comprehensive understanding of concepts and relationships among them. Therefore, in this study, where there is little knowledge available regarding the fact and the study is exploratory in nature, a qualitative approach was adopted for the research.

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the required qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews; authors used the method as a type of “conversation” (Burgess, 1984) with the respondents; from both sides, representatives from the HR department and employees from other departments. For the analysis, respondents were divided into two groups:

- (1) Cluster 1: Respondents working in the HR department and looking after the L&D (see Table 1); and
- (2) Cluster 2: Employees working in the non-HR department and participating in online training. Later on, 30 respondents from Cluster 2, which was named as Cluster 2.1 (see Table 2).

For Cluster 1, to get insights from the HR perspective, a total number of 14 people working in the HR department were interviewed in depth. HR people were selected via using judgment sampling technique based on their experience with training, L&D, culture and policy development in any organization (especially experience of implementing e-learning in the organization). The respondents are mainly working in different multinational organizations, banks, non-bank finance organizations and telephone operator companies leading the L&D and playing critical roles in human resource (HR) and L&D. Researchers found their views

Code	Role	Working experience with L&D	Number of online training arranged in COVID-19	Number of employees engaged in the training sessions
H-R01	Head of HR	12+	16	70+
H-R02	Head of HR	6+	30	200+
H-R03	Senior executive	4+	24	90+
H-R04	Manager	7+	44	150+
H-R05	Manager	6+	21	70+
H-R06	Assistant manager	5+	17	200+
H-R07	Senior manager	10+	15	170+
H-R08	Deputy manager	7+	24	130+
H-R09	Executive	3+	8	81+
H-R10	L&D specialist	4+	40	450+
H-R11	Executive	3+	14	200+
H-R12	HRD specialist	4+	25	100+
H-R13	HR business partner	6+	8	120+
H-R14	Senior executive	3+	15	150+

Source(s): Authors, interview analysis

Table 1.
Interviewees' profile
Cluster 1

Particulars		The sample size, $N = 30$		Particulars		Frequency %	
		Frequency	%				
Sex	Female	12	40%	Devices uses for learning purposes	Only mobile	4	13%
	Male	18	60%		Only laptop/desktop	1	3%
Years of experience	0–2	2	7%	Average hours spend online (March 2020–January 2022)	Mobile and laptop	21	70%
	3–5	11	37%		Mobile and desktop	3	10%
	6–8	8	27%		Mobile, laptop and desktop	1	3%
	9–10	5	17%		3–4	1	3%
	11–13	3	10%		4–5	1	3%
	More than 13	1	3%		5–6	3	10%
Department	Sales and marketing	8	27%	Number of training attended (March 2020–January 2022)	6–7	8	27%
	Business development	3	10%		7–8	10	33%
	Internal audit	1	3%		More than 8 h	7	23%
	Operation (Production)	8	27%		1–3	3	10%
	Brand and communication	1	3%		4–6	4	13%
	Finance	2	7%		7–9	9	30%
	Customer service	4	13%		10–12	8	27%
	Commercial	1	3%		13–15	2	7%
	Quality assurance	2	7%		More than 15	4	13%
		30	100%				

Table 2.
Interviewees' profile
Cluster 2.1

Source(s): Authors, interview analysis

very important to explore the current practice of employee training and learning development and their perception of e-learning as an L&D tool.

Cluster 2 to get the learners' view, 50 employees working in different organizations in cities of Bangladesh like Dhaka, Chittagong and Rajshahi in different departments were interviewed initially, who were selected via convenience sampling technique.

After the initial interview, the researcher picked 30 respondents and named the group as Cluster 2.1, considering the engagement with e-learning with at least five online-based training or e-learning courses. For a deeper understanding, each respondent from Cluster 2.1 was interviewed twice, and each interview session lasted around 30 to 40 min.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Employee learning and development

HR is not only the foundation of organizational competitive advantage (Sultana *et al.*, 2018) and effectiveness (Senge, 1990) but also a means of achieving the goals of an organization. At the same time, L&D initiatives in any organization essentially enable its employees to accomplish their personal and collective organizational goals. It is firmly believed that employee L&D or HR development is the most effective tool that allows the employees to transform the organization's vision, mission and goals into performance-specific outcomes.

In any organization, the L&D unit under the HR department deals with the continuous process of employee learning and training need analysis, take L&D initiatives, i.e. arrange on-the-job or off-the-job training, help the employees to attend short or long courses and certification programs depending on specific job role.

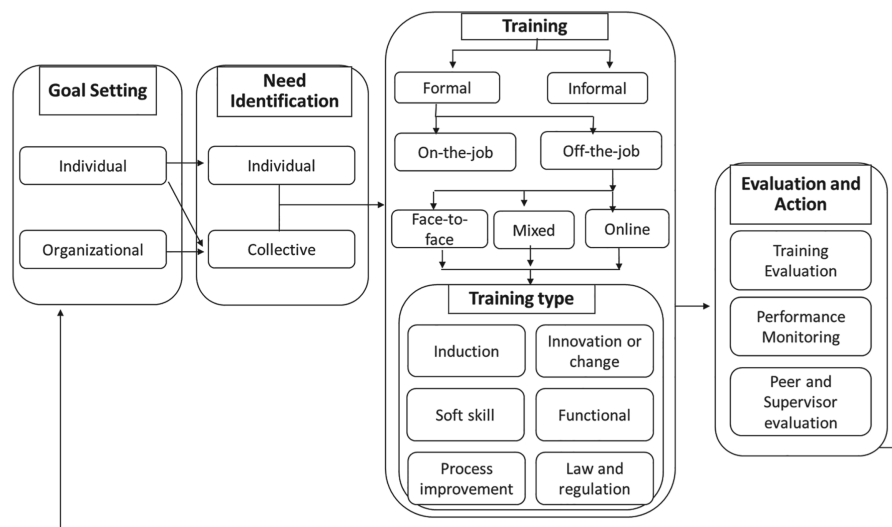
Measuring the effectiveness of the training, succession planning, building the succession management pool are also a part of HR development or L&D programs. L&D programs or training increases the employees' ability to complete the assigned tasks in a shorter time, increase their work efficiency and increase employee job satisfaction (Olejniczak-Szuster and Łukasik, 2018; Pajo *et al.*, 2010). It also increases their adaptability to new changes. Training helps organizations to develop their workforces to acquire

different skills and integrate performance and progress that benefit all organizations. Training or employee L&D is considered a strategic investment to improve employee performance and increase their productivity (Watson, 2008; Smith and Hayton, 1999). Studies showed that managers engaged in training and self-study are the high-performing employees in the organizations and provide better support to the participative management system (Miah *et al.*, 2003).

The learning process within the organizations can be explained well with Figure 1 framework developed through the analysis of interview outcomes. For instance, the learning process in an organization begins with personal or institutional goal setting and planning, which are determined based on the assessment of collective and individual skill gaps or by identifying specific skillset or knowledge requirements. Training processes throughout the organizations can encompass various approaches, ranging from formal to informal procedures. Formal training is usually initiated through on-the-job and off-the-job systems, where face-to-face, online and hybrid-type training facilities are organized in off-the-job training programs. Organizations inaugurate diverse training programs where most usual types include induction, change management, soft skill development, functional or technical skill development, process improvement and law and regulation education-based training. The effectiveness of any training program is evaluated through direct observation, performance monitoring and finally peer or supervisor evaluation.

As training and learning process can be both formal and informal, in the case of informal learning, individuals learn from doing the job; from trial and error; from peers, coworkers and supervisors. There are mainly three modes of formal training or certification-based or regular off-the-job training, i.e. face-to-face or classroom-based training; online-based training or e-learning and mixed or blended learning.

Once any formal training is done, the organization must evaluate the training method and its effectiveness through a systematic feedback form, through employee performance evaluation and review from peers, supervisors and heads of the departments (HODs).



Source(s): Authors, interview analysis

Figure 1.
Organizational L&D
process

4.2 Digitalization and Bangladesh

Over the past two decades, the uses and access of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have increased noticeably not only in developed countries but also in developing countries such as Bangladesh. Bangladesh is now very close to accomplishing its “Vision 2021” and achieving the status of “Digital Bangladesh” by 2021 (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance, 2011; Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, 2010; Karim, 2010; Access to Information Programme- Prime Minister’s Office, 2009). The access and uses of computers, the internet, ICTs have also increased at a very rapid pace because of governmental policies and support. These policies aided the revolution in the digitalization process and ensured the collective acceptance of digital platforms by the population. The number of internet users is increasing day by day in suburban areas, i.e. divisions, districts and even in unions and small villages alongside metropolitan cities.

The expedition of the internet in Bangladesh was first introduced in 1996 (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016), and since the 1980s, the country had been using computers, only for research purposes at the initial stage (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). Over the years, the country has experienced almost exponential growth in the use of the internet. According to the website of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission – BTRC (2020a), the total number of internet subscribers in Bangladesh hit 99.984 million by the end of February 2020 (see Table 3).

The present data on internet subscribers show the consistent growth of the country’s internet users and usage as the number of subscribers is growing at a persistent rate. Bangladesh government’s vision of building a “Digital Bangladesh” not only digitalized common public services and made them internet based but also subsequent investment in the information technology (IT) sector expanding the number of internet users day by day. The coverage throughout the nation and affordability have made the internet well available for almost everyone, which is bringing a new technological revolution as people are transforming to online-based services, businesses and education, breaking the traditional paradigms.

As a developing country, Bangladesh has made outstanding progress in reducing poverty. Bangladesh has earned the lower-middle-income country status in 2015, and by the purchasing power parity, it is now the 29th largest economy. Because of the economic development, people gained more purchasing power, so they were able to buy smartphones, personal computers, laptops and tablet computers, which by the same token increased the use of the internet. Whereas upper- to upper-middle-class people can buy international brands, local brands took the strategy to produce and sell smartphones at a low price to capture the segment of working class and low-income or upper-lower-class (Kotlar and Armstrog, 2012, p. 140) people.

Some mobile operating companies even offered free smartphones with internet connections as a part of company promotion strategies. Alongside broadband and Wi-Fi connections, the presence of these mobile operator companies providing stable internet connections all over Bangladesh has greatly impacted the feasibility of digitalization in Bangladesh (see Figure 2).

A massive increase in the use of smartphones can be remarked as one of the main reasons that influenced the exponential growth in the usage of the internet in Bangladesh.

Internet subscribers (million)	Operators	Years						
		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
	Mobile internet	41.959	55.512	63.120	77.495	86.268	94.236	103.193
	WiMAX	0.215	0.136	0.089	0.086	0.061	0.005	
	ISP + PSTN	1.245	2.669	4.036	5.56	5.731	5.743	9.522
	Total	43.419	58.317	67.245	83.141	92.061	99.984	112.715

Table 3.
Number of internet subscribers in Bangladesh

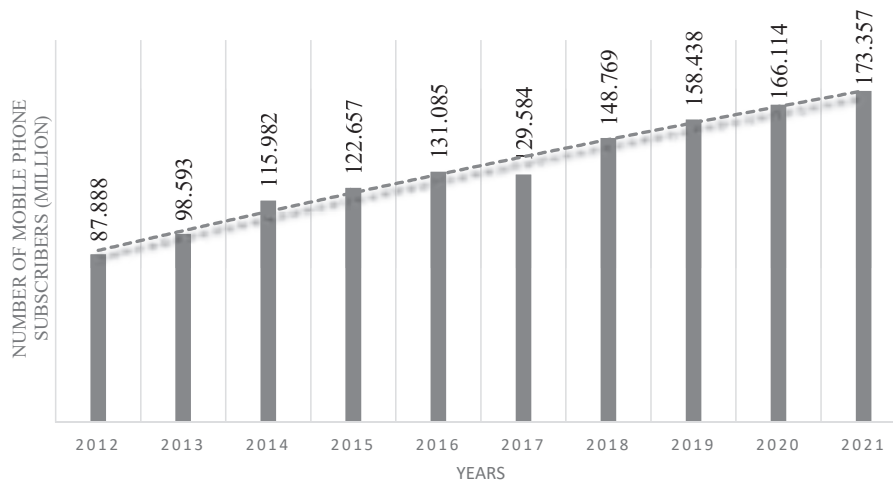
Note(s): *Considering the data of February for each year

Source(s): Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission-BTRC (2021a), website, from February 2015 to February 2021

Flexibilities	Details
Date and time	After enrollment, learners can complete the course according to the course schedule, they can read the learning materials and watch video lectures at any time they want
Distance learning	Learners can access the courses from anywhere (from home, office or any other place), they just need the internet access and a device
The flexibility of device uses, easy access and user-friendliness	Learners can use devices like personal computer, laptop, tab and smartphone (including Android, Apple's iOS or Windows phones). According to the learners, these e-learning platforms are easy to access, and many are user-friendly. After creating a personal account on any e-learning platform, they just need to follow the general instructions to fully complete an online course
Learning pace	Through e-learning, learners can learn at their own pace. They can read and revise as many times as they want within the course period and even discuss with their peers, the course coordinator and the course instructor to clarify confusion or doubts
Flexibility of exam	Learners can participate in the exam at any time according to the course schedule; however, they can also participate in a re-exam if they face any technical problem, or learners can even upon request to the course coordinator
Interactive and interesting course content	E-learning course contents, i.e. video lectures, puzzles, gamification with elements such as points, levels, badges, visual case studies and competitions and recognition, ensure the active participation of the learners. According to the respondents, it helps them to better understand and remember things

Source(s): Interview analysis of Cluster 2.1

Table 4.
Verbatim analysis of the respondents' Cluster 2 on the benefits of e-learning from the learners' perspective



Note(s): This table was generated considering the data of February for each year

Source(s): Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission-BTRC (2021b); Website, from February 2015 to February 2021

Figure 2.
Total number of mobile phone subscribers (million) in Bangladesh from 2012 to 2021

Consequently, these aspects helped the availability and acceptance of the internet through the use of smartphones. Within just eight years from 2012 to 2021, the number of mobile phone subscribers has increased from 87.888 million to 173.357 million.

The increased number of mobile phone subscribers is allowing people to have easy access to the internet and online-based services, and eventually, internet users, as well as online services, are rising constantly. Moreover, as a powerful handheld device, mobile phone smartphones are enabling users to surf the vast sea of the internet and learn new things. Additionally, mobile or smartphones created substantial education opportunities for institutional and corporate learners by easing access to MOOC platforms where learning became convenient, affordable and spontaneous.

Wind of the information age and implementation of IT in every aspect of business activities also shaped HR management ways. As a shift to digitalization became imminent in their affairs, they adopted measures accordingly to cope with shifting tides. As one of the HR executives explained:

Digitalization associated with information technology is the current age's foremost demand and to fulfill this demand we have adapted to up-to-date and creative measures. We even started online training programs and webinars for employees' benefit and skill development. We think online systems are great ways to train a large number of employees in terms of accessibility and cost as well as effectiveness (Respondent Code: H-R06, interview date: July 11, 2020).

When respondents were asked about the merits of digitalization and its opportunities in their productive activities, many of them expressed how they are affiliated with technology and digitalization profoundly, for instance, an employee mentioned:

Digitization or if I should say internet-based services and activities have become a part of our lives. I think digitalization is everywhere now, like scheduling a meeting with Google Meet, chatting with colleagues via Facebook messenger, or reporting to a work-team via WhatsApp groups and even calling a ride via Uber, all things have made life easier and convenient. And yes, online learning methods are the most blessed product of internet and information technology (Respondent Code: N-H06, July 5, 2020).

Using the internet for educational purposes is also becoming very popular among young people in Bangladesh. Most university students have accounts on social networking sites. They browse various open-access websites and video-sharing sites to collect important information and learning materials, which also enhances the foundation of basic knowledge transfer in the international context.

4.3 Online-based learning for employee development

E-learning or online-based learning is more about self-driven learning, where a learner joins in an online course offered by a MOOC provider or online training and go through the learning materials, i.e. interactive online video-based lectures, PowerPoint presentations, books and Word documents, case study-based question-answer sessions, puzzles, instructive games with level-up options, peer review and interaction, online assignments and finally, short quizzes and exams. After successful completion of any e-learning course, the learner receives a certificate. Or, learners get online access from the HR department of the organization or any third party (L&D solution provider) based on the HR department's nomination.

MOOC-based e-learning platforms mainly offer MOOCs designed for unlimited participation via online and open access for all. Many e-learning platforms and MOOC providers are already offering different types of courses worldwide. Some of the most popular platforms include Coursera, edX, Alison, Instructure, FutureLearn, Khan Academy, LinkedIn Learning, Udacity, Udemy, Masterclass, etc. Muktopaath, eshikkha, REPTO, 10 Minute School, Shikkhok Batayon, Sudoksho, BYLCx are some Bangladeshi e-learning platforms (mainly MOOC, but some are providing corporate training solutions too) for open-access online courses.

Interestingly, nowadays companies have also started acknowledging e-learning courses. Experts are also suggesting e-learning for skill development; as a result, the demand for e-learning is increasing. Organizations are trying to overcome the disadvantages of

classroom-based training; therefore, the use of online-based training and e-learning is increasing for employee L&D. E-learning is fun, engaging, interactive and effective; therefore, organizations are now considering e-learning as their best partner for employees' L&D. Big corporate houses, multinational companies, banks and non-bank financial institutions are even implementing their own e-learning platforms and digital content library.

However, recently, the concept of blended learning is getting more popular. Blended learning is a combination of online learning (e-learning, online classes, online assignment quizzes, etc.) and classroom-based training/learning. It is becoming more and more popular among both learners and trainers or facilitators. Blended learning is said to have a more positive impact on effective learning (see Figure 3).

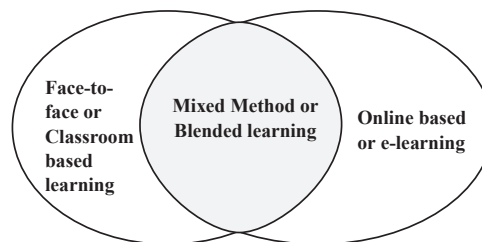
As a mixed learning approach comprising both traditional and e-learning, blended learning is becoming more popular and effective in the corporate learning or HR development sector because of its convenience and practicality. During the pandemic time, organizations relied on e-learning systems, and later on, the application of both traditional and e-learning provided sustainable learning outcomes.

In a situation like the COVID-19 crisis, as organizations are using the technology to stay connected with the employees, clients and key stakeholders, it helped them to immediately shift to the online-based remote working environment, where employees can support the business without any face-to-face interaction. It was also found that among 14 HR personnel, 11 mentioned that organizations are very concerned about the coming days as they need to prepare their workforce ready for the new challenges in upcoming days. As training and learning present prime opportunities to upskill, reskill and expand the knowledge base of the employees, organizations are quickly adapting to these new-age learning methods.

4.4 Emergence and acceptance of e-learning: employer perspective

This pandemic crisis has brought dramatic changes for the management of organizations (De Massis and Rondi, 2020), impacted organizational culture (Spicer, 2020) and transformed the operational strategies in 2020. Organizations around the world had to move toward remote working practices and roster-based duties quickly; these changes may even last in 2021 or following years as well. Organizations have had to transform the daily office and working practices into the home office during the lockdown caused by this COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, L&D processes also experienced radical transformations.

HR division designs and develops L&D solutions for the employees to unlock employees' true potential. To make the work-from-home period productive, most of the organizations are busy with allocating home-based tasks, and HR divisions at the organizations are playing a vital role to accelerate the process. Here are WHYs to think over the necessity of e-learning in the COVID-19 pandemic period. By acknowledging these professional requirements, HR, line managers, divisional heads made the strategic decisions to implement online training that benefited the company and its employees.



Source(s): Authors, Interview Analysis of Cluster 1

Figure 3. Blended learning (the combination of e-learning and traditional classroom-based learning)

4.4.1 Prepare the workforce for “new normal” and post-COVID-19 workplace. COVID-19 situation or the coronavirus pandemic event introduced “new normal” scenarios in daily life as well as business activities. Today, people are on the “Internet,” they are way more informed (Momen *et al.*, 2020) and connected with others now than they used to be earlier (Shahriar *et al.*, 2019). This advancement in the ICT sector essentially helped the organizations to move to the remote work exercises. While employees were instructed to work from home, keeping them in pace with this new normal situation risen by the pandemic event was challenging by the HR management. Online sessions and training programs contributed profoundly in such circumstances as an HR executive dictated:

Pandemic situation brought distressful repercussions in the work environment, though employees were working from home and virtually, they were new to this procedure and they needed proper support and teaching. To keep them productive and motivated we launched several online learning sessions including webinars, training, or coaching programs as well as some open-ended discussion sessions. I believe these approaches helped them to cope well with the “new normal” situation and they adapted to this unique circumstance relatively better (Respondent Code: H-R08, Interview date: August 25, 2020).

Experts are also expecting some permanent, long-term and shift changes in the post-pandemic workplace (Kane *et al.*, 2021; Joly, 2020; Pedersen and Ritter, 2020). Findings indicated that to redesign the workplace for the post-pandemic world, organizations are seeking people with a growth mindset and rethinking HR development framework, training mode, change leadership, team dimension, open communication culture, etc.

Therefore, it is clear that organizations that invest in continuous L&D programs by innovative learning tools in the concurrent new normal era for upskilling, reskilling, multi-skilling and cross-functional skilling of its employees are the ones who will be able to retain their top talent and create future-ready leaders. This habituation by adapting L&D is the best optimization of ongoing uncertainties.

4.4.2 Most convenient mode employee learning and development. Events like pandemics or global outbreaks of deadly diseases are not something that the world faces every now and then. Since most of the organizations and institutions are closed, their activities are carried out through the internet and at home if possible. Considering learning as an important part of the employee life cycle, organizations continued to offer training and different certified courses to their employees online.

One of the respondents from the Cluster 1 mentioned that “Unlike many organizations, those believe that employee training and development is unnecessary during the pandemic, we found it important to engage employees and boost their motivation level. To contain the spread of Coronaviruses disease, we are avoiding offline or physical training but we are regularly arranging In-house training though online” (Respondent Code: H-R06, Interview date: August 25, 2020).

As the COVID-19 pandemic event restricted HR’s ability to initiate physical training and development programs for the employees, HR managers had to rely heavily on the online learning modes. They started training sessions in online software and also encouraged employees toward personal development and learning, for instance, an HR manager from the Cluster 1 narrated:

We could not initiate any physical training or development programs, sessions at the pandemic time when employees were working from home. So, e-learning was the only way, we tried to make the best out of the internet and as employees were familiar with software like Zoom or Google Meet, we started some training sessions over those apps and also held some webinars on regular basis. Some new recruits were also coached by our online training programs. We also recommend and inspired employees to learn more from online MOOC portals. I think online training and learning programs worked effectively for the employees (Respondent Code: H-R012, Interview date: August 30, 2020).

4.4.3 Acceptance of online-based trainings among the employees. The internet has transformed the mode of global learning; e-learning, distance learning, virtual classroom, online

training and MOOCC are some buzzwords that are pronounced very often nowadays. Employees are also used to it, so it became easier for organizations to continue the L&D initiatives through online training.

For the first three months March, April, and May we have gone through an uncertain and unwanted situation. Later on, we planned two in-house online training by using MS Team and Zoom, initially, we thought we might not get the desired participation but interestingly we found that employees are used to online training and e-learning courses. We also supported employees to obtain international certificates from Coursera and edX (Respondent Code: H-R013, Interview date: August 22, 2020).

4.4.4 A tool for employee engagement. The physical and emotional well-being of employees should always be important to employers. Interestingly, 100% of respondents from Cluster 1 and around 89% of respondents from Cluster 2 admitted that they found online-based training programs and e-learning-based capacity-building programs as an effective tool for employee engagement during the pandemic. Respondents from Cluster 1 also confirmed that online training sessions help them to engage all employees in their health and well-being projects.

A respondent from Cluster 1 shared a similar view and said “In response to the pandemic we have initiated work-from-home facilities for most of the employees. Departments like Customer service (CS), Finance, and commercial are fully working from home. Teams like Sales and marketing, Planning, IT, Technical Support are doing roster-based (2 days a week in the office and rest of the days working from home) duties both in factory and Head office. Teams like Production, Maintenance and Logistics and Delivery are doing regular office. We are frequently arranging online and offline training sessions both for the Executives and factory-level workers. Currently, we are more focusing on functional (Prompt customer service, Online Sales and support, etc.) and employee health and safety-related training (i.e., Preventing Corona, Social distancing at workplace and workplace safety, stress management and work-from-home guidelines)” (Respondent Code: H-R04, Interview date: August 9, 2020).

Respondents from the both clusters confirmed that online-based learning sessions, virtual employee engagement initiatives, employee psychical and mental well-being programs essentially helped the employees to achieve mental stability during the lockdowns.

4.5 E-learning as a source of knowledge: employee perspective

E-learning has a huge potential in the digitalization of learning for the local workforce and of the L&D of the employees of the organizations in Bangladesh. Following the footprints of global e-learning platforms, organizations in Bangladesh have come up to enhance the process through distinctive e-learning platforms and creative solutions. The fast growth of the e-learning culture in Bangladesh has been fueled by the spontaneous participation of educators and learners and the quick adaptation of the stakeholders to the e-learning ecosystem.

4.5.1 The alternative source of knowledge. COVID-19 or the coronavirus pandemic event presented the workforce environment with a unique situation. Following the health protocols, most of the employees had to work from home, and it gave them much leisure in some cases. While employees were already engaged with official online activities, this leisure helped them to learn new relevant things. For instance, an employee described her situation like this:

As I had to work from at the time of covid-19, surprisingly I got much free time than before. So, I decided to use this spare time in some productive activities for my career development plan. Outside activities were not available, so I searched online and found many interesting courses in Coursera, edX, Udemy, finally, I ended up enrolling myself in some of the preferred courses (Respondent Code: N-H024, Interview date: October 15, 2020).

Another respondent from Cluster 2.1 mentioned “Online learning has helped me to utilize my time in this pandemic and skill up myself in a more convenient way. Many of us think of training ourselves to cope with the dynamic environment of the current world. But most of the time, we do not do it because of the lack of convenience. However, as this pandemic has forced us to work from home

through online media, it also encouraged us to get involved with several online learning platforms and also give and receive training through video conferencing media" (Respondent Code: N-H21, Interview date: November 1, 2020).

4.5.2 Psychological recreation self-initiated learning. During the coronavirus pandemic time, not only the employee-initiated self-development goals via e-learning measures but also their employers or respective companies assisted them and adopted designated procedures to enhance employees' capabilities through online mediums. For example, an employee's statement reveals that:

The pandemic event is a stressful time but those of us who were blessed with leisure time, we managed to keep ourselves busy with personal development programs or courses available online. I found some free and paid courses or programs available on various websites and YouTube that helped me a lot learn technical and job-related new things as well as honed my work skills. My company also held some webinars (online seminars) and live training programs online which also helped me to learn new things (Respondent Code: N-H028, October 26, 2020).

4.5.3 Affordability due to discount offers from the massive open online course providers during this pandemic. Also, during the pandemic time, to keep learning and education afloat and to make the learning experience smoother, many universities, as well as online learning portals with MOOC facilities, made their courses and programs easily available at low or no cost, which also increased learner's participation in e-learning. For instance, one employee stated:

At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, while I was looking for some online course relevant to my career, I found many courses on renowned online MOOC platforms which were offered at free or discounted prices. So, I enrolled and completed a lot of them, I think this temporary but constructive opportunity really helped me learn many things (Respondent Code: N-H022, Interview date: October 25, 2020).

4.5.4 Core benefits of e-learning and online training. From the learners' perspective, the best part of e-learning is its flexibility. Here is the list of flexibilities that respondents from Cluster 2 have mentioned:

Learners were asked about the other free access platforms that provide learning materials and information free of cost. According to the interview result, respondents said that they learn many things from video-sharing sites like YouTube. One respondent mentioned:

I often go to YouTube to learn many things, like how to use a formula to solve any particular problem in Excel, how to make a better presentation using infographics or how to change my WIFI password but I cannot claim my learning in my CV in any interview board (Respondent Code: N-H06, Interview date: July 13, 2020).

YouTube is considered the largest (Gill *et al.*, 2007) and extremely popular video-sharing site among e-learners. It is a source of huge open- or free access video content for the users; even registered users not only can see and download the videos like other users but can easily upload videos (Ng and Hussain, 2009); the videos can also be shared on other social networking sites. But, these are mainly used for informal learning, though useful but informal.

However, MOOC providers or companies' online platforms provide more methodical and formal learning. Most of the courses on MOOC platforms are created by universities or renowned institutions that also provide formal certificates. Training provided by organizations' e-learning platforms also provides certificates to its employees after successful completion of the courses; therefore, most of them prefer these courses for training as they have better acceptance, which advances one's career.

5. Discussion

The COVID-19 outbreak turned out to be a global pandemic at the beginning of 2020 and dramatically transformed the world within a few months. The changes brought about by this

pandemic are perceived to be lasting for a longer period. In the past, pandemics used to have brought the world to its knees. Today, with the advancement of technology, the world is better equipped to fight a global pandemic.

The findings of the research also suggested that Bangladesh has all the components to turn out to be one of the most potential hubs of e-learning in the days to come, given that the process is already up and running. With some fundamental benefits such as flexibility, distance learning facility, with no time restrictions and pace fitting learning (Alsalmi *et al.*, 2019; Kimathi and Zhang, 2019), e-learning is becoming more and more popular for employee development programs. It has also served as an efficient tool for employee engagement and active monitoring. Even though, as a developing country, Bangladesh faces challenges and impediments from multiple fronts, the country is on the verge of achieving its long-cherished dream of “Vision 2021” by digitalizing the country with widespread and easy internet accessibility, IT implementation in all sectors and adaptation of the latest technology following the global trends. The results of such extensive measures are vividly noticeable throughout the nation, as even in the stressful coronavirus pandemic, public and private, all types of organizations managed to continue their services with the help of internet facilities.

When pandemic measures restricted physical office and training or development programs, organizations improvised and introduced online-based HR development practices. However, later on, online-based learning or training for employees became a part of organizational culture for many institutions as many of their employees reacted positively to such approaches, and the management found online-based learning-training effective in enhancing employee capabilities. So, from mere improvisation to adaptation, e-learning or online-based training and HR development programs introduced new dynamics in the organizational talent development scenario. The transformation or shift of traditional paradigms to virtual or hybrid (both traditional and online methods) systems is not only theoretical now, rather more practically proven as effective. Hence, e-learning and online training and development concepts are providing organizations and their HR managers sustainable opportunities to take steps toward virtual learning-training systems or platforms, and since the outcome is favorable for most organizations, or proven to be effectively fitting with organizational HR development goals, adaptation to such new learning-training standards firmly can yield positive HR development and management returns.

Organizations have initiated online L&D programs to enhance their employees' capabilities; many employees even engaged themselves in their self-development activities through available online courses and programs on various platforms. People also got used to lots of open-source alternative digital learning methods with the advent of e-learning culture fueled by “having to spend lots of free time in digital space due to the pandemic.”

6. Conclusion

To summarize, the development of the e-learning ecosystem in Bangladesh has been an integral part of its successful elevation to the middle-income countries in 2015 and its successful journey toward “Vision 2021,” a new digitally transformed Bangladesh. The significance of e-learning, including online training e-learning courses, cannot be overlooked now, as there are evidential certifications for participation and performance in online learning events now, and many HR personnel also concluded that online learning has shown effective results in their employees' performance as well as skill developments. Since it is hard to estimate how long the pandemic will last and as e-learning has manifested constructive potentiality in business or especially workforce management, and also as the shift toward online systems is becoming eminent day by day, its high time e-learning or online-based distance learning get the limelight of further contemporary business research studies.

The findings of this paper will encourage future researchers to explore new horizons of digitalized, remote and blended learning in the various segments of academia and organizational

context as the e-learning ecosystem shapes in Bangladesh. Grounded on the present paper, future researchers can shed light on the extent to which the infrastructure of Bangladesh is prepared to welcome the emerging demand for e-learning, the strategies and policies of the Government of Bangladesh in mainstreaming e-learning and the involvement of the public and private sector business institutions in capitalizing the digital learning phenomena.

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Further reading

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Can small and medium businesses endure the COVID-19 crisis through strategic philanthropy?

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Abstract

Purpose – Small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) are typically reported to have a limited interest in broader societal concerns across the world. As a result, the purpose of this study is to develop a model of SME's strategic philanthropic performance in light of the societal reactions to the COVID-19 issue, particularly in terms of the intervention of corporate spirituality and the solid regulatory motive behind these.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic mixed review analysis has been executed to analyze the strategic philanthropic performance configuration triggered by the recent COVID-19 crisis, in which over 369 publications are read and reviewed by the authors. It has also established the reliability and validity of literature analysis. Also besides, a short form of qualitative investigation has been used to support the direction of the study.

Findings – Through regulatory adjustments, the study's findings effectively developed a strategic philanthropic performance configuration for SMEs. In this case, the strategic philanthropic convergence of corporate giving, corporate volunteering, corporate foundation and food bank has the potential to help SMEs thrive in the long run. The study also discovers that corporate spirituality might potentially mediate between appropriate regulations and strategic philanthropic performance of SMEs in the context of a supportive external environment.

Research limitations/implications – Prior empirical attempts are subsequently required to inquiry about the proposed conceptualization from different perspectives.

Practical implications – The decision-makers of SMEs, with the efficient implementation of the proposed outline, will use the understanding given for their required actions to develop the competitive advantage in terms of social concerns. On this note, the outcomes of the study can also enhance business differentiation and competitiveness. It can also serve as a strategic guideline for firms to develop organizational values for long-term survival.

Social implications – In the COVID-19 reality, SMEs will contribute to the concerns through philanthropy activities that are better suited for both enhanced social good and greater corporate advantages. The idea can also serve as a basis for SMEs to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first research that conceptualizes the influence of government regulation on the strategic philanthropic performance of SMEs while taking corporate spirituality into account in order to survive the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords CSR, SME, Food bank, Strategic philanthropy, COVID-19

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The worldwide health, economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are becoming more severe day by day. The epidemic has interrupted all business and personal activities across the world. The pandemic is also expected to provide an unprecedented external shock to small- and medium-sized companies (SMEs) (Islam *et al.*, 2021a; Juergensen *et al.*, 2020).

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This paper and the research behind it would not have been possible without the exceptional influence of Ariful Islam's mother Hosna Ara Begum. Her enthusiasm, knowledge, emphatic views, and wisdom have always been an inspiration for Ariful Islam and kept his work on track.



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According to the IMF report, the pandemic would result in a nearly 9% point rise in the failure rate of SMEs (Gourinchas *et al.*, 2020). Despite the fact that SMEs contribute significantly to economic growth, they are frequently the most susceptible to severe public crises (Lu *et al.*, 2020). SMEs, however, play a significant role in the majority of countries, since they promote growth, create jobs and open new markets. This sector accounts for up to 40% of GDP in developing nations and accounts for 70% of all occupational possibilities (World Bank, 2018). According to a World Trade Organization (2016) research, SMEs also account for more than 90% of commercial setups, 60 to 70% of employment and 55% of GDP in advanced nations. Furthermore, SMEs are well-known for their lack of resources, which limits their ability to fulfill their social obligations (Anwar and Clauß, 2021). However, given the importance of SMEs in economic growth, it is becoming increasingly impossible to disregard the latter in socially important issues or concerns (Larrán Jorge *et al.*, 2016). Interestingly, the pandemic has compelled SMEs to develop a strategic competitiveness landscape to survive the crisis and protect stakeholders such as employees, owners, communities, suppliers and customers in terms of social obligations (Islam *et al.*, 2021b; Mahmud *et al.*, 2021; Tesfaye and Lundström, 2021).

As the business model evolved (Carroll *et al.*, 2012), society modernized, customer pressure increased, regulation acknowledged various demands and rivalry emerged, social performance became a major source of competitive advantage for businesses (Anwar and Clauß, 2021; Frynas, 2015). Companies have understood that corporate social responsibility (CSR) is the key to gaining competitive advantage (Lee *et al.*, 2016), positive reputation (Zhu *et al.*, 2014) and financial success (Cavaco and Crifo, 2014). Surprisingly, rather of implementing CSR in terms of “doing good”, the duty of “avoiding bad” concentrates the conversation on CSR (or “corporate social irresponsibility” (CSI)) on problems of insurance and prevention (Lin-Hi and Müller, 2013) rather than “to promote some social good” (von Schnurbein *et al.*, 2016). In this context, we believe that corporate philanthropy may be a valuable strategic component of CSR during this epidemic. Carroll and Shabana (2010) also integrate philanthropy as part of the ethical CSR domain. Although it has been argued that corporate philanthropy is unique to CSR, the relevance of corporate philanthropy for businesses and society should not be overlooked but should be recognized for its economic, motivating, creative and moral values (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2012; von Schnurbein *et al.*, 2016). Firms can align social activities with their own goals, objectives and markets through strategic philanthropy. If SMEs use philanthropic strategies to respond to the COVID-19 problem, it may be a watershed moment that will be remembered for decades.

Many scholars who take a broad view of the neoclassical arguments believe that corporate philanthropic approaches can really improve economic performance (Gautier and Pache, 2015). According to the aforementioned enlightened self-interest approach, executives' primary reason for engaging in corporate philanthropy may thus be maximizing profits. Corporate philanthropy, however, has frequently come under fire for lacking in strategic value (Cha and Rajadhyaksha, 2021). Two characteristics of corporate philanthropy as it has been practiced up to this point have drawn criticism from academics: its low degree of participation and its detachment from the company's primary business. Interestingly, most socially responsible strategies fail because they emphasize the conflicts rather than the connection between business and society (Porter *et al.*, 2006). As a result, CSR and charitable initiatives are not aligned with the company's strategy and do not improve the company's long-term competitiveness or have any significant societal effect. These scholarly criticisms undoubtedly reflect how managers in many businesses struggled to integrate charitable giving into their overall business strategy.

The study of Muller and Whiteman (2009) examines the charitable strategies of Fortune Global 500 companies from North America, Europe and Asia to search for regional trends in three recent disasters: (1) South Asian Tsunami, (2) Hurricane Katrina and the

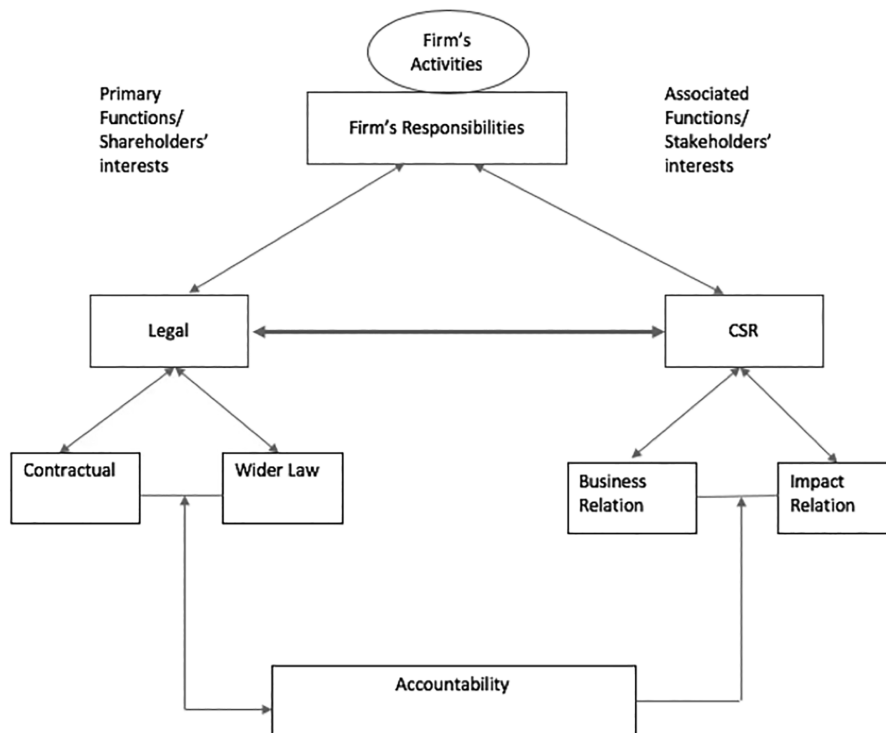
(3) Kashmir earthquake. They detect evidence that a company is more likely to give, both in frequency and volume, if it is located in a disaster-stricken area. In addition, Koehn and Ueng (2010) discover that corporations with restated earnings are more generous in their philanthropic donations in a sample of 384 US firms. Crampton and Patten (2008) also discover that changes in corporate donations following 9/11 are positively and significantly related to a firm's pre-existing short-term profitability. Again, some research studies show that investors reacted badly to Hurricane Katrina's shock, particularly for businesses seen to be socially irresponsible (Muller and Kräussl, 2011). However, because philanthropic strategy is a costly expense and represents a direct outflow of resources (Fombrun *et al.*, 2000), a firm's philanthropic actions are also influenced by its resource availability (Sasse and Trahan, 2007). A crucial stakeholder in this context is government support, which may substantially impact corporate philanthropy activities through business involvement (or regulatory pressure) based on the available resource base (Albareda *et al.*, 2009; Chen *et al.*, 2022). Bertrand *et al.* (2020) stress that businesses might obtain tax breaks through philanthropic initiatives. In addition, Hao *et al.* (2020), Wang and Qian (2011) and Yang and Tang (2020) argue that charitable actions can assist a company in eliciting good stakeholder responses (e.g., investment) and gaining political access.

A growing amount of literature has recently focused on the necessity to regulate socially responsible behavior and the function of legislation (Fassin, 2008; Malesky and Taussig, 2019; Situ *et al.*, 2020). However, because there is no agreement on the nature of the duties that corporations have under the present CSR models, imposing regulations is fraught with difficulties. Scholars have been compelled to investigate the relationship between law and CSR because of the rise in the number of negative externalities associated with business operations and the limited role that voluntary approaches to CSR have played in alleviating them (Okoye, 2016). Philanthropic components have significantly reduced the potential for adopting regulation within CSR in this approach. They may present chances for businesses to take advantage of such charitable gifts to later cause additional harm by circumventing CSR commitments (Luo *et al.*, 2018). Through such charitable giving, businesses might assert that their CSR responsibilities have been met while failing to fully address the urgent issues. In this situation, the two sets of obligations that inherently go along with a function are legal and moral.

Interestingly, several studies support the concept that, rather than jeopardizing firms' survival during a crisis, socially responsible practices may potentially provide an opportunity for decision-makers to achieve growth for their businesses (Bocquet *et al.*, 2017; Islam *et al.*, 2021b; Yelkikalan and Köse, 2012). In this respect, the value generated in philanthropic activities cannot only mitigate the negative economic impact of the crisis on a short-term basis but may also contribute to product or service differentiation and to strengthening relationships with stakeholders, especially customers (Arco-Castro *et al.*, 2020), which in turn sustain long term profitability (Karaimrahimoglu, 2010). In fact, philanthropic initiatives to prevent the local business setting from degrading can favorably affect the competitiveness of firms in the long term. There is considerable evidence that SMEs are using beneficial chances to effectively manage their resources for social performance (Gautier and Pache, 2015; Memon *et al.*, 2020). This is particularly essential in the context of the COVID-19 for the intervention of holistic personal values or psychological aspects of SME's decision-makers since all people do not share the same positive mentality in participating in social activities (Anwar and Clauß, 2021; Carroll, 2021; Zawawi and Abd Wahab, 2019). The relationship between decision-makers' spirituality and philanthropy here seems inherent as spiritual values might affect one's outlook on social commitments (Rahmawati *et al.*, 2019). Zsolnai (2015) also emphasizes that corporate ethics need a spiritual base because spirituality connected to a strong character of social good and the public good is a practice of value

management with a strong feeling of social responsibility. *The direction may serve as a foundation to connect accountability with responsibility* (see Figure 1).

In response to the preceding arguments, we anticipate that a suitable regulatory structure strengthens holistic incentives and, as a result, can lead strategic philanthropic performance of SMEs in surviving the current crisis through the negotiation of corporate spirituality. Tamvada's (2020) study establishes the ground for our understanding that his framework provides a platform for consistent development of legislation across different nations, which may lead to the successful discharge of social obligations. According to the study, moral or ethical obligations are interwoven with legal responsibilities connected with the execution of fundamental activities by a firm. While the current literature on CSR has highlighted the necessity for an appropriate regulatory framework (e.g., Boodoo, 2020; Kinderman, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2018), few studies have offered an explicit and direct investigation of the relationship between regulation and strategic forms of corporate philanthropy (Jain *et al.*, 2021). Despite this, the influence of corporate spirituality of managers and owners as it relates to philanthropic activities is frequently overlooked. Perhaps no study has yet focused on corporate spirituality in the social obligations of SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the limitations, this article sets the research focus on how suitable regulation from the government can assist SMEs in achieving corporate spirituality-driven strategic philanthropic performance to endure the COVID-19 crisis. The study's main goal is to add to the corpus of knowledge about transdisciplinary approaches to the intersection of CSR and strategic management.



Source(s): Tamvada (2020)

Figure 1.
A framework for social
performance
regulation

The next section would examine the study's methodology before going into the concepts of corporate philanthropy, corporate spirituality, government support (regulation) and theoretical underpinnings. In addition, the study will offer a brief analysis of qualitative results to support the predicted configuration. The study query would then be answered using a newly conceptualized model of strategic philanthropic performance, which may serve as a holistic path for SME's to endure the COVID-19 crisis on basis of social obligations.

Methodology

This study used the mixed review analysis approach proposed by Islam *et al.* (2021a). The part on systematic literature review was based on previous comprehensive research in which the authors read and assessed over 500 papers. The overall method followed Hart's (2001) proposed phases for performing an SLR: (1) identifying sources of information, (2) identifying publications and (3) identifying item reviews. The authors also began with a list of key databases, which included WoS (Web of Science), SCOPUS, Emerald, ScienceDirect, Springer, Sage, MDPI, Google Scholar and Wiley Online Library. We were able to generate a comprehensive list of relevant peer-reviewed publications by using a mixed combination of databases. All of the articles were divided into the five categories stated below: (1) essential words; (2) unit of analysis; (3) region of data collection (i.e., contexts or settings); (4) approach (conceptual vs. empirical); and (5) application of theoretical outline. The papers were screened by concentrating on their content relevance by reading their abstracts and, in certain cases, the entire articles. We identified 369 articles that were relevant to our research direction. Following this assessment, we found many pertinent topics, including (1) CSR, (2) business ethics, (3) corporate philanthropy, (4) government assistance, (5) sustainable business, (6) the COVID-19 pandemic and (7) miscellaneous. The literature review was conducted by two researchers, and each stage was addressed before and after to improve inter-rater reliability throughout the literature analysis (Seuring and Müller, 2008). The objective was to attain validity by sampling articles according to accepted criteria (Hart, 2001), and constructs from previously published literature reviews were compared, both inside and beyond the focus of study (Fagerberg *et al.*, 2012; Horte *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, continuing research on this issue has been presented at conferences and seminars, giving other academics the opportunity to give input on work-in-progress.

In addition, a qualitative investigation design was used in conjunction with the purposive judgmental sampling technique to support the direction of our study. The study's intended goal was for 10/12 interview sessions; however, data saturation related to our purpose was achieved so quickly that no new codes were produced from the last few interviews. Nine semi-structured interviews were performed in all. The semi-structured interview technique was used in this case since it was appropriate for gathering observations to help in the study's desired conceptualization. All interview sessions were conducted by Facebook Messenger video chat and lasted around 8–10 min, based on scheduled appointments. The entire operation took only a few weeks to complete. Both online meetings with reflecting members were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were entered into coding and analytic tools. The procedures for conducting interviews, capturing audio and coding activities were all carried out by a single researcher, ensuring optimum familiarity with the collected data. Furthermore, as research support resources, non-governmental organization publications, theses, project documents and documentary films were used. At this stage, the analyzed data have been triangulated in order to improve the validity and reliability of the research process.

Corporate philanthropy

Firms have faced contradictory expectations from the public and shareholders over the last few decades. On the one hand, the public has demanded higher standards of social responsibility from businesses, while shareholders have demanded the maximum return on their investments (Cha *et al.*, 2022). According to Rangan *et al.* (2015), businesses increasingly engage in a broad range of CSR activities, from pure charity to environmental sustainability to the proactive pursuit of shared value. Businesses may try to deliberately adopt charitable giving to balance business goals and strategies with societal responsibilities, which helps to enhance their competitive context—the caliber of the business setting in the regions where they operate (Cha *et al.*, 2022; Godfrey, 2005; Porter and Kramer, 2002). In this case, institutional settings may strengthen corporate philanthropy, enabling businesses to use it strategically and allocate more resources to it as part of their social performance (Mithani, 2017).

At present, there has been a significant amount of scholarly study on corporate philanthropy, which is defined as the “voluntary and unconditional transfers of cash or other assets by corporations for public purposes” (Gautier and Pache, 2015). There are still some uncertainties around the notion of corporate philanthropy (Liket and Simaens, 2015). Chen *et al.*, 2022 strictly define corporate philanthropy as monetary and supply gifts. In practice, corporate philanthropy nowadays consists mostly of strategic donations or charities. In truth, corporate philanthropy refers to a company's contributions to initiatives that benefit the community as a whole (Godfrey, 2005). These charitable activities may be financially beneficial to businesses if corporate philanthropy is handled strategically, which means that managers match philanthropic investments to the firm's commercial objectives (Su and Sauerwald, 2018). Thus, a strategic form of corporate philanthropy is viewed as a useful business action and described as “giving of corporate resources to solve nonbusiness community concerns that also help the firm's strategic position and, eventually, its bottom line” (Saiia *et al.*, 2003, p. 170).

In reality, corporate philanthropy entails resource allocation decisions that may be motivated by managerial self-interest. Surprisingly, the managerial motivations driving corporate philanthropy are obscure, making it difficult to discern genuine managerial intent. While corporate philanthropy may increase the firm's social standing (Gardberg and Fombrun, 2006), it may also feed managers' egos (Cennamo *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, while prior research has suggested that corporate philanthropy generates private returns (Koch, 2012), the majority of the benefits derived from philanthropic investments are intangible, such as goodwill (Surroca *et al.*, 2010), and will only become apparent in the long run (Windsor, 2017).

Corporate philanthropy, according to strategy researchers, may positively add to company value by allowing enterprises to amass resources that are difficult to acquire or develop (ArcoCastro *et al.*, 2020; Barnett, 2007). According to this strategic viewpoint, the business value is produced when corporate philanthropy results in a resource endowment that is desirable, unusual and costly for competitors to duplicate. From this angle, corporate philanthropy may increase company value by supporting organizational goals or improving the firm's competitive setting (Luo *et al.*, 2020; Su and Sauerwald, 2018). This may be the case when philanthropic investment activities generate intangible resources such as business reputation (Williams and Barrett, 2000), consumer trust (Idrees *et al.*, 2021), employee happiness (Bauman and Skitka, 2012) and good stakeholder connections (Surroca *et al.*, 2010; Su and Tsang, 2015).

Dimensions of corporate philanthropy

Corporate philanthropy may be divided into three categories: (1) corporate giving, (2) corporate volunteering and (3) corporate foundations (Gautier and Pache, 2015; von Schnurbein *et al.*, 2016). In this context, corporate giving refers to all types of

donations – both monetary and in-kind – made by the business. According to Hogarth *et al.* (2018), the reasons why businesses contribute to charity include strategic profit maximization, altruistic motivation, political motivation and managerial utility motivation. Corporate volunteering, on the other hand, is described as encouraging and supporting workers' efforts to do community service and activities during working hours (Grant, 2012). It attempts to improve the company's community and employee relations. In addition, corporate foundations are philanthropic organizations founded and mostly supported by for-profit corporations (Pedrini and Minciullo, 2011). These philanthropy approaches, however, are mostly criticized for treating symptoms rather than core causes of societal ills. Based on the critique, a method known as "scientific philanthropy" emerged that was promoted by John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie foundations. Its main concept is to combat societal issues by creating knowledge and performing philanthropic research (von Schnurbein *et al.*, 2016). However, this method has been criticized for overemphasizing theoretical notions that do not account for the complexities of social change processes and cultural differences (Anheier and Leat, 2006).

From another perspective, the COVID-19 epidemic reversed the previous decade's progress toward eradicating hunger in poor countries, and yet an increasing number of people are turning to food banks to get by (Bidisha *et al.*, 2021). In this respect, food bank management may be a major value-creating philanthropy approach for companies to tackle the rising food poverty. We believe that food banks may be envisioned as a business-founded emergency service that assists to individuals in need during times of disaster. There are several scholarly approaches to the notion of food banks. According to Handforth *et al.* (2013), a food bank acts as a collection point for contributions of canned, fresh, frozen goods and beverages. Again, Martins *et al.* (2011) recognize that a food bank is a social solidarity organization that distributes food through a broad variety of non-profit social solidarity organizations that feed low-income individuals. Entities that can collaborate with the firm's food bank initiatives include various food producers, distributors, shopping malls, wholesalers, warehouses, retailers, transportation companies, financial entities, advertising and communication agencies, public institutions and various types of national and international organizations (González-Torre and Coque, 2016).

Corporate spirituality

Spirituality is concerned with logic and views of human existence, community and psychological activity. Indeed, the idea of spirituality provides "a more open viewpoint to seek meaning in oneself, one's life, and one's work" (Rozuel, 2013, p. 685) by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living entities. Spirituality, according to Zare and Beheshtifar (2013), is an expression of our need to find meaning and purpose in our lives, and it is a process of carrying out one's strongly held personal beliefs. In this note, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003a, b) define spirituality in the workplace as a set of organizational values reflected in the culture that encourages employees to experience transcendence through their work, enhancing their sense of being connected to others in a way that gives them a sense of completeness and joy. Spirituality at work is also defined by Dehler and Welsh (2010) as a search for purpose, greater self-knowledge or transcendence to a higher level. In this view, corporate spirituality is essentially anchored by virtuous and optimistic managers who lead to smart decision-making, which is critical to the organization's long-term growth (Zawawi and Abd Wahab, 2019). The directive essentially acknowledges that individuals work with their emotions and spirits as well as their hands. We believe that people can discover a sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of fulfillment when they work with a devoted spirit, which implies the workplace can be a place where people can express their complete or entire self.

There has not been much research in the disciplines of spirituality and CSR, but those that have been done have shown that spirituality and socially responsible business practices interact well (Ghosh and Mukherjee, 2020). Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003a, b) conducted a poll of US businesses to learn more about their views on socially responsible business practices. This study found that individuals' perceptions of whether specific business activities were ethical or not were significantly influenced by their spirituality. However, Kumar and Giri (2020) contend that there are many parallels between ethical business practices and the role of spirituality, which will aid in changing current management discourses and addressing crucial concerns. In this course, the importance of spirituality in directing businesses, leaders, and organizations toward ethical excellence and sustainable ideals is crucial.

Petchsawang and Duchon (2009) highlight five themes in corporate spirituality: connection, compassion, mindfulness, meaningful work and transcendence. Here, connection is feeling a member of the community and being able to identify with the group's common goal. In addition, the idea of compassion is defined as a strong awareness of and sympathy for others, as well as a desire to alleviate their suffering. Mindfulness is a condition of inner awareness in which one is cognizant of one's thoughts and actions in the present moment. Meaningful work, on the other hand, is described as one's perception that his or her work is a major and meaningful aspect of one's life. Furthermore, transcendence denotes a link to a higher power (Petchsawang and Duchon, 2012). However, strategic management academics have looked at the role of spiritual dimensions in fulfilling a firm's social duties to a limited extent, mostly from the standpoint of spiritual leadership and workplace spirituality (Rahmawati *et al.*, 2019). Spiritual beliefs may affect one's perception of the environment and society, thus the connection between spirituality and philanthropy may appear fundamental in this sense. Indeed, corporate spirituality has the capacity to reshape moral standards and, as a result, a company's philanthropy mission.

Government support (regulations)

Governments can design regulatory regimes for businesses that are more or less advantageous. Given this assumption, donations may be utilized by businesses to foster an environment that is conducive to doing business as well as to shield them from increased taxes or trade restrictions (Gautier and Pache, 2015). In fact, Government regulation's influence on companies is a major policy concern for economies all over the world. Regulation, according to the BRTF (2003), is any government measure or intervention aimed at changing the behavior of individuals or groups. It can grant individuals rights (such as equal chances) while also limiting their behavior. In addition, the OECD (1994) defines regulation as "... a system of 'incentives' established by the legislature, government, or public administration that requires or bans individuals' and businesses' activities'. The clear prospect of penalty for noncompliance underpins regulations. All actions or interventions implemented by central and local government agencies that impact business activity are included in these definitions.

Regulations that impact responsible business practices may also differ by industry, with each area subject to its own set of conventions, attitudes and beliefs, as well as, in certain circumstances, specific compliance (Vashchenko, 2017). Companies are likely to participate in socially responsible activities and projects that are in accordance with industrial norms to secure organizational long-term survival (Graafland and Bovenberg, 2020) and societal "license to operate" (Livesey, 2001). An appropriate regulatory structure is widely thought to be required for stable business circumstances and the development of business trust, both of which are beneficial to SME growth (Islam and Abd Wahab, 2021; Jiang and Nie, 2014). Experts think, however, that the regulatory burden's nature may have an impact on SMEs' competitiveness and productivity (Akinboade and Kinfack, 2012). Djankov *et al.* (2003)

and Tamvada (2020) believe that public enforcement through regulation can be a separate technique of control if the government wants to manage companies to achieve specific social obligations. In reality, the government may play an increasing role in supporting and promoting favorable rules for a company's societal duties in areas where private actors and initiatives have historically governed. Nevertheless, according to Lee *et al.* (2012), the most effective method to enhance SMEs' social performance is to implement an adequate regulatory outline. Unfortunately, SMEs appear to be unaware of and uninformed about different rules affecting their social performance (Jamali *et al.*, 2017). The intricacies of regulation may further confound issues and discourage businesses from properly comprehending their ethical duties in times of crisis.

Theoretical underpinning of the study

The Neo-Institutional theory discusses institutional changes that are methodically, uniformly, organized or institutionally produced, resulting in homogenous or similar behaviors or characteristics in an organizational outline (Tina Dacin *et al.*, 2002; Lounsbury and Zhao, 2013). This theory describes how institutional variables influence the process of institutionalization. The neo-institutional approach may also be used to describe the complexity of CSR features by exposing the process of how corporate and community borders are formed (Aggarwal and Jha, 2019; Brammer *et al.*, 2012). This concept, according to Karyawati *et al.* (2020), connects corporate actions, particularly CSR practices, to the values and conventions of the society in which they operate. This link eventually leads to a need for an organization to retain, obtain and recover credibility. In addition, Chiu (2018) highlights that the institutional account of corporate regulation continues to be able to explain regulatory changes, emphasizing the institutional modifications that are required to link the efficacy of corporate regulation to satisfying social duties.

During the mid-1990s, on the other hand, John Elkington attempted to assess sustainability by incorporating a new framework for measuring performance in corporate USA (Slaper and Hall, 2011). The triple bottom line (TBL) paradigm goes beyond standard profit, return on investment and shareholder value measurements to incorporate environmental and social elements. Business ethics and CSR, it is suggested, cannot create a meaningful organizational performance without the TBL as a social grammar that establishes integration of economic, environmental and social elements (Painter-Morland, 2006; Pan *et al.*, 2021). Businesses must take care of social responsibility in this situation to obtain long-term advantages and societal acceptability (Masud *et al.*, 2019). As a result, using the TBL methods, proactive organizational strategic planning and policy enhances a firm's social performance. Later, according to Zawawi and Abd Wahab (2019), an extra component called corporate spirituality should be included in the configuration based on the quadruple bottom line (QBL) idea. The QBL has implications for the creation of sustainable business models by providing corporate spirituality assistance to decision-makers so that they may make smart judgments in their operations while considering environmental, social and economic factors (Islam and Abd Wahab, 2021).

A brief analysis of the interview outcomes

In the demographic part, two of the nine interviewees are female. Several SMEs stakeholders are interviewed, including: (1) CEO or director (two participants), (2) manager (four participants) and (3) senior executive (three participants). Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan are among the nations represented in the interviews. Garments and textiles, e-commerce (IT) and health are among the industries covered. All of the competitors have at least a bachelor's degree, according to their academic credentials. The majority of the people interviewed are

between the ages of 30 and 35. They have all worked in management for at least three years. The majority of them expressed a desire to link business operations with philanthropic ideology when we explained our planned idea of the firm's responsible practices during the COVID-19 issue. Some respondents also believe that the COVID-19 will create local economic uncertainty, pushing local businesses to become more conservative in their resource allocation decisions and reduce charitable spending costs. Our sessions indicate that government assistance and social responsibility context components have a more positive impact on today's company growth for SMEs, whilst spiritual context aspects can drive management effectiveness in charitable actions for the community.

Several SMEs are now actively structuring their social performance-related initiatives, according to our interview findings. Surprisingly, the majority of firms began humanitarian projects to help disadvantaged populations by giving food, clothes, masks, sanitizers, ambulance service and oxygen supply. One respondent also mentions that her firm is one of the sponsors of a local COVID-19 patient isolation unit. In reality, this company collaborates closely with local government officials. However, as compared to others, some of the participants show a strong desire to engage in social activities. Four interviewees strongly feel that their social activities can help them build a favorable reputation and satisfy stakeholder expectations in this pandemic scenario. Corporate philanthropy may serve as a tool for some SME decision-makers to better position themselves within their competitive context (Bruch, 2005).

Our findings, on the other hand, suggest that a firm's philanthropic efforts might be guided by the decision-maker's values, attitude or even spiritual views. Given his own spiritual values, one of our chosen participants has created a charity donation-based crowdfunding site to assist the local community with food supplies. This participant believes that "...those who undertake charity deeds are the first to join Heaven". He describes humanitarian activities and the need to aid as religious responsibilities that all humans, wealthy and poor, must fulfill. The example illustrates how a manager's good values based on spiritual views may drive him to assist the community through charitable actions that go beyond government expectations. We have also seen that when these contribution acts are motivated by one's own holistic values or belief system, they are less likely to be publicized or reported. This makes determining the whole effect of a company's strategic philanthropy in pandemic-affected countries, as well as how to manage or enhance it, challenging.

In addition, majority of participants emphasize that appropriate government backing may motivate firms to enhance their performance and promote socially responsible actions. One of the most efficient methods to address societal problems during this epidemic is for the government and the corporate sector to work together. However, the data also point out that the effectiveness of the partnership is contingent on how the government provides low-interest loans, incentives, pay-check protection programs and tax breaks to socially engage businesses. Obviously, some interviewees believe that voluntary measures might be a means to increase corporate accountability without resorting to additional governmental pressures during the current pandemic. Our findings, however, are somewhat comparable to the outcomes of Rahmawati *et al.* (2019) and Zou *et al.* (2020, 2021).

Proposed conceptual model

For SMEs, social performance has a broad strategic reach. In this context, accountability refers to an obligation and a duty to do what a company is expected to do. However, there have lately been demands to provide regulatory support for businesses' social activities (Kara, 2018; Tamvada, 2020). Skare and Golja (2014) detect that governments that substantially promote social obligations through supportive regulation experience better

economic growth rates. In addition, based on a cross-sectional analysis, Amran and Devi (2008) based on the Malaysian CSR outline suggest that the government's support and commitment to social obligations is likely the most appropriate motivator for firms' responsible business practices. In fact, many businesses have discovered that being socially conscious may increase their competitiveness. With the assistance of the necessary government measures, UK businesses are currently among the leaders in this area when it comes to disclosing their social performance (Elmaghrabi, 2021).

From another angle, while a firm's reputation can be tarnished by violating numerous government rules, the severity of the tarnishment can be greatly mitigated by philanthropic contributions (Williams and Barrett, 2000). Gao and Hafsi (2015) look at the role of government assistance in corporate philanthropy using data from a national survey of Chinese SMEs. The findings demonstrate that government support, in the form of appropriate legislation, boosts SMEs' corporate philanthropy practices (both giving probability and amount). In general, community peers appear to be a clear reference for SMEs and exercise a strong isomorphic impact in regard to government funding. As a result, we present a hypothesis regarding the relationship between government regulation and SME strategic philanthropic performance in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Again, external and organizational contexts may impact corporate spirituality and responsible business practices, while also assisting the corporation in changing dominant values in the economy and society. In this course, the study of Islam and Abd Wahab (2021) demonstrates a clear relationship between government laws and corporate spirituality, resulting in a long-term business configuration.

Rahmawati *et al.*, on the other hand, show that spirituality is important in three aspects of social obligations: (1) as a key element of the broader social and cultural context in order to create a conducive external environment for social performance; (2) to inspire business leaders; and (3) as a complement to sustainable governance. Taking into consideration the entire setting, we try to propose that corporate spirituality may be capable of mediating the link between regulation and strategic philanthropic performance in SMEs (see Figure 2).

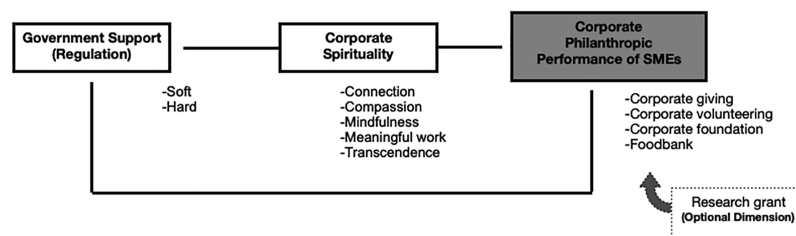


Figure 2.
A strategic
philanthropic
performance model
of SMEs

Source(s): Developed by authors

Theoretical contributions

The idea adds to the growing body of knowledge in the field of corporate philanthropy (Gautier and Pache, 2015). Theoretically, the importance of corporate spirituality in the equation between government assistance and charitable actions of a business is established in this study. Although we cannot anticipate the quantity of philanthropic giving, we do believe that the relationship between rules and strategic corporate philanthropy will only develop under the guidance of owners or managers who have high moral principles. Because it is concerned with efficiently employing existing resources for social duties, management effectiveness founded in corporate spirituality plays an essential role in this situation (Islam *et al.*, 2021b; Sharma *et al.*, 2013). By adjusting the present legal system, the direction also

enhances our understanding of the link between spirituality-focused strategic philanthropy and firm value. In other words, the study emphasizes that successful corporate spirituality development may redirect managerial efforts to strategically deploy charitable funds, which will eventually be reflected in company value. However, the businesses' unique path may fail if they do not establish close links with local governments and other stakeholders.

Our research also challenges the literature's institutional interpretation of the strategic philanthropic performance of a firm based on the QBL. We show how companies might respond to economic uncertainty in the local business environment in response to criticism of philanthropic studies' misunderstanding of "institutional" (Gautier and Pache, 2015, p. 362) and "spiritual" (Rahmawati *et al.*, 2019) factors. Because of the interaction between institutional and organizational variables, each firm's philanthropic actions will be based on its own strategic calculations. Our study provides early evidence on the under-researched philanthropic decision-making processes engaged in social activities during the COVID-19 crisis in this regard.

Practical and social implications

Given the growing concern about the COVID-19 crisis throughout the world, our research has immediate implications for policymakers, senior management and practitioners. The obtained model aids in understanding the relationship between strategic philanthropy and competitive environment in order to determine where firms should focus their social performance. It directs how strategic philanthropy produces value and shows how businesses may have the greatest social and economic effect through their social efforts throughout the crisis. The where and how, as we will see, are mutually reinforcing. The developed approach has the potential to provide a comprehensive form of company differentiation and competitiveness among SMEs.

The COVID-19 crisis has sparked a broad demand in the corporate sector for socially motivated activities (Anwar and Clauß, 2021; Bae *et al.*, 2021). From this perspective, our study serves as a roadmap for businesses to respond to this problem and manage current resources via managerial effectiveness. Consider contributing funds to charities in the firm's name from a central account to guarantee the concern's brand is closely associated with philanthropic efforts, which may boost the firm's reach and reputation. During the COVID-19 crisis, this reputation may aid management in attracting more investment. We also believe that because of their social, relationship-focused conduct, managers with corporate spirituality may do better in the acquisition of external resources (Zawawi and Abd Wahab, 2019). On the other hand, not only does this assist the community, but it also benefits SMEs and their employees. Employee-initiated charity initiatives foster stronger ties and improve employee engagement (Arco-Castro *et al.*, 2020). Employee involvement, in turn, boosts productivity and business outcomes.

SMEs' business success might become more intimately entangled with local institutions and other contextual factors as a result of our conception. And, as manufacturing and marketing become more globalized, context is increasingly essential for a company not just in its own country but also in foreign markets (Sasse and Trahan, 2007). Along with the findings of this study, policymakers will be able to better structure the government's role in promoting social duties inside SMEs as a means of boosting economic growth. We also note that the findings of this study give the beginnings of a roadmap for SMEs' evolving expectations of philanthropic duty in the SDGs era (ElAlfy *et al.*, 2020). So far, our research has also focused on no poverty (SDG-1), excellent health and wellbeing (SDG-3), economic growth (SDG-8), responsible production/consumption (SDG-12) and collaboration (SDG-17), according to the obtained model.

Final thoughts

There is no inherent conflict between enhancing the competitive environment and making a genuine commitment to helping society. Indeed, as we have shown, the more tightly a company's strategic philanthropy is tied to its competitive context, the greater the company's societal impact. In this regard, the research has developed a corporate spirituality-focused strategic philanthropic performance model for SMEs to accomplish company development while taking regulatory adjustments into account. In summary, it has the potential to assist both societies as whole and responsible SMEs in navigating the COVID-19 dilemma. The model's strategic core stresses the concept that, rather than jeopardizing company existence, SMEs' strategic philanthropic performance may actually represent a chance for businesses to move to a better position during a crisis. Furthermore, corporate spirituality at the managerial level promotes the firm's transition into a community through social obligations (Wrenn, 2020). Firms may use proactive methods, such as the strategic form of philanthropy, to restrict COVID-19's spread and reduce the resulting economic instability because businesses cannot survive in a damaged environment. Increased economic uncertainty, on the other hand, may compel SMEs to examine their resource allocation decisions via an economic lens (Islam *et al.*, 2020). During this tough period, certain businesses with limited resources may be more worried about their short-term survival and, as a result, adopt cost-cutting tactics and cut back on social activities.

Moreover, the conception incorporates an institutional viewpoint based on Tilcsik and Marquis' research (2013). With this methodology, the government's resource allocation procedure may fulfill two political goals: (1) to assist communities during COVID-19 through SMEs and (2) to improve SMEs' competitiveness to promote sustainable growth. Strategic philanthropy actions at the firm level might vary depending on political and reputational considerations. Even when altruism is taken into account, corporate philanthropy is projected to rise as the local epidemic spreads. Some firms may have significant incentives to obtain government backing and cultivate political ties that may be translated into future profits, particularly in nations with weak property rights (Gautier and Pache, 2015). It is worth noting that the value of political resources gained through strategic philanthropic activities is higher for businesses that aren't government-owned or politically linked because "gaining political resources is more essential for such businesses" (Wang and Qian, 2011). Given the immense pressures that governments experienced during the epidemic, philanthropy efforts might be seen as assisting governments.

In reality, the extensive literature on a firm's social performance has incorrectly assumed voluntarism and diminished the duties that are otherwise inherently inevitable in the absence of accountability through direct regulation (Tamvada, 2020). In agreement with this viewpoint, we think that regulation is a requirement for the efficient fulfillment of a range of corporate requirements for strategic philanthropy methods, without which both legal and moral commitments have weak grounds. It implies that social obligations and economic objectives are comparable to moral and legal duties that are inextricably connected to one another. However, a lack of direction, clarity and voluntarism may result in the selection of social obligations at random rather than in response to community needs (Sheehy, 2015).

We admit that our study has a number of flaws that should be addressed in future research. Because this is a conceptual research article with little exploratory support (from interviews), no suitable empirical data to generalize any region is obtained. The topic of whether the negative charitable response to SMEs at the provincial level is illogical or not is not addressed. As a result, managers' concern about the pandemic may be reflected in the negative bias in philanthropy during the COVID-19. Another component of the strategic philanthropic performance model that is often ignored is communication tactics. A future study might look into how cross-national differences in institutional characteristics impact

charitable reactions to crisis scenarios at this point. Researchers should also look into the relationship between strategic philanthropy and a firm's sustainable growth.

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A decade later: exploring managerial insights on millennials

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research was to explore managers' perceptions related to the emerging needs, roles, values, responsibilities and commitments of millennials in the multi-generational workplace, and to determine how managers may effectively recognize and use millennial contributions to enhance the organizational culture and infrastructure.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative, narrative inquiry study utilized semi-structured interviews to capture collective insights of managers who lead millennials within multi-generational teams. All researchers used an interview protocol with each participant to maintain integrity. Data analysis included the creation of a code manual which was developed utilizing the first five interviews. The code manual included definitions, descriptions and exemplar text and was then used to code all remaining interviews.

Findings – Data are presented through three key areas of exploration: The contributions of millennials in multi-generational workplaces, the evolution of managerial views of millennials and the tactics managers use for millennial management in multi-generational teams.

Originality/value – Scholarly literature has clearly presented perceived qualities millennials bring to the workplace, including poor communication, advanced technology skills, overconfidence, and a need for work–life balance. This study seeks to provide an understanding of the generation, through the lens of their managers.

Keywords Diversity, Millennials, Transformational leadership, Multi-generational workplace, Organizational culture

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Within today's contemporary workforce, employees represent four to five generations, with the millennial generation (those born between 1981 and 1996) now representing the largest group in the United States (US) workforce (Soman, 2022). Upon their entry into the workforce, millennials were quickly portrayed as “the entitled generation” and, although they were hailed for being highly skilled at navigating technology and dominating social media, they were also pegged as difficult and self-centered (Greenwell and Mansell, 2021). While assorted studies have focused squarely on the millennial population as they navigate the variations of work within these fields, little research examines managing the performance and integration of this generation, including an overall examination of multi-generational workforces, through the lens of managers of these unique teams (Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Volini *et al.*, 2020).

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study was to explore managers' perceptions related to the emerging needs, roles, values, responsibilities and commitments of millennials in the multi-generational workplace, and to determine how managers may effectively recognize and use millennial contributions to enhance their organizational cultures. The primary questions explored within this research include (1) how have



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managerial views of millennials in the workplace evolved over the last decade? And (2) through the lens of managers, what value have millennials contributed to multi-generational workplaces in the last decade? Within the exploration of these two primary questions, researchers sought to discover more of the thoughts and narratives of managers responsible for leading multi-generational teams containing millennial workers. This study also includes managerial insights surrounding this generation as they relate to leading millennials, supporting collaboration within multi-generational working groups, and recommended practices for retaining and motivating workers from this generation.

Literature review

Within today's contemporary workforce, managers are unclear of and sometimes unresponsive to the emerging needs of multiple generations in the workplace due to a lack of information about how to effectively lead and develop these workers (Greenwell and Mansell, 2021; Ng and Perry, 2016). However, since their entry into the workforce over a decade ago, millennials have commanded the attention of managers, as many speculated how this generation would perform in the workplace (Ferri-Reed, 2014). Managers sometimes struggle to fully incorporate the various generational differences and mindsets within the work setting (Durocher *et al.*, 2016). A small minority of researchers espouse there are little to no impacts to workplaces arising from generational differences in the workforce; however, most researchers agree there are notable impacts found in multi-generational workplaces and generationally diverse working groups (Constanza and Finkelstein, 2015; Van Rossem, 2019). Moreover, as millennials currently reign as the largest generation represented in the workforce, research suggests managers still do not effectively utilize, totally understand and recognize the contributions of millennials in the workplace and the long-term impact this generation has on the organizational growth and culture (Baker-Rosa and Hastings, 2018; Dimock, 2019; Ferri-Reed, 2014; Mencl and Lester, 2014).

A noted benefit of millennials' entering into the workforce was the expansion of the labor pool from which managers selected skilled and talented employees to replace Baby Boomers who are retiring or aging out of the workforce (Dimock, 2019; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Constanza and Finkelstein (2015) contend there is "little solid empirical evidence supporting the existence of generationally based differences" in the workforce (p. 321). However, Graen and Grace (2015) propose a counter-narrative, by proposing that multi-generational teams create opportunities to implement "new talent strategies" (p. 395) and, when specifically referencing the millennial generation, noting that their entry into the workforce can be beneficial to the workforce. Diesing (2016) contends that to remain in a position of competitiveness, organizational managers need to invest in developing enduring relationships with millennial employees, endeavoring to promote comprehensive work-life balance and team-based approaches to problem-solving; all efforts to engage and stimulate the millennial employees and address their expectations. Managerial perceptions and processes are beginning to acknowledge foundational studies addressing the millennials in the workplace and how they interact within a multiple generation workforce (Baker-Rosa and Hastings, 2018; Ng and Perry, 2016). PricewaterhouseCoopers studies (2008, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016) represented some of the largest global generational research ever conducted on millennial workers. These studies validate additional research on what millennials want in the workplace and could be utilized by managers to understand and support their development within organizations. Graen and Grace (2015) recommend options for reframing previous studies in the context of designing "new talent strategies" (p. 404).

Millennials are the innate progression to replacing the retiring Baby Boomers, and managers need to know how to best capitalize on their attributes and lead them effectively in the changing workforce (Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Volini *et al.*, 2020). Through their study, Ng and Perry (2016) note the

need for a comprehensive review, understanding and interpretation of the millennials' professional career explorations and expectations. These components also help managers respond to the millennials' personal priorities, formulate unique career opportunities, and create productive work settings with a stronger propensity to attract, engage and retain millennial workers (Grotkamp *et al.*, 2020; McNally, 2017; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2016). Acknowledging and responding to the differences in generations in the workplace may enhance the perspectives of managers and their understandings of millennial workers and how to develop them to meet organizational objectives (Hoffman, 2018; Volini *et al.*, 2020; Wood, 2019). As an example, in their study on developing millennials in the workplace, Giambatista *et al.* (2017) noted one challenge of having millennials in the workforce could be the excessive amount of time supervisors may need to direct toward leading millennials. However, they also clearly acknowledged that supervisors should recognize the benefits of the technological savviness and adaptability found within this generation, as well.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2008, 2011, 2013) suggested that globalism, technology and sociopolitical and demographic changes would influence the way businesses operate in the future; as a part of this revelation, millennial employees would be the newest source of talent to recruit and develop to meet the needs of a global workforce in most organizations. Notably, the millennial employees are the first group of workers to enter the workplace embracing technological advances, heightened globalization perspectives, and increased awareness of sociopolitical and demographic changes far exceeding any other generation of employees (Jirasevijinda, 2018; Knouse, 2011; Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Wood, 2019). This knowledge enhances their adaptability to changes influencing organizational growth (Hoffman, 2018). These studies concluded millennial employees' personal and professional development and work-life balance motivators and found that endeavors are more important than motivators related to financial rewards and compensations (Kuron *et al.*, 2015; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2011). They also suggest there is a significant gap between millennial employees' wants and expectations as it relates to their career and work experiences in their organizations.

Numerous studies explored the extent to which managers understand and respond to these wants and expectations and those of multiple generations within the workforce (Gratton, 2011; Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Weldy, 2020). Cravens *et al.* (2015) surmised from their study, organizational commitment and workplace culture are each positively associated with job satisfaction, the employee's self-assessment of performance and intention of remaining with the employer. Each generation's results are differed by age group and length of employment. Knapp (2017) and McNally (2017) further note, to successfully integrate millennials into today's workforce, all generations must cooperate with one another to promote organizational growth and sustainability and to add value to the workplace.

Cennamo and Gardner (2008) concluded in their research that managers need to understand the differences and similarities between generational groups within the workplace. As a result of their comprehensive as well as renewed understanding of millennial workers, specialists and generalists, which include human resources staffing, attorneys, training specialists, pension administrators, psychologists, managers and key decision makers can further develop policies, procedures and processes that enhance communication, improve employee satisfaction, inspire commitment, promote retention, increase organizational knowledge management through interpretation and integration, and increase productivity. Managers should focus on building a sustainable culture, one in which they can build, grow and maintain a strong organizational culture (Chillakuri and Mogili, 2018; Hoffman, 2018; Ng and Perry, 2016). They further suggested more emphasis should be placed on the commonalities associated with having numerous generations represented in the workforce. Researchers have agreed that managers should also explore the shared values of each generation and their belief systems (Kuron *et al.*, 2015; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2011, 2016; Yogamalar and Samuel, 2016). Understanding similarities of employees across different generations enables managers to establish goals which allow them to lead more effectively (Berisha, 2020).

Stewart *et al.* (2017) espoused the benefits of managing millennial workers by understanding their motivation and priorities which differ from other generational workers. Managers must be creative in assessing the value of millennial employees and in developing strategies to attract and retain them (Busey and Daniels, 2019; McNally, 2017; Ng and Perry, 2016). Cravens *et al.* (2015) and Thompson and Gregory's (2012) research found that organizational commitment and workplace culture were key determinants in millennial employees' job satisfaction, self-assessment and desire to remain with an employer. The research is further supported by Carroll (2020) and Deloitte's (2018, 2020) observations of how managers should collaborate with generational cohorts ranging from traditionalists to Generation Z employees. One of the characteristics of the millennial generation is that they grew up during a time when society was focused on making them feel special and accepted which contributed to the perceptions by older generations that they respond to life and work as if they are entitled (Gausepohl, 2018; Kim, 2018; McNally, 2017). Their exposure to technology, social media and educational opportunities is immense in comparison to previous generations (Deloitte, 2018, 2020; Garcia *et al.*, 2019). They are also more socially adept to diversity and inclusion concepts (Chillakuri and Mogili, 2018). Strong transformative leadership will bring together the strengths of each generation and enhance their value and contributions to businesses and organizations.

Conceptual lens

Transformational leadership theories introduced in the 1970s by James MacGregor Burns provide a framework for understanding the principles of cooperation, ethics and community in addition to focusing on the higher human values presented within an organization. Transformational leadership enhances the motivation, morale and performance of followers through a variety of mechanisms to promote empowerment, personal development and align employees' strengths to their assigned tasks. This theory is often coupled with motivation theories. Members of the organizations can create solid relationships that promote an increased percentage of trust in both the leaders and employees which invariably produce a domino effect of increased intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Members of the organizations are motivated by the task to be performed or the persons they are working for or with. The adaptive nature of these theories promotes serving the greater needs of each generation working within an organization. The more educated the members of the organizations, the more likely these theories will support organizational culture and growth. The managers and employees strive for cultural change (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008, 2011).

The challenges presented in transformational leadership theories may impact the organization's culture when employees opt to go along (conform versus cooperate), to get along. Additionally, a leader's or specific individuals' personality drives the activity and productivity outcomes of the organization. Leaders who are not aware of or exercise transformational practices may also have limited success as transformational leaders. To balance the pros and cons of transformational leadership theories, organizations need to be aware of and capitalize on the skills, talents and abilities of all the employees, realizing more can be accomplished through the collective and cooperative efforts. Ideally, all members of the organization will contribute to decision-making and the goal achievement, highlighting characteristics of the millennial worker (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008, 2011). More importantly, managers must respond appropriately to monitoring, displaying and promoting effective leadership characteristics that can be taught and developed with millennial employees to foster the spirit of cooperation and empowerment. Transformational leadership theories redesign and inspire managerial and employee perceptions, ethics and values, and changes expectations and aspirations of employees (Hetland *et al.*, 2018).

Bass (1985) further developed Burns' (1978) concept of transformational leadership to determine how a leader's influence could be measured and how it could impact employee motivation, productivity and performance. Transformational leaders provide their followers (employees) with an inspiring mission and vision prompting transformation and give them an identity to connect with using his or her idealized influence, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. The transformational leader galvanized employees individually and collectively to create new, unique and innovative ways (both subjective and objective) to challenge the status quo and to purposefully modify the environment to support their beliefs of being successful (Ahmad and Ibrahim, 2015). These activities and characteristics are symbolic of millennial perceptions of the types of leaders they most identify with (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Kaifi *et al.*, 2012). Transformational leaders must be educated, intelligent and empathetic with the ones being led, demonstrating ethical values conducive with an organization's culture, vision and goals (Bass, 1985, 1990).

Four elements of transformational leadership

According to Bass (1985), there are four elements to transformational leadership that leaders illuminate, all of which could also be applied to working with millennial employees:

- (1) Individualized consideration – Represents the degree to which the leader responds to employees' needs, serves as a mentor or coach to the follower, listens to the follower's concerns and needs, gives empathy and support, keeps communication open, places challenges before the followers, respects and celebrates the individual contribution followers can make to the team. The followers express their individual will and aspiration for developing themselves and they are intrinsically motivated to complete their assigned and assumed tasks. Leaders are attentive to the millennial employees' individual personal and professional needs and help them to connect to the larger operational needs of the organization.
- (2) Intellectual stimulation – Represents the degree to which the leader challenges assumptions, takes risks and solicits followers' ideas by stimulating and encouraging creativity in their followers. They nurture and develop people who think independently and ask questions about how to better execute their tasks and pursue additional learning opportunities. These actions promote the concepts of the roles of a shared decision maker and as a team member. This role also enhances the employee's sense of responsibility and accountability.
- (3) Inspirational motivation – Conveys the degree to which the leader illuminates a vision that appeals and inspires followers; speculating positive buy-in by the employees. Leaders and managers inspire motivation and challenge employees with the value of high standards, communicate optimism about future goals and provide meaning for the task at hand. Followers need to have a powerful sense of purpose if they are to be motivated to act and make the visions a reality within the workplace and in their lives. Understanding purpose provides the catalyst that drives individuals and groups forward to meet their objectives. The leader's vision is supported by effective communication skills that portray the vision as understandable, precise, powerful and engaging. The followers are willing to invest more effort in their tasks, and they are encouraged and optimistic about the future and believe in their abilities because they have the support of their leaders.
- (4) Idealized influence – Provides an active role model through employers and managers demonstrating high ethical behavior, instilling pride, gaining respect and trust throughout the organization and with employees. The managers live the life he or she

projects, and the employees observe firsthand the expectations and behaviors of the leaders. Employees begin to internalize and emulate the leader's ideals, beliefs and behaviors. This professional and personal development tool reveals transformational leadership throughout public, private and government working sectors.

The generational theory presented by Strauss and Howe (1991) posits each generation's era results in epochal events that contribute to the creation of the beliefs and values most expressed by people born in that generation. The epochal events relate to historical activities in the social, economic, religious and political climates of periods of time ranging between 20 and 25 years. The illumination of the attributes and characteristics of this research is commonly known and accepted as the generational theory when describing the generational periods. Within the multi-generational workforce, the majority of managers described in this research are responsible for supporting and leading the generations identified within their organizations.

Methodology

Research design

After receiving Institutional Review Board's approval in 2020, this qualitative, narrative inquiry study used semi-structured interviews to capture the experiences and stories of managers and resulting beliefs emerging from leading multi-generational teams. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the research approach because of its ability to examine historical perspectives of how managers came to understand their role in leading multi-generational teams, their interactions with millennial employees, and how they may have behaved in response (Kim, 2016). Barkhuizen (2014) explains narrative inquiry as data collected in the form of stories derived from biographical data or obtained from interviews. Within this process, Riessman (2008) and Kim (2016) note the importance of self-reflection and introspection, prior to sharing stories and historical accounts. The primary questions explored in this research are how have managerial views of millennials in the workplace evolved over the last decade? Also, through the lens of managers, what value have millennials contributed to multi-generational workplaces in the last decade?

Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was adopted to identify managers for the current study (Kim, 2016). Recruitment was conducted through a series of targeted emails to managers connected (directly or indirectly) to three chambers of commerce located in the Northeast and Southwest regions of the US. These three organizations then forwarded recruitment materials for this study to their members. This study also relied on snowball sampling, as qualified participants were asked to refer other potentially qualified participants to the research team. Selected participants were required to have at least 10 years of management experience, at least five years of experience managing multi-generational teams containing millennials, and not be a member of the millennial generation. Of the 22 managers within this study, six represented the Baby Boomer generation and 16 represented Generation X. While we considered limiting this study to focus on managers within only one industry, instead, we decided this initial study should focus more on the management process and we would look for any substantial differences across industries within the data analysis process; this idea supported the inclusion of the snowball sampling procedures to enhance the richness of a larger sampling frame for the data collection and data analysis processes. Participants represented multiple industries with the majority of industries being food, education and government.

Data collection

Data were gathered via a series of semi-structured interviews, using a list of focused interview questions within an interview protocol to maintain data integrity and consistency (Kim, 2016).

These one-hour interviews were conducted through a Zoom video meeting by the three researchers on this research team. Before each interview, participants were given the opportunity to read the consent form, ask any questions, and were required to sign the consent form before the commencement of their interview. In order to maintain the integrity of the data, all researchers used an interview protocol with each participant during the data collection phase of this study. Six demographic questions were asked of the participants and eight research content specific questions included in the interview session. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using *Temi*, an online transcription service. Transcripts were analyzed for any errors. Specific names, locations and other identifying information were coded to protect participants' identities and provide anonymity. Upon completion, participants were provided an opportunity to revisit their statements for accuracy. Within two days, interview transcripts were emailed back to participants for member checking (Birt *et al.*, 2016). Participants were granted seven days to check for transcription accuracy, noting passive consent and needing to respond only if corrections were needed.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using a rigorous thematic analysis. King (2004) noted that thematic analysis is useful in examining different perspectives, highlighting similarities and differences and identifying outlying themes within participant responses. The first step in our data analysis process included the development of a code manual (Saldana, 2015). When using a code manual within data analysis, researchers are tasked with first developing the codebook before commencing with an in-depth analysis of the data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saldana, 2015). Therefore, utilizing the first five interviews, each member of the research team participated in the development of a coding manual that included definitions, descriptions and exemplar text. Within this process, each researcher was tasked with labeling question responses and observed behaviors within each transcript. Once completed, as a team, we discussed each transcript for accuracy and agreement. We continued to create subcategories with corresponding codes for each category and associated phrases and behaviors. This codebook was then used to code all remaining interviews. We conducted subsequent coding at this stage with two researchers coding each interview for reliability (Saldana, 2015). Finally, once all the data were coded and collated, they were organized into the major themes presented within this report (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

Scholarly literature has clearly presented perceived qualities that millennials bring to the workplace, including poor communication, advanced technology skills, overconfidence and a need for work–life balance (Carroll, 2020; Deloitte, 2018, 2020; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2014; Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Volini *et al.*, 2020). Generational changes do require leaders and managers to reflect upon their leadership approach to managing the changes and challenges as each generation brings their values and beliefs to the organization (Ahmad and Ibrahim, 2015; Gausepohl, 2018; Weldy, 2020). Yet, this study seeks to provide an understanding of the generation, through the lens of their managers. As millennials have been represented in the US workforce for over a decade, the managers in this study provided insight into their views of and experiences with leading millennial employees in multi-generational teams. Below, data are presented through three key areas of exploration: The contributions of millennials in multi-generational workplaces, the evolution of managerial views of millennials and the tactics managers use for millennial management in multi-generational teams.

Millennials in the multi-generational workplace

Organizational advancement

Managers in this study all concur that millennials are valuable in organizational efforts to build diverse cadres of employees for the purpose of organizational advancement. Historically, in light of their contributions, many of the beliefs about this generation in the workplace have been overwhelmingly negative. However, several managers highlighted the benefits they observed from managing this generation and the positive benefits to other generations in their organizations, as well. Todd, a human resources manager with 10 years of management experience, discussed the reciprocal impact of having millennials represented on his team:

Millennials bring new and fresh ideas. I think that they are often more motivated and more driven because they are younger and they are chasing betterment of themselves. Their actions also light the fire under my older people who are from other generations because this gives them the needed competition when they might have been stagnant otherwise. And it helps having both generations within the workplace because the older generation can learn from the newer generation and the new generation can learn from the older generation. I can see where the millennial presence has helped all of my employees perform better.

Over three-fourths of participants noted the importance of millennials as a catalyst for organizational change. Similar to Todd, Melissa recognized the importance and value of the millennial presence in her team of communication services professionals:

Although they (millennials) might not have the extreme levels of experience or years of experience that a senior person would, including experience in solving issues and critical thinking, often millennials bring different perspectives and fresh, efficient ways of doing things. This helps the organization, as older workers may not have thought of certain solutions because they have been doing things for so long, the same way. Innovative ideas create the changes we need to survive as a company, so each generation, while new, will likely add value as they enter the workplace.

While some managers referenced lack of acceptance by older generations, they also provided examples of how they stress the importance of a multi-generational workplace to their employees. According to one manager:

I encounter a lot of people who do not like working with the millennials. They think they are headstrong and do not tend to assimilate well into the existing group. However, the benefit of the millennials is to just help with the diversity within the workforce and to show differences in perceptions that individuals have. Therefore, their presence is definitely needed.

Challenging status quo

Most managers noted that millennials are adept with technology and that this talent is beneficial to the organization's procedures and processes. Those in the younger generations exhibit extensive "technical ability" and are able to "process information in a completely different way." A manager in the banking industry summed up:

Millennials use their skills to simplify and improve processes, and they really want to be valued and want to do a good job. Overall, this group's abilities are evident. They learn quickly and can catch on to something and run with it. This group could get things done ten times faster if we just listened and considered more of their suggestions. As a result, procedures and processes may be simplified or expedited. Older workers can understand that just because something occurred or happened or was done a certain way before, it does not mean that it is the best way or the most effective way to do it now, even if it worked before. I appreciate knowing younger workers often think outside the box, bring fresh ideas and challenge how we do some things.

Since this group is adept with technology, they often, for example, spend a lot of time on their cell phones during work hours. Some managers see this as a negative view of their productivity, while others accept that people, regardless of generational group, have different work styles and manage to get things done their way. One manager noted that it is important for him to be “receptive to their having the freedom to function without being micromanaged.”

Millennials know and understand that technology continues to change and evolve, so that their way of doing things may one day be considered as dated and no longer efficient. For example, one manager concluded that “We were remarking about the fact that they (Gen Z) basically would prefer to never use email, particularly personally where in my millennials are also sitting there stating, “What! I have to think about contacting people outside of email!” So, it is imperative that we acknowledge and support the various generational mindsets to harvest the best from each to meet the organizational objectives.

Communication

Multi-generational teams also need to be aware of the generational communications dynamics within the workplace. A few managers noted that “a lot of the things that are happening now that we see or that I see are repeating and younger workers don’t have that historical perspective of the events and behaviors, so it is not as big of a deal to them.” Managers want to capitalize on those types of teachable moments to help the collective members of each generation understand the other as well as the importance of those learning opportunities.

There are times when millennials may lack soft skills, like providing feedback and being accountable for their time or demonstrating empathy. In some situations, one manager stated, “It is just that they are not used to communicating face-to-face. And sometimes they think they hide with and behind the face of the technology, especially in using the cell phone. So, if they can be busy with that, then they do not have to engage face to face.”

It is crucial for managers to help younger multi-generational team members to see exactly where some of their weaknesses are so that they can improve upon, especially in personal face to face, written, and oral communications. In addition, it benefits the entire organization when all members of the team understand as well as recognize organizational boundaries, social boundaries and interpersonal boundaries. Managers note the importance of facilitating the learning process and providing guidance on expected social behaviors to build unity with the teams. A manager in the governmental industry commented:

I have noticed with the millennials that I know [. . .] they may lack soft skills, like providing feedback and being accountable for their time and, these do directly involve my direct report. I also noticed that reporting skills are not wonderful. If a person attends a meeting on my behalf, I don’t get a lot of feedback about what happened at that meeting. I would have to ask a lot of questions of the millennial to get the full overview of the meeting. I continue to teach the importance of listening, capturing details and relaying the same.

Another manager relayed her summary of how millennials communicate in her industry:

Communication in email form seems to be an issue. I have noticed that habitually, he does not seem to read the entire email. He might read the first sentence of the email. I have noticed this also with some of the older generation employees, but I noticed this more often with younger people. It is like you must feed more of the information to more of the younger group. Oftentimes we must go back and forth, maybe two or three times with the same email. I know he sees the content but responds as if it is invisible. I seem to do a lot more hand holding with him and the younger group than I do with other generations in the workplace.

Lack of proactivity

Some of the managers note their millennial employees lack proactivity and require additional direction and prompting to complete their tasking. Yet, one manager has embraced this as a teachable moment, as shared through the following comments:

Millennials are often motivated by purpose. And again, I cannot speak to other businesses. I think it is very easy for us to identify a purpose driven mission. I also find those come across really all the generational groups. So, with millennials, I really have to get them to think about purpose and not just drive to the task as sort of the technology process would ask them. They should do their task as they were trained by the organizational collection process, which is usually a type of technology. So, the challenge with millennials is getting them to think much more broadly.

Another manager expressed concern about the communication style of some millennial team members as follows:

In particular, this is not someone who has an attitude, mind you. This is someone who was very personable. He's very friendly [...] he just doesn't talk that much. He does not give a lot of information about the details of a topic. I have found that he and other millennials within our setting may not be the most proactive. Instead, they tend to wait for others to point out what needs to be done. Then they will respond. But there is not a lot of being the first to lead a project.

One manager felt that communication with millennials is different in a variety of ways and stated that in their development from childhood to adulthood, millennials have been taught and shown what to do rather than being made to figure things out for themselves. This manager outlined the challenges that arise when employees fail to interact in a proactive manner to maintain productivity in the workplace. Of particular concern was the manager's need to keep them (the entire team) busy because, if they are not busy with work-related tasks, they tend to get into other things that are not as important as completing their assigned tasks. Therefore, it was noted that productive engagement must be closely monitored, and managers need to consider creative strategies that foster continuous engagement in the work at hand.

The evolution of managerial views of millennials

Upon entry into the US workforce, millennials were subjected to various stereotypes about their generation, including being lazy, self-absorbed and compulsive job hoppers (Greenwell and Mansell, 2021). Within interviews with study participants, while some managers noted the presence of these negative beliefs, they also questioned the fairness and accuracy of these beliefs. For example, Michael, noted the existence of long-standing biases about millennials, both within the workplace and collective society:

Everyone has likely heard about how difficult millennials are [...]. Whether it is on the news, in social media, or the job, having millennials is often viewed as a bad thing. But I have difficult older workers just like I have difficult younger workers. With 20 years of management experience, I think we are trying to unfairly ascribe negative attributes to this generation without the acknowledgement that all within a generation are not the same.

Surprisingly, most managers discussed some level of mindfulness of their own beliefs about millennials. Within her interview, Lisa, a manager within a technology firm, provides an example of how managers begin to challenge their own beliefs about the millennial generation and those they manage:

This might be an age thing [...]. Millennials tend to feel that they know more than anyone else and that is not restricted to any particular area or subject. They seem to be having an aversion to advice and recommendations. For instance, they do not like to be told how to go about doing something even if they have never done that thing before. The good thing about this is that my millennials actually do take my advice. Like my direct report actually does take my advice, even though he appears to be sort of lost when we are going through the process of the explanation. Maybe that is my own issue and it is easier to rely on what I have heard about them than to try and figure them out. I guess I never thought about it until now.

While Lisa rests in the beginning stages of individual mindfulness, most managers displayed aversion to the practice of stereotyping this generation and noted numerous examples which

support the existence of supportive views of millennials in the workforce. As one manager noted:

I feel bad for them (Millennials). As a manager, it is like you are feeling that you have to defend them against the stereotypes [...]. I completely understand that feeling. So, I find myself constantly affirming, "You are who you are. You are awesome." I feel like they are always pushing up against this stereotyping and they want to say, "I am not that way." Yet, we choose to see what we want to [...]. I think managers have to make the effort to understand the people they are directly managing, so they can really understand their work ethics, their beliefs [...] what makes them tick. Because, if you do not understand that, then how can you really manage somebody the proper way?

Tactics managers use in managing millennials within multi-generational teams

Managerial flexibility

Flexibility encompasses not only processes, but workplace and communication style preferences. For example, managers find that it is wise "to give workers a lot of leeway to do things in a way that they like to do them and not to be very dictatorial about the way I want things done. As long as the job gets done right, they can take different routes to get it done." One manager commented on his ability to manage the millennials' impact on the organization, "In many cases, millennials don't want to just sit in their office. I find a lot of millennials will go to a coffee shop and work . . . millennials often prefer for me to send a text and send an email as opposed to coming up and doing a person-to-person conversation." Within interviews, the majority of managers noted a difference in their expectations of their employees and the way some millennials perform within their positions. For example, many managers noted that millennials are more relaxed in the way they perform in the workplace and one manager specifically noted a personal struggle to adopt a more relaxed leadership style. Another noted that "Millennials get on the computer at nine, ten at night to finish the work that they didn't finish during the day. As a manager, it was hard to accept this . . . But I am learning to adapt my thinking to this new way of working."

Several managers shared their tactics and concepts of flexibility and how they respond to the millennials in the multi-generational workplace. One manager noted his surprise when, in an interview, a millennial applicant vocalized that her "non-negotiable" was having the ability to work from home on certain days. He also noted that, whereas this demand would have been an immediate deal breaker only a few decades ago, in the case of millennials, he sees where there is a higher level of expectation that an organization will be willing and able to negotiate the terms of work.

Another manager offered the following insight on how she remains flexible when managing millennials:

I give the millennials, as well as our entire multi-generational team, a lot of leeway to do things in a way that they like to do them and not to be very dictatorial about the way I want things done. You know, they understand what the end prize is and what we are trying to get to. As long as they feel comfortable and confident in getting there, I am fine with their methodology. Overall, I assume that they have got it unless they tell me they do not have it or unless the work productivity suffers [...]. They tend to like to do things independently and have the autonomy to do things in a way that makes the most sense to them versus following lots of instructions. I am comfortable with that.

Additional managerial support

Managers need to approach and respond to each generation's uniqueness to the workplace. Managerial support varies by organization. Specifically, managers noted that families are particularly important to millennials. Including comments and asking about the welfare of

their family is important to the employees' progress and productivity. One manager commented that he has weekly meetings where he and the employee begin talking about issues in the workplace, what the employee is doing personally in terms of his or her personal development and they always conclude their meeting talking about the employee's family. This has helped to build trust and relationships throughout the organization. Not all managers take this approach; however, some within this study noted the importance of implementing an integrated approach to managing millennials and note a need to provide consistent feedback and guidance to many of the millennials they manage:

I tend to approach (millennial employee) a little bit differently than I approach people in my age group [...] I allow him to believe he is making the decisions on his own at times. I tend to lead him to a decision through some coaching or mentoring during the conversation [...] I might say, what do you think about how he or she approached that situation so that I can help him to see that maybe it was not the best approach [...]. While I may not do this with others, I have noticed he receives this approach better.

Millennial retention was also noted as a persevering concern of managers within this study. Many spoke of their beliefs that millennials were not loyal to their organizations and would eventually leave if they became bored with the work or did not see opportunities for rapid advancement. One manager discussed a change in his level of flexibility in order to retain millennial employees in the workplace:

We have had to make some quick decisions to support our millennials [...] I think it has been a little bit of a balancing act of giving them what they need versus what we want them to have. Some of the millennials wanted a quick promotion along with more responsibility or more autonomy. My personal response to this is moving people too quickly basically set them up for failure. Based on my observations, I do not really think that they are ready for the role that they think they are ready for, and I do not think they will succeed. We have created training and leadership programs for those who are eager to move up quickly to address developing those skills. We strategically plan for their success.

Encouraging creativity

Within the multi-generational workplace, the majority of managers within this study reflected upon the importance of providing millennials with a space to think, grow, be creative, and be themselves. Managers help to create an environment where they feel the contributions of the millennials within the organization also benefits the millennials. They capitalize on transforming the organization through their creative works and connecting them with members of each generational group. That means having a mindset of growth in each generation represented in the workplace. Not every organization of managers is able to do this because of their organizational culture and the type of work they perform. For those businesses that are open to change and transform the culture, managers appreciate being change agents and allowing their workforce to evolve. The generations glean from each other and accept responsibility and accountability for continuing this process of growth.

Discussion and implications

Managers of multi-generational teams understand that it is important to honor all generations and have them work together for the overall good of the organization. Transformational leaders must intentionally take the initiative to provide opportunities for growth to employees by first determining how their needs align with the organizations' needs. This may only be established by getting to know their employees and developing work relationships that are authentic. Millennials have been viewed through a variety of lenses and various stereotypical behaviors placed upon them. Effective transformational managers approach this generation of workers with optimism and resolve to eliminate barriers so that

the entire organization lean in toward opportunities to learn, grow, and produce new leaders. Nwachukwu *et al.* (2022) recommend managers exhibit flexibility by adjusting work routines, redesigning job descriptions and minimizing disruption to work–life balance. While these adaptations can be time consuming, they are seen as beneficial long-term. These implications align with the literature review, the research design theorists and conceptual framework.

Best practices suggest managers serve as role models for millennials and openly support their endeavors. This includes setting expectations that encourage teamwork and learning from the ground up. Instead of focusing on quick advancement, millennials should focus on “paying their dues.” Managers expressed the importance of how effective and constant communication could help millennials “understand,” rather than to criticize organizational processes or their peers (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008).

Technology opens the doors to engage and involve millennials in updating organizational policies relating to use of the internet and social media (Deloitte, 2018, 2020; Garcia *et al.*, 2019). This may also help them modify these systems, platforms and policies to move the organization forward and enhance their competitiveness as a business. They would help others to learn and increase their technology proficiencies. Some managers stated that appropriately conveying social responsibility within the organization shows how corporate values and culture are aligned with millennials’ personal values and overall social consciousness. This also demonstrates how value is added to each member of the organization. Managers should acknowledge that there may sometimes be unconscious bias from older workers and younger workers toward millennial employees.

The managers contributing to this research recognized the significance of their leadership role and effectively managing a multi-generational workforce. Understanding similarities of employees across different generations enables managers to establish goals which allow them to lead more effectively (Berisha, 2020). This may require them to redesign job descriptions to recognize work–life balance preferences for employees. Many also recognize that they may need to update the employee recognition and feedback process to increase type and frequency to encourage employee engagement and motivation. Organizational growth and personnel development are necessities within the organization. Managers articulated the ongoing need to provide training for both millennials and managers. This will help them highlight the connection between individual contribution and the corporate vision. This enhances the sense of belonging. As the workforce grows, managers are aware that they must continually address and discuss issues of diversity and inclusion in order to support their employees.

Conclusion

The managerial lens over the past decade has explored multiple paths and approaches to embracing the contributions of millennials in the multi-generational workplace. Through the literature review, conceptual framework, narrative inquiry design and managers’ insights, researchers explored managerial perceptions related to the emerging needs, roles, values, responsibilities and commitments of millennials in the multi-generational workplace, and determined how managers may effectively recognize and use millennial contributions to enhance the organizational culture. Two primary questions were explored on how managerial views of millennials in the workplace evolved over the last decade and the managers’ views on the value millennials workers contributed to multi-generational workplaces. The results of this study suggest a level of willingness from many of these managers to adapt their approach to connecting the generations and unifying the organization’s focus on growth and sustainability. This has meant managers dissecting stereotypes of each generation and ushering in strategic activities to support the largest generation within the workforce today. The literature illuminates the unique challenges faced by managers of millennials in a multi-generational workplace through the lens of 22 managers across the US. The conceptual framework of

transformational leadership guided the research. The narrative inquiry study allowed this research team to hear the stories of managers who had varying levels of managerial and leadership experiences to align with the literature and appropriately thematically analyze the data. The researchers were able to effectively weigh the conceptual framework of the transformational leader to the practical needs of the organization and industries represented, resulting in a heightened awareness of managerial views of millennials in the multi-generational workplace. The results are compelling for leaders, add to the existing body of knowledge and present insights into future research opportunities.

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I have to apply this strategy! Understanding the mediating effect of digitalization on strategic orientations and sustainable competitive advantage among small enterprises in Tanzania

Strategic
 orientations
 among
 enterprises

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Abstract

Purpose – The combination of strategic orientation and digitalization for sustainable competitive advantage among small businesses is still not given much attention in the literature. Therefore, this study aims to understand the influence of strategic orientation on sustainable competitive advantage while mediating the relationship with digitalization.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a cross-sectional design. This design helped collect data from 234 small businesses in Arusha city, Tanzania. Since the study used latent variables, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze relationships and conduct confirmatory factor analysis. Through bootstrapping confidence intervals, Hayes's Process was also used to test how digitalization mediates the relationship between strategic orientations and sustainable competitive advantage.

Findings – The strategic orientation attributes that include market orientation, entrepreneurial orientation and learning orientation were positively and significantly related to digitalization. Furthermore, the results on digitalization and sustainable competitive advantage show a significant positive relationship. Finally, digitalization was analyzed to mediate the relationship between strategic orientation, market orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, learning orientation and sustainable competitive advantage. Hence, all hypotheses were supported.

Research limitations/implications – This study adopted a cross-sectional design that helped to capture the quantitative information. In addition, the current study is limited to Tanzania's small businesses; thus, the findings cannot assure generalization of the conclusion to other countries because of the differences in social, cultural and technology across countries.

Originality/value – This study integrates the concepts of strategic orientation from the strategic management discipline and digitalization from a technology perspective. As a result, the study adds new knowledge about combining two aspects and determining whether they add value in terms of providing a sustainable competitive advantage. This knowledge comes from digitalization, which acts as a mediator between strategic orientation dimensions and a sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords Strategic orientation, Market orientation, Entrepreneurial orientation, Learning orientation, Digitalization, Sustainable competitive advantage, Tanzania

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Every manufacturer in the contemporary world is committed to sustainability (Rajak *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the process through which enterprises acquire and retain a sustainability



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has garnered considerable attention in the strategy literature (Amani and Ismail, 2022; Haseeb *et al.*, 2019; Ismail, 2022; Papadas *et al.*, 2019; Raj *et al.*, 2020; Rajak *et al.*, 2022; Yasa *et al.*, 2020). Sustaining a competitive advantage helps enterprises outperform their competitors by producing superior or lower cost products and services, resulting in increased sales or profit margins. As a result, sustainable competitive advantage can be defined as an organization's ability to meet customer needs or provide them with the value they desire from products (Khorsheed *et al.*, 2020). In other words, competitive advantage means outcomes related to activities performed effectively while also utilizing organizational strengths to provide value to customers that its competitors cannot provide (Sadq *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, Kotler and Armstrong (2018) insisted that competitive advantage over competitors is achieved by providing greater consumer value either through lower pricing or by providing additional benefits that justify higher prices.

Various efforts have been made to enhance and sustain small businesses' sustainable competitive advantages, including identifying alternative strategies and competencies and developing skills through training (Arsawan *et al.*, 2022; Eidizadeh *et al.*, 2017). However, regardless of the efforts made, the sustainability of small business competitive advantages, particularly in developing nations, is questionable (Amani, 2022; Kharaishvili *et al.*, 2018; Srnita, 2019). There is still a mismatch between what is delivered in the market and what the customers require. Several challenges are associated with this mismatch. These small enterprises face a genuine technology gap in the broadest sense. As a result, small enterprises generally do not meet sustained competitive edge standards.

Apart from that, small businesses in developing economies lack access to crucial resources like improved production equipment, materials and managerial expertise, as well as barriers to market entry, supplier and buyer strengths, and decision-making accuracy in the face of market competition (Ismail and Changalima, 2022; Lorenzo *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, as competition from items manufactured in the locations where these small businesses operate grows, so does competition from products imported from developed economies whose technology is thought to be superior to that of the emerging country.

Similar to other emerging nations, small businesses in Tanzania have not developed their competitive edge (Kapinga and Montero, 2017). The primary reasons for Tanzanian small enterprises' apparent lack of sustained competitive advantage are their lack of competitiveness, inadequate capital bases, lack of competency among business players and poor technology for commercializing innovative products. Therefore, it is vital to research dynamic issues affecting small businesses to solve today's dynamic business environment's problems and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage. However, most previous research on competitive advantages has focused on normative rather than strategic issues. As a result, the existing viewpoints on sustainable competitive advantage are deficient in dynamic components and are therefore largely suited to a static setting. The significance of strategies for sustainable competitive advantage can be traced back to a resource-based view (RBV). According to the RBV, strategic resources develop firm capabilities that can bring sustainable competitive advantages (Barney, 1991).

However, although prior studies have made significant contributions, the present literature has rarely addressed how various strategic orientations interact with technologies for superior outcomes (Hsu *et al.*, 2014). This existing gap necessitates the development of a strong theoretical framework capable of elucidating the influence of strategic orientations and technological factors in business management to sustain competitive advantages. Therefore, involving digitalization as a mediator of the relationship between strategic orientation and sustainable competitive advantage raises new positive insight about how strategy may be integrated with other technological aspects to produce more beneficial outcomes, such as sustainable competitive advantages. From the growing body of academic research on digital transformation, it is clear that digitalization has a significant impact on all

aspects of a business and can fundamentally alter how a company operates and provides value to its customers (Hinings *et al.*, 2018). This means understanding the relationship between strategic orientation, digitalization and sustainable competitive advantages is critical for providing empirical evidence to support theoretical development.

On a practical level, the fundamental abilities associated with strategic orientation may enable the development of digitalization, resulting in the establishment of new online clients and the prototyping of new business concepts. This new knowledge is not only important to Tanzania and other developing countries but it is also important for the developed countries. This means that while strategic orientation aims to develop organizational cultures that foster entrepreneurial, marketing and learning orientation skills development Krzakiewicz and Cyfert (2019), digitalization goes beyond that by extending practical orientation skills into new ways of thinking about entrepreneurship itself, thereby providing another new way of incorporating technological issues into entrepreneurship theories for sustained competitive advantages.

Hence, the novelty of this study is to analyze the mediation effect of digitalization on the relationship between strategic orientations and sustainable competitive advantage. This objective is governed by three research questions: what is the influence of strategic orientations on the digitalization? What is the influence of digitalization on the sustainable competitive advantage and what is the mediating effect of digitalization on the relationship between strategic orientations and sustainable competitive advantage?

Theoretical review

Competitive advantage is a prominent topic of discussion in the literature on strategic management (Herden, 2020). There is a clear correlation between strategic management strategies and competitive advantage. This relationship is conceptually based on an awareness of the impact of management techniques as vehicles for raising the likelihood of small businesses practicing strategies that increase their chances of defeating their competitors. Various theories in strategic management have been associated with competitive advantages, depending on the needs and factors utilized to study them. This study adopted two dominating perspectives: RBV and knowledge-based view (KBV). The RBV advocates for competitive advantage based on organizations' assets, processes, capabilities, attributes and knowledge (Barney, 1991). If managed strategically and appropriately, these resources can enable a business to develop and implement initiatives that enhance its competitive advantages (Herden, 2020). Normally, the RBV is primarily adopted by the firms for achieving competitive advantage (Mathiyazhagan *et al.*, 2021).

Since empirical evidence confirms that achieving a sustainable competitive advantage is a difficult goal for the majority of small businesses in developing countries, concerning the RBV, this study theoretically postulates that small businesses must simplify this situation through strategic orientation practices that offer several simplified options, such as the adoption of improved equipment and technology, providing experience and intelligence, planning and control. Additionally, adopting a strategic orientation enables small businesses to forecast the potential of available resources in response to internal and external changes in the business environment, including technological advancements such as digitalization as organizational capability, and thus encourages corporate behavior to be more oriented toward sustainable competitive advantages.

Apart from that, according to Grant (1996), one critical premise of the KBV is the fundamental idea of a corporation as a knowledge-integrating entity. The KBV reduces the number of resources required to give enterprises a competitive edge to a single item that satisfies all requisite qualities. Individuals in the organization must integrate and apply their knowledge to achieve a competitive advantage. As the process of integrating and applying

strategic orientations becomes more aligned with the knowledge that is needed, the firm will be able to identify, analyze and solve problems by using additional resources, such as technologies, which can help the firm achieve sustainable competitive advantages more quickly. In general, the KBV provides a reasonable theoretical foundation for investigating how competitive advantage is generated, as it is associated with the successful utilization of complex resources, such as digital concerns. Therefore, capabilities (strategic orientations) provided by the practical application of knowledge can expedite the advancement of technology, resulting in sustainable competitive advantages.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Market orientation and digitalization. Market orientation prioritizes profitable production and the retention of customer value over all other objectives (Ismail, 2021). Market orientation is conceptualized as an organizational action that analyzes consumer behavior and needs and competitor strategies and then disseminates all market analysis data throughout the organization with a coordinated effort, with due consideration for time constraints and profit. One of the key arguments in the literature on market orientation and entrepreneurial innovation is whether the former promotes the latter or merely results in incremental product improvements due to shifting customer preferences. Despite this debate, an increasing body of research demonstrates the favorable relationship between market orientation and business innovation (Lewrick, 2009; Prifti and Alimehmeti, 2017; Zhou *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, these studies argue that adhering to market orientation principles positively improves the magnitude and efficacy of innovation initiatives. Hence, a strong market orientation is critical for the entrepreneur in today's diverse and dynamic digital environment.

According to Hair *et al.* (2012), the more digitally savvy a business becomes, the more information it can access about its customers and competitors and the more tools it has to process that information. On the other hand, nondigital enterprises usually do not have access to this level of information. As a result, if it is available, nonmarket-oriented firms will pass on it. Digital market-oriented businesses are the businesses that their competitors do not watch. This makes them able to analyze abundant information about competitors and customers.

Additionally, digital capabilities enable market-oriented businesses to be obsessed with obtaining, disseminating, evaluating and acting on knowledge. Apart from that, Hair *et al.* (2012) suggested that market orientation is important to a digital venture's success. They added that meeting customer demands is a critical issue for start-up businesses, especially when focusing on digitalization, which offers tremendous opportunities for sensing consumer demands and tracking entrepreneurs' strategies with innovation activities. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that

H1. Market orientation has a significant impact on digitalization.

Entrepreneurial orientation and digitalization. Entrepreneurial orientation is a construct that has been extensively investigated in the realm of entrepreneurship and business innovation (Gupta and Wales, 2017; Shaher and Ali, 2020). According to Anderson *et al.* (2015) and Shaher and Ali (2020), entrepreneurial orientation is a strategic enterprise-level evaluation that sheds light on a company's processes, leadership attitudes and inherently entrepreneurial behaviors. One of the characteristics that the preceding conceptual definition of entrepreneurial orientation shares is an emphasis on innovation creation through different aspects, including digitalization, such as social media, digital platforms, digital users and Internet adoption. Its innovative potential allows the application of novel ideas and elements through ingenuity and trial and error, with a special emphasis on

digitalizing product development, extended services and new procedures (Gupta and Wales, 2017; Shaher and Ali, 2020). Furthermore, as reported by Fan *et al.* (2021), there is a direct positive correlation between entrepreneurial orientation and social media platform use. Their study findings on entrepreneurial orientation, based on the RBV theory, indicated that entrepreneurial orientation is a vital factor for enterprises competing in a digital economy. The more entrepreneurial a business is, the more likely it is to be able to compete digitally in its industry. This is because entrepreneurialism is more open to accepting new technology and responding proactively to changing trends.

Additionally, a study by Dutot and Bergeron (2016) discovered a positive correlation between entrepreneurial orientation and social media use and recommended that businesses be proactive on social media platforms by offering new products to new markets in novel ways to increase customer interaction. A study by Quinton *et al.* (2018) also noted a positive relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and the digital economy and suggested that entrepreneurial orientations create an intangible resource that enables organizations to be uniquely competitive, as entrepreneurial attributes typically define managers' ability to innovate. Also, a study by Niemand *et al.* (2021) revealed a positive relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and digitalization by pointing out that nonentrepreneurial orientation activities delay digitalization, and it would be characterized by a "wait and see" posture with which businesses implement services and online features that have proven to be successful. From this literature review, it can be hypothesized that

H2. Entrepreneurial orientation has a significant impact on digitalization.

Learning orientation and digitalization. Strategy-driven learning orientations present the means on how businesses acquire the skills and competencies required to achieve their business objectives and adjust their operating model or build new strategies to achieve them. A learning orientation imbues an organization with ideas that promote the acquisition, formation, distribution and use of relevant information. A higher degree of learning orientation shows a firm's overall structural learning, which includes the elimination of outmoded processes, grasp of new procedures and standards, and proactive application of new methods to ensure long-term competitive advantage (Meekaewkunchorn *et al.*, 2021). As a result, it encourages an open and inventive culture within the organization and "out of the box" thinking (Meekaewkunchorn *et al.*, 2021). This means that in today's business environments dependent on digitalization, learning orientation has risen to become one of the most important factors in the development of digital platforms that connect businesses with customers through the use of Internet social media applications. Even though there is not much research on the direct link between learning and digitalization, available research studies show that organizational learning helps with the successful implementation of different parts of digitalization.

A study by Gaurav and Indranil (2019) suggested that learning through experimentation enables organizations to obtain market information, which is critical for entrepreneurs when designing flexible business models that respond to market needs. Learning orientation as a viable strategic orientation can be a vital resource in developing an organization's strategy (Chung *et al.*, 2015). Learning develops the capacity to address novel problems and enables innovation-driven economic performance by leveraging digitalization-specific processes such as cloud computing and e-business (Satalkina and Steiner, 2020). That is to say, learning procedures enable an organization to acquire knowledge about the market, its customers and competitors and assimilate and analyze the new market and entrepreneurial information to comprehend the industrial environment (Huang and Wang, 2011).

Apart from that, Nasution *et al.* (2011) emphasized that innovation is mostly the result of the learning orientation components, which they defined as information acquisition, processing, storage and recovery. Additionally, learning orientation is crucial to innovations

such as digitalization, with outcomes varying dependent on the stage of the learning activity. Similarly, a study by Quinton *et al.* (2018) noted that a learning perspective is one of the complementary qualities that might assist businesses in thriving in the digital age. Therefore, it is hypothesized that

H3. Learning orientation has a significant impact on digitalization.

Digitalization and sustainable competitive advantage. Under normal circumstances, digitalization in businesses is associated with increasing a firm's performance. The implication is that advantages presented by digital technology challenge traditional models of sustained competitive advantage (Koch and Windsperger, 2017). Although there are few studies on the influence of digitalization, most of the available studies done using the dimensions of digitalization and competitive advantages have shown a positive relationship with each other. Through digital platforms, businesses can be able to migrate away from traditional practices and conduct business through digital channels such as online marketing, the App Store, electronic transactions and online and smartphone purchases. Hence, digital platforms enhance business success (Qian Qiu and Mok Kim Man, 2021).

A study by Leão and da Silva (2021) has demonstrated a positive relationship between digital transformation and competitiveness among firms, primarily by examining competitive advantage items such as innovation, efficiency, cost reduction and value chains on specialization, governance and upgrading. Most businesses have developed websites in response to digital transformation to gain sustainable competitive advantages, and few new marketing strategies are signed off on without including social media in the mix. In other words, social media has become an important part of any digital strategy in this age of digitization (Magdalena, 2018).

On the other hand, Qian Qiu and Mok Kim Man (2021) suggested that the development of novel digital technologies can positively impact opportunities for new ventures and business transformation and hence enable businesses to keep up with shifting client needs, allowing them to function more efficiently in a competitive business environment that is always changing in reaction to technological breakthroughs for competitive advantage. Ojala *et al.* (2018) further posted that digital platforms enable the hosting of complementary offerings, of which different services given by digital platforms aid in the improvement and expansion of product offerings, which in turn aids in attracting new clients while saving time and effort in the pursuit of competitive advantages.

The digital economy differs from traditional economies in that geographical location no longer confers a competitive advantage and that the use of digital technologies, such as e-commerce platforms, cloud computing, mobile devices, social media, mobile applications, mobile devices and smart contracts, plays the primary role. These dimensions, which constitute digitalization, are important factors in accelerating competitive advantage development. This idea is supported by Nurova and Freze (2021), who stated that digitization is believed to be a critical aspect in building sustainable competitive advantages. Based on this review, it can be hypothesized that

H4. Digitalization has a significant impact on sustainable competitive advantage.

The mediating effect of digitalization on strategic orientations and sustainable competitive advantages

According to Menguc and Auh (2005) and Serafim and Veríssimo (2021), a company's strategic orientation is defined by its strategic direction for instilling the appropriate behaviors that will lead to the company's continuous superior performance. Masa'deh *et al.* (2018) and Storey and Hughes (2013) argue that strategic orientation is critical because it

directs firms to use organizational resources to pursue new market opportunities and exploit existing markets by investing in innovation.

Digitization is one of the most important strategic resources. This is because digitization improves efficiency and consistency, as well as accessibility, cost savings, knowledge sharing and timely response to clients (Magdalena, 2018). Furthermore, strategic orientation is regarded as a critical factor in a company's strategic positioning, particularly when acquiring opportunities such as digital technologies. This is because a company with a strong strategic orientation develops behaviors and attitudes that increase openness to new ideas like digitalization (Arias-Pérez *et al.*, 2020; Quinton *et al.*, 2018).

Under normal circumstances, businesses must anticipate future customer needs in order to create value through innovation (Kandampully, 2002). Therefore, businesses must have multiple strategic orientations that enable them to anticipate marketing behaviors associated with providing customers with superior value. Strategic orientation is the primary strategic apex of a company's efforts to be innovative and proactive (Covin and Slevin, 1989). For instance, Niemand *et al.* (2021) noted that, as digital technologies begin to replace conventional business models, entrepreneurial orientation is presently regarded as one of the most important initiatives for explaining digital technology. According to the study, entrepreneurial orientation is essential for achieving competitive advantages because it provides the means to integrate digitalization benefits into the firm. In addition, according to Davidson and Vaast (2010) and Hervé *et al.* (2020), orientation entails identifying, seizing and transforming value-creating opportunities. Thus, the values created are associated with the use of digital media and other forms of information and communication technology. On the other hand, while strategic orientation provides a solid capacity to perceive, seize and transform digital technology, digitalization is associated with a number of business performance-related benefits. It is possible to make the hypothesis that

- H5. Digitalization mediates the relationship between market orientations and sustainable competitive advantages.
- H6. Digitalization mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial orientations and sustainable competitive advantages.
- H7. Digitalization mediates the relationship between learning orientations and sustainable competitive advantages.

Methodology

Sampling and data collection

This is a cross-sectional study in which respondents were defined as small company owner-managers in Arusha city, Tanzania's northern zone. The study presented 240 structured surveys using the Google Forms platform, distributed to respondents through WhatsApp and Telegram. This study focused on digitalization, which is conducted mostly through digital platforms, so it was vital to identify business owners who use the Internet in their everyday operations. Additionally, the small business was supposed to be present and active on at least one social media network (it should post new content on a social media platform regularly, at least twice per week on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter). In this study, owner-managers were chosen as key respondents because they have the most information about their firm's environment, strategy and competitive advantages (Dutot and Bergeron, 2016). However, the study noted that six questionnaires were returned as invalid due to incorrect data provided by respondents. This process of data collection was done between June and September of 2021. To avoid ethical concerns, participants in this study were instructed to maintain their identity. Table 1 contains information about the respondents.

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	102	43.6
	Male	132	56.4
<i>Total</i>		234	100
Business area	Restaurant	49	20.1
	Service	26	11.1
	Fashion	63	27.8
	Craftsmanship	96	41.0
<i>Total</i>		234	100
Business experience	>21 years	19	8.1
	16–20 years	21	8.9
	11–15 years	30	12.8
	6–10 years	99	42.3
	1–5 years	65	27.1
<i>Total</i>		234	100
Educational level	Postgraduate degree	35	14.9
	Bachelor degree	130	55.5
	Diploma	53	22.6
	Certificate level	16	7
<i>Total</i>		234	100
Number of employees	38–48	14	5.9
	27–37	20	8.5
	16–26	76	32.5
	5–15	124	53.1
<i>Total</i>		234	100
Average capital investment	122–182 m Tshs	21	8.9
	51–121 m Tshs	32	13.7
	5–65 m Tshs	181	77.4
<i>Total</i>		234	100

Table 1.
The characteristics of
respondents

According to the findings in Table 1, the majority of small business owner-managers are males (132, 56.4%), the majority of them operate in the business area of craftsmanship (96, 41%) and the average capital investment is between 5 and 65 m Tanzanian shillings (Tshs), 181 (77.4%). Additionally, the findings suggest that 130 (55.5%) small business owner-managers have a bachelor's degree, indicating that they can combine strategic orientations and digitalization to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage.

Common method variance

In addition, Harman's single factor test was used to ensure that the data were free of common method bias. The presence of common method bias due to the prevalence of self-reported data in social sciences research may pose a major threat to the data's trustworthiness and may affect the study's outcomes (Conway and Lance, 2010). The result indicates that a single factor has a variance of 25.935%, which is less than 50%. So, it is safe to say that there is no common method bias in the data.

Measurement items and data analysis

The study adopted items from previous studies (Table 2) with minor modifications to reflect the size (a small business) and adjust to the Tanzanian context. First, market orientation (MO) was measured by items (MO1–MO7) from Idar *et al.* (2012), Kasim *et al.* (2018) and Pratono *et al.* (2019) while for entrepreneurial orientation (EO), the study adopted items (EO1–EO8) from Basco *et al.* (2020), Liu *et al.* (2002) and Pratono *et al.* (2019). On the other hand, the study

Construct	Items	References
Market orientation (MO)	MO1: My marketing strategy is very dedicated MO2: My customer satisfaction is important MO3: My firm put the hardest effort to know about the market environment MO4: We have a meeting to discuss market trends and developments MO5: It takes us forever to decide how to respond to our competitor's price changes MO6: Advertisement is useful for the growth of my firm MO7: My product offerings are well accepted compared to those of competitors	Idar <i>et al.</i> (2012), Kasim <i>et al.</i> (2018) and Pratono <i>et al.</i> (2019)
Entrepreneurial orientation (EO)	EO1: My firm is often the first business to introduce new products in markets EO2: My firm typically initiates movement to which competitors then respond EO3: My company has often made dramatic changes to products and services EO4: My company typically responds to the actions initiated by competitors EO5: My company engages in investment projects with moderate risk EO6: My firm minimizes the probability of making costly decisions EO7: Relative to our competitors, our company has a higher propensity to take risks EO8: Our company has a higher ability to identify customer needs and wants	Basco <i>et al.</i> (2020), Liu <i>et al.</i> (2002) and Pratono <i>et al.</i> (2019)
Learning orientation (LO)	LO1: We have the managerial competence to absorb new knowledge LO2: We can successfully integrate our existing knowledge with new information LO3: We can learn new knowledge is the key to our competitive advantage LO4: The basic values of this firm include learning as key to improvement LO5: Learning in my firm is seen as necessary to guarantee firm survival LO6: We are not afraid to reflect shared assumptions about our customers	Liu <i>et al.</i> (2002), Pratono <i>et al.</i> (2019) and Wang (2008)
Digitalization (DG)	DG1: We use digital technologies to understand our customers better DG2: We market and sell our products and services through digital channels DG3: We use digital channels to provide customer service DG4: Technology allows us to link customer and operational processes in new ways DG5: We have an integrated view of key operational and customer information DG6: We use analytics to make better operational decisions DG7: We use digital technologies to add value to our existing products and services DG8: We have launched new business model based on digital technologies	Abou-foul <i>et al.</i> (2021)

Table 2.
(continued) Measurement items

Construct	Items	References
Sustainable competitive advantage (CA)	CA1: Our new products respect entrepreneurial social responsibility percepts CA2: Our new products incorporate knowledge of environmental sustainability CA3: Net profit margin of our organization increased CA4: Return on investment of our organization increased CA5: Profitability growth has been outstanding CA6: Profitability has exceeded our competitors CA7: Overall financial performance has exceeded competitors CA8: My firm is superior to its competitors in terms of price and quality of services CA9: My firm can offer high value to customers CA10: My firm reduces the cost of functioning operations	Haseeb <i>et al.</i> (2019), Khorsheed <i>et al.</i> (2020) and Pratono <i>et al.</i> , (2019)

Table 2.

adopted items (LO1–LO6) of learning orientation (LO) from Liu *et al.* (2002), Pratono *et al.* (2019) and Wang (2008), while items for digitalization (DG), the study items (DG1–DG8) were adopted from Abou-foul *et al.* (2021). Finally, the items (CA1–CA10) of sustainable competitive advantage (CA) were adopted from Haseeb *et al.* (2019), Khorsheed *et al.* (2020) and Pratono *et al.* (2019).

Also, this study used structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the relationships of multiple constructs based on hypothesized models. SEM is a multivariate technique that integrates the observed variables (measuring) and unobserved variables (latent) (Ryan, 2020; Smeda *et al.*, 2018). In contrast, other classical linear modeling methods only measure the observed variables. In particular, SEM combines the simultaneous performance of diverse multivariate methods, for instance, factor analysis and regression analysis. On the other hand, this study used the PROCESS Macro mediation test to test the mediation effects of digitalization on the relationship between strategic orientation and sustainable competitive advantage.

Results and discussion

Confirmatory factor analysis and model fit

The findings in Table 3 indicate that all items have factor loadings above 0.5; hence, they were accepted and included in the path analysis (Kline, 2011). Also, the values in Table 4 fall within the threshold, which means that the predicted model fits perfectly.

Validity and reliability

The constructs' average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged between 0.528 and 0.672, whereas the construct reliability values ranged between 0.900 and 0.942. The findings give strong evidence for the presence of convergent validity given that AVE should be larger than or equal to 0.5 and less than construct reliability to demonstrate convergent validity. This suggests that the constructs explain a greater proportion of the variance in the construct indicators than the measurement error. As a result, the confirmatory factor analysis results support convergent validity. On the other hand, the study used Cronbach's alpha to

							Strategic orientations among enterprises
Construct	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	MSV	Construct reliability	
Market orientation (MO)	MO1	0.876	0.745	0.580	0.372	0.905	
	MO2	0.768					
	MO3	0.746					
	MO4	0.813					
	MO5	0.645					
	MO6	0.756					
	MO7	0.704					
Entrepreneurial orientation (EO)	EO1	0.845	0.867	0.672	0.292	0.942	
	EO2	0.685					
	EO3	0.746					
	EO4	0.875					
	EO5	0.765					
	EO6	0.896					
	EO7	0.876					
	EO8	0.846					
Learning orientation (LO)	LO1	0.791	0.786	0.604	0.314	0.900	
	LO2	0.756					
	LO3	0.673					
	LO4	0.634					
	LO5	0.856					
	LO6	0.917					
Digitalization (DG)	DG1	0.785	0.749	0.561	0.384	0.910	
	DG2	0.845					
	DG3	0.685					
	DG4	0.684					
	DG5	0.754					
	DG6	0.684					
	DG7	0.876					
	DG8	0.645					
Sustainable competitive advantage (CA)	CA1	0.603	0.845	0.528	0.384	0.917	
	CA2	0.895					
	CA3	0.764					
	CA4	0.624					
	CA5	0.745					
	CA6	0.709					
	CA7	0.853					
	CA8	0.604					
	CA9	0.761					
	CA10	0.643					

Table 3.
Validity and reliability test

The goodness of fit index	Recommended value	Actual value	Comment
GFI	Close to 1	0.922	Good
AGFI	Close to 1	0.904	Good
NFI	Close to 1	0.901	Good
IFI	Close to 1	0.952	Good
TLI	Close to 1	0.911	Good
CFI	Close to 1	0.952	Good
χ^2/df	$1 \leq \chi^2/df \leq 3$	1.723	Good
RMSEA	$0 \leq RMSEA \leq 0.1$	0.056	Good

Table 4.
The goodness of fit index for the structural model

determine internal consistency. This reliability coefficient shows how much responses to different items in a measure are the same (Kline, 2011). Additionally, construct reliability was employed to determine whether or not the individual items adequately represented their respective constructs. In all cases, a Cronbach's alpha and construct reliability result of 0.7 or higher was taken to mean that the instrument is reliable.

Discriminant validity

The criteria proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) were used. First, the values of AVE must be greater than the values of maximum shared variance (MSV). This criterion was met as presented in Table 5. The second criterion requires the square roots of AVE to be larger than the values of the correlation of inner constructs. This was also met (Table 5). Based on these criteria, Table 5 results show that discriminant validity was reached.

Hypothesis testing

The study engaged in testing five hypotheses, all of which were supported (Table 6). The first hypothesis tested the relationship between MO and DG. The results revealed that MO has a significant positive relationship with DG ($\beta = 0.624, p < 0.001$). Therefore, hypothesis *H1* was supported. This means that any attempt to increase MO will increase DG by a factor of 0.624 (62.4%). The study also found a significant positive relationship between EO and DG ($\beta = 0.556, p < 0.001$). This means the hypothesis *H2* was supported. Hence, improving EO by one unit will increase DG by a factor of 0.556 (55.6%). Apart from that, the findings of this study show that LO significantly influences DG ($\beta = 0.0473, p = 0.004$). Thus, *H3* was supported. This suggests that increasing LO by one unit increases DG by a factor of 0.473 (47.3%). On the other hand, DG was positively and significantly related to CA by ($\beta = 0.684, p = 0.002$), suggesting that *H4* was supported. It further means that when DG is increased by one unit, it increases CA by a factor of 0.684 (68.4%).

Testing of mediation effect

Andrew Hayes' process mediation criteria (Hayes, 2018) were used to assess the mediating effects of digitalization. As shown in Tables 7–9, all three dimensions of strategic orientation were separately tested based on their hypotheses. The bootstrap lower limit confidence

Table 5.
Discriminant validity

Construct	CR	AVE	MSV	DG	MO	EO	LO	CA
DG	0.910	0.561	0.384	<i>0.749</i>				
MO	0.905	0.580	0.372	0.250	<i>0.761</i>			
EO	0.942	0.672	0.292	0.420	0.540	<i>0.820</i>		
LO	0.900	0.604	0.314	0.480	0.520	0.330	<i>0.777</i>	
CA	0.917	0.528	0.384	0.620	0.610	0.340	0.560	<i>0.727</i>

Note(s): Italic diagonal line denotes the square roots of AVE

Table 6.
Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coeff	SE	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Decision
H1	MO → DG	0.624	0.053	11.773	***	Supported
H2	EO → DG	0.556	0.078	7.128	***	Supported
H3	LO → DG	0.473	0.132	3.583	0.004	Supported
H4	DG → CA	0.684	0.119	5.747	0.002	Supported

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$

interval (BootLLCI) and upper limit confidence interval (BootULCI) contained no zeros in the 95% confidence intervals. This justifies that digitalization is a significant mediator of the relationships. Specifically, results in Table 7 indicate that the BootLLCI is 0.2791, and the BootULCI is 0.5039. This means there is no zero value between the upper and lower limit. Hence, *H5* was supported. This means that digitalization mediates the relationship between market orientation and sustainable competitive advantage.

Also, findings in Table 8 show that the BootLLCI is 0.1225 and the BootULCI is 0.3174. This means there are no zero values within the limit; therefore, it can be concluded that digitalization mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and sustainable competitive advantage. Hence, *H6* was supported.

Finally, Table 9 revealed that *H7* was supported. This is because BootLLCI is 0.1195, and BootULCI is 0.2797. This also means there are no zero scores between the limits. Therefore, digitalization was found to mediate the relationship between learning orientation and sustainable competitive advantage.

Relationship	Direct effect	SE	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	LLCI	ULCI
MO → CA	0.3969	0.0614	6.4617	***	0.2758	0.5180
MO → DG	0.3871	0.0673	5.7505	***	0.2544	0.5198
DG → CA	0.3140	0.0783	4.0102	***	0.1288	0.1409
Relationship	Indirect effect		BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	
MO → DG → CA	0.1215		0.0513	0.2791	0.5039	
Note(s): *** <i>p</i> < 0.001						

Table 7.
Process mediation test
for market orientation

Relationship	Direct effect	SE	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	LLCI	ULCI
EO → CA	0.3258	0.0602	5.4098	***	0.2071	0.4446
EO → DG	0.4547	0.0662	6.8637	***	0.3241	0.5852
DG → CA	0.4704	0.0565	8.3275	***	0.3590	0.5817
Relationship	Indirect effect		BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	
MO → DG → CA	0.2139		0.0491	0.1225	0.3174	
Note(s): *** <i>p</i> < 0.001						

Table 8.
Process mediation test
for entrepreneurial
orientation

Relationship	Direct effect	SE	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	LLCI	ULCI
LO → CA	0.4348	0.0798	5.4474	***	0.2775	0.5922
LO → DG	0.8948	0.0405	22.1134	***	0.8150	0.9746
DG → CA	0.1269	0.0345	3.6782	***	0.1200	0.2737
Relationship	Indirect effect		BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	
LO → DG → CA	0.1135		0.0773	0.1195	0.2797	
Note(s): *** <i>p</i> < 0.001						

Table 9.
Process mediation test
for learning orientation

Discussion

This study examines the mediating effect of digitalization on the relationship between strategic orientation and the sustainable competitive advantage among small businesses. Justification for the study is based on current evidence that demonstrates that sustainable competitive advantage among small businesses is still an alarming challenge. If not properly addressed, it may result in a slowdown in performance indicators such as employment, taxation and increasing exit rates among small businesses. The study further argues against the current understanding that small businesses cannot use technologies because of the sector's small scale of operations in terms of capital and informality. Finally, with support from existing empirical studies and two dominant strategic management theories, RBV and KBV, the study establishes a theoretical foundation on the idea that small businesses and entrepreneurs who actively pursue strategic orientations as strategic resources are likely to develop a variety of behaviors that can increase their chances of meeting customer needs and hence improve performance. Aside from that, adopting digitalization as an organizational capability has a number of benefits, such as the ability to use digital technologies to add value to goods and services, market goods and services through digital channels, and adopt technology that allows businesses to connect customers and operational processes in a modern way.

Specifically, the study's findings indicate that market-oriented owner-managers design market strategies based on available digital channels such as the Internet, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram. These digital platforms have evolved into a necessary component of any organization and are no longer the exclusive domain of digital natives. Digital platforms are quickly becoming a competitive necessity and the foundation for creating new value and small businesses that ignore them risk falling behind. However, as a digital platform strategy, market orientation is still a challenging problem for most small businesses. Compared to large businesses with large capital bases, small businesses struggle to transform their activities to penetrate the online market digitally. To address this challenge, most small businesses are now implementing a variety of market orientation strategies, including orienting themselves about new digital changes in the market environment, holding frequent meetings to discuss online market trends and development and focusing on digital advertising as a necessary strategy for staying in touch with customers.

These strategies, which cover the behavioral components of customer orientation, competitor orientation and interfunctional coordination, are now digitalized to increase the visibility of the products and services offered to customers who are widely dispersed; thus, it may be difficult for small businesses to reach a large number of them without digital platforms. The connection between market orientation and digitalization is also documented by Hair *et al.* (2012), who noted that a well-defined market orientation entails outreach to the market. In the digital marketplace, where entrepreneurs of varying motivations and quality abound, the response of the entrepreneur to current market conditions must include attracting the market's attention. They maintain that the visibility provided by digital platforms in the marketplace is at least as critical to distinctiveness and success as a fundamentally strong service or product offering.

Similarly, entrepreneurial orientation characteristics like risk-taking, aggression and proactivity enable the adoption of novel business methods, resulting in the defeat of competitors in the market. Hence, possessing all of these characteristics may assist the firm in adopting technology that enhances its chances of succeeding versus competition. The findings align with Dutot and Bergeron (2016) and Fan *et al.* (2021), who noted that entrepreneurial orientation is a critical component to consider when it comes to businesses competing in the e-commerce business climate. Furthermore, in light of the features of innovativeness, it is projected that firms with higher entrepreneurial tendencies will be more inclined to adopt new technologies, such as social media. According to Fan *et al.* (2021), firms

that adopt new or innovative technologies can do so because of entrepreneurial orientation components such as proactivity, risk-taking and innovativeness.

Additionally, learning orientation is positively related to digitalization. The justification is that learning orientation provides a mental set of minds that enables business owners to evaluate and recalibrate inputs and the outcomes, processes and policies required for adopting technology such as digitalization. So, learning orientation is seen by many as a key part of helping businesses gain a competitive edge and run more efficiently. This concurs with Mantok *et al.* (2019), who said that once businesses realize how important it is to be open to learning, they make sure their employees have access to new information and are encouraged to share their ideas on how to make business processes run more smoothly.

Finally, the findings of this study support the theoretical understanding developed in this study, which is that when enabling environments applied in strategic orientation are created for small businesses, there is a greater likelihood of developing proper digitalization within small businesses, which increases the likelihood of achieving sustainable competitive advantage over the long term. Specifically, the study findings revealed that digitalization is an important mediator between strategic orientation and sustainable competitive advantage. This is because the digitalization created by proper strategic orientation can result in proper technological assets like the Internet and information, which can offer entrepreneurial activity that can transfer an asset, service or major part of the business into digitally characterized items for competitive advantage. From the findings, it is clear that when owner-managers absorb the strategic orientation, they can develop digitalization, which influences them to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Conclusion

The current study is primarily concerned with finding the mediating effect of digitalization on the relationship between strategic orientations and sustainable competitive advantage. The findings of this study conclude that all three strategic orientations used, such as marketing, entrepreneurial and learning orientation, are significant factors for digitalization of business practices. Similarly, it was concluded that digitalization is a significant factor for sustainable competitive advantage. Finally, it was concluded that is a significant mediator of the relationship between strategic orientation and sustainable competitive advantage.

Practical implications

This study is one of few that have looked into the mediating effect of digitalization in the context of strategic orientations and sustainable competitive advantage. The findings indicate that investing in strategies increase the application of digital technologies which further increase the likelihood of achieving a sustainable competitive edge. Essentially, it is understood that customers are eager to continue purchasing products and are resistant to switching intentions if a company develops appropriate strategic actions that ensure the quality of the products and services offered. That is to say, business owner-managers must understand that a more thorough application of strategic orientations would encourage businesses to take advantage of technological opportunities that can contribute to the enhancement of a competitive advantage. To be more specific, the strong link between market orientation and digitalization means that owner-managers need to get better at using digital technologies to figure out what customers want and make products that meet those needs.

Second, businesses must improve their ability to develop entrepreneurial strategies in order to adopt digital technology, which will enable them to produce new products, connect

with customers through digital platforms and exploit opportunities that can help them gain a competitive advantage. In a similar vein, businesses must increase the learning orientation of their employees by designing job tasks that encourage learning practices that are compatible with the current state of digital technology. In general, businesses must capitalize on training related to strategic orientations and digitalization in order for their employees to be able to manage all digitalized business activities and be capable of managing the business. Owner-managers must also recognize that the ability to maintain superior quality necessitates a continuous process of developing and implementing strategies that are compatible with dynamic business environments. Therefore, they must take advantage of skills development programs and training that improve their ability to identify strategic orientations and digital technologies that can help them produce quality products at competitive prices and increase their capacity to deliver high-quality products on time.

Theoretical implication

The findings support the RBV and KBV regarding the important of intangible resources in small businesses context. This is important because studying strategic orientation as strategic resources and digitalization as organizational capability is crucial for decision-making in small business management. Therefore, the study provides a theoretical explanation of the influence of strategic orientations on digitalization. Second, it contributes to the influence of digitalization on the sustainable competitive advantage and the mediating effect of digitalization on the relationship between strategic orientation and sustainable competitive advantage. Apart from that, few studies have demonstrated theoretical contribution using RBV and KBV in explaining strategic resources and organizational capabilities on sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, this study extends the theoretical understanding of these prominent theories by including strategic orientations and digitalization as intangible resources not covered in those theories.

Specifically, the findings of this study add to the limited knowledge on the mediating effects of digitalization on the relationship between market, entrepreneurial and learning orientations and sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, this study gives insights on how small businesses can benefit by digitalization through investing on the strategic orientations. Additionally, by bringing digitalization as the mediator in the relationship, this study contributes to the understanding that strategic orientations can meaningfully impact on the sustainable competitive advantage if related with other mediating factors such as digitalization.

Limitations of the study

Despite the substantial contribution made by this study to the body of knowledge, the following limitations provide a window of opportunity for future research in the same field or other relevant fields. First, a cross-sectional survey that captured the quantitative characteristics of the topic solely was the first step toward a more quantitative approach to the subject. Additionally, this study's respondents were small-business owner-managers who responded to the survey questions based on their perceptions. Also, the current study only looks at small businesses in Tanzania. Because of the different social, cultural and technological settings in other countries, the results cannot be applied to all of them.

Direction for future studies

The following recommendations for future research are made in light of the constraints mentioned above. To begin, a qualitative method is required to paint a lifelike image of the subject under research. Additionally, in future studies, this study will address small business

owner-managers, including employees and other stakeholders. Second, in the same way, it is very important to compare small and large businesses in terms of their strategic orientation and digitalization. Furthermore, future research can examine the role of digitalization as a moderator of the relationship between strategic orientation and long-term competitive advantage in the marketplace. This is due to the fact that small businesses differ in their level of adoption of digitalization. In this way, by concentrating on the low and high levels of digitalization usage among small businesses, future studies can contribute to the knowledge gap on the importance of digitalization on the strengthening of the impact of strategic orientation on competitive advantage by focusing on low and high levels of digitalization usage among small businesses.

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Hope during the COVID-19 lockdown – the role of organization interventions

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to investigate organization interventions experienced by employees during the lockdown for Coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19), and the effect of these organization interventions on hope.

Design/methodology/approach – The respondents for the study were employees in full-time white-collar or professional job positions; they performed their job roles by way of work from home (WFH) in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 lockdown. Structural equation modelling was used to analyse the data.

Findings – Results showed that employees maintained high levels of hope while working from home. The study identified four organization interventions that (a) promote collaborative and coordinated work, (b) promote meaningful goals and a sense of social support, (c) alleviate psychological strain and (d) assist in maintaining physical health. These four organization interventions increased hope during the COVID-19 lockdown while working from home.

Originality/value – The literature calls for research on intervention studies explaining the promotion of hope. The present study was built on the theories of positive organizational behaviour, conservation of resources theory and hope theory. The findings support that these three traditional theories have lasting theoretical resonance in explaining present-day phenomena with unique applications.

Keywords Conservation of resources theory, COVID-19, Hope, Hope theory, Lockdown, Organization interventions, Pandemic, Positive organizational behaviour, Psychological capital, Telecommuting, Work from home, South Asia, Sri Lanka

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Hope enables individuals to plan to meet goals, imagine alternative paths to meet goals and challenge difficult circumstances. The goals can be “anything that individuals desire to get, do, be, experience, or create” (Peterson and Byron, 2008, p. 787). Hence, hope is important and valuable to be maintained by individuals. This is especially true in times of difficulty. The world has witnessed the pandemic Coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19), which is *like no other* health crises of the past such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS CoV-1), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), swine flu (*H1N1 influenza*) and Ebola and Zika virus infections (Bhadoria *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic had a broad and profound effect on individuals and organizations incapacitating economies worldwide. The pandemic has made a tremendous psychological influence on individuals due to isolation, health concerns for them and their loved ones and uncertainty. Hope has become a much-needed state for survival during this pandemic.

The state-regulated lockdowns and social distancing measures to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic have transformed millions of employees into a working-from-home workforce



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overnight. Work from home (WFH) or telecommuting as an optional work arrangement was not new to the world since it was foreseen as early as 1950, become viable in early 1970 with the creation of personal computers and portable modems and initial implementations occurred in the mid-1970s (see Hill *et al.*, 1998). The literature identifies WFH as one of the best options for workplace flexibility (for review, Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Raghuram and Wiesenfeld, 2004). However, the recent literature during the pre-COVID-19 era suggests that the WFH option was discouraged by organizations and not favoured by employees (Putnam *et al.*, 2014; Wall Street Journal, 2020). Still, the COVID-19 lockdown did not allow organizations and employees to view WFH as an optional work arrangement. The state-mandated WFH during the lockdowns forced all employees to physically be located at home but psychologically or behaviourally involved in their job roles. Some studies provide evidence for an increase in the workload and job responsibilities of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic (MTI Consulting, 2020). To overcome problems faced because of the pandemic, organizations had to think strategically about the use of WFH and maximizing the full potential of the workforce. Organizations introduced several interventions to engage employees in their job roles while working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown. Hope is malleable to development (Luthans *et al.*, 2006); these organization-led interventions may have influenced employees' hope when faced with tremendous difficulties created by the pandemic and when adjusting to the forced work arrangement of WFH.

In the above context, the main construct of the study is hope. In investigating the effect of organization interventions on hope, the study draws on three theories, i.e. positive organizational behaviour (Luthans, 2002), conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002) and hope theory (Snyder, 2002). In brief, positive organizational behaviour focuses on a "positive approach to developing and managing human resources in today's workplace" (Luthans *et al.*, 2007, p. 542). As a derivative of positive organizational behaviour, psychological capital which is widely known as PsyCap identifies hope as a positive psychological construct and as one of its four constituents (Luthans *et al.*, 2004, 2006, 2007). The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307) stipulates that individuals accumulate resources from their environment, and these "resources are centrally valued in their own right or act as a means to obtain centrally valued ends", where hope is identified as one of such resources. The hope theory asserts that in relation to the ongoing events in individuals' lives, they have the will for successful goal-oriented determination and viable means to accomplish these goals (Snyder *et al.*, 1996, p. 321). Drawing on these theories, which were reviewed in detail in the next section, the specific objectives of the study were to investigate the effect of organization-led interventions implemented during the COVID-19 lockdown in enhancing employees' hope, who performed their job roles working from home in Sri Lanka.

Concerning the importance of the study, firstly, the literature suggests that a limited number of empirical research on hope has been conducted in work settings (Luthans *et al.*, 2007, p. 546; Wandeler *et al.*, 2017). Of these, many explored its impact on employee behaviours and organizational outcomes as reviewed in the next section. Although the literature suggests that organization interventions could enhance hope, empirical studies involving specific organization interventions to enhance hope are rare (for review Namono *et al.*, 2021; Wandeler *et al.*, 2017; Zhong *et al.*, 2021). According to Luthans *et al.* (2007), hope is a unique psychological capital valuable to be possessed by any individual, a valuable resource in work settings, and it is identified as malleable to development. Hence, it is important to better understand organization interventions implemented and whether these interventions helped develop hope.

Secondly, in connection with the above, the present study integrates positive organizational behaviour, conservation of resources theory and hope theory to investigate the influence of organization interventions on employees' hope. In doing so, we respond to

calls for more research in different contexts and samples and more research on intervention studies explaining the promotion of hope (see Reichard *et al.*, 2013; Wandeler *et al.*, 2017 for review). The COVID-19 lockdown and WFH make our study context novel with respect to previous studies that suggested possible connections between organization interventions and hope (see Wandeler *et al.*, 2017).

Thirdly, hope is a valuable personal resource to be possessed during a situation of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Our surmise is that hope helps individuals to withstand the circumstances created by the pandemic and helps them to preserve their energies. This is in line with recent observations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Genç and Arslan, 2021; Turliuc and Candel, 2022; Zhong *et al.*, 2021) as well as other fast-paced and unpredictable workplace contexts experienced by employees, such as mergers, acquisitions and layoffs (Wandeler *et al.*, 2017). Although hope is a positive psychological strength against uncertainty, unpredictability and adversity, empirical research that addressed how hope operates and what organization interventions are effective on employees during the COVID-19 lockdown has not surfaced sufficiently, yet.

Fourthly, hope has become a construct of interest due to the mandatory adoption of WFH with the occurrence of the COVID-19 lockdown. Employees faced not only a threat to life but also required an involuntary adjustment to unfamiliar/inexperienced work form, i.e. WFH. In this regard, Adams *et al.* (2002) identify the workplace as a conspicuous source of a sense of purpose for employees. Therefore, the results of our study provide employees' experience of organization interventions and the effect of these on their hope during the COVID-19 lockdown. When thinking beyond the era of COVID-19, since organizations and employees worldwide have paid the start-up price for WFH, there will be a long-run explosion of this work form as a standard perk for employees in the post-COVID-19 era (Bloom, 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand organization interventions effective under the condition of WFH for the creation of better workplaces, organizational sustainability and employees' well-being.

Fifthly, we tested our research model in a South Asian developing country, Sri Lanka, drawing responses from 245 employees as detailed in the section on the sample. As emphasized by Reichard *et al.* (2013), our study provides much-needed diversity to empirical evidence on hope and its antecedents.

2. Review of literature

The present study was grounded on positive organizational behaviour (Luthans, 2002), conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002) and hope theory (Snyder, 2002). These three theories and their importance for the present study are reviewed in the following sections.

2.1 Positive organizational behaviour

Positive organizational behaviour, which is defined as "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement" (Luthans, 2002, p. 59), is built on the presumption of using positive approaches to develop and manage people in the context of work. Luthans *et al.* (2004, 2006, 2007), building on the literature on positive organizational behaviour, proposed and empirically validated four positive psychological constructs (i.e. hope, resilience, optimism and self-efficacy) under the umbrella term psychological capital (PsyCap). According to Luthans *et al.* (2007, p. 542), positive organizational behaviour as well as its derivative PsyCap proposes "individual motivational propensities that accrue through positive psychological constructs". Unlike human capital which centres on individual competence to accomplish tasks and social capital

which centres on individual ability to navigate interpersonal context, PsyCap centres on individual strengths to capitalize on the positive aspects of the environment (Kim *et al.*, 2017). Still, PsyCap enables individuals to transit from the actual self to the possible self by allowing them to explore their becoming, without restricting them to being, thus transcending human and social capital (Kim *et al.*, 2017, p. 661). With reference to hope, Stengers (2002, p. 245) identifies the difference between probability and possibility by stating “if we follow probability there is no hope, just a calculated anticipation authorised by the world as it is. But to think is to create possibility against probability. It doesn’t mean hope for one or another thing or as a calculated attitude, but to try and feel and put into words a possibility for becoming”. Thus, the constituents of PsyCap depict positive and strength-based state-like capacities with malleability to development that have “a positive impact on work-related individual-level performance and satisfaction” (Luthans *et al.*, 2007, p. 542). As a constituent of PsyCap, hope focuses on an individual’s positive psychological state, which involves persevering towards goals as well as redirecting paths to goals, when necessary, for success (Luthans *et al.*, 2007).

2.2 Conservation of resources theory

The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002) posits that individuals persist in acquiring, retaining, perfecting and building resources that are valuable to them. Hobfoll (1989, p. 516) identifies these valuable resources as “objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individuals or that serve as means of attaining of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies”. Further, individuals who hold resources are in a better position to build up further resources, which may lead to a spiral of gains in resources (Hobfoll, 2002). One of the personal characteristics or personal resources identified by Hobfoll (2002) as a valuable resource to individuals and important in the context of work is hope. As an internal resource, individuals hold hope and take advantage of it to build more resources, which, in turn, leads to generating other resources. High and low levels of hope result in hopefulness and hopelessness, respectively. Wandeler *et al.* (2017, p. 52) state “higher levels of hope, higher levels of professional performance, and higher levels of mental health are characteristics of healthy functioning persons and are resources. . . . Beyond hope being generally related to better mental health, a specific relationship exists between hope and healthy behaviour at work”. Further, interactions among these resources result in mutual stabilization in situations of these are lost or threatened (Wandeler *et al.*, 2017). Hope can promote a perception of an individual’s ability to control and influence his or her surrounding successfully when faced with situations of uncertainty and a threat to life (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014; Ullah *et al.*, 2022) such as the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals who are hopeful will withstand challenges. In this context, Wandeler *et al.* (2017) emphasize the need of understanding facilitating conditions that provide the basis for hopeful thinking.

2.3 Hope

Hope is a belief in one’s capacity to initiate and sustain actions and one’s capacity to generate routes to reach goals (Snyder *et al.*, 1996, p. 321). The belief in one’s capacity to initiate and sustain actions is named as agency and the belief in one’s capacity to generate routes is named as pathways (Snyder *et al.*, 1996, p. 321). Agency taps the perceived capacity to pursue goals or goal-directed determination, while pathway taps the perceived ability to generate means or routes to attain goals or plan to meet goals (Snyder *et al.*, 1996, p. 321). Hence, hope constitutes “the will to succeed and the ability to identify, clarify, and pursue the way to success” (Luthans *et al.*, 2007, pp. 545–546). Hope theory postulates that agentic and pathways thinking are “positively related, additive and reciprocal, but neither component

alone defines hope, nor are they synonymous” (Wandeler *et al.*, 2017, p. 49). Hence, agency and pathways combined entail an overall perception that one’s goals can be met (Snyder *et al.*, 1996, p. 321).

The present study draws on the temporal state of hope or state hope which is identified by Snyder *et al.* (1996, pp. 321–322) as “related to the ongoing events in people’s lives” that “reflect particular times and more proximal events” and “more strongly relate to mental analyses of those situations”. Since measured with reference to a given moment, state hope provides a snapshot of goal-directed thinking; this goal-directed thinking plays a vital role in the subsequent accomplishment of desired outcomes (Snyder *et al.*, 1996, p. 321–322; also see Reichard *et al.*, 2013; Wandeler *et al.*, 2017 for review). Previous research supports that individuals with high hope have physical, emotional and psychological resources to persist in efforts to obtain desired outcomes in contrast to individuals with low hope. Previous research provides evidence to suggest that hope is positively associated with coping with disability (Elliott *et al.*, 1991), preventing and recovering from physical illness (Snyder *et al.*, 2000), health and well-being (Reichard *et al.*, 2013) and life satisfaction (Yıldırım *et al.*, 2022). Further, beyond the context of individuals’ life in general, the extant literature provides ample evidence to suggest that individuals’ hope is positively associated with desirable outcomes that are of interest to organizations’ performance such as financial performance (Peterson and Luthans, 2003) and profitability at firm/unit level (Luthans *et al.*, 2007; Reichard *et al.*, 2013). Besides such findings at the firm level, previous research across countries, industries and work settings also suggests that hope is positively associated with many other valued outcomes from employees at work, such as innovative work behaviour (Namono *et al.*, 2021), creativity (Rego *et al.*, 2012), knowledge sharing and knowledge creation (Goswami and Agrawal, 2020), work engagement (Ozyilmaz, 2020), job involvement (Ullah *et al.*, 2022) and employee retention (Peterson and Luthans, 2003); hope is negatively associated with absenteeism (Avey *et al.*, 2006), burnout and stress (Reichard *et al.*, 2013).

Overall, hope discourses essential motivational, cognitive and emotional processes of an individual’s thinking, feeling and action, which can contribute to or hamper his or her capabilities for meeting job demands and challenges facing workplaces. Hence, as a developable capacity and a workplace construct, hope provides organizations with an avenue to drive employees’ performance for organizational success.

2.4 COVID-19, WFH and hope

When concerning the COVID-19 lockdown as a specific event in employees’ lives (refer to Snyder *et al.*, 1996), it created uncertainty, social distancing, procrastination, loneliness and psychological exhaustion (Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Kumar *et al.*, 2021; Palumbo, 2020; Turliuc and Candel, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021). As a resource-providing state, hope is important for employees to cope with dynamism (Ahmad, 2020) and to engage in new work methods (Namono *et al.*, 2021) in the pandemic-stricken work context. Zhong *et al.* (2021) state that hope denotes motivation and persistence to attain the desired ends despite the adversity presented by the pandemic. In the same context, Kim *et al.* (2017, p. 662) state that when a planned route is infeasible, highly hopeful employees have the capability to seek alternative routes, the ability to set realistic but challenging goals and the ability to come up with back-up plans instead of getting discouraged by predicament along with a positive outlook for the continued pursuit of centrally valued ends. Even if employees encounter barriers in meeting the desired ends, possessing high hope leads to resuscitating their energy to seek alternative avenues and to be assertive in the chosen routes (Snyder *et al.*, 1996).

When considering the context of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a forced choice for employees that resulted in workplace isolation, which could subsequently elevate levels of loneliness (Wang *et al.*, 2021). The conditions experienced by workers was identified as

stressful (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021) since they were made to involuntarily perform their job roles under serious health-related threat and unusual working conditions using a difficult as well as a new work form. In the new normal – in the post-pandemic era, WFH will be a standard mode of work in the corporate world. The orientation of hope was towards a yet uncertain future (Wandeler and Bundick, 2011). Luthans *et al.* (2004, p. 516) describe this as “future-referenced, affective cognition based on the wish for events and some expectation of the occurrence of these events”. Employees’ adherence to new approaches, like WFH, can be identified as connected with taking risks for which success is not very certain. Still, hopeful employees are optimistic about future achievements, which leads them to find alternative routes to achieve the intended outcomes when their usual routes are blocked. Further, hopeful employees may depict higher levels of professional performance as well as mental health as characteristics of healthy functioning individuals (Wandeler *et al.*, 2017). Hence, hope is a personal resource to have persevered in challenging situations created by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated WFH.

2.5 Organization interventions

The interventions of positive psychology are activities that could build positive individual capacities, such as hope (Meyers *et al.*, 2013; Wandeler *et al.*, 2017). The term organization intervention is used in our study to refer to organization-initiated interventions. In the contemporary corporate world, it is possible to assume that these interventions are often structured with explicit intentions of enhancing work performance by influencing the physical and psychological health of the workforce. These organization interventions revolve around four dimensions relating to the workplace, namely, jobs (such as autonomy), roles (such as role conflict), leaders (such as facilitation) and work groups (such as cooperation) (refer to James *et al.*, 2008 for more). The extant literature provides support for organization interventions that promote hope. For example, Luthans *et al.* (2006), Combs *et al.* (2010), Ruddell *et al.* (2010), Avey *et al.* (2011), Barrios *et al.* (2019) and Namono *et al.* (2021) provide evidence for the importance of targeted/focused interventions or “micro-interventions” to enhance hope. Extant knowledge can be questioned in extraordinary contexts. The term organization intervention is used in the present study to include any organization-led support practice specifically designed and implemented with the aim of helping employees and maintaining a productive workforce during the COVID-19 lockdown. While confronted with enormous unpredictable hardships during the COVID-19 lockdown, business organizations have designed and implemented various support practices on trial-and-error in line with the vision and its application to maintain employees’ contributions for the continued pursuit of organizational goals recognizing their work mode as WFH. We postulate that organization interventions are positively related to employees’ hope in driving them successfully through the COVID-19 lockdown, and therefore, these operate as antecedents of hope. Therefore, the following is proposed as the main hypothesis of the study.

- H1.* Organization interventions implemented during the COVID-19 lockdown promoted hope in employees, who worked from home

These organization interventions may span around various dimensions of work. As reviewed in the following paragraphs, the extant literature allows us to identify four types of organization interventions that might be appropriate in our context.

Work collaboration and coordination (WCC). Organization interventions addressing work collaboration and coordination could revolve around leadership behaviour, organizational structure and organizational culture (Reichard *et al.*, 2013), which are identified within the broad term of favourable environmental conditions (refer to Deci and Ryan, 2000 for more). Further, shared goals are also identified to enhance employees’ hope. Goswami and Agrawal

(2020, p. 188) state “shared goals enable members to have consensus on what is essential at work, to share the same vision and ambitions and to be energetic about pursuing the missions and common goals of the whole organization” and “act as volunteer binding force among employees”. Goswami and Agrawal (2020) empirically showed that when employees have shared goals, the likelihood for them to cooperate and work together is higher, and that shared goals are positively related to hope. In the context of COVID-19, Zhong *et al.* (2021) showed that interventions adopted by campuses relating to teaching, interaction and support increased students’ hope. Based on the literature reviewed above that provides evidence for the capacity of these favourable conditions of the organization environment for the development of hope, it is hypothesised:

H1a. Organization interventions implemented during the COVID-19 lockdown addressing work collaboration and coordination promoted hope in employees, who worked from home.

Work direction (WD). As per Reichard *et al.* (2013), “low-cost strategies” that revolve around the job itself can foster hope in employees (refer to Deci and Ryan, 2000 for more). In this regard, Kenny *et al.* (2010) and Reichard *et al.* (2013) provided empirical evidence to support that the provision of job autonomy for employees is positively related to hope. Snyder *et al.* (2000) emphasised the importance of promoting employees’ hope by creating favourable organizational conditions to maximize their sense of pursuing meaningful goals while experiencing the satisfaction of performing job tasks as well. In this regard, Adams *et al.* (2002) also stated that goals and tasks shared in the workplace increase the sense of social support, which could help in internalizing a sense of hope. Empirical research support that allowing freedom for employees to set their own goals helps to foster hope (Adams *et al.*, 2002; Wandeler and Bundick, 2011) as well as allowing opportunities for employees to find solutions to problems, make decisions and implement new ideas help to foster hope (Adams *et al.*, 2002). Hence, Wandeler *et al.* (2017) suggest the importance of providing training programmes in goal setting and problem-solving for employees to better engage in setting and pursuing goals. In the specific context of COVID-19, Wang *et al.* (2021, p. 16) showed that job autonomy, workload and monitoring can alter challenges involving WFH, i.e. work-home interference, ineffective communication, procrastination and loneliness. It is hypothesised:

H1b. Organization interventions implemented during the COVID-19 lockdown addressing work direction promoted hope in employees, who worked from home.

Psychological wellness (PsyWell). Support from the organization plays an important role in fostering hope in situations where employees are confronted with novel work contexts or challenging circumstances. The research provides evidence of psychological strain experienced by employees while working from home (Palumbo, 2020) as well as working from home during challenging circumstances of COVID-19 (Turliuc and Candel, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Hope is a valuable personal resource to be possessed during a situation of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Our surmise is that hope helps individuals to withstand the circumstances created by the pandemic and helps them to preserve their energies. This is in line with recent observations (Genç and Arslan, 2021; Turliuc and Candel, 2022; Zhong *et al.*, 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other fast-paced and unpredictable workplace environment experienced by employees, such as mergers, acquisitions and layoffs (Wandeler *et al.*, 2017). Previous research showed that open communication and feedback practised between management and employees are identified as positively related to hope (Adams *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, leader behaviour and mentoring relationships (Avey *et al.*, 2011), the nature of supervision (Tillman *et al.*, 2018) and the workplace social environment (Wandeler *et al.*, 2017) are identified as important conditions of the organization environment that foster employees’

levels of hope. Wandeler *et al.* (2017) suggest the possibility of providing training programmes in time management, aerobic exercise and relaxation techniques as a basis for promoting hopeful thinking in employees. In addition, the literature suggests the sharing of new or innovative organizational strategies or practices with employees. For example, a recent study by Fazal-e-Hasan *et al.* (2023) showed that organizations' adoption of innovative green practices and open communication of such initiatives and obtaining employees' feedback have a positive impact on employees' hope. It is hypothesised:

H1c. Organization interventions implemented during the COVID-19 lockdown addressing psychological wellness promoted hope in employees, who worked from home

Physical wellness (PhyWell). The literature provides evidence that disasters and mass emergencies, like the COVID-19 pandemic, represent enormous physical threats (Carter *et al.*, 2023; Drury *et al.*, 2016; Ntontis *et al.*, 2020; Stoyanova *et al.*, 2022). The lifestyle of people changed, and physical activity levels fell very low in the COVID-19 pandemic-stricken environment (Rožman and Tominc, 2022; Washio *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, people always felt the threat of COVID-19 infection to their physical health (Stoyanova *et al.*, 2022). In addition to the concern of getting infected with the virus, people suffered several other physical health concerns such as weight gain due to disruptions to daily routines of eating, exercise and sleep patterns (Washio *et al.*, 2022). Both Stoyanova *et al.* (2022) and Washio *et al.* (2022) highlighted the importance of coping resources to improve health status. Previous studies such as Carter *et al.* (2023) and Stevenson *et al.* (2021) suggest that individuals' identification with leaders involved in the management of an emergency is important, and leaders should be able to foster a sense that actions taken are in the public interest. In the organizational context, employees' experiences of dealing with the workplace are important in creating an identification with the workplace, in creating a sense of control as well as in creating favourable perceptions towards work, peers and the employer (Krug *et al.*, 2021; Mousa *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, organization support and meaningful relations with employees for them to maintain physical health during the lockdown could generate hope. It is hypothesized:

H1d. Organization interventions implemented during the COVID-19 lockdown addressing physical wellness promoted hope in employees, who worked from home

3. Methodology

3.1 Measures

Hope was measured with the six-item state hope scale of Snyder *et al.* (1996). These items were on an eight-point scale, where 8 denotes definitely true and 1 denotes definitely false, as suggested by Snyder *et al.* (1996, p. 335). Organization interventions or organization-led support practices implemented by the organizations during the COVID-19 lockdown were measured with a scale developed for the present study, which had 16 items. In developing this measurement scale, five steps were followed. Firstly, we did a preliminary investigation into organization-led support practices implemented during the COVID-19 lockdown by firms operating in the country. Secondly, previous theoretical and empirical work was reviewed to isolate practices that are prominent in the literature that appear to fit into our study and to isolate practices that are identified as important in the study context. Thirdly, these practices were assessed by a panel of experts to ensure face and content validity. Fourthly, the measurement scale was pre-tested to ensure content and face validity. The fifth and final step ensured internal consistency reliability, factor structure, convergent validity, discriminant validity and construct reliability (see next section for procedure). Items were on a five-point scale (5 – strongly agree, 4 – agree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 2 – disagree, 1 – strongly disagree). This item measure is shown in Table 4.

3.2 Sample and method of data collection

The target study population is employees in full-time white-collar or professional job positions who performed their job roles by way of WFH during the first government-mandated lockdown in Sri Lanka that took place nationwide from mid-March to mid-May 2020. Considering the millions of workers in Sri Lanka that qualify for this categorization, we used convenience and snowball sampling methods to identify the study sample (refer to Jager *et al.*, 2017; Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Initial contacts were made through personal networks, employees' welfare associations and industry associations. Since the first occurrence of the government-mandated lockdown was sudden, official data were not available to have a clear picture of the number of employees who were in full-time jobs performed their work by way of WFH. We made every attempt to obtain a representative sample, which is reflected in the respondents' characteristics shown in Table 1. The sample required when the target population is over 100,000 (>100,000) is 384 (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016, p. 263). Data were collected during the above-mentioned first lockdown period in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and distributed via email and social media. Since the questionnaire was anonymous, it protected the anonymity of the respondents. Considering the difficulties faced by the populace and organizations, and their unpreparedness for a health crisis of this magnitude, data collection dragged on to one month after the end of the first government-mandated lockdown in Sri Lanka. We managed to obtain 245 valid responses, which we considered satisfactory since the number of responses received fell within the rules of thumb proposed by Sekaran and Bougie (2016, p. 264), and on par with other previous studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as Ullah *et al.* (2022) and Wang *et al.* (2021). The respondents' characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Characteristic	%
<i>Age</i>	
20–35 yrs	70
36–50 yrs	22
51–65 yrs	8
<i>Sex</i>	
Female	51
Male	49
<i>Marital status</i>	
Single [†]	51
Married	49
<i>Highest level of education qualification</i>	
Postgraduate degree	18
Bachelor's degree	59
Certificate or diploma	23
<i>Sector</i>	
Service sector	74
Manufacturing sector	26
<i>Years of operation of organizations to which respondents attached to</i>	
More than 20 yrs	41
5–20 yrs	44
Less than 5 yrs	15

Table 1.
Respondents'
characteristics

Note(s): [†] Includes never married, separated, divorced and widowed
Source(s): Table by authors

3.3 Method of data analysis

Harman's single-factor test statistics for common method variance provided satisfactory results (refer to Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003 for procedure and thresholds). Since the measurement scale for organization interventions was created by us for the present study, both EFA and CFA were performed (refer to Cabrera-Nguyen, 2010; Hurley *et al.*, 1997; Worthington and Whittaker, 2006). EFA was performed using principal component factor analysis, whereas CFA was performed using the structural equation modelling (SEM) procedure. When comparing data analysis options, specifically between SEM and multiple regression, Cheng (2001) showed that SEM is more effective than multiple regression, while Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012, p. 777) provided compelling justifications for choosing SEM over multiple regression analysis. Accordingly, the present study used SEM for the analysis. The results of SEM were assessed based on normed chi-square statistic (χ^2/df) and fit indices. A value near 1.00 for the normed chi-square statistic is considered a sign of good fit (refer to Arbuckle, 2007). Regarding fit indices, the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used. Tucker–Lewis index and CFI values close to 1 but above 0.95 are considered as an indication of good fit; an RMSEA value around 0.05 is considered a sign of good fit (refer to Arbuckle, 2007).

4. Results

The results of EFA for hope led to identifying a single factor for hope. As shown in Table 2, the hope construct explained 63% of the variation. The construct yielded Cronbach's alpha value of 0.880, AVE of 0.630 and construct reliability of 0.910).

The results of EFA for organization interventions yielded four factors, namely, WCC, WD, PsyWell and PhyWell. These four factors explained 68% of the variation (Cronbach's alpha = 0.919). The values of AVE and construct reliability relating to each factor of organization intervention are given in Table 2. Table 3 shows the correlation between variables. The diagonal entries of the correlation table show the square root of AVE.

The results of CFA are shown in Tables 4 and 5. Fit indices derived from CFA are shown in Table 5. As shown in Table 5, χ^2/df and fit indices of TLI, CFI and RMSEA fulfil the recommended thresholds (refer to Arbuckle, 2007). Table 5 shows estimates for hope. All four organization interventions significantly predict hope, i.e. WCC (0.206, $p < 0.01$), WD (0.318, $p < 0.001$), PsyWell (0.185, $p < 0.05$) and PhyWell (0.152, $p < 0.05$). Figure 1 shows the final model with path coefficients. The coefficient of determination of 0.182, which is shown in Table 4, suggests that WCC, WD, PsyWell and PhyWell account for 18% of the variation of hope. Therefore, the results shown in Tables 4 and 5 support the main hypothesis (H1) of the study as well as H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d.

Variable	Explained variation	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	Construct reliability	Number of factors yielded
Hope	62.966	0.880	0.630	0.910	1
Organization interventions	67.94	0.919	–	–	4
WCC	18.230	0.856	0.579	0.846	–
WD	17.295	0.844	0.505	0.836	–
PsyWell	16.653	0.812	0.528	0.816	–
PhyWell	15.770	0.758	0.532	0.772	–

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 2.
EFA - fit indices

Table 3.
Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age (in yrs)	34.32	2.51	—								
2 Sex [†]	—	—	0.031 [*]	—							
3 Marital status [†]	—	—	0.182 [*]	0.079	—						
4 Sector [†]	—	—	0.076	0.046	0.073	—					
5 WCC	3.85	0.74	0.095	0.029	0.065	0.017	0.760				
6 WD	4.05	0.72	0.079	0.066	0.098	0.026	0.430 ^{**}	0.710			
7 PsyWell	3.68	0.81	0.102	0.034	0.073	0.033	0.427 ^{**}	0.467 ^{**}	0.727		
8 PhyWell	3.77	0.78	0.098	0.013	0.081	0.029	0.482 ^{**}	0.448 ^{**}	0.416 ^{**}	0.729	
9 Hope	6.83	0.92	0.118	0.121	0.114	0.103	0.392 ^{**}	0.447 ^{**}	0.363 ^{**}	0.337 ^{**}	0.794

Note(s): †Binary coded (refer to characteristics of respondents), * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, diagonal entries, square root of AVE

Source(s): Table by authors

5. Discussion of the findings, contribution to theory and implications for practice

The study was conducted in a time period of immense uncertainty, unpredictability and threat to life, under which hope is a valuable personal resource for individuals to maintain and promote. As a constituent of PsyCap, hope provides purpose, meaning and belief for individuals in their ability to withstand and constitute personal resources to influence their surroundings to attain goals in the context of COVID-19 and WFH. Drawing from the positive

Model	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	Coefficient of determination
Hope	3.115	0.891	0.883	0.078	0.182

Source(s): Table by authors

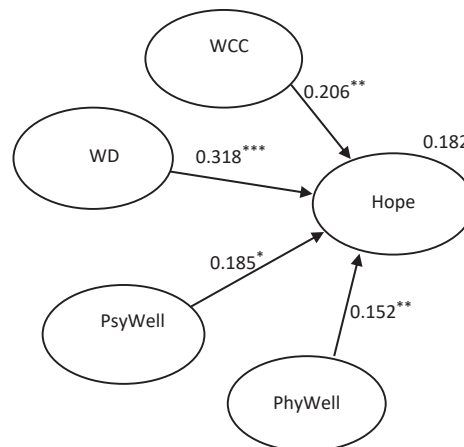
Table 4.
CFA – indices of
final model

Path		Standardised regression estimate
Hope	← WCC	0.206**
Hope	← WD	0.318***
Hope	← PsyWell	0.185*
Hope	← PhyWell	0.152*
A1 You are satisfied with the support received from other departments/ sections of your organization for work	← WCC	0.810***
A2 You are satisfied with the support received from your department/ section for work	← WCC	0.851***
A3 There is no resistance from your department/section for the way work is conducted	← WCC	0.767***
A4 Employees of your organization are willing to share work	← WCC	0.694***
B1 Your organization's expectations from its employees are quite clear	← WD	0.824***
B2 Your organization offered flexible work hours/days	← WD	0.812***
B3 Your organization's treatment to all employees is consistent	← WD	0.776***
B4 Your organization delegated responsibility to employees for their own work	← WD	0.701***
B5 Your organization reassured the importance of employees to it	← WD	0.692***
C1 Your organization shared positive outcomes with employees	← PsyWell	0.761***
C2 Your organization is confident about its survival	← PsyWell	0.825***
C3 Your organization is appreciative of the work done by you during this difficult time	← PsyWell	0.707***
C4 Your organization extended the deadlines for your work goals	← PsyWell	0.692***
D1 Your organization is interested in knowing the health status of employees	← PhyWell	0.745***
D2 Your organization took necessary actions to make employees aware about hygienic behaviours	← PhyWell	0.792***
D3 Your organization regularly collects information on employees' health conditions	← PhyWell	0.815***
E1 If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it	← Hope	0.640***
E2 At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my goals	← Hope	0.761***
E3 There are lots of ways around any problem that I am facing now	← Hope	0.678***
E4 Right now, I see myself as being pretty successful	← Hope	0.749***
E5 I can think of many ways to reach my current goals	← Hope	0.877***
E6 At this time, I am meeting the goals that I have set for myself	← Hope	0.814***

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 5.
CFA - Estimates
for hope



Note(s): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 1.
Model with
standardised path
coefficients

organizational behaviour (Luthans, 2002), conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002) and hope theory (Snyder, 2002), we postulated and tested a model linking organization interventions to hope. The findings presented above provide much-needed support for the beneficial effects of organization interventions in promoting hope when employees are performing their job roles by way of WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown. The interventions identified, namely, WD, WCC, PsyWell and PhyWell, are significantly related to hope. The findings suggest that these interventions can promote hope to persist in their goal-directed achievements and to find alternative routes to accomplish these goals if normal routes are blocked while engaged in the form of WFH during the pandemic. Snyder *et al.* (2003) proposed that any intervention to raise hope should be simple with sufficient guidance. The findings of our study on the four interventions confirm the proposition of Snyder *et al.* (2003). Hence, the four organization interventions lead to creating hopeful employees who are capable of handling negative elements in their environment and are more optimistic about their surrounding and future. Given the limited research on hope and hope-raising interventions conducted in a time period of a crisis and a forced work arrangement, our study contributes to the extant literature and provides implications for practice.

5.1 Contributions to the extant literature

The present study makes four contributions to the extant literature. Firstly, the study was built on positive organizational behaviour (Luthans, 2002), conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002) and hope theory (Snyder, 2002). The study's primary contribution lies in the application of these three theories to better understand contemporary phenomena. Our study applied these three theories in the context of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown. We proposed, tested and provided empirical evidence to show that organization interventions are antecedents or enhancers of hope during the disruption of the pandemic. The findings provided clear evidence that employees are in need of personal resources to successfully engage in job roles using the involuntary work mode of WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown. Further, the findings support that the positive organizational behaviour, conservation of resources theory and hope theory have lasting theoretical resonance in explaining present-day phenomena with unique applications.

Secondly, the extant literature suggests that empirical research on hope in organization settings is rare (see Wandeler *et al.*, 2017 for review). Previous studies called for more research in different contexts and samples on organization interventions to explain the promotion of hope (see Reichard *et al.*, 2013; Wandeler *et al.*, 2017). Since empirical studies on organization interventions that promote hope are rare, it is very difficult to find already empirically validated measurement scales on organization interventions. We have created and empirically validated a 16-item organization intervention scale. We have followed the five-step procedure described in the section on measures for this purpose. Following Cabrera-Nguyen (2010), Hurley *et al.* (1997) and Worthington and Whittaker (2006), we tested the empirical data for both EFA and CFA. As described in the section on measures, the 16-item organization intervention scale ensured face validity, content validity, internal consistency reliability, factor structure, convergent validity, discriminant validity and construct reliability. The findings showed that organization interventions promote hope – the construct that received much attention in positive organizational behaviour, conservation of resources theory and hope theory. Therefore, our research is novel and adds value to the existing literature.

Thirdly, the four organization interventions can be identified as micro-interventions (refer to Luthans *et al.*, 2006) targeted specifically for the crisis and difficulties created in making employees accustomed to using WFH for the completion of their job roles. Further, a scrutiny of Table 4 implies that these four organization interventions can also be identified as low-cost interventions (refer to Reichard *et al.*, 2013). The literature supports the contention that strategies for lowering work stress and coping in general, such as targeted training in goal setting, time management and relaxation techniques facilitate a basis for hopeful thinking (refer to Wandeler *et al.*, 2017). However, it is possible to argue that the context created by the COVID-19 lockdown together with the adoption of WFH is unique and novel, which expects organizations to be more strategic in the use of limited resources, which led to the adoption of interventions found in our study. Therefore, our study advances knowledge about organization interventions that can foster hope.

Fourthly, the interventions we identified fostered hope (Snyder *et al.*, 1996) that comprise both agency and pathways for an individual to present high hope. As per hope theory (Snyder, 2002), hope is necessitated by both goal-directed determination and planning ways to meet goals, whereas each component alone is insufficient to achieve hope (Snyder *et al.*, 1996, p. 321). Therefore, the findings provide evidence for organization interventions that enrich the higher-order construct of hope. The goal-directed nature and focus on alternative routes are what employees much needed when performing job roles in the form of WFH in the COVID-19 lockdown. The organization interventions assisted employees to develop alternative routes to desired goals and enhance their determination through agency thinking to benefit from alternative routes to adapt and confront the unfamiliar created by the COVID-19 lockdown and WFH. When considering from the employees' adaptive capacity development perspective, the four organization interventions identified helped employees to fruitfully handle more goals and farther ambitious goals allowing them opportunities to develop their capacities further.

Fifthly, the literature calls for empirical research in hope-raising interventions in different contexts and samples (see Reichard *et al.*, 2013). We contributed to this call by designing and testing our model on a sample of employees who worked from home full-time during the COVID-19 lockdown in Sri Lanka. We believe our study is one of a kind to be conducted in the country. Studying hope as a personal resource and organization interventions that promote hope is very important because Sri Lanka is one of those countries from the developing world which do not have many resources to spare and are faced with immense economic challenges. The interventions found can also be identified as low-cost micro-interventions, as mentioned earlier. A scrutiny of the interventions found implies that the success of these relies more on organizational characteristics such as leadership, organizational structure and culture. In this regard, our study also contributed to the call by Wandeler *et al.* (2017, p. 53) by providing

reasonable answers to the questions they raised, i.e. "What can companies do to promote hope? What can leaders do to promote and also leverage the hope of their employees?" based on a study conducted in an Asian developing country during the COVID-19 lockdown.

5.2 Implications for practice

The present study provides multiple implications for practice. Firstly, considering the context, in which the study was conducted, i.e. the COVID-19 lockdown and mass working from home, the findings present organization-led interventions that are introduced on the urgency of trial-and-error without much detailed planning. Assuming the possibilities of future crises similar to COVID-19 or higher/lesser in magnitude, the interventions found in the study would be of value to organizations and policymakers. Our practices showed four interventions that can be implemented to promote hope, and which interventions are the most contributing to cultivating hope. Further, it is undeniable that the workplace is one of the main sources of hope in our study context. Since the COVID-19 lockdown and WFH have been experienced by all most all employees, the findings of the study offer insightful direction to organization decision-makers as options when cultivating hope.

Secondly, in connection to the above, the findings imply which characteristics and whose capabilities are important in the organization interventions. The interventions of WD, PsyWell and PhyWell imply the importance of organizational leadership for successful adoption. The intervention of WCC implies the importance of supporting work culture, which could also ultimately be attributed to organizational leadership. Snyder and Shorey (2004), in this regard, asserted that high-hope bosses play an important role in employees' lives in creating hope in them.

Thirdly, the findings of the study showed that the employees' level of hope is high (mean = 6.83, on an eight-point scale). From the point of employees' capability development, the context of work and events of the surrounding environment pose opportunities for personal development. The organization interventions experienced by employees under extreme pressure and lack of control during the COVID-19 lockdown and WFH have promoted hope providing opportunities for them to manage personal situations, life events and work outcomes successfully. The effect of this can be viewed from two angles. On the one hand, hope-nurturing interventions at difficult times suggest organizations' efforts to satisfy the basic psychological needs of employees, which is pronounced in the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000). On the other, any development in employees' personal resources will eventually be fruitful for organizations when concerning individual-level desirable behaviours and outcomes in the workplace.

Fourthly, even in the post-pandemic era, the value of hope as a personal resource is high. Hope is identified as one of the most relevant personal resources for a fast-changing world (Luthans *et al.*, 2006). Further, hope and underline goal-directed thinking are teachable and learnable (Snyder, 2002). According to Snyder (2002), a lack of hope results in when individuals are not being taught to think in a hopeful manner. Furthermore, when individuals accumulate experience in an environment, they may yield beliefs on their capabilities to generate pathways and sustain energy essential to pursue goals. Therefore, if organizations take steps to make employees aware of the power of organization interventions on employees' hope capabilities, they could be encouraged to seek such opportunities within or outside of the workplace to enhance their thinking of agency and pathways.

Fifthly, the pre-pandemic studies showed that WFH reduces organizational expenses such as maintenance cost, utility and building rent and reduces commute time for employees (refer to Hill *et al.*, 1998). However, the evidence for the benefits of WFH is mixed. Few studies showed increased work effectiveness and improved work morale (refer to Hill *et al.*, 1998) due to greater flexibility in the location and timing of work. Still, some other research showed

WFH reduces upward, downward and horizontal work communication and increases feelings of isolation (refer to Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). More recent studies showed that the WFH as a work mode was discouraged by employers for concerns such as its consequences for innovation and productivity, and the reluctance of employees to use this as an option due to possible effects on their career (refer to Putnam *et al.*, 2014; Wall Street Journal, 2020). However, the world now recognizes WFH as a standard mode of work. This implies that organizations and employees need to prepare themselves to accept WFH and get the maximum out of this work mode. For this, organizations must support and nurture WFH. In this regard, organizations could provide avenues for employees to lodge their experiences/ concerns relating to WFH and assistance received from organization interventions in setting realistic goals and finding alternate routes for attaining goals. Such steps may also increase employees' voice in the workplace for work design.

6. Conclusion

Hope is a personal resource that should be protected to attain goals. Individuals who are more hopeful do better in work and life. The study investigated organization interventions experienced by employees during the COVID-19 lockdown while performing job roles by way of WFH, and whether organization interventions promoted hope. The findings of our study provide timely information on employees' levels of hope during the COVID-19 lockdown, organization interventions adopted during this period and the effect of these interventions in promoting hope. The study identified four organization interventions (i.e. WCC, WD, PsyWell and PhyWell) adopted by organizations. These interventions can be identified as micro-interventions (see Luthans *et al.*, 2006) or low-cost strategies (see Reichard *et al.*, 2013) effective in enhancing hope. All four interventions significantly positively promoted employees' hope. As a human capacity, hope is malleable to development (Luthans *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, the organization interventions identified in the study have promoted hope during the COVID-19 pandemic when employees were performing their work in the form of WFH. Since WFH is predicted to stay for a considerable time in the future, WFH and achieving desirable work outcomes will continue to have significant strategic importance in the workplace. Hope is one of the most valuable personal resources for employees to successfully manage their personal situations, life events and work outcomes. Therefore, the organization interventions identified in the study provide a meaningful understanding of possibilities that will be of interest to different audiences alike, such as researchers and decision-makers. Overall, the findings of our study support that the traditional theories, i.e. positive organizational behaviour, conservation of resources theory and hope theory have lasting theoretical resonance in explaining present-day phenomena with unique applications. As discussed earlier, our study contributes to both theory and practice.

7. Limitations and directions for future research

The present study has a few limitations, which could form the basis for further research. Firstly, the study was confined to a sample of respondents pooled using the sampling methods of convenience and snowball. Future research could consider having a larger representative sample of the population, which would allow opportunities for testing, for example, moderator effects of demographic characteristics. Secondly, as reviewed earlier, hope provides positive effects for individuals and organizations, such as increased life satisfaction (Yildirim *et al.*, 2022), enhanced innovative work behaviour (Namono *et al.*, 2021) and increased job involvement (Ullah *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, future research could investigate mediator relationships involving hope. Thirdly, future research could broaden the depth of analysis by further diversifying the coverage of interventions. Otherwise, future research

could explore the things that organizations must avoid to promote hope in situations of crisis. Fourthly, the investigations of state hope provide employees' with levels of hope at a specific time. In the case of our study, it was during the COVID-19 lockdown while working from home. The cross-sectional design of the study suits our investigation. However, future research could examine the longitudinal effects of organization interventions. Fifthly, future research could empirically investigate the limits of hope ameliorating the workplace, especially in situations of uncertainty and unpredictability. Last but not least, as reviewed earlier, PsyCap, which is limited to selected four constructs that come under positive organizational behaviour, identifies hope as one of its components. Hence, future research could investigate the effects of organization investigations on all four components of PsyCap.

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Electric vehicles in the business processes and sustainable development

Electric
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processes

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aimed at analyzing operations managers' perception of the use of electric vehicles (EVs) in business processes and its impact on overall business process cost (BPC) and sustainable development (SD).

Design/methodology/approach – The present study adopts the triangulation approach which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The data was collected using structured and scientifically tested questionnaires from the industrial managers working in the industries in the Mysore region of Karnataka. Descriptive statistics, factor analysis and structural equation models were employed to analyze and interpret the data.

Findings – The findings revealed that the usage of EVs in Business Processes significantly impacts the BPC ($b = 0.851, t = 8.037, p < 0.01$) and it is also the usage of EVs in business processes can significantly impact SD ($b = 0.889, t = 7.923, p < 0.01$). Thus, the adoption of EVs in the business process offers many benefits to business organizations such as minimized operational costs, an eco-friendly business model, more tax incentives, less BPCs, a low-emission footprint and a contribution towards SD at large.

Practical implications – Many business organizations operating in the present time show interest in employing EVs in their business processes. Hence, before introducing EVs in industries on a large scale, it becomes imperative to obtain the perception of industrial managers who have already experienced its impact. This study may help industrial organizations to understand the impact of EV on various aspects of the business and to design a business model which would help in achieving SD goals.

Originality/value – The use of EVs in the daily life of human beings and business activities is gaining importance because of the various positive impacts. Therefore, it is necessary to understand industrial managers' opinions regarding the use of EV in business activities.

Keywords Electric vehicles in business, Business processes, Business cost, Electric vehicles and environment, Sustainable development, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs)

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

A series of functions, such as procurement, manufacturing, marketing, logistics and others, are collectively responsible for making a business organization (Sezen, 2005). The integration of

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these activities is called the “Business Processes” (Zelbst *et al.*, 2010; Green *et al.*, 2012). However, business processes and logistics activities are infamous for their unsustainable environmental impact. Transportation and the related activities used in business processes are causing severe effects on the environment. The severity of the impact is such that it is higher than the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) level of countries across the globe (Aronsson and Huge Brodin, 2006). To achieve multiple objectives such as minimizing the negative impacts of business transportation, improving business processes, minimizing cost and achieving environmental sustainability, one of the keys would be the use of Alternative Fuel Vehicles, also referred to as Electric Vehicles or EVs (Pernestål *et al.*, 2020; Tyagi and Vishwakarma, 2022). Further, business organizations can also use EVs as a potential medium for enhancing air quality and energy security and resolving natural resources problems at large [4].

The concept of “Environmental sustainability” stresses balancing the three P’s, namely, People, Profit and Planet. This balance can be primarily observed by inducing EVs during business (Ao Dos Santos *et al.*, 2014). In the context of “people”, business concerns should take necessary measures to avoid accidents with large business logistics vehicles and mitigate the harmful impacts of emissions on the health of local people.

In the context of “profit”, a business should minimize costs. EVs can support the business by reducing the costs associated with transportation, maintenance and other logistics functions [1]. Further, adopting alternative fuel vehicles during the business process enables a business to claim various subsidies, tax incentives and other benefits offered by government and municipal authorities [2],[6]. This can have a dual effect of minimizing the overall business process costs (BPCs) and maximizing profits.

In the context of “planet”, using alternative fuel vehicles in business positively impacts CO₂ emissions and the conservation of scarce natural resources (Sunderlin, 1995; Sridhar, 2012; Quak and Nesterova, 2014). This balancing act would undoubtedly assist in protecting natural resources and thereby conserving the environment for the future generation. Further, adopting EVs in business operations is a necessary step for a business organization towards fulfilling its corporate social responsibility [3].

To balance business and environmental performance, a firm should adopt various green initiatives such as EVs, green supply chains, green marketing and green advertising strategies, among others, in their business process. These strategies will help the firm to improve operational performance and contribute to sustainable development (SD) at large (Smith, 2010; Kushwaha and Sharma, 2016). The efforts of business organizations towards contributing to SD certainly help them gain a competitive advantage and sustainable leadership in the market. However, they need to design a sustainable supply chain by inducing various means and ways, such as E-vehicles for logistics, eco-friendly production processes and many more (Barratt and Oke, 2007; Sen, 2009). Further, using EVs in business improves the health and safety of employees as it ensures better surroundings and improved air quality by minimizing NO₂ emissions and other pollutants [5], [6]. In addition, the use of EVs in business processes also leads to making an organization a sustainable organization and helps to gain sustainable leadership in the environment in which it is operating.

This paper focuses on analyzing the use of EVs in business processes and its impact on overall cost and SD. The rest of the paper is organized as a literature survey, theoretical framework, hypothesis development, methodology, data analysis, discussion, conclusion, limitations and scope for further research.

2. Earlier studies and literature gap

The present study is unique and is considered exploratory, as the related literature on the current topic was found to be scarce. The focus is on analyzing the impact of EVs on BPC by

considering the perception of operations managers. The summary of earlier studies is presented as follows:

Logistics is an important component of the business process, and in terms of costs, it represents a significant contribution to business costs along with the cost of goods sold (Ballou, 1997). In a study by Napoli *et al.* (2021), it was noted that freight transport across the globe is witnessing a considerable increase and along with this carbon dioxide emissions are also increasing.

Carbon emissions from freight transport in India are projected to increase by 400% to around 1200 million tonnes in the next couple of decades (Dias, 2022). This fact stresses the need to switch to an environment-friendly approach to logistics and transportation activities. The logistics sector has been infamous as the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions (Juan *et al.*, 2016). Thus, according to the studies by Barratt and Oke (2007), Sen (2009), Rahman *et al.* (2015) and Jain (2022), it has been suggested that to avoid such emissions and reduce energy consumption, and to contain environmental degradation, switching to alternative fuel vehicles is the need of the hour. The business houses should also take a step towards incorporating the objective of reducing emission costs and attempting to find a trade-off between economic and environmental goals (Juan *et al.*, 2016). In this respect, electrification is a key tool in minimizing emissions from vehicle use in business. Juan *et al.* (2016) in their study mentioned that modern cities, to improve air quality and emissions, have been encouraging fleets of vehicles to adopt alternative fuel vehicles.

Mohammed *et al.* (2020) noted that the shifting of focus on alternative fuel vehicles, the initiatives and efforts encouraging their adoption is ultimately aimed at reducing carbon emissions and our reliance on fossil fuels. Switching to alternative fuel vehicles or EVs is also expected to have a drastic effect on a country's GDP.

However, the infrastructure for implementing alternative fuel vehicles or EV in developing countries like India is inadequate, as compared to Western countries. The major infrastructure facilities required to use alternative fuel vehicles are related to establishing charging stations and service centres in public places which are easily accessible. Further, Serohi (2022) noted that the research competencies needed to enable switching to alternative fuel vehicles are also inadequate. In contrast, as noted by Dias (2022), there has been intensive research on Internal Combustion Engine vehicles, and improvements are done over the years which have reached a point of saturation. Thus, there is much scope for research and improvements in alternative fuel vehicles and EV, particularly concerning battery technology, faster charging and other new-age technologies. Further, the study also opined that the use of EVs and alternative fuels in business logistics leads to better employment opportunities, a better natural environment, better health of the community, and faster economic growth and productivity.

In addition to research and efficiency building, support from the Government is necessary to assist business organizations in the adoption of EVs and avoid the usage of fossil fuel-based vehicles during their manufacturing activities (Melton *et al.*, 2016). In this respect, the Government of India along with the state governments is taking initiatives and promotional measures to encourage the acceptance and development of EVs in the country. For instance, through its flagship scheme called Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid and) EVs (FAME) and other similar schemes, India is promoting electric mobility. The Government in India also expressed an opinion that the improvement in the use of EVs can cause a fall in the usage of petrol and thereby result in cost reduction. Further, due to this, the logistics cost which is around 16 to 18% of the GDP in the country is expected to reduce to 10% in another five years (Narayan and Luthra, 2022).

Along with governmental support promoting the adoption of EVs, business organizations should also make efforts towards adopting EVs in their operations.

In their study, Smith (2010) and Kushwaha and Sharma (2016) stressed that business organizations should also be involved in the innovation and development of green strategies to be adopted along the supply chain. There is a need for structural changes in business functions that contain matters relating to minimizing the negative environmental impact and overall costs to the organization (Aronsson and Huge Brodin, 2006). This is because, though the upfront costs relating to EVs are higher, the cost over the lifetime of an EV is lesser. A report by Mecalux (2022) suggested that the last mile delivery, which is considered to be the costliest and most polluting stage, can be optimized by switching to electric trucks. This is possible because EVs can help reduce logistics costs by eliminating the use of fossil fuels and thus reduce the burden of transportation and logistics costs on the selling price of the products.

It may be noted that among the various decisions involved in business operations, the mode of transportation selection is crucial. The various regulatory norms, such as carbon caps, carbon tax and fuel norms, must be considered thoroughly before finalizing the mode of transportation. The scarcity of resources, the high negative impact of industrial emissions on the environment and the higher cost of transporting business resources pave the way for adopting a new business model, which should incorporate alternative fuel vehicles in the business process. Such a model would certainly minimize the overall BPCs in terms of fewer repairs and maintenance expenses, high tax incentives, government subsidies and less environmental taxes (King, 2008; Mai and Schlesinger, 2011; Nieuwenhuis and Wells, 2012).

On the other hand, sustainable business operations must be undertaken to mitigate the ill effects of climate change and avoid the negative impact of business operations on profit, people and the planet at large. Therefore, an integrated view of a business's economic, environmental and social performance is needed to tackle the present vulnerable situation (Seuring, 2004; Carter and Liane Easton, 2011; Pernestål *et al.*, 2020; AmaroVerneque *et al.*, 2021).

Another study by Palak *et al.* (2014) noted that efficient transportation minimizes the overall negative environmental impact and cost to the company. Adopting Full Battery Vehicles in business logistics is one of the structural changes in the supply chain. It can assist in mitigating the adverse environmental effects of carbon emissions (Tran *et al.*, 2012). Designing new business models considering sustainability is also a necessary part of the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) framework. EV-based business models could contribute to the sustainability of both business and the environment at large (Vasileiou and Morris, 2006; Vachon and Klassen, 2007; Jiao and Evans, 2016; Juan *et al.*, 2016).

Adopting alternative fuel vehicles in various aspects of the economy can pave the way for SD. However, adopting these vehicles in business processes requires more research support and technological advancement. Further, the usage of these vehicles can help to cut the overall fossil fuel import in the future and can assist in strengthening the economy at a more significant rate (Malik *et al.*, 2018; Narayan and Luthra, 2022). Business organizations would certainly gain many advantages by transitioning to EVs as it minimizes the overall organizational cost and maximizes productivity. Furthermore, it enhances the environmental concern and organizational reputation at large (Handfield *et al.*, 1997; Esty and Winston, 2009) [5].

The review of the literature revealed that past studies have attempted to emphasize only the wide significance of adopting EVs in business operations to achieve sustainability in the long run. However, the majority of earlier literature focused on the use of EVs only in the logistics industry and not in all other industries in a conceptual way (Smith, 2010; Kushwaha and Sharma, 2016; Narayan and Luthra, 2022). No studies have tried to evaluate EV adoption from business and industry perspectives. That is, empirical evaluations of the significance of EVs in the business house and their impact on profitability and sustainability should be

studied. So, the present study is intended to examine the perception of operations managers on the impact of EVs on BPCs and SD. The present study is thus focused on the use of EVs in any type of business house and their impact on overall BPCs and SD.

3. Research questions

Research questions show the direction for any research activities. The following research questions were framed based on the review of earlier studies and the literature gap identified:

- (1) What are the costs and benefits of using EVs in business?
- (2) What is operations managers' perception of the impact of EVs on business processes?
- (3) How does the usage of E-vehicles impact SD?

4. Research objectives

From the literature gap and the analysis of conceptual aspects pertaining to the title of the paper, the following objectives are framed:

- (1) To conceptually analyze the cost and benefits of using EVs in business processes.
- (2) To analyze the perception of operations managers on the impact of EVs in the business process.
- (3) To evaluate E-vehicle usage and its impact on SD.

5. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

Designing a business model that strives to balance business processes and SD is an essential aspect of the contemporary business world (Mohan Das Gandhi *et al.*, 2006; Lamptey *et al.*, 2021; Dias, 2022). Such a business model certainly brings many opportunities and helps gain a huge market competitive advantage. Many strategies and methodologies can be induced in business processes to trade off between environmentally friendly operations and SD contribution of business (Pernestål *et al.*, 2020). The adoption of EVs in business processes is one of the most feasible ways to achieve this.

The use of EVs in the business process certainly alters the functions of business and minimizes the overall cost through different ways, such as

- (1) Lower running cost of vehicles.
- (2) Minimization of maintenance cost of fuel-based vehicles.
- (3) Increased tax incentives on the use of EVs.
- (4) Lowered environmental tax burden.

Reducing such costs contributes to minimizing the overall BPC (Nieuwenhuis and Wells, 2012; Pernestål *et al.*, 2020; Tyagi and Vishwakarma, 2022). Hence, it is hypothesized that (H_1) the use of EVs minimizes overall BPCs.

On the other hand, EVs used in the business process also help to undertake several other environmentally friendly activities, which in turn would contribute to SD at large (Vasileiou and Morris, 2006; Vachon and Klassen, 2007; Jiao and Evans, 2016; Juan *et al.*, 2016; Jain, 2022). Further, the adoption of EVs in business operations also helps a firm to enjoy sustainable leadership in the market.

Environmental benefits of using EVs in the business process may include the following:

- (1) Reducing the carbon footprint of the organization.
- (2) Improving employees' health and safety through ensuring better air quality and minimizing exposure to NO₂ and other pollutants.
- (3) Compliance with environmental regulations.
- (4) Reduced exploitation of natural or non-renewable energy in a significant manner.

These environmental aspects of the use of EVs in the business process help to carry the business function in a sustainable way and in turn, it makes the company a sustainable organization [6], [7]. If business organizations operate across the globe and initiate EVs in their process, then it certainly supports the achievement of sustainable goals set by various international bodies. By this, it is hypothesized that (**H₂**) the use of EVs in the business process significantly contributes to SD (Figure 1).

6. Research methodology

6.1 Research design

The present study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, also known as the triangulation approach. This method uses multiple techniques to develop a comprehensive understanding of particular research issues in the most scientific manner (Patton, 1999; Cooper *et al.*, 2006; Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007). The quantitative data were collected through a well-structured questionnaire and qualitative data were collected through a focused group interview. Descriptive analysis is conducted to describe the managers' perception and inferential analysis is used to test the hypotheses.

6.2 Study population

Managers of operations of firms were selected as a study population. Here, the researcher collected the opinion of firms' managers to understand the cost and benefits of using EVs in business processes and their role in SD. Full-time operations managers who oversee the operations of the organizations are considered for the study. These managers are the right persons who have proper knowledge of business processes.

6.3 Instrument development

Since there is no standard measurement instrument in the published literature to measure the impact of EVs usage in Business Processes and on Sustainable Development through the cost

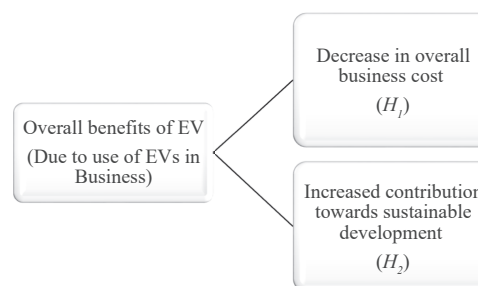


Figure 1.
Conceptual model

Source(s): Authors compiled

and benefits involved, researchers developed a questionnaire with a systematic and scientific procedure. They tested the validity and reliability of the tool developed.

(1) Item generation

With the help of previous studies and Focus Group studies, the researcher developed items to measure predetermined constructs, namely, *Business Process Cost (BPC)*, *Business Process Benefits (BPB)* and *Sustainable Development (SD)* from the managers' perception view. A focused group discussion was conducted among academicians, manufacturing staff, industrialists and accountants, and auditors. Each focus group consisted of five expert members (see Appendix). Open-ended questions were asked like, "What do you think of the use of EVs in the business process?" "Does the use of EVs reduce process cost?" and "How use of electric vehicles helps in SD?". The opinions were recorded and later conducted content analysis to generate a few items for constructs. In the initial stage, the researcher identified seven items for BPC, six for BPB, and five for SD. Later, after getting an expert opinion, it was reduced to five items in each construct. Table 1 shows the pool of items and the source used to develop the item.

6.4 Sampling procedure

To finalize the sample size, the two-step formulae method is followed. A pre-survey was conducted to find the population proportion in the first step. The researchers visited 100 organizations to find out whether those organizations used EVs during their business processes. Out of these 100 randomly visited organizations, only 9 were using EVs. Therefore, the population proportion for the current study is 9%. Based on population proportion, formulae are used to find sample size (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970). The final sample size derived is 138.

6.5 Type of data and data collection process

The present paper employs both primary and secondary sources of information. Secondary sources of information are gathered from published sources such as newspapers, survey reports published by the government ministry and other published academic research articles. The secondary sources were used to write literature and to develop a conceptual framework. The primary source of information is collected through a structured research questionnaire from the operations managers working in select firms in various industrial zones of Mysore city and collected primary data were used in the discussion part. A structured questionnaire was formulated after reviewing related literature and focused group discussions with the various experts (see Appendix). The structured questionnaire was distributed and administered to the operations managers of selected 150 organizations from the sample frame of 236 organizations that are using EVs in their business operations. The sample frame was prepared as per the information gathered from the regional transport office, Mysore. Out of the questionnaires distributed, 147 filled questionnaires were collected from the managers. Out of the received questionnaires, 144 were completed questionnaires. Accordingly, 138 completed questionnaires were randomly selected for further analysis as per the sample size determined.

6.6 Statistical tools used

Descriptive statistics such as Percentage, Mean and Standard deviation were used to describe the sample profile and managers' perceptions. Exploratory Factor Analysis is used to identify the factors representing perception and Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted to verify whether the identified items perfectly represent the factors. Cronbach's Alpha test, Composite reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Fornell and Larcker test

Factors	Items	Source/Support
Business Process Benefits (BPB)	The use of EVs minimizes overall mobility (both people and products) costs to the organization. (BPB1)	[1], [6]
	Repairs and maintenance costs of EVs are less than that of petrol and diesel alternatives. (BPB2)	[1], [6]
	Tax exemption, incentives and subsidies provided by the Government reduce the overall cost of business. (BPB3)	Focused Group, [1], [6], [7]
	The overall maintenance cost of EVs is less, and the initial cost is high. (BPB4)	[6], [7]
	The use of EVs helps in adopting eco-friendly green business operations. (BPB5)	Malik <i>et al.</i> (2018), Pernestål <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Business Process Cost (BPC)	The use of electric vehicles in business organizations minimizes overall costs. (BPC1)	[5], [6], [7]
	The initial investment in electric vehicles is high, but businesses can get depreciation benefits. (BPC2)	Focused Group [6]
	Due to the use of electric vehicles, the overall consumption of fuel is minimized. (BPC3)	Focused Group [6]
	Overall working capital requirements for businesses will be minimized after introducing electric vehicles. (BPC4)	[6], [7]
	Tax incentives and other benefits allowed by the Government on the use of electric vehicles positively impact the overall business process costs. (BPC5)	[4], [5], [6], [7]
Sustainable Development (SD)	Due to the use of electric vehicles in business logistics, carbon emission levels can be minimized. (SD1)	Sunderlin (1995), Sridhar (2012), Quak and Nesterova (2014), [4], [5]
	Using electric vehicles in business processes positively impacts the natural environment in which the business operates. (SD2)	Focused Group, Pernestål <i>et al.</i> (2020), [4]
	The use of electric vehicles maximizes the triple-bottom-line performance of the business. (SD3)	Pernestål <i>et al.</i> (2020), Tyagi and Vishwakarma (2022)
	The use of electric vehicles in business processes minimizes the exploitation rate of non-renewable energy. (SD4)	Focused Group [5]
	The adoption of electric vehicles for business processes is one of the sustainable business practices as it preserves non-renewable energy for future generations. (SD5)	[5]

Table 1.
Pool of items and their
source/support

Source(s): Authors compiled

were conducted to test the validity and reliability of the instrument. Further, Structural Equation Model (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses and confirm the developed model.

6.6.1 Exploratory factor analysis. Exploratory Factor Analysis was used as a dimension-reduction technique to determine each item's factor loading. This allows the researcher to decide whether to retain or remove a particular item for further analysis (Fabrigar and Wegener, 2011; Cureton and D'Agostino, 2013). Therefore, the researcher conducted EFA, and the result is tabulated in Table 2.

The minimum factor loading criteria was set to 0.50 (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). Since the factor loading of each item is greater than 0.5, all items under each factor significantly

					Electric vehicles in business processes
Factors	Items	1	2	3	
Business Process Benefits (BPB)	BPB1	0.766			
	BPB2	0.745			
	BPB3	0.850			
	BPB4	0.720			
	BPB5	0.848			
Business Process Cost (BPC)	BPC1		0.771		103
	BPC2		0.874		
	BPC3		0.818		
	BPC4		0.815		
	BPC5		0.829		
Sustainable Development (SD)	SD1			0.741	
	SD2			0.822	
	SD3			0.804	
	SD4			0.745	
	SD5			0.854	
Source(s): Authors compiled					Table 2. Construct and loadings

represent the respective constructs. Further, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy showed 0.828 (accepted level greater than 0.7) and Bartlett’s test of Sphericity showed *p*-value lesser than 0.001. This indicates that the correlation matrix is statistically significant.

6.6.2 Confirmatory factor analysis. The measurement models were tested using the structural equation modelling technique. IBM SPSS Analysis of a Moment Structures (AMOS) 24 was used to assess the goodness of fit, CR, convergent, and discriminant validity. Confirmatory Factor Analysis is a technique used to confirm items or factors which perfectly represent constructed factors (Hoyle, 2000; Fabrigar and Wegener, 2011; Brown and Moore, 2012; Cureton and D’Agostino, 2013). From the result of confirmatory factor analysis, all items perfectly fit each construct they represent (loading greater than 0.5). Later, fit indices are calculated to know the model’s overall fit. The result of fit indices and the respective threshold levels set by Brown and Moore (2012) are tabulated in Table 3.

The table of fit indices exhibits that the fit indices of the model are acceptable for the three considered factors. Even though the *p*-value is less than 0.01, the sample size is good enough to ignore the limitation. Therefore, it was concluded that the three-factor model fits the data well.

6.6.3 Reliability and validity analysis. The CR coefficient was calculated for each factor to evaluate the internal consistency of items measuring the construct. Table 4 shows the CR and

Fit indices	Threshold level	Value	Table 3. Fit indices
X ² /df		277.799/87	
P	Insignificant	0.000	
CMIN/df	≤5	3.193	
SRMR	≤0.08	0.06	
RMSEA	≤0.06	0.05	
CFI	≥0.90	0.92	
TLI	≥0.90	0.95	
PGFI	Range of 0.50	0.70	
Source(s): Authors compiled			

AVE. Since CR coefficients are greater than 0.6, measures in the study are reliable (Hair *et al.*, 2012).

The opinion of experts in the industry and academia was taken to check the questionnaire's content validity; later, the AVE determined the convergent validity of the measures. If the average variance is greater than 0.5, then it establishes convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Since the AVE in respect of all three factors is greater than 0.5, it can be concluded that all measures showed convergent validity. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the diagonal values (square root of AVE) should be greater than vertical values (inter-correlation). Since all diagonal values (shown in *italics* values in Table 3) are greater than vertical values, this indicates the discriminant validity between the construct measures.

7. Sample profile

Questionnaires were distributed among the various operations managers working in the organization to know their perceptions of the use of EVs in business processes and their impact on the BPC and SD. Out of the total 150 managers selected for the data collection process, the researchers considered the perception of 138 managers as per the sample size determined. Among them, a majority of 47% were Production supervisors, 31.9% were Operations managers and 21% were Functional foremen. Researchers attempted to collect information from different industry categories and were able to collect data from the Manufacturing industries (59.4%), Service (20.3%) and Trading industries (20.3%). The experience of managers showed that while 37.7% have 10–14 years of experience, nearly 40% of them had an experience of more than 15 years in the industry. The sampling distribution shows that managers have adequate experience to give proper input regarding the study, and the researchers have covered the three sectors of the industry (Table 5).

Table 4.
Validity measures

	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	BEN	BPC	SD
BEN	0.891	0.62	0.4624	0.442225	<i>0.787401</i>		
BPC	0.912	0.676	0.4225	0.4225	0.65	<i>0.822192</i>	
SD	0.895	0.631	0.9604	0.442225	0.68	0.65	<i>0.794355</i>

Source(s): Authors compiled

Table 5.
Demographic profile

Demographic profile parameter	Categories	Frequencies	Percentages
Nature of industry	Manufacturing	82	59.4%
	Service	28	20.3%
	Trading	28	20.3%
	<i>Total</i>	138	100%
Designation	Operations manager	44	31.9%
	Production supervisor	65	47.1%
	Functional foremen	29	21%
	<i>Total</i>	138	100%
Experience	5–9	32	23.2%
	10–14	52	37.7%
	15–19	43	31.2%
	20 above	11	8%
	<i>Total</i>	138	100%

Source(s): Authors compiled

8. Analysis and discussion

This section of the paper deals with analyzing and interpreting the collected data. The analysis has been classified into two parts based on the study's objectives. In the first part, the descriptive analysis and *t*-test have been employed to explain the managers' perception of the benefits of EVs on various aspects of business processes and SD. In the second part, an SEM was generated through AMOS and was used to test the relationship between variables.

8.1 Managers' perception of benefits of EVs on business process

The Industrial managers are the real observers and experienced persons who experienced the industrial working environment. In the case of new methods, technologies and resources employed in the business process, the impact of such new inducements is primarily observed by them, and their observation provides valuable input for modifications and further improvements. The employment of EVs in the business process is one such technological inducement. Therefore, the perception of industrial managers serves as a valid input for the present research. This section of the paper deals with the descriptive analysis of managers' perceptions of the benefits of EVs on business processes.

Table 6 shows the managers' perception of the benefits of EVs on business processes. The managers agreed that using EVs minimizes overall mobility costs, for both people and products, to the organization ($M = 3.34$), and the use of EVs helps adopt eco-friendly green business operations ($M = 3.37$). Further, the managers agreed that tax exemption, incentives and subsidies provided by the Government reduce the overall cost of business ($M = 3.38$), and repairs and maintenance costs of EVs are less than that of petrol and diesel alternatives ($M = 3.25$). The managers also agreed that though the initial cost of EVs is high, the maintenance cost is low ($M = 3.25$). The overall mean and standard deviation are 3.32 ± 1.19 , which shows that managers agreed that the usage of EVs has positive benefits on their business process. One sample *t*-test was conducted to know the significance of the opinion given by managers' and the result shows a significant *p*-value of less than 0.01, which indicates that the opinion given by the respondent managers is statistically significant. Thus, it is clear that the use of EVs offers more benefits than fuel-based vehicles and business organizations can reap its benefits for their efficient performance (Pernestål *et al.*, 2020; Tyagi and Vishwakarma, 2022; Dias, 2022, [8]).

8.2 Managers' perception of the impact of EVs on BPC

The primary intention behind the use of EVs is to minimize the overall BPC [4], [5], [6], [7]. The actual impact of EVs on BPCs is witnessed by the managers working in the industry in which

	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
The use of EVs minimizes overall mobility (both people and products) costs to the organization	138	3.34	1.093	3.595	0.000
Repairs and maintenance costs of EVs are less than that of petrol and diesel alternatives	138	3.25	1.256	2.372	0.019
Tax exemption, incentives and subsidies provided by the Government reduce the overall cost of business	138	3.38	1.197	3.621	0.000
The overall maintenance cost of EVs is less, and the initial cost is high	138	3.25	1.241	2.297	0.023
The use of EVs helps in adopting eco-friendly green business operations	138	3.37	1.180	3.588	0.000
Overall	138	3.32	1.19	3.10	0.000

Source(s): Authors compiled

Table 6.
Managers' perception
of benefits of EV on
business process

EVs are induced. So, by keeping this aspect in mind, the perception of managers on the impact of EVs on BPCs is analyzed. The descriptive analysis of their perception is presented in this section.

Table 7 shows that the managers agreed that the use of EVs in business organizations minimizes overall cost ($M = 3.61$) and agreed that due to the use of EVs, overall fuel consumption is minimized ($M = 3.37$). Further, managers also agreed that the initial investment in EVs is high. However, businesses can get depreciation benefits ($M = 3.32$), and tax incentives and other benefits allowed by the Government on the use of EVs positively impact the overall BPCs ($M = 3.31$). The managers agreed that the overall working capital requirement for the business would be reduced once the EVs are introduced ($M = 3.29$). The overall mean and standard deviation are 3.38 ± 1.27 , indicating that managers agreed that using EVs positively impacts BPCs. One sample *t*-test was conducted to know the significance of the opinion given by managers' and the result shows a *p*-value less than 0.01, which exhibits that the opinion given by the respondent managers is statistically significant.

8.3 Managers' perception of the impact of EVs on SD

The primary reason for adopting EVs is that it is environmentally friendly and eliminates the consumption and exploitation of non-renewable natural resources. Further, it reduces carbon emissions (Sunderlin, 1995; Sridhar, 2012; Quak and Nesterova, 2014; Dias, 2022) and promotes green business operations (Malik *et al.*, 2018; Pernestål *et al.*, 2020; Jain, 2022). This, in turn, impacts on SD. Therefore, some survey questions have been framed to gather the perception of managers on the impact of EVs on SD. This section deals with the descriptive analysis of their perception regarding the impact of EVs on SD.

Table 8 shows that the managers agreed that using EVs in business processes minimizes the exploitation rate of non-renewable energy ($M = 3.44$) and positively impacts the natural environment in which the business operates ($M = 3.40$). Further, managers agreed that using EVs maximizes the triple-bottom-line performance of the business ($M = 3.36$) and that carbon emission levels can be minimized due to using EVs in business logistics ($M = 3.33$). Also, they agreed that adopting EVs for business preserves non-renewable energy for future generations ($M = 3.25$). The overall mean and standard deviation are 3.36 ± 1.19 , indicating that managers agreed that using EVs in the business process helps SD. One sample *t*-test was conducted to know the significance of the opinion given by managers' and the result shows a *p*-value less than 0.01, which exhibits that the opinion given by the managers is statistically significant.

Table 7.
Managers' perception
of impact of EVs on
business process cost

	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
The use of electric vehicles in business organizations minimizes overall costs	138	3.61	1.264	5.657	0.000
The initial investment in electric vehicles is high, but businesses can get depreciation benefits	138	3.32	1.261	2.969	0.004
Due to the use of electric vehicles, overall consumption of fuel is minimized	138	3.37	1.273	3.409	0.001
Overall working capital requirement for businesses will be minimized after introducing electric vehicles	138	3.29	1.268	2.685	0.008
Tax incentives and other benefits allowed by the Government on the use of electric vehicles positively impact overall business process costs	138	3.31	1.296	2.790	0.006
Overall	138	3.38	1.27	3.502	0.002

Source(s): Authors compiled

	N	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Due to the use of electric vehicles in business logistics, the carbon emission level can be minimized	138	3.33	1.216	3.219	0.002
The use of electric vehicles in business processes positively impacts the natural environment in which business operates	138	3.40	1.231	3.762	0.000
The use of electric vehicles maximizes the triple-bottom-line performance of the business	138	3.36	1.193	3.510	0.001
The use of electric vehicles in business processes minimizes the exploitation rate of non-renewable energy	138	3.44	1.313	3.956	0.000
The adoption of electric vehicles for business processes is one of the sustainable business practices as it preserves non-renewable energy for future generations	138	3.25	1.237	2.340	0.021
Overall	138	3.36	1.24	3.36	0.000

Source(s): Authors compiled

Table 8.
Managers' perception
of impact of EVs on
sustainable
development

8.4 Structural model assessment

An SEM (see Figure 2) generated through AMOS was used to test the relationships between variables. A good fitting model is accepted if the value of the CMIN/df is <5, and the goodness-of-fit indices (GFI) (Hair *et al.*, 2010), the Tucker and Lewis (1973) index (TLI) and

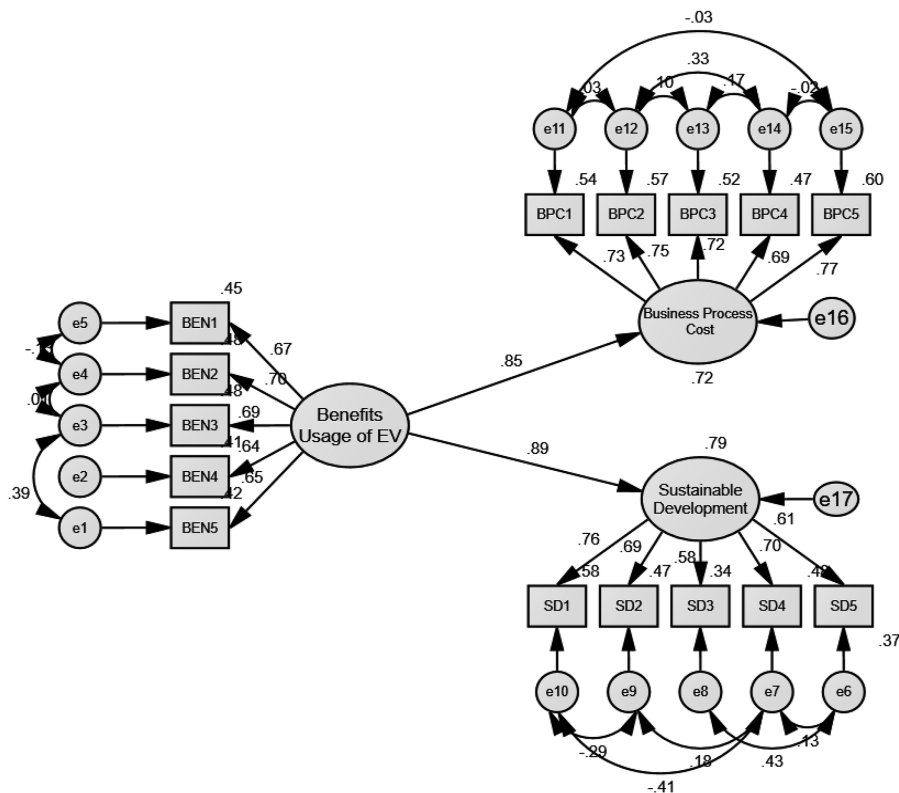


Figure 2.
Tested model

Source(s): Author compiled

the Confirmatory fit index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990) are >0.90 (Hair *et al.*, 2010, 2012). In addition, an adequate fitting model is accepted if the AMOS computed value of the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) <0.05 and the root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) is between 0.05 and 0.08 (Hair *et al.*, 2010). The fit indices for the model shown in Table 6 lie within the acceptable range: CMIN/df = 2.402, GFI = 0.980, TLI = 0.954, CFI = 0.922, SRMR = 0.04 and RMSEA = 0.052.

The Squared Multiple Correlation estimated that the Benefits in Usage of EVs explain 72.4% of the variance in BPC. In other words, the error variance of BPC is approximately 27.6% of the variance in BPC itself. Likewise, Benefits in the Usage of EVs explain 79% of the variance in SD. In other words, the error variance of SD is approximately 21% of the variance of SD itself.

The Notes for the Model showed a Chi-square value of 730.168 (d. f = 304) with a probability value less than 0.01, which indicates that the model's covariance structure is significantly different from the observed matrix of the data. If the Chi-square p -value is <0.05 , then the model is considered ill-fitting. However, since the sample size is large, it can be ignored.

The study evaluated the impact of EV usage on BPC (H1) and SD (H2). Table 9 shows that the Usage of EVs in Business Processes significantly impacts BPC ($b = 0.851$, $t = 8.037$, $p < 0.01$), and it also exhibits that the Usage of EVs in Business Process Significantly impacts SD ($b = 0.889$, $t = 7.923$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, the researchers accept both hypotheses at a 1% significance level.

9. Practical implications for policy formulation

Several studies in their outcome (Liu *et al.*, 2020; O'Neill, 2020; Aktar *et al.*, 2021) reported that industries and transportation contribute more than 60% to carbon emissions. In addition to this, industries are facing huge costs on transportation due to an increase in diesel rates and employee retention problems due to health and safety matters. Though literature proved the benefits of EVs in the business process, the adaptation of EVs in business is in the hands of top management. Therefore, this study helps to identify the management perception (especially the Operations Manager) about the use of EVs in the business process. These industries are already using EVs in the business process and enjoying cost-reduction benefits. Further, they are significantly contributing to SD and getting a reputation from the government by allowing less carbon into the environment. The findings of the study help the managers of other firms to understand the benefit of EVs in the production process and sustainable environment. It also helps the government to understand the importance of EVs in the business process and they can bring more subsidies or other incentives to organizations for the use of EVs in the industries. The model developed by researchers helps

Hypothesized relationship	Standardized estimates (b)	t-value	p-value	Decision
Usage of EVs in Business Process significantly impact Business Process Cost (H ₁)	0.851	8.037	0.000	Accept H ₁
The usage of EVs in Business Process significantly impact Sustainable Development (H ₂)	0.889	7.923	0.000	Accept H ₂
<i>R-Square</i>				
Business Process Cost	0.724			
Sustainable Development	0.790			
<i>Model fit</i>				
CMIN/df = 2.402, GFI = 0.980, TLI = 0.954, CFI = 0.922, SRMR = 0.04 and RMSEA = 0.052				
Source(s): Authors compiled				

Table 9.
Estimates and fit
indices

society to understand the impact of EVs on BPC and Benefit and their contribution to SD so that they can implement the use of EVs in their daily life too.

10. Conclusion

The purpose of the present research was to examine whether the use of EVs in the business process reduces the overall cost of operations and impacts SD at large. A self-constructed research instrument was used to evaluate the perceptual impact of EVs on BPCs and SD. The observations made during descriptive and inferential analysis revealed that the usage of EVs in the Business Process significantly impacts the BPC ($b = 0.851, t = 8.037, p < 0.01$), and it is also revealed that the usage of EVs in the business process can significantly impact SD ($b = 0.889, t = 7.923, p < 0.01$). These outcomes are consistent with the outcomes of (Smith, 2010; Palak *et al.*, 2014; Kushwaha and Sharma, 2016).

Finally, the study found that the adoption of EVs in the business process offers many benefits to business organizations such as minimized operational costs, eco-friendly business model, more tax incentives, less BPCs, low-emission footprint and contribution towards SD at large (Pernestål *et al.*, 2020; Tyagi and Vishwakarma, 2022). These results of the study add to the rapidly expanding field of research on the current topic and it also serves as one of the foundational research on EV-based business models.

The major limitation of this study is that it was only focused on BPCs and SD and not focused on other aspects such as challenges involved in the adoption of EVs and their maintenance. Further, the study focused only on the perception of operational managers and not focused on other experts. A further study could focus on these aspects to expand the research on the current topic and to build strong theoretical models which may support business organizations to reform their existing business model with the help of EVs.

Further, continued efforts are needed to make use of an EV-based business model to a larger extent. In the near future, environmentally friendly business models like EV-based models will become the solutions to changing business and environmental needs to reach SD goals (Malik *et al.*, 2018; Pernestål *et al.*, 2020; Jain, 2022).

Thus, the present study concludes that there is always a need to employ new methods and technologies in business operations to reap the benefits both in the context of business and the environment at large. The use of EVs in business would eradicate many logistic challenges such as the high cost of fuel, large emission footprint and higher environmental tax, among others (Sunderlin, 1995; Sridhar, 2012; Quak and Nesterova, 2014). Therefore, it may be concluded that EVs will be the primary source for business transportation in the near future and would offer many tangible and intangible benefits such as simplifying the business process, minimizing the overall logistics costs, improving profitability and contributing to SD at large. Thus, adopting EVs in the business process would help promote green business initiatives by preserving natural resources and regulating the harmful effects of carbon emissions. In the long run, these initiatives would serve all the business stakeholders, including the owners, employees, consumers, society, Government and the environment. Further, the outcome of this study may also become an input to the business organizations operating across the globe to redesign their business model with the help of EVs.

Notes

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Appendix

Sl. no.	Focus group	Background	Members
1	Academicians	Operations Management, Sustainable Development, Innovations in Business, Accounting, Finance and Cost Management	5
2	Manufacturing staff	Operations, Production and Supply Chain Management	5
3	Industrialists	Manufacturing and Service	5
4	Accountants and Auditors	Taxation, Costing, Finance and Cost Management	5
<i>Total</i>			20

Source(s): Compiled by the researchers

Table A1.
Details of focus group
interview

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