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Transgressive Voiceover Narration and Contested Audience Complicity in *The Wolf of Wall Street*: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse-Reception Analysis

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This study examines how a transgressive voice-over narrator sustains charisma while recounting fraud, addiction, sexual excess and legal exposure. Data comprise 199 JORDAN (V.O.) units from *The Wolf of Wall Street* screenplay and an IMDb reception corpus of 2,063 user reviews. The full review corpus was searched for recurring reception terms, and a purposive sample of 200 substantive reviews was qualitatively coded. Using corpus-assisted interactional-pragmatic discourse analysis, the study investigates how the narrating-I converts wrongdoing into performance, quantification, comedy and legal procedure, while positioning an implied audience as witness, consumer and occasional accomplice. The findings show that the voiceover is strongly self-centred, frequently quantified and rich in money, sex/body and drug vocabulary, but comparatively poor in explicit moral vocabulary. The narrating-I appears reflective through ironic distance from the acting-I, yet this split rarely becomes moral answerability. The voiceover does not simply recount criminal ascent; it sells a socially desirable identity built around money, masculine confidence, risk and survival. IMDb reviews further show that viewers publicly negotiate the same tension. Many reviewers describe the film as energetic, funny and seductive, whereas others criticize its lack of morality, victim erasure and possible glorification of Belfort's lifestyle. This pattern is described as pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction. These findings extend interactional pragmatics beyond participation management by demonstrating how voiceover systematically organizes moral positioning and how this positioning is reproduced, resisted and complicated in public reception discourse.

Keywords: voiceover narration, interactional pragmatics, dialogical self theory, moral neutralization, reception discourse

Narratives of wrongdoing do not always damage the narrator's self-image. Some narrators can publicly acknowledge greed, fraud, addiction, betrayal or exploitation while still appearing charismatic, funny, self-aware and in control. This creates a linguistic and pragmatic problem: how can transgressive narration make wrongdoing narratable without making the narrator fully answerable for it?

Film is a cultural product as much as a narrative one. As Teays (2012) observes, "with movies, we can explore complex ethical issues in a venue that allows us to feel, think and judge at the same time." For the present study, film is treated not only as a visual object but also as a site where language organizes moral attention. Recent work on screen narratives similarly treats television drama as a site where social meanings and audience engagement are produced (Adway, 2024; Yasin & Khan, 2022).

Language in films is also relevant because meaning in films is generated not only through plot and images, but through language, including dialogue, silence and tone. Dialogue in film is of special significance for analysis because it is designed to appear naturalistic yet performs carefully scripted pragmatic work (Kozloff, 2000). Voiceover is especially important because it can speak across diegetic and extradiegetic levels, addressing viewers while also commenting on the narrated world.

Recent work in film pragmatics has shifted voiceover from a narratological device of exposition or focalization to an interactional-pragmatic phenomenon. Dynel (2025) shows that voiceover narration can reorganize participation frameworks through narrator turns that operate at the production end, the reception end and the level of diegetic quasi-participation. Existing interactional-pragmatic research therefore explains how voiceover manages participation, but it has not adequately accounted for how voiceover reorganizes moral accountability across narrating selves, or how such moral positioning is reproduced, resisted and complicated in reception discourse. The present study addresses this limitation by examining voiceover not only as participation management, but also as a mechanism for organizing moral accountability and audience positioning.

To address this limitation, the article brings interactional pragmatics into dialogue with Dialogical Self Theory, moral neutralization and reception discourse. It proposes pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction as a framework for analysing cases where a retrospective narrator appears divided from a past acting self, yet uses that division to manage, rather than deepen, moral accountability. *The Wolf of Wall Street* is used as an empirical case because Jordan Belfort's homodiegetic voiceover offers a concentrated example of transgressive narration organized around split-self commentary, direct address, quantification, comedy and legal procedure.

The present study examines the voiceover narration in *The Wolf of Wall Street* screenplay. The analysis consists of 199 voiceover passages attributed to the narrating Jordan Belfort. It uses interactional pragmatics of voiceover narration, Dialogical Self Theory, moral neutralization and reception discourse to explain how the narrating-I manages a morally damaged self-image while directing audience attention toward charisma, comedy, money, expertise and survival.

The study also uses IMDb reviews as a receptional triangulation corpus. It contains 2,063 user reviews, many of which explicitly debate whether the film is comedy, critique, glamorization, satire or a morally empty spectacle. These reviews are not treated as controlled audience-response data. Rather, they are treated as public reception discourse. They show how viewers themselves negotiate the tension between attraction and moral unease.

Five research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: What corpus-assisted linguistic patterns characterize Jordan's voiceover narration in the screenplay?

RQ2: What interactional-pragmatic strategies does the narrating-I use to make morally transgressive conduct narratable?

RQ3: How does the voiceover construct the relationship between the narrating-I, the acting-I and the implied audience?

RQ4: How do IMDb reviewers negotiate the film's tension between entertainment, charisma, moral unease and perceived glorification?

RQ5: To what extent do IMDb reviews reproduce, resist or complicate the audience positions designed by the voiceover?

The study advances four closely related arguments. First, the interactional practices of voiceover examined in recent pragmatics research also operate in transgressive narration, as distinct from nostalgic or reflective narration. Second, Jordan's narration produces a pseudo-dialogical self: the narrating-I appears divided from the acting-I, but the split does not develop into sustained moral answerability. Third, the screenplay's voiceover transforms fraud, excess and legal danger into scale, comedy, knowledge and procedural risk. Fourth, IMDb reviews show that this moral appeal is socially debated as viewers adopt, reject or complicate the invitation to enjoy transgression. The study therefore contributes in three ways. It extends interactional-pragmatic voiceover analysis to transgressive narration, introduces pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction as an analytic concept, and demonstrates a replicable two-corpus design that links the interactional-pragmatic design of scripted voiceover narration to public reception discourse.

Literature Review

Voiceover narration and interactional pragmatics

Voiceover narration has been discussed in narratology and film studies as a means of explanation, memory and focalization (Bordwell, 1985; Chatman, 1990; Kozloff, 1988; Piazza, 2010). Beyond these narratological functions, pragmatics of fiction and film discourse treats voiceover as a communicative act with participant roles and reception effects (Dynel, 2011; Goffman, 1981; Janney, 2012; Jucker & Locher, 2017). Dynel's (2025) interactional-pragmatic account is especially important for this study because it treats voiceover as a turn structure that operates at the production end, the reception end and the level of diegetic quasi-participation. Dynel's call for further datasets directly motivates the present article, which tests these insights on another narrator and genre.

This perspective is central to the present study. Jordan's voiceover is not treated as a mere explanatory device or as simple exposition. It is treated as a pragmatic resource that organizes participation by addressing, instructing, joking with, challenging and sometimes implicitly involving the audience it constructs. In this sense, the voiceover does not only tell the story of fraud and excess; it frames how that story can be heard, judged and morally negotiated.

Narrative identity and split-self representation

McAdams' (1993) narrative identity theory suggests that an individual creates a sense of self by creating a life-long history based on their experiences. Wortham (2001) similarly emphasizes that narratives do not simply report events; they position speakers and characters across narrated and narrating events.

The present study draws on this distinction because Jordan's voiceover constantly separates the self who acted from the self who now narrates. Harrison's (2020) study of *The Handmaid's Tale* is useful here because it shows how voiceover can mediate split-self presentation, especially when linguistic features such as "you" address combine with filmic composition devices to shape audience interpretation. In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, however, the split self has a different ethical function. It is not primarily a structure of trauma or resistance. It is a mechanism of self-management: the narrating-I can mock, coach or correct the acting-I while preserving control over the moral meaning of the story.

Dialogical Self Theory and pseudo-dialogical selfhood

Dialogical Self Theory posits that there exist multiple I-positions within an individual's self structure that can interact with one another in unique ways (Hermans, 2001). Harré and Moghaddam (2003) explore this multiplicity from an interactionist perspective, asserting that subject positions are constructed through discourse and social relations. This framework is suitable for addressing how the narrating-I and acting-I are organized in the screenplay.

Tappan's (1999) extension of this framework includes a normative aspect that is missing in purely structural models. Tappan posits that authentic moral agency requires a special type of relationship between the authorial voice and the experiential voice: the narrator must allow the past or experiential self to address and potentially trouble the present authorial self. Raggatt (2015) similarly warns that multiplicity does not automatically produce meaningful dialogue. A self may contain several positions without allowing those positions to challenge one another.

This distinction allows the present study to develop the concept of pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction. The voiceover creates structural dialogicality because the narrating-I and acting-I are distinguishable. Yet it rarely creates moral dialogicality because the acting-I is narrated, mocked and managed rather than allowed to accuse the narrating-I. The self is split, but the split often protects rather than transforms the narrator.

Moral neutralization, pragmatic unreliability and transgression narratives

Scholars have examined multiple strategies through which storytellers account for immoral conduct. Presser (2004) identifies how offenders construct moral selves even while describing violence. Menard-Warwick (2005) shows how speakers can voice contradictory moral positions in transgression narratives. Phillips (2013)

demonstrates how available ideological vocabularies can transform contradictions into acceptable self-presentations.

Together, these studies show that accountability in transgression narratives can be managed across categorical, relational and ideological dimensions. The present study extends this concern to scripted film voiceover by showing how Jordan's narration redescribes wrongdoing through comedy, quantification, professional register, sales language and legal procedure. This is why Dynel's (2021) work on deception in multimodal film narrative is relevant. The issue here is not always factual lying. It is a form of moral-pragmatic misdirection in which the narrator guides attention toward excitement, scale and skill while moving victims, harm and remorse to the margins.

Corpus-assisted film pragmatics and reception discourse

Corpus-assisted approaches are useful because they reduce reliance on isolated memorable examples and allow recurring patterns to be checked across a defined dataset. Bednarek (2015) demonstrates the value of bringing corpus procedures into the analysis of television and film narratives, while Zykova's (2025) study offers a recent model for combining an ad hoc film corpus, manual pragmatic annotation and frequency-based evidence. The present study follows this general logic rather than a fully automated corpus-linguistic design: it uses systematic extraction, selected frequency counts, review-term searches and qualitative pragmatic coding to support the close analysis of scripted voiceover narration.

The second corpus in this study consists of IMDb reviews. In this case, reviewers repeatedly discuss the same issues that the voiceover analysis raises: energy, comedy, charisma, excess, moral discomfort, possible glorification, satire and victim absence. Voiceover research has long emphasized that voice choices shape authority, truth-value and representation (Drummer, 2014; Kozloff, 1988). The IMDb corpus allows this article to examine not only how the voiceover designs audience positions, but also how those positions are taken up or challenged in public commentary.

Previous work on *The Wolf of Wall Street*

Prior scholarly engagement with *The Wolf of Wall Street* has approached the film from several disciplinary positions. Laurence (2016) reads the film through moral ideology and late capitalism, showing why viewers may be drawn to a figure they are also invited to condemn. Brokerhof et al. (2025) offer a particularly important recent connection, finding that popular Wall Street narratives can relate to viewers' desired future work selves. This matters for the present study because it suggests that the film's moral problem is not only representational; it is also aspirational. Viewers may read Belfort not simply as a warning, but as a figure attached to fantasies of success, freedom and status.

The gap is therefore precise. Existing studies help explain the film's ideological ambivalence and its potential relation to viewer aspiration, but they do not show in detail how that ambivalence is produced by the voiceover's language. The present study fills this gap by isolating the full JORDAN (V.O.) corpus and asking how its interactional-pragmatic design makes transgression enjoyable, narratable and commercially reusable. The IMDb review corpus then adds a second layer: it shows how public reviewers explicitly debate the same tension between critique and attraction.

Method

Research design

This study uses corpus-assisted interactional-pragmatic discourse-reception analysis. The design combines close discourse analysis with selected frequency counts and public reception coding. It remains a qualitative, case-intensive study rather than a statistically generalizable study of all film voiceover narration. Its purpose is to explain how one influential transgressive narrator is linguistically and pragmatically constructed, and how public reviewers negotiate that construction.

The study is based on two corpora. Corpus A contains the screenplay voiceover units marked as JORDAN (V.O.). Corpus B contains IMDb user reviews. Corpus A provides the primary textual evidence for self-construction, moral neutralization and implied audience positioning. Corpus B provides receptional evidence for how public reviewers reproduce, resist or complicate that audience positioning.

Corpus A: Screenplay voiceover corpus

The source-text data for this study are taken from the screenplay of *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Winter, 2013), specifically the Buff Revised Pages version dated March 5, 2013. *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese, 2013) is a biographical crime film based upon the memoir of Jordan Belfort, a stockbroker convicted of securities fraud and money laundering. The object of analysis is not the real Belfort's psychology, but the diegetic narrating-I constructed by the screenplay.

All JORDAN (V.O.)-designated sections were extracted systematically. Each analytical unit was defined as a continuous stretch of voiceover attributed to Jordan from a JORDAN (V.O.) label until the next speaker label, scene transition or interruption by screenplay action. Speaker labels, scene descriptions, page headers and non-voiceover dialogue were excluded from the word count. The final corpus contains 199 analytical voiceover units and 3,664 strict spoken voiceover words. A raw search for JORDAN (V.O.) produces a slightly higher count because screenplay formatting sometimes includes continuation markers; these were not automatically treated as new units unless they introduced a new discrete stretch of voiceover discourse.

Corpus B: IMDb reception corpus

The user reviews were extracted from the IMDb website and comprise 2,063 publicly available user reviews of *The Wolf of Wall Street*. IMDb was selected because it provides a large, publicly accessible and film-specific archive of user reviews attached to a single film page. This made it suitable for examining extended public reception discourse, rather than platform-specific interactional debate, as might occur on discussion-based sites such as Reddit or Letterboxd. For the main qualitative reception analysis, a purposive sample of 200 substantive reviews was examined. Title-only, rating-only and empty spoiler-placeholder entries were excluded. The aim was not statistical generalization to all viewers but receptional triangulation: the reviews were used to identify how public reviewers discuss the same moral tensions identified in the voiceover corpus.

After text extraction and basic cleaning, the exported IMDb review file comprised approximately 298,932 running-word tokens. The full review corpus was also searched for key reception terms associated with the study's analytic categories, including comedy, entertainment, energy, excess, greed, money, morality, glorification and victim absence. These searches were not treated as statistical measures of audience attitude, but as a corpus-assisted map of salient public-reception vocabulary.

Corpus-assisted measures and coding

For Corpus A, the analysis counted first-person singular forms, first-person plural forms, second-person forms, money/success terms, legal/procedural terms, explicit moral vocabulary, drug terms, sex/body terms, numbers/quantifiers and adversative markers. These features were selected because they relate directly to self-reference, audience address, measurable achievement, legal accountability, moral scarcity and transgressive domains.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, the extracted voiceover corpus was cleaned by removing speaker labels, page headers, scene descriptions and non-voiceover dialogue. The cleaned corpus and IMDb

review corpus were then imported into NVivo for organization, exploratory word-frequency queries, text-search queries and qualitative coding. Targeted frequency counts were produced and checked through NVivo searches alongside spreadsheet-based and scripted searches. Searches were conducted case-insensitively, and related forms were grouped where analytically relevant; for example, moral-family forms included *moral*, *morally*, *morality*, *morals*, *immoral* and *amoral*. For Corpus A, the analysis recorded both raw frequency and the number of voiceover units in which each feature occurred. For Corpus B, the full IMDb review text was searched for recurring reception terms, and selected hits were checked in context before being used as evidence in the qualitative interpretation.

NVivo functioned as the main qualitative data-management and retrieval tool. It was used to store the two corpora, organize coding nodes, retrieve coded segments and compare patterns across the screenplay and review data. Interpretation, however, remained grounded in close iterative reading of the voiceover units and review excerpts rather than in software output alone.

Qualitative coding grouped the voiceover units into five functional families: self-performance, moral neutralization, legal proceduralization, pseudo-dialogical self-construction and implied audience positioning. Passages could receive more than one code when they performed more than one function. For example, a quantified statement about illegal profit could be coded as both self-performance and moral neutralization. Appendix A provides 30 short illustrative V.O. excerpts from the screenplay voiceover corpus, keyed to the five functional coding families. The appendix identifies the most salient functional family as the main code and records an overlapping pragmatic or social function as a secondary code where relevant.

For Corpus B, reviews were coded for eight reception patterns: charismatic appeal, entertainment/euphoria, comedy framing, moral unease, glorification critique, satire/critique defense, audience implication and victim absence. These categories were developed through iterative reading of the reviews, while also being informed by the voiceover findings. This allowed comparison between textual design and reception discourse without treating the reviews as direct proof of audience effects.

The concept of pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction was developed through an abductive and iterative analytical process. Initial coding was informed by Dialogical Self Theory and moral neutralization, while repeated reading of the voiceover corpus showed that Jordan's narrating-I/acting-I split repeatedly produced apparent self-reflection without sustained moral challenge. The concept therefore emerged through movement between theory, corpus patterns and close reading rather than through either purely deductive or purely inductive coding.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Trustworthiness was addressed through transparency, triangulation and peer audit. The corpus extraction process is reproducible because the screenplay marks the voiceover passages formally. A full voiceover index, review sampling log, codebook, frequency tables, representative examples and negative-case examples were prepared as supporting materials. The review corpus is also reproducible at the level of sampling criteria and coding categories. Following corpus-pragmatic practice in film discourse research, coded units retained contextual metadata rather than being treated as isolated quotations (Zykova, 2025).

The initial coding was conducted by the author, who maintained analytic notes on coding decisions, category refinements and borderline cases during the iterative reading process. A peer audit was also conducted. A colleague with a PhD in English linguistics and the rank of assistant professor independently reviewed 20% of the voiceover units and 20% of the IMDb review sample against the coding framework. Points of disagreement were discussed, category definitions were refined and borderline cases were checked again before the final coding was used. This procedure was used as a peer-audit process rather than a statistical intercoder-reliability test; therefore, no agreement coefficient is reported. Its purpose was to test category clarity, identify borderline cases and strengthen coding consistency. To maintain conceptual coherence, each theoretical framework was assigned a distinct analytical role: interactional pragmatics explains participation; Dialogical Self Theory explains the narrating-I/acting-I relation; moral neutralization explains accountability management; and reception discourse explains public uptake.

Ethical and copyright considerations

The study did not collect private participant data. Corpus A consists of a published screenplay used for scholarly analysis, and Corpus B consists of publicly posted IMDb reviews. The review analysis avoids reproducing usernames as evidence and uses only short fragments when necessary. The screenplay is copyrighted, so the full corpus is not redistributed. Supplementary reproducibility materials can instead provide voiceover ID numbers, page references, coding categories and short legally limited excerpts. This approach allows methodological transparency without reproducing the full screenplay or review archive.

Results

Corpus profile: self-centering, quantification and moral scarcity

The screenplay corpus consisted of 199 analytical voiceover units, comprising 3,664 strict spoken words. Most units are brief and compressed. In practice, they tend to work through classification, numerical precision, ironic correction, rhetorical questioning and direct address rather than through extended moral reflection.

Table 1

Corpus-assisted lexical profile of Jordan's voiceover corpus.

Feature	Frequency	Units containing feature	Percentage of corpus units
First-person singular forms	213	122	61.3%
First-person plural forms	36	24	12.1%
Second-person forms	47	24	12.1%
Numbers/quantifiers	87	55	27.6%
Money/success terms	41	32	16.1%
Legal/procedural terms	21	14	7.0%
Explicit moral vocabulary	2	2	1.0%
Drug terms	24	19	9.5%
Sex/body/masculine terms	61	50	25.1%
Adversative markers	34	30	15.1%

Table 1 shows a clear pattern. The voiceover is strongly self-centred and frequently quantified. It contains recurrent language of money, sex/body display, drugs and legal procedure, but comparatively few explicit moral terms. Self-reference, scale and transgressive domains are therefore not occasional features; they are recurring resources through which the voiceover organizes Jordan's narrated self.

The scarcity of explicit moral vocabulary does not mean that morality is absent from the narration. Rather, morality is displaced into other interactional resources: quantification, comedy, legal procedure and direct address. This finding extends interactional-pragmatic accounts of voiceover by showing that participation management can also operate as accountability management.

Table 1 also points to a wider social pattern. The voiceover codes financial charisma through masculinity, bodily excess and class aspiration. Money is not presented only as economic success; it is attached to sexual access, bodily confidence, group worship and the ability to dominate or recruit others. Jordan's narrated self is therefore not simply rich or criminal. It is constructed as a masculinized financial persona whose authority depends on appetite, risk, excess and command over other people's desire.

Transgression is admitted but converted into performance

The coding identified several recurrent mechanisms through which the narrating-I constructs and protects a favorable image of himself while recounting transgressive behavior. These mechanisms can be understood through one broader interactional-pragmatic finding: the narrator repeatedly admits transgression, but he converts it into performance, expertise, comedy or achievement before it can settle into moral accountability.

An adversative concession pivot acknowledges transgression and then immediately redirects it toward achievement, comedy or institutional failure. In these cases, the utterance briefly approaches moral recognition but then displaces it, so acknowledgment functions as a route to neutralization rather than as a move toward accountability.

Voiceover examples include V.O.26, “Though I knew I was selling garbage, within twelve weeks I was making a fortune”; V.O.71, “It was obscene—in the normal world. But who wanted to live there?”; and V.O.94, “The SEC knew I was doing something shady, but they couldn’t figure out what the fuck it was.” In each case, the utterance begins near moral recognition but ends by moving attention elsewhere: fortune, abnormality as freedom or institutional incompetence. The theoretical significance of this pattern is that concession does not necessarily produce accountability. In Jordan’s voiceover, acknowledgement becomes an interactional bridge away from blame and toward performance, humour or institutional failure.

Transgressive actions are also classified using vocabulary associated with expert levels of professionalism - commercial tiers, clinical stages and connoisseurship - and therefore transform transgressions into areas of expertise. The register implies mastery, not culpability. For instance, prostitution services are classified through stock-market categories such as “blue chips,” “NASDAQs” and “pink sheets,” while drug intoxication is organized into “the tingle phase,” “the slur phase,” “the drool phase” and “the amnesia phase.”

Quantification is another central strategy. Precise measures - dollars earned, time elapsed, shares sold and amounts moved - are emphasized without corresponding detail about legality or harm. V.O.2 states, “The year I turned 26, I made 49 million dollars as the head of my own brokerage firm.” V.O.3 immediately adds that this was “three shy of a million a week.” The comic complaint is effective because it converts criminal wealth into a joke about underachievement. Similarly, V.O.121 reports that a stock opened at “\$4.50 a share” and was over “eighteen dollars” three minutes later. The narrative thrill comes from speed and scale, not from the victims of manipulation.

Parallel listing produces a spectacle of abundance. V.O.8 places “Naomi and my two perfect kids” alongside a “mansion, private jet, six cars, three horses, two vacation homes and a 170 foot yacht.” V.O.9 continues the list by placing gambling, drinking, prostitution and federal investigation in the same grammatical rhythm. The syntax gives possessions, family, vices and criminal exposure the same narrative weight. This is one way the voiceover turns moral disorder into stylistic momentum.

Another mechanism is credential and legend construction. The narrating-I does not only claim to be successful; he repeatedly represents success as something already recognized by others. V.O.49 states that word had spread on Wall Street and that he was becoming a legend, while the Forbes profile is first called a “hatchet job” and then immediately absorbed as the source of superstardom. The negative article becomes proof of cultural visibility. The narrator’s self-image is not built through confession followed by repair, but through hostile recognition converted into status. Even criticism is turned into evidence that the self has become too large to ignore. The pragmatic move is therefore double: the narrator reports external judgment while stripping it of its evaluative force and retaining only its credentialing value.

Legal accountability replaces moral answerability

The voiceover repeatedly treats accountability as legal procedure rather than moral answerability. Legal terms appear in relation to the SEC, federal agencies, indictments, proof, arrest, jail, prison, cooperation and charges. Yet the narrator rarely dwells on guilt, harm, restitution or victims. This produces a form of accountability without moral reckoning. In positioning terms, Jordan is therefore not primarily positioned as a guilty moral agent, but as a procedural actor moving through investigation, proof, arrest and survival. The voiceover shifts accountability from ethical relation to institutional process.

All federally serious crimes are constantly referred to by non-formal, casual or professional vocabulary that reduces the seriousness of crime or illegality. V.O.94 refers to securities fraud as “something shady.” V.O.186 describes criminal financial activity as “something about laundering drug money through offshore boat racing and a guy named Rocky Aoki.” The phrase “something about” makes the charge sound vague and almost comic, even though the underlying issue is serious.

This pattern becomes clearer when the screenplay is read against the IMDb reception corpus. Some reviewers notice precisely what the voiceover tends to avoid. One review says the film is engaging but limited by its “lack of morality.” Another says the film “lacks a moral core,” and another complains that “we hardly get the other side or get to see a victim.” Public reviewers therefore register the same problem: the film’s energy can outpace its moral counterweight.

Two additional patterns strengthen this finding: blame externalization and providential attribution. When the Swiss banker is arrested, the narration frames the event as improbable misfortune rather than as a predictable outcome of an illegal concealment network. The later Benihana reference works similarly: institutional exposure is redescribed through comic fate and divine cruelty rather than through causal responsibility. The Qualalude-driving episode also shifts from danger to miracle. V.O.162 calls it an “absolute miracle” that Jordan was not killed and an even bigger miracle that he had not killed anyone. The sentence acknowledges possible death, but the structure makes survival the main point and potential victims a secondary clause. In this respect, the voiceover does not erase consequences completely; it reorganizes them so that their narrative value returns to Jordan’s exceptional survival.

Pseudo-dialogical self-construction: split self without moral transformation

The analysis found four different ways the dialogical relationship between the acting-I and the narrating-I can be configured. These configurations include ironic commentary on the acting-I, second-person self-address in crisis, outcome-only narration and retrospective superiority positioning.

The narrating-I views the acting-I from afar and employs irony or mock bewilderment. The acting-I is made to appear foolish rather than reprehensible. V.O.115 asks, “What kind of maniac abuses eye drops?” V.O.161 says, “Wow. Maybe I hadn’t made it home okay.” In both examples, the narrator recognizes absurdity but not moral responsibility. The effect is comic distance rather than ethical confrontation.

The narrating-I also addresses the acting-I in second-person by name, establishing a coach-client relationship between the two positions. V.O.74 states, “Think, Jordan, think! How can you get up to her apartment?!” The narrating-I says nothing like “I had to think” or “I had to try to get up to her apartment.” Instead, it refers to the acting-I as “Jordan,” placing the speaking position outside the action. The second-person form creates a narrator who observes and coaches instead of a self who acts and answers.

Outcome-only narration also limits moral dialogue. V.O.84-85 says “I felt horrible” and then, “Three days later I filed for divorce and moved Naomi into the apartment.” The emotional sentence is immediately followed by a sequential outcome. What happened to Teresa as a moral subject is not explored. The narrating-I maintains control by moving the story forward before the acting-I can be held in place long enough for moral interrogation.

These patterns produce pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction. The self is structurally divided because the narrating-I and acting-I are distinguishable. However, this division does not become morally dialogical. The acting-I is observed, mocked, coached and explained, but not permitted to challenge the narrating-I’s authority. Self-awareness becomes a rhetorical resource rather than a moral event. This is the main theoretical implication of the split-self pattern: dialogical structure alone does not guarantee moral dialogue. In this corpus, the split between narrating-I and acting-I allows the narrator to display self-distance while retaining control over moral interpretation.

Implied audience positioning as interactional pragmatics

Jordan’s voiceover does not only manage the relationship between narrating-I and acting-I. It also manages the audience’s position. In interactional-pragmatic terms, the narration creates a reception end even though viewers cannot reply. The voiceover asks questions, gives commands, explains how systems work, assumes shared desire and occasionally assigns the audience a gendered body.

The voiceover’s interactional profile can also be described through recurrent pragmatic orientations. Drawing loosely on speech-act distinctions between assertives, directives, expressives and commissives (Searle,

1976), Table 2 summarizes the main orientations coded in NVivo. The categories are used analytically rather than as a rigid count, since many voiceover units perform more than one pragmatic function.

Table 2

Recurrent pragmatic orientations in Jordan's voiceover narration.

Pragmatic orientation	Typical realization	Pragmatic function
Assertive narration	Reports events, numbers, outcomes and business facts	Authorizes the narrating-I and projects control over the narrated world
Evaluative-expressive commentary	Jokes, mock surprise, insults, admiration and charged description	Turns excess and wrongdoing into comic or affective performance
Directive address	Commands, prompts and invitation-like imperatives	Recruits the audience as an addressed recipient or trainee observer
Rhetorical interrogative	Viewer-facing questions that do not request a real answer	Simulates interaction while steering interpretation
Classificatory declaration	Labels, taxonomies, rankings and insider categories	Transforms transgression into expertise or connoisseurship
Sales-oriented promise	Aspirational framing, transformation promises and infomercial logic	Converts biography into a sellable model of success

These orientations show that Jordan's voiceover is not only descriptive. It repeatedly combines reporting, evaluating, joking, categorizing and recruiting. This layered pragmatic design helps explain why the narration can normalize fraud and excess while still sounding vivid, confident and socially engaging. This supports the view that voiceover organizes participation, but extends it by showing that the addressed audience is also positioned morally and commercially. The reception end is not only invited to understand the story; it is invited to consume Jordan's narrated self.

The script repeatedly places the audience in an addressed position before moral interpretation can take shape. V.O.5 asks, "See that humongous estate down there? That's my house." V.O.18 asks, "You want to know what money sounds like? Visit a trading floor on Wall Street." V.O.11 commands, "Check this out." These forms turn the audience into addressed recipients, not distant observers.

The narrating-I also addresses the audience assuming that they participate in similar desires, appetites or value systems. V.O.13 claims that money buys "a better life" and "makes you a better person." The utterance does not invite the audience to debate whether this is true. It performs as if the claim belongs to a shared moral economy. The voiceover also positions the audience as consumers of Jordan's narrated self. The later infomercial passages recycle the origin story, achievement quantification and transformation promise already used in the voiceover. What first appears as autobiography later becomes a product.

This commercial structure becomes most visible in the late infomercial sequence. The origin story, the quantified success and the promise of transformation reappear as selling points in the seminar advertisement. The audience is therefore not recruited only at the moment when the seminar is announced. From the opening voiceover onward, Jordan's narrated self is organized as a product: humble beginnings establish relatability, numbers establish proof, and direct address creates a prospective customer. The screenplay's audience positioning is thus not merely a matter of intimacy or direct contact. It is a sales relation in which the viewer is trained to consume the self before the film reveals that self as a commodity.

This commercial audience positioning is also socially gendered. Jordan's voiceover repeatedly presents wealth as a route to masculine recognition, sexual access and group authority. Finally, embodied substitution assigns a male-coded heterosexual body to the audience. V.O.7 commands the audience to "put your dick back in your pants," while V.O.70 and V.O.81 similarly use second-person bodily substitution. The audience is not merely asked to hear Jordan's story; it is temporarily placed inside a gendered economy of money, sex and desire. This is why audience positioning in the screenplay is not only cognitive or moral. It is also bodily, masculine and commercial.

However, this masculine persona is not fully stable. The same voiceover that sells confidence also exposes bodily failure and comic loss of control, as when Jordan claims he could fly while "seeing two of everything" (V.O.11), classifies his Quaalude collapse through the "drool phase" (V.O.151), and later admits,

“Maybe I hadn’t made it home okay” (V.O.161). The gendered audience position is therefore dominant, but it is also undercut by moments where masculine control collapses into addiction, incapacity and ridicule.

IMDb reception: charisma, comedy, moral unease and contested complicity

The IMDb reception corpus shows that the tensions identified in the voiceover are also salient in public discourse. As Table 3 indicates, reviewers repeatedly describe the film as energetic, funny and seductive, while others criticize its moral emptiness, limited attention to victims and possible glorification of Belfort’s lifestyle.

Table 3

Keyword evidence for main reception frames in the full IMDb review corpus.

Reception frame in the full IMDb review corpus	Keyword evidence
Money/greed/excess	money: 688; greed: 332; excess/excessive forms: 485
Comedy/entertainment/energy	comedy: 313; entertaining: 307; funny: 280; hilarious: 194; energy: 147
Moral unease	moral-family forms (moral, morally, morality, morals, immoral, amoral): 294 combined occurrences
Glorification debate	glorif- forms: 104; glamor/glamour forms: 35
Victim absence	victim: 49
Charisma and attraction	charismatic: 48; enticing: 4; “swept along”: 2
Audience implication / alignment	rooting: 7; root for: 17; “wanted it for myself”: 2; “swept along”: 2
Condemnation / critique	condemn forms: 20; denounce forms: 4; criticized/criticised: 5
Satire/critique defense	satir- forms: 76
Narration and address-device salience	narration: 45; voice-over/voiceover/voice over forms: 23; narrator: 5; fourth wall: 12

Figure 1 presents a data-faithful word cloud based on selected recurring content and reception terms in the IMDb corpus. Title words, actor/director names, reviewer names, platform words and common stop words were excluded; word size was scaled to the verified corpus counts used in the reception analysis.

Figure 1.

Frequency-weighted word cloud of selected IMDb review terms, based on the corpus counts reported in Table 3.



The qualitative review sample clarifies what these counts mean. One review says some people view the film as a “glorification” of Belfort’s lifestyle and “want to be like him,” while also arguing that the film shows how empty and destructive that life can be. The wording holds destruction and attraction together: the film is recognized as destructive, yet its form remains enticing. Another reviewer writes that there is an “instantaneous joy, energy and euphoria” in watching the film, paralleling Jordan’s own life of speed and excess.

The full-corpus scan indicates that the review corpus is not only a set of isolated striking comments. Comedy, entertainment, energy, excess and morality recur across the reviews as a whole, while the qualitative sample shows how reviewers combine these frames in extended judgments. Public reception is therefore structured around ambivalence rather than simple approval or rejection. The significance of this ambivalence is that reception discourse does not simply mirror the film’s moral positioning. It reproduces, resists and

complicates that positioning, which is why IMDb reviews are useful here as evidence of public negotiation rather than as proof of direct audience effects.

The reviews also register the narration device itself. In the exported review corpus, narration appears 45 times, voice-over/voiceover/voice over forms appear 23 times, narrator appears five times and fourth wall appears 12 times. These references are not numerous compared with broad evaluative terms such as money, story or performance, but they are analytically relevant because they show that some reviewers explicitly notice the film's addressive design. Several reviews describe the device as breaking the fourth wall, talking directly to the camera, or using voice-over to explain and inform situations. Others evaluate the same device differently: one praises the film's "superb narration," another calls the voice-overs "tedious," and another describes the voiceover narration as "self-aware, confessional, and dripping with irony." Public reception therefore responds not only to the film's moral content but also to the narrational and addressive mechanism that Corpus A isolates.

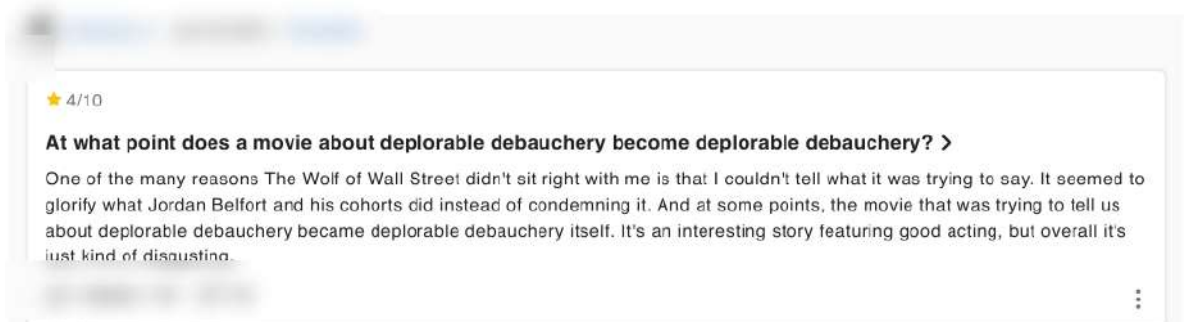
Other reviewers openly describe audience implication. One review says the viewer is "swept along" and that the film shows "how easy it is to get caught up in the grab for success, for money, for status." The same reviewer admits being "glad to be part of it" and wanting it "for myself," before criticizing the film for failing to balance the appeal. The wording mirrors the audience position designed by the voiceover: witness, consumer and temporary participant.

Not all reviewers accept that position. Some resist it. One negative review asks, "At what point does a movie about deplorable debauchery become deplorable debauchery?" and argues that the film seemed to glorify Belfort instead of condemning him. Others take a more ambivalent stance, describing the film as hilarious, excessive and technically brilliant while also noting its "lack of morality" or lack of a "moral core." Such reviews do not simply praise or condemn the film. They publicly negotiate the same moral instability created by the narration.

Figure 2 provides an anonymized example of this resistant reception frame, where perceived glorification becomes the reviewer's central moral objection.

Figure 2

Anonymized IMDb review excerpt illustrating resistance to the film's perceived glorification of transgression.



Taken together, the reviews create a pattern of three parts. Some reviewers (re)create the audience position created by the voiceover through their support for the fast pace, self-confidence, comic excess and Belfort's persuasive energy. Some resist that position by naming the film as glamorizing, shallow, disgusting or morally empty. The most analytically useful reviews complicate the position: they recognize the film as critique while admitting that its form makes critique pleasurable. This last pattern is closest to the voiceover's own logic. It shows that public reception often remains inside the same tension that the narration builds: the film can be understood as an exposure of greed while still being consumed as a fantasy of charisma and excess.

Text-reception synthesis

The two corpora converge without being collapsed into one another. The reviews show that the film’s tension between critique and attraction is not an invented critical problem but a publicly articulated reception problem.

Table 4
Text-reception synthesis across the screenplay and IMDb corpora.

Voiceover mechanism in Corpus A	Receptional uptake or resistance in Corpus B	Analytical link
Self-performance through money, scale, comedy and excess	Reviews repeatedly describe the film as energetic, hilarious, excessive and entertaining, sometimes while acknowledging its greed and corruption.	Quantification and comic framing recur in both textual design and reception vocabulary.
Legal proceduralization and moral scarcity	Reviews that complain about “lack of morality,” “lack of moral core” or missing victims echo the screenplay’s limited moral vocabulary and weak victim presence.	Moral scarcity in the voiceover is echoed by public complaints about weak moral balance.
Pseudo-dialogical split between narrating-I and acting-I	Reviews often recognize the character as corrupt while still praising performance, charisma and narrative energy, which reproduces the split between moral judgment and narrative attraction.	Reviewers separate moral judgment from narrative attraction, paralleling the split-self structure.
Direct address, sales discourse and implied audience participation	Some reviews describe being “swept along,” wanting the fantasy, or being pulled into money/status; others resist this position by calling the film glamorizing or disgusting.	Reception discourse shows both uptake of and resistance to the film’s addressive sales relation.

Discussion

The results confirm and expand upon previous interactional-pragmatic analyses of voiceover narration. Recent work by Dynel (2025) suggests that voice-over narrators can influence participants’ roles in participation frameworks within fictive communication levels, and calls for additional research on other types of voice-over narrators. The current study meets that call for additional research. It shows that comparable participation practices appear in a very different dataset, although the function of those practices differs. In Dynel’s (2025) study on *The Wonder Years*, adult narration of childhood produces memory, commentary and quasi-participation. In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, retrospective narration produces moral management. Jordan’s voiceover does not simply help the viewer understand what happened in the past. Rather, it sells a morally damaged self as energetic, knowledgeable and entertaining. What the voiceover sells is therefore not only a version of past events, but a socially desirable persona: entrepreneurial, masculine, class-mobile, excessive and apparently immune to ordinary moral restraint. The study therefore extends neutralization research by showing that mitigation is not produced only through excuses or justifications. In Jordan’s voiceover, blame is also managed interactionally: the audience is positioned as witness, consumer and occasional accomplice before sustained moral judgment can take shape (Phillips, 2013; Presser, 2004). This sets up the article’s central theoretical contribution. That is, if voiceover can organize participation, it can also organize how moral accountability is distributed between narrating selves, narrated selves and implied audiences.

Pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction

The main theoretical contribution of this study is the concept of pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction. The term does not simply mean that the narrator has a divided self. Split narration, retrospective narration and self-commentary have all been discussed in different forms in narrative and dialogical-self research. The specific point here is different. Jordan’s voiceover creates the appearance of dialogical self-reflection while preventing that self-division from becoming sustained moral answerability. The narrating-I can observe, mock, correct and explain the acting-I, but the acting-I is rarely allowed to trouble the authority of the narrating-I.

This distinction matters for Dialogical Self Theory. Hermans' (2001) model allows the self to be understood as a multiplicity of I-positions, while Harré and Moghaddam's (2003) positioning perspective shows how these positions are produced through discourse and social relations. However, the present analysis shows that multiplicity alone is not enough. A narrator may display several I-positions without creating genuine moral dialogue between them. In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the narrating-I and acting-I are clearly differentiated, but their relation is asymmetrical. The acting-I is made visible as an object of comedy, excess, desire or foolishness, while the narrating-I retains interpretive control.

This is where the finding extends Raggatt's (2015) warning that multiplicity does not automatically produce dialogue. It also develops Tappan's (1999) argument that moral agency requires a meaningful relation between the authorial voice and the experiential voice. In the present corpus, that condition is only partially present. Jordan's voiceover repeatedly creates the formal conditions for dialogue: temporal distance, retrospective commentary, self-address and evaluative correction. Yet these conditions do not lead to moral confrontation. The past self is not given enough ethical force to accuse the present narrating self. Instead, the past self is contained, stylized and narratively managed.

Pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction therefore has three linked features. First, there is self-separation. That is, the narrating-I appears distinct from the acting-I and speaks from a position of later knowledge. Second, there is self-containment as the acting-I is interpreted before he can become a source of moral demand. Third, there is audience display. This managed self-division is performed for an implied audience, which is invited to read self-awareness as charisma, wit or expertise rather than as moral transformation. These features explain why the voiceover can sound reflective without becoming ethically accountable.

This also extends interactional-pragmatic work on voiceover. Dynel's (2025) account is important because it shows how voiceover reorganizes participation frameworks across communicative levels. The present study adds that such participation management can also become moral management. Jordan's voiceover does not only create a relation between narrator and audience; it creates a relation among narrating-I, acting-I and audience. The audience is positioned as a witness to self-division, but the terms of that witnessing are controlled by the narrating-I. The audience sees the acting-I through a voice that has already classified, joked about or redirected the moral meaning of the action.

The concept also refines moral neutralization theory. Neutralization is not produced only through explicit excuses, denials or justifications. In this corpus, neutralization is also produced through the structure of the speaking self. The narrator does not always need to say that wrongdoing was acceptable. Instead, he can split the self, laugh at the past self, convert harm into anecdote, and move the audience toward performance before moral judgment develops. In this sense, pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction is a form of accountability management built into narration itself.

The theoretical value of the concept is that it helps distinguish between genuine moral reflexivity and performed self-awareness. A genuinely dialogical moral self would allow the past self, harmed others or competing moral voices to challenge the authority of the present narrator. A pseudo-dialogical self displays difference without allowing that difference to transform the narrator's moral position. This distinction is useful beyond the present film because many transgressive narratives depend on narrators who appear candid, ironic or self-aware while still controlling the moral terms of their own wrongdoing.

The findings also refine the idea of unreliable narration. Jordan's voiceover is not always unreliable because it reports false facts. Much of its force comes from apparent candor: he tells us about drugs, fraud, sex, manipulation and law enforcement. The unreliability is more pragmatic than factual: the narration does not depend mainly on false reporting, but on guiding attention toward money, comedy, expertise and legal procedure while pushing victims, harm and remorse to the margins. This extends classic accounts of unreliable narration and voiceover authority by showing how unreliability can operate through framing rather than factual contradiction (Chatman, 1990; Kozloff, 1988). Money is measurable; crime is procedural; excess is funny; victims are mostly absent. In this sense, the voiceover produces moral misdirection without necessarily needing

to lie. This point follows from the pseudo-dialogical structure: the narration is unreliable not mainly because it falsifies events, but because it organizes the relation between self-awareness and accountability in a misleading way.

The IMDb reception corpus shows why this matters beyond the screenplay. Reviewers repeatedly debate whether the film is critique, comedy, glamorization, satire or moral emptiness. Some explicitly describe being drawn into the very desire for money and status that the film seems to critique. Others resist that pull by naming the film's lack of victims or moral balance.

Implications for film-pragmatic analysis

An implication of the current study findings concerns the status of screenplay language. The analysis shows that screenplay voiceover can be studied as a pragmatic resource in its own right, not only as a blueprint for performance. The written labels, transitions and recurring voiceover turns make it possible to treat the screenplay as a structured discourse corpus. It shows how verbal design can organize attention, moral alignment and audience participation before performance, editing or cinematography intensify those effects. The value of the two-corpus design is that it places textual design and public uptake in conversation.

This also offers additional utility for research on communications and screenwriting. The study demonstrates that voiceover functions both as a mechanism for persuasion and as a tool for developing a narrative. Voiceover directs the focus of the audience, prevents interpretation by others (and thereby establishes it), creates interpretive frameworks for the viewer and enables the audience to participate in the development of a story prior to an articulated moral stance. For film criticism, this means that debates about glamorization cannot be limited to plot content or visual spectacle. They must also examine the verbal mechanics through which a narrator teaches audiences how to hear, desire and evaluate what they see. For screenwriting research, the finding is equally important: the ethical force of a script can reside in small linguistic decisions such as adversative pivots, second-person address, lists, labels and quantifiers. These are not decorative details; they are part of how the film's moral communication is built.

Conclusion

This study examined Jordan Belfort's voiceover narration in the screenplay of *The Wolf of Wall Street* and connected it with IMDb reception discourse. By isolating the 199 JORDAN (V.O.) units, the analysis showed how the narrating-I builds charisma while recounting fraud, bodily excess, addiction and legal exposure. The voiceover does not mainly hide wrongdoing. It makes wrongdoing narratable by translating it into numbers, jokes, expertise, sales logic, legal procedure and masculine display. The IMDb reviews showed that this tension is publicly recognizable, as reviewers repeatedly negotiate the film as comedy, critique, seduction, glamorization and moral discomfort at once.

The importance of these findings is that they show how moral positioning can be produced through verbal design rather than through explicit moral argument. Jordan's voiceover organizes what becomes noticeable, pleasurable and narratable before moral judgment fully settles. This matters because popular narratives of financial crime do not only represent greed or fraud; they can also make transgressive ambition sound energetic, comic and socially desirable. If popular Wall Street narratives can shape or intensify viewers' aspirational work selves (Brokerhof et al., 2025), then the verbal mechanisms that make transgression enjoyable are part of how financial ambition and moral judgment are socially organized.

The theoretical implication is that interactional pragmatics should treat voiceover not only as participation management, but also as a mechanism of moral positioning and accountability management. The concept of pseudo-dialogical moral self-construction helps explain this process: Jordan's narrating-I appears self-aware because he can laugh at, correct and distance himself from the acting-I, yet this split rarely becomes moral answerability. The study therefore distinguishes structural self-division from genuine moral dialogue. It also shows the value of linking scripted narration with public reception discourse, not to prove direct audience effects, but to examine how textual positioning is reproduced, resisted and complicated in public commentary. One limitation is that the analysis is based on the screenplay and public IMDb reviews rather than a full

audiovisual analysis of the completed film. Future research can compare script and screen, or apply the same framework to other crime and financial films such as *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, *Boiler Room* and *The Big Short*. These films are especially relevant because reviewers in the corpus repeatedly use them as points of comparison.

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Appendix A. Illustrative Coding Excerpts from Corpus A: *The Wolf of Wall Street* Screenplay Voiceover Corpus

V.O. ID	Short excerpt	Main code	Secondary code	Function
V.O.1	“My name is Jordan Belfort.”	Self-performance	Identity positioning	Introduces the narrating-I as the controlling source of the story.
V.O.2	“I made 49 million dollars.”	Self-performance	Quantification as achievement	Turns criminal ascent into measurable achievement and proof of success.
V.O.3	“three shy of a million a week”	Self-performance	Comic quantification	Makes extreme wealth sound like humorous underachievement.
V.O.5	“See that humongous estate down there?”	Implied audience positioning	Direct address / display	Positions viewers as addressed witnesses to wealth and property.
V.O.7	“put your dick back in your pants”	Implied audience positioning	Gendered embodiment	Assigns the audience a male-coded bodily position.
V.O.8	“mansion, private jet, six cars”	Self-performance	Class aspiration / display	Builds financial charisma through possessions and status signs.
V.O.9	“gamble... drink... three different Federal agencies”	Moral neutralization	Parallel listing	Places vice and legal exposure inside the same spectacular rhythm.
V.O.11	“Check this out... seeing two of everything”	Implied audience positioning	Masculine control undercut	Uses direct address while turning dangerous intoxication into comic competence.
V.O.13	“money... makes you a better person”	Moral neutralization	Shared moral economy	Reframes money as moral improvement rather than greed.
V.O.18	“You want to know what money sounds like?”	Implied audience positioning	Rhetorical interrogative	Stages viewer-facing interaction and draws the audience into Wall Street.
V.O.26	“Though I knew I was selling garbage...”	Moral neutralization	Adversative concession pivot	Acknowledges fraud but redirects attention toward rapid profit.
V.O.28	“my only responsibility was to put meat on the table”	Moral neutralization	Responsibility narrowing	Reduces ethical responsibility to provider logic.
V.O.39	“young, hungry and stupid”	Self-performance	Recruitment / domination	Frames exploitable followers as material Jordan can make rich.
V.O.49	“I was becoming a legend.”	Self-performance	Credential construction	Converts public attention into proof of exceptional status.

V.O. ID	Short excerpt	Main code	Secondary code	Function
V.O.67	“three kinds of hookers... blue chips”	Moral neutralization	Classificatory declaration	Turns sexual exploitation into market taxonomy and insider expertise.
V.O.70	“pray your dick didn’t fall off”	Implied audience positioning	Gendered bodily risk	Uses second-person bodily substitution to align viewers with male sexual risk.
V.O.71	“It was obscene -- in the normal world.”	Moral neutralization	Adversative pivot	Acknowledges obscenity but relocates value outside ordinary moral norms.
V.O.73	“You people’re all shit outta luck.”	Implied audience positioning	Direct audience address	Addresses viewers as outsiders to the narrated drug culture.
V.O.74	“Think, Jordan, think!”	Pseudo-dialogical self-construction	Second-person self-address	Splits the narrating-I from the acting-I through internal coaching.
V.O.81	“your cock went to heaven”	Implied audience positioning	Embodied substitution	Places the audience inside a male heterosexual fantasy position.
V.O.84-85	“I felt horrible” / “Three days later...”	Pseudo-dialogical self-construction	Outcome-only narration	Brief remorse is displaced by rapid movement to the next event.
V.O.94	“doing something shady”	Legal proceduralization	Euphemistic minimization	Reduces securities fraud to vague, casual illegality.
V.O.115	“What kind of maniac abuses eye drops?”	Pseudo-dialogical self-construction	Comic distance	Turns self-recognition into mockery rather than moral confrontation.
V.O.121	“\$4.50 a share... over eighteen dollars”	Self-performance	Numerical precision	Builds narrative thrill through price movement rather than victim harm.
V.O.151	“tingle phase... drool phase”	Moral neutralization	Taxonomy / bodily failure	Classifies drug collapse as comic expertise and undercuts control.
V.O.161	“Maybe I hadn’t made it home okay.”	Pseudo-dialogical self-construction	Retrospective correction	Uses comic correction to expose failed control without extended accountability.
V.O.162	“an absolute miracle”	Moral neutralization	Survival framing	Makes survival the main point while possible harm to others remains secondary.
V.O.181-182	“free seminar” / “I can change yours, too!”	Implied audience positioning	Sales-oriented promise	Converts biography into a commercial model offered to viewers.
V.O.186	“something about laundering drug money...”	Legal proceduralization	Vague legal summary	Makes criminal financial activity sound indirect and almost comic.
V.O.191	“sell me this pen”	Implied audience positioning	Sales pedagogy	Ends with a transferable sales lesson rather than moral closure.

Note. This supplementary table presents 30 short illustrative voiceover excerpts from *The Wolf of Wall Street* screenplay. Each excerpt is identified by V.O. number and coded according to the functional categories used in the analysis: self-performance, moral neutralization, legal proceduralization, pseudo-dialogical self-construction and implied audience positioning. Secondary codes indicate overlapping pragmatic or social functions where relevant.

Conditional Interdependence and Stable Bilateral Relations: The Limits of Trade-Led Stabilization in the Pakistan-Afghanistan Case (2015-2025)

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This paper examines the relationship between economic interdependence and bilateral stability through Pakistan-Afghanistan trade and transit relations during 2015-2025. A basic assumption of Liberal theory is that expansion of trade promotes peace and cooperation by raising the cost of conflict. However, long-term economic exchange persisted alongside recurring political tensions and security concerns in the Pakistan-Afghanistan context. This paper employs a qualitative approach to analyze trade patterns, policy developments and institutional arrangements and develops the concept of conditional interdependence to explain why trade did not produce stable bilateral relations. It finds that structural economic factors like geographic proximity, market demand and Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan's transit routes were instrumental in sustaining trade and transit whereas political tensions, security incidents, mistrust, asymmetrical dependence, issues with institutional reliability and security-driven governance limited its stabilizing effects. The paper argues that without credible institutions and environment of political trust and accommodation, economic interdependence alone is insufficient to ensure peace and stability.

Keywords: economic interdependence, conditional interdependence, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, trade and transit Governance, bilateral stability.

Economic interdependence has been an important lens of analysis in international relations (IR), especially within the framework of liberalism, which links expansion of trade between two states with promotion of peace. The core proposition is that sustained economic cooperation increases the cost of conflict, which incentivizes states to continue a peaceful relationship. However, a considerable body of scholarship suggests that the ability of economic interdependence to promote this stable relationship is neither automatic nor linear, rather shaped by political, institutional and structural conditions. Accordingly, the main enquiry of this paper is to examine why sustained trade and transit relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan during 2015-2025 did not translate into stable bilateral relations despite persistent economic interdependence?

In this paper, stable bilateral relations refer to consistent diplomatic engagement, predictable trade flows, institutionalized dispute management mechanisms and reduced frequency of interstate tensions that disrupt bilateral interaction. The conditions under which economic interdependence meets success or failure, as an instrument of bringing stability to interstate relations, is the broader theoretical and empirical question being raised by this enquiry.

If liberal theory posits that trade lowers the risk of conflict, then why did Pakistan and Afghanistan experience diplomatic crises and security tensions despite continued economic relations? To what extent did factors such as asymmetrical dependence, political mistrust and weak institutional implementation constrain the stabilizing impact of trade? These questions challenge the conventional belief that trade leads to peace and are not only central to explaining the Pakistan-Afghanistan case, but also to developing the concept of

conditional interdependence, which contends that economic relations may continue without producing political stability in the absence of necessary political and institutional conditions.

Substantial literature examines the trade-peace relationship in different regional and global contexts, whereas relatively limited research focuses on conflict-prone environments which are characterized by low political trust and weak institutional reliability. In such environment, the potential of economic interdependence is constrained by political and institutional conditions, as uncertainty, policy volatility and strategic considerations shape the functioning of cross-border exchange. Thus, economic interdependence may persist but may not produce stabilizing effects.

This paper argues that economic interdependence between Pakistan and Afghanistan during 2015-2025 was conditional and reliant on the existence of political trust and institutional reliability. These enabling conditions are necessary for economic interactions to contribute to stable bilateral relations. Despite being vulnerable to changes in policy, administrative decisions and evolving political climate, trade continued because of structural and market-based factors.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section reviews relevant literature, followed by the development of analytical framework of conditional interdependence in the third section; fourth section carries out analysis of Pakistan-Afghanistan trade and transit relations from 2015 to 2025, whereas the last section elaborates broader implications of the research findings, followed by the conclusion.

Literature Review

Economic interdependence occupies a central place in liberal theories of IR, which argue that when trade expands between states, it contributes to peace and cooperation among them. The core assumption is that increased economic exchange raises the opportunity costs of conflict, thereby discouraging the use of force. Early formulation of the concept can be traced back to Classical liberal thought. Kant contends that commercial interdependence creates structural disincentives to war as the costs of disruption outweigh the benefits of destabilization (Kant, 1795/ 1917), pioneering the trade-peace thought.

Building on this foundation, empirical scholarship sought to systematically test the trade-peace relationship. Polachek's research shows that higher trade volumes lower the probability of conflict by increasing the opportunity costs of using force; disruption of mutually beneficial economic relations brings real losses that rational actors try to avoid (Polachek, 1980). Similarly, Oneal and Russett confirm Kant's trade-peace assumption through an analysis of the international politics between 1885 and 1992. They opine that greater trade interdependence may lower the likelihood of militarized disputes, especially if it is reciprocal and supported by institutional framework (Oneal & Russett, 1999).

However, these liberal arguments attracted significant criticism. A key challenge is regarding the assumption of a linear relationship between interdependence and peace. Barbieri argues that under certain conditions, especially where trade relations are asymmetric, high levels of interdependence may increase the chances of conflict (Barbieri, 1996). This type of interdependence can create vulnerabilities and strategic incentives that may exacerbate tensions instead of mitigating them.

The more recent scholarship, which emphasizes the role of power and network structures, further challenges the liberal narrative. Farrell and Newman argue that states can exploit asymmetric control over key nodes in global economic networks. Trade networks, in this perspective, are viewed as instruments of power and conflict, where institutions serve as controlling tools (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Therefore, trade no longer reduces conflict in such situations, rather, it becomes an instrument of power politics pursued through economic means (Drezner, 2003). This argument is more applicable to politically contested transit trade-dependent dyads.

Beyond structural asymmetry, a growing body of literature highlights the importance of institutions in shaping the effects of interdependence. Mansfield and Pollins emphasize that stabilizing potential of economic interdependence depends on existence of institutions that can manage conflicts, reduce uncertainty

and help the parties to behave in a more predictable way (Mansfield & Pollins, 2001). Predictable and efficiently implemented institutions are the key factors that determine if interdependence will result in cooperation or remain vulnerable to conflict.

Non-Western and Global South approaches challenge liberal assumptions about trade and peace by emphasizing on asymmetry, hierarchy and regional context. For instance, Prebisch, a dependency theorist, argues that the international division of labour placed “peripheral” economies in subordinate position to the industrial “centre” while they supplied food and raw materials, whereas the advantages of technological progress were not shared equally between centre and periphery (Prebisch, 1950, pp. 1-2). Similarly, Acharya's Global IR approach argues that IR should be studied through pluralistic perspectives, taking into account regional histories, non-Western agency and a wide variety of sources of knowledge (Acharya, 2014). These perspectives are relevant to the Pakistan-Afghanistan case because interdependence operated under unequal conditions, with Afghanistan facing greater structural vulnerability and institutional weakness, while the political effects of trade remained dependent on the regional, historical and institutional context in which economic exchange took place.

While the existing literature acknowledges that interdependence is not an automatic cause of peace, it does not explain cases where commercial exchange continues along with persistent instability. Particularly, the mediating role of political trust deficit and institutional inconsistency remains underexplored. This article, therefore, addresses this gap by developing the concept of conditional interdependence, emphasizing that stabilizing effects of economic interactions are largely dependent on the existence of enabling political and institutional conditions.

Analytical Framework

While liberal theories highlight the peace-building role of trade, the relationship between economic interdependence and political stability remains contested. In this section, the analytical framework has been formed by combining liberal assumptions about trade-peace relationship with economic interdependence, neoliberal institutionalism and trade-conflict literature. Building on these insights, interdependence is conceptualized as a context-dependent process, rather than an inherently stabilizing force.

In IR, interdependence refers to situations in which reciprocal effects are produced among states or actors of different states. Keohane and Nye conceptualize interdependence as a condition in which states are dependent on cross-border exchanges to such an extent that disruption of these would bring great losses to both sides (Keohane & Nye, 2012). In this paper, interdependence is operationalized as the extent to which Pakistan and Afghanistan are dependent on sustained trade, transit and border-related economic activities such that if disruptions occur, these would produce tangible economic and political losses for both states. This includes trade volumes, shared infrastructure, institutional arrangements and expectations of continuity.

Keohane and Nye's distinction between sensitivity and vulnerability interdependence is particularly relevant to this paper. Sensitivity refers to the immediate effects of changes in one state's policies or external conditions on another state, whereas vulnerability is concerned with costs of alternative options after disruption occurs (Keohane & Nye, 2012). In the Pakistan-Afghanistan case, both states have been sensitive to disruptions of trade and transit, as border closures, regulatory restrictions and delays impose costs on traders and state revenues. However, Afghanistan has shown greater vulnerability due to its reliance on Pakistan's transit corridors and higher costs associated with alternative routes. This asymmetry helps explain why interdependence did not generate equal incentives for stable cooperation.

Farrell and Newman argue that interdependence may generate strategic leverage when states occupy critical nodes within international economic networks. This enables states to influence the behaviour of interconnected actors by restricting access to network flows (Farrell & Newman, 2019). The case of Pakistan-Afghanistan illustrates how Pakistan's position as a principal transit corridor for Afghan trade provides it with a degree of structural leverage. However, rather than treating this leverage as a central explanatory factor, this paper argues that its effects were conditioned by broader political trust and institutional reliability.

Economically interdependent states have been found to produce a range of results, from cooperation to conflict, highlighting the ambivalent nature of interdependence (Vries, 1990). Keohane and Nye caution that interdependence may not necessarily eliminate international conflict. “On the contrary, conflict will take new forms, and may even increase” (Keohane & Nye, 2012, p. 7). Taken together these views, this framework challenges deterministic liberal assumptions and emphasizes the contingent nature of the trade-peace relationship.

Neoliberal Institutionalism provides a significant extension to the concept of interdependence by emphasizing the role of institutions in facilitating cooperation under anarchy (Stein, 2008). Keohane argues that international regimes, which he defines as principles, norms and rules, establish rules and expectations that make compliance more attractive, reduce information asymmetry and uncertainty and lower transaction costs by making interactions among states easier (Keohane, 1984). These features of regimes make it possible for states to cooperate even when there is no central authority.

However, the effectiveness of institutions varies. Their potential to sustain cooperation is substantially constrained if they are weak, implemented inconsistently or politically contested. This issue is particularly relevant to conflict-prone environments, where formal institutional arrangements may exist but face enforcement challenges.

Constructivist IR also provides theoretical basis for understanding trust in conditional interdependence. It emphasizes that state behaviour is not shaped only by material interests but also by identities, meanings and expectations that evolve out of interaction. Wendt argues that identities provide the basis for interests (Wendt, 1992), while Adler and Barnett associate regular interaction and institutions with the development of trust and expectation of peaceful change (Adler & Barnett, 1998). In Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, historical mistrust, contested border narratives and conflicting views on security issues prevented the development of trust, which validates the argument that trade can support stability only when accompanied by trust-building and reliable institutions.

Building on these insights, this paper recognizes political trust and institutional reliability as major conditioning variables that shape the effect of economic interdependence. Political trust refers to the degree to which a state believe that the other state is a credible and predictable partner. Empirically, it is reflected in the observable patterns like recurring border closures, trade restrictions and use of economic policy as a strategic instrument. When trust is low, states are likely to interpret economic interdependence from a security perspective and adopt restrictive policies. According to Keohane, the existence of common interests and the trust that partners will keep their commitments are essentially required for cooperation (Keohane, 1984). In an environment of low mutual trust, the perceived risk of being exploited increases, undermining interdependence’s stabilizing potential.

Institutional reliability, referring to institutional consistency and predictability in applying rules in economic interactions, is central to the effectiveness of institutions. Indicators of institutional reliability include stability of trade procedures, uniform application of regulations and the degree of coordination among regulatory agencies. As cooperation facilitation potential of regimes is closely linked with credible and consistent enforcement (Keohane, 1984), inconsistent implementation and procedural variability can produce uncertainty, higher transaction costs and discourage long-term engagement. These variables are mutually reinforcing. Low political trust diminishes institutional credibility while less/ unreliable institutions erode trust.

The framework underlines two mechanisms through which interdependence is shaped by political trust and credibility of institutions. First, the policy restriction mechanism, caused by trust deficit in the shape of border closures or regulatory controls, which disrupt economic flows. Second, the uncertainty mechanism, which is caused by institutional inconsistency, makes rules unpredictable, increases transaction costs and discourages long-term engagement. In the Pakistan-Afghanistan context, these mechanisms are observable in fluctuations in trade, delays in customs clearance, higher costs and diversion of trade to informal or alternative routes.

Based on this framework, the paper advances three analytical expectations: first, trade is likely to persist even under conditions of political tension in the presence of strong structural economic incentives; second, under conditions of low political trust, interdependence will be accompanied by frequent policy-induced disruptions; third, in case of weak institutional reliability, trade will operate under conditions of uncertainty, which will result in higher transaction costs, informality and constraints on long-term integration.

Conditional interdependence can thus be defined as economic interdependence whose contribution to stable bilateral relations is reliant on political trust and institutional reliability. It conceptualizes interdependence as operating within political and institutional constraints that determine its outcomes. When such conditions exist, interdependence may lead to stable cooperation; however, in their absence it remains fragile, vulnerable to disruption and lacks the potential to produce sustained political stability, even when economic exchange continues.

Method

This paper employs a qualitative case study design to examine Pakistan-Afghanistan trade and transit relations during 2015-2025. Since the paper seeks to explain the political and institutional mechanisms through which economic interdependence influences interstate relations, rather than establishing statistical causality, a qualitative approach is deemed more appropriate. In the Pakistan-Afghanistan case, the coexistence of sustained trade and recurrent political tensions provides a suitable setting that makes it a critical case for evaluating the constraints of trade-led stabilization.

The paper relies on multiple sources of evidence, including bilateral trade and transit agreements, official policy documents, government notifications, international organization reports, trade statistics and academic literature. These sources serve the purpose of highlighting long-term patterns and identifying major turning points in Pakistan-Afghanistan trade and transit relations; use of multiple data sources allows triangulation of evidence and strengthens credibility of the analysis.

Analytically, the paper employs process tracing as the principal strategy to examine how changes in the political setting, institutional arrangements and security conditions have shaped economic interdependence over time. Instead of treating trade volumes as a sufficient indicator of interdependence, the paper traces the causal sequence that connects political trust, institutional reliability and trade governance to the observed patterns of bilateral economic interaction.

For analytical clarity, the empirical discussion is organized into two phases: 2015-2021, covering the period of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the implementation challenges of trade arrangements; and 2021-2025, covering the return of the Taliban to power and the subsequent evolution of trade governance under changing political and security conditions. The post-2021 transition is treated as a critical juncture that altered the political and institutional environment of interdependence, while continuing some pre-existing patterns of security-driven trade governance. This periodization facilitates a comparison of how changes in the political and security environment influenced the outcomes of economic interdependence.

Empirical Analysis of Pakistan-Afghanistan Trade Relations (2015-2025)

While operating within the broader environment of political and security tensions, trade and transit relations exhibited a pattern of continuity. This persistence was mainly due to structural economic factors, which primarily include geographical proximity, market demand and Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan's transit routes.

Persistence of Trade Despite Political Tensions

Being a landlocked country, Afghanistan remained heavily dependent on transit trade through Pakistan (Khalil et al., 2025). This structural condition created incentives for sustaining the trade flows even during periods of political uncertainty. This was further supported by complementarities in production and the existence of historically established trading networks.

Empirical trends further illustrate this pattern of resilience. According to Table 1 (World Integrated Trade Solutions (WITS), 2015-2023; World Trade Organization (WTO), 2015-2024 & Trading Economics,

2026), Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral trade continued throughout 2015-2025. However, its volume as well as the relative shares of both states changed over time. Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan, which were US\$ 1.722 billion in 2015, declined to US\$ 1.110 billion in 2025. This reduced Afghanistan's share in Pakistan's total exports, reducing it from 7.80 percent in 2015 to 4.66 percent in 2024. Similarly, Pakistan's share in Afghanistan's total imports declined from 17.43 percent in 2015 to 10.75 percent in 2024. The table highlights that Pakistan's relative position in Afghanistan's import market weakened over the decade.

Table 1*Pakistan-Afghanistan Bilateral Trade and Relative Dependence (2015-2025)*

Year	Pakistan's Exports to Afghanistan (million US\$)	In %age of Pakistan's Total Exports	In %age of Afghanistan's Total Imports	Afghanistan's Exports to Pakistan (million US\$)	In %age of Pakistan's Total Imports	In %age of Afghanistan's Total Exports
2015	1,722.22	7.80	17.43	415.92	0.92	39.65
2016	1,369.77	6.67	18.35	369.9	0.79	47.5
2017	1,390.08	6.35	16.6	414.87	0.72	42.94
2018	1,347.93	5.7	14.67	508.36	0.84	42.86
2019	1,180.11	4.97	12.87	492.44	1.05	34.31
2020	871.27	3.87	12.02	602.85	1.09	24.89
2021	833.42	2.89	15.75	875.54	1.00	31.15
2022	976.02	3.17	12.34	1,056.56	1.61	35.54
2023	969.04	3.37	11.14	571.03	1.03	23.92
2024	1,513.05	4.66	10.75	658.72	1.17	31.47
2025	1,110.00	-	-	459.36	-	-

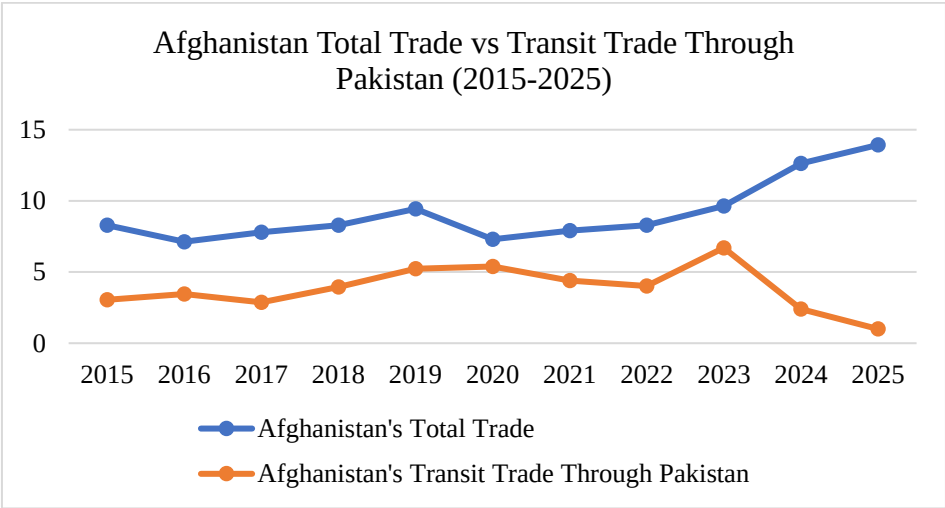
Such downturns coincided with political mistrust, border closures, stricter documentation and regulatory controls. After 2020, Afghanistan's exports to Pakistan increased, however, this rise was temporary and should not be interpreted as stable bilateral economic exchange; the increased Afghan sales of coal and other raw materials in the post-2021 period was probably the main reason behind this.

Unlike bilateral trade, Afghan transit trade through Pakistan witnessed significant surge until 2023. As Figure 1 (WITS, 2015-2023; WTO, 2015-2024; *PAJCCI*, 2021; Embassy of Pakistan, Kabul-Afghanistan, n.d.; Khan, 2025 & "Afghanistan's trade volume surges," 2026) illustrates, trade flow through Pakistani corridor increased from approximately US\$ 3.05 billion in 2015 to US\$ 6.7 billion in 2023. This indicates continued reliance of Afghanistan on Pakistan for access to international markets.

However, the data show an increasing divergence in the next two years. Afghanistan's overall trade expanded from US\$ 9.64 billion in 2023 to US\$13.93 billion in 2025, indicating surge in Afghanistan's external trade despite the Taliban takeover in 2021. However, its transit trade through Pakistan sharply reduced from US\$ 6.7 billion in 2023 to just US\$ 1 billion in 2025 (see Figure 1).

This divergence indicates that the decline in Afghan transit trade through Pakistan was not the result of reduced trade demand, rather it was associated with Pakistan's anti-smuggling measures, import restrictions and Afghanistan's increased use of alternative routes, including Iran's Chabahar route (Khan & Iqbal, 2025). These restrictions came after Pakistan's implementation of October 2023 regulatory measures, including SRO 1397(I)/2023 which set limits on several transit items prone to smuggling and SRO 1380(I)/2023 which imposed a 10 percent processing fee on certain Afghan transit commercial goods. This significant decline exemplifies the essence of conditional interdependence: trade persisted, yet its volume, trade route and institutional factors became exceptionally sensitive to security concerns.

Figure 1
Afghanistan Total Trade vs Transit Trade Through Pakistan (2015-2025)



Overall, Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate that even though Pakistan-Afghanistan economic interdependence persisted, its direction, intensity and route structure changed significantly. These patterns support the argument of conditional interdependence that geographical and market complementarities sustained economic exchange but political mistrust, security-driven regulations and regional route diversification limited the stabilizing potential of economic interdependence.

Regional Context and Route Diversification

The changing dynamics of Afghan transit trade should also be viewed within the wider regional infrastructure landscape since Afghanistan’s access to global markets has increasingly been shaped by competing regional corridors and the involvement of external actors. India’s engagement through Chabahar provided Afghanistan with an alternative maritime outlet (“Trilateral transit pact,” 2016) and Central Asian routes (Seerat & Hamdard, 2025) offered additional access to international markets, thus, reducing Afghanistan’s reliance on Pakistan. China’s regional interconnectivity initiatives through the Belt and Road Initiative and possible extension of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor added the dimension of regional interdependence. However, these initiatives remained contingent on improvements in Afghanistan’s security and political environment (Khan et al., 2023). Despite providing partial diversification options, Pakistan’s geographical importance for Afghan trade remained significant.

Political and Diplomatic Constraints on Trade

Bilateral political relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan during 2015-2025 played a decisive role in shaping the functioning of trade and transit arrangements. Economic exchange remained embedded within a diplomatic environment that fluctuated between periods of engagement and confrontation. This embeddedness underscored the central role of political trust as a conditioning variable influencing stability and predictability of economic interdependence.

Efforts for expansion of trade cooperation were generally associated with periods of diplomatic rapprochement. For example, after former President Ashraf Ghani took office, there was clear signaling of moving away from past grievances and taking a fresh start in bilateral relations (Sial, 2016). Diplomatic initiatives emphasized trust-building, enhancement of security cooperation and promotion of regional economic connectivity, while the setting of ambitious bilateral trade expansion targets (raising trade volume to US\$ 5 billion) (Idrees & Naazer, 2022) reflected not only the expectation that economic interdependence could contribute to stabilizing relations, but also highlight that the period of rapprochement had a positive impact on bilateral trade.

This phase of political rapprochement, however, turned out to be very short. The relations between the two states deteriorated after several high-profile attacks were carried out in Afghanistan in June 2015. The breakdown of relations caused by these incidents and the subsequent blame game from both sides eroded mutual trust and disrupted diplomatic engagement. Although these engagements continued through bilateral and regional platforms, the capacity of these engagements to translate into deeper economic cooperation was limited.

Inconsistent functioning of the institutional mechanisms is another indication of the impact of volatile relationship between the two states on trade governance. For example, draft amendments of APTTA were to be discussed in seventh meeting of Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Coordination Authority (APTTCA) scheduled in March 2016 (“Pakistan, Afghanistan to Revise”, 2016). However, diplomatic tensions and border closures undermined continuity of this very important revision process. Postponement of such planned engagements indicates that institutional continuity was contingent upon the prevailing diplomatic climate, thereby weakening the predictability of trade governance.

Trade flows between the two countries were significantly affected by episodes of heightened tensions. The closure of border crossing points, in response to security incidents in Pakistan, illustrates how political and security concerns influenced trade governance, like the disruption of supply chains, the increase in transaction costs and reinforcing the perception among traders that cross-border commercial exchanges were subject to political contingencies. Similarly, the announcement of the expiry of APTTA by Afghanistan during 2017 (The World Bank Group, 2019) also highlights the fragility of institutional arrangements under conditions of mistrust.

Subsequent efforts to stabilize relations, such as establishment of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) framework in 2018 (Ahmed, 2021), the Shared Vision in 2020 (PR 74, Situation in Afghanistan, 2020) and the seventh and eighth APTTCA meetings in the same year, revived the dialogue process on trade facilitation and APTTA revision. These initiatives restored channels of dialogues, although progress on trade facilitation and APTTA revision remained slow.

When the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, the prevailing political environment was further complicated (Popalzay, 2021). Pakistan favoured engagement with Afghanistan’s de facto authorities while balancing broader international concerns and domestic security considerations. The following years witnessed periods of escalated tension between the two countries, mainly due to security issues and disputes over management of the border. These frictions resulted in periodic border closures and disruptions of trade activity.

The evidence clearly illustrates that trade and transit relations were highly sensitive to the fluctuations in bilateral political relations. Even though economic exchange continued mainly due to structural factors, its expansion was greatly hindered by diplomatic instability and trust deficits. This supports the claim that without political trust, interdependence remains vulnerable to disruptions and cannot function as an independent driver of stability.

Institutional Reliability and Governance Constraints

Institutional reliability determines how economically interdependent states can harness trade to support stable relations. Keohane argues that institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing information asymmetry and transaction costs and by making states’ behaviour more predictable (Keohane, 1984). In Pakistan-Afghanistan context, APTTA and APTTCA provided formal frameworks; however, inconsistent rule application, delayed meetings, sudden procedural changes and weak inter-agency coordination made trade costly and unpredictable.

APTTA, designed to provide a rule-based system to manage Afghanistan’s transit trade through Pakistan, introduced formal procedures for the routes, transport modalities, guarantees and documentation. However, a number of provisions were either delayed, partially implemented or became subject to political and security conditions. According to the World Bank, APTTA faced persistent implementation issues such as Afghanistan’s restriction of Pakistan’s access to Central Asian Republics by Afghanistan on the grounds that Pakistan denied Indian access to Afghanistan and Afghanistan’s unilateral withdrawal from APTTA in 2017,

which weakened the agreement's purpose (The World Bank Group, 2019). Similarly, Ahmed highlights that even with a formal trade framework in place, Pakistan-Afghanistan economic collaboration was constrained by procedural hurdles, mistrust and inconsistent policy implementation (Ahmed, 2021). Such shortcomings weakened APTTA's credibility as a predictable institutional mechanism and increased transaction costs.

Reliability of institutions was further weakened by the delayed revision of APTTA and the irregular functioning of APTTCA. APTTCA was designed as the principal coordination mechanism to review implementation problems, resolve operational disputes and update the transit procedures. However, its meetings were irregular and at times impacted by the broader diplomatic environment. For example, the draft amendments of APTTA were to be deliberated upon in the seventh meeting of APTTCA. However, due to diplomatic tensions, border closures and the contentious issue of Indian exports to Afghanistan, this meeting was delayed for four years and finally held in November 2020 ("7th APTTCA Meeting Held in Kabul," 2020). This delay demonstrates that the institutional mechanism was not capable of operating independently of the broader diplomatic environment, weakening its effectiveness as a dispute-management forum, delaying institutional reform and increasing uncertainty among traders.

Governance fragmentation also constrained the reliability of Pakistan-Afghanistan trade and transit arrangements (Bukhari & Zaidi, 2025). On the domestic front, several agencies with overlapping border management roles, including customs, security, immigration and anti-narcotics were involved (CAREC, 2023). At Torkham, for instance, coordination problems surfaced and duplication of procedures occurred because of involvement of several agencies, which led to procedural delays and increased costs (Hussain, 2019). Even though reforms like Web Based One Customs, Pakistan Single Window and Integrated Trade and Transit Management System facilitated greater digitalization, they could not completely address the inter-agency interoperability gaps (Bukhari & Zaidi, 2025).

On the Afghanistan side, governance was fragmented due to weak state capacity, competing authority structures and parallel revenue collection even outside formal control of the state (prior to August 2021) (Custers, 2020). Thus, the formal institutions' coordination capacity was weakened by fragmentation, which made Pakistan-Afghanistan transit governance less predictable and less capable of contributing to stabilization.

Overall, formal mechanisms for trade and transit existed, but poor enforcement, lack of coordination and procedural ambiguity limited their effectiveness in fostering stable and predictable bilateral cooperation.

Security Constraints and Security Logics of Trade Governance

The perspective of security is significant because initiation and escalation of terrorism in Pakistan had resulted from fallout of the Afghan war (Parveen et al., 2023). Therefore, security considerations emerged as a pivotal factor that influenced management of Pakistan-Afghanistan trade and transit relations during 2015-2025. Although these measures increased transaction costs and reduced predictability, policymakers considered them necessary responses to militancy, smuggling and irregular cross-border movement, turning trade and transit corridors into potential conduits for security risks.

This process increasingly aligned trade facilitation with security objectives. Formal trade-related frameworks such as APTTA continued to provide institutional basis for economic exchange; however, their implementation became dependent on prevailing security assessments. Thus, risk management and threat mitigation progressively became central to the regulatory environment governing trade.

Security-oriented trade governance was driven primarily by concerns over militancy, smuggling, illicit trade and irregular cross-border movement. To translate these sensitivities into tangible actions, measures like tightening of visa regimes (Herbert & Idris, 2024), documentation requirements and stringent inspection procedures were implemented (Jones & Rosenblum, 2013). Although intended to enhance security and regulatory oversight, implementation of these measures often blurred the distinction between legal and illegal trade, which led to increased scrutiny of legitimate trade, reduced procedural efficiency and raised transaction costs.

These controls also created wider domestic political economic effects. Due to higher compliance costs and procedural uncertainties, informal channels became more attractive for traders (Momand & Ahmadzai, 2025). Instead of eliminating illicit flows, such regulations could displace them while increasing administrative discretion and rent-seeking opportunities.

Security dynamics affected trade outcomes through tighter administrative procedures, increased compliance requirements, extended clearance times and periodic border closures, which disrupted supply chains, increased transaction costs and reduced predictability of trade flows; these disruptions were more damaging for traders dealing in perishable goods. Expansion of administrative discretion in trade governance, decisions on inspections, clearances and border operations, relied on context-specific security evaluations rather than standardized procedures. This introduced a high degree of uncertainty because anticipating changes in regulatory practices, introduced in response to security concerns, was difficult for economic actors.

These mechanisms illustrate how security considerations translated into economic outcomes. Security issues did not halt trade entirely, but the altered conditions under which trade operated made it more costly, less predictable and more vulnerable to disruption. This corresponds to the “uncertainty mechanism” outlined in the analytical framework, whereby institutional inconsistency and discretionary enforcement increase transaction costs and discourage long-term engagement.

Reassessing Trade-Peace Linkages through Conditional Interdependence

The empirical analysis of Pakistan-Afghanistan trade from 2015 to 2025 highlights significant insights into the broader debate on the contribution of economic interdependence to the stability of relations between states. In this section, findings of the paper have been situated within the existing theoretical debate and their implications have been highlighted so as to fully understand the limits of trade-led stabilization.

The key finding is that sustained economic exchange coexisted with political instability. Even though bilateral and transit trade continued owing to geographic proximity, Afghanistan’s landlocked geography and dependence on Pakistan’s transit routes at the structural level, this reflected trade was occurring out of necessity rather than political cooperation between the two sides. Instead of deepening cooperation, trade activities remained exposed to disruptions due to security incidents and political contingencies. This finding is in agreement with the argument advanced by critical scholarship, arguing that interdependence does not automatically reduce conflict.

The asymmetric structure, particularly in the domain of transit trade, was instrumental in determining these outcomes. During most of the study period, around 45 percent of Afghan transit trade passed through Pakistan’s corridor (WTO, n.d.; WITS, n.d.; PBC, n.d.). This heavy dependence on Pakistan made Afghanistan’s trade vulnerable to policy shocks. The use of Pakistan’s transit facilities by a significant share of Afghan transit trade, despite the availability of alternative routes, underlines that structural dependence is still a major factor in their relationship.

Theoretical literature on interdependence suggests that asymmetry can result in power differentials capable of enabling the less dependent state to exert leverage (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Since Pakistan had a more diversified trade structure, it was less vulnerable to disruptions than Afghanistan, which had to bear higher adjustment costs when borders were closed or regulations changed.

Nevertheless, asymmetry did not result in enduring dominance. Rather, it contributed to volatility as the two countries periodically altered policies in line with evolving political and security situations. This suggests that an asymmetrical structure of interdependence, without robust institutional mechanisms, might result in increased uncertainty and instability.

Institutional reliability and political trust were the main mediating factors. Transit agreements provided formal channels for exchange, but inconsistent implementation and procedural gaps constrained effectiveness of these agreements in lowering uncertainty and transaction costs. Deep-rooted mistrust and security concerns led to the frequent overshadowing of economic incentives by strategic

considerations. This pattern illustrates that security factors may take precedence over economic gains, thereby restricting the potential of interdependence as a source of stability.

From theoretical perspective, these findings support the concept of conditional interdependence as a more accurate framework for understanding the trade-peace relationship in this context. The effects of interdependence were mediated by political mistrust, institutional inconsistency and security imperatives, constraining it from evolving into a stabilizing force.

Overall, the Pakistan-Afghanistan case demonstrates the constraints of trade-stability linkage in conflict-prone environment. Although economic interdependence played central role in sustaining commercial exchange, its potential for stable interstate relations proved insufficient. The concept of conditional interdependence offers a more context-sensitive explanation by accounting for the influence of political and institutional factors in determining the outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper examined the link between economic interdependence and bilateral stability in Pakistan-Afghanistan trade and transit relations from 2015 to 2025. It argued that interdependence remained conditional as its stabilizing potential remained reliant on political trust, institutional reliability and security-driven disruption. Trade continued because of geographic proximity, market demand and Afghanistan's transit needs, but its political effects were constrained by mistrust, asymmetry, weak institutional implementation and security-driven border governance.

The policy implication is that Pakistan and Afghanistan should not treat trade cooperation dependent as solely on a comprehensive political settlement. In fragile bilateral environments, stable relations may be advanced through low-politics measures such as customs digitalization, prior notification of regulatory changes, joint handling of perishable goods, provision of emergency trade lanes during border closures and regular technical meetings under the existing transit frameworks. These measures may not remove political mistrust; however, they could reduce uncertainty, improve predictability and strengthen institutional reliability.

Highlighting that interdependence can persist without promoting cooperation is a major contribution of this paper. In conflict-prone regions, economic exchange by itself will not be enough to guarantee cooperation. Effective stabilization requires supportive political and institutional conditions. When these conditions are missing, trade will continue but will not be able to transform interstate relations.

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Practical E-Module Using Flipbook Maker as A Solution For Visual Learner Type Students

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This study addresses the development of a cognitive-based e-module for Technical Drawing courses in Fine Arts Education, aiming to enhance students' procedural and motor skills through structured, stepwise learning. Post-pandemic shifts toward hybrid learning have highlighted the need for digital instructional materials that integrate enactive, iconic, and symbolic representation stages as proposed by Bruner. Employing a Research and Development approach with the ADDIE model, the study conducted curriculum, instructional, and student analyses to design, develop, implement, and evaluate the e-module. The sample collection used a totally sampling technique for subjects in this study, namely 25 fine arts education students taking the Technical Drawing course. Validation by experts yielded an average Aiken's V of 0.951 and ICC of 0.855, indicating high validity and reliability. Implementation with pretest-posttest design demonstrated significant improvement in students' orthogonal projection skills, with mean scores increasing from 60.22 to 77.13 and N-gain of 0.73. The paired t-test results were $t(24) = 12.00$, $p < .001$ and Cohen's d effect size measurement value was 2.40. Findings confirm that the e-module effectively supports independent, structured learning, bridging gaps in procedural comprehension and practical application. The study contributes to digital pedagogy in art and vocational education, providing a validated model for hybrid learning environments that enhances cognitive, procedural, and psychomotor competencies.

Keywords: e-module, technical drawing, cognitive, hybrid learning, motor skills

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has been gradually implementing a transformation and focusing on improving hybrid public services—that is, a combination of digital and in-person services. Various social, economic, and educational activities have resumed at a relatively stable level, in line with the national development agenda as outlined in the Indonesia Digital Vision 2045 (National Economic Council, 2025). In line with this, the government, through Presidential Instruction No. 7 of 2025 on the Revitalization of Educational Units, has demonstrated its commitment to promoting equitable, technology-based education while strengthening an inclusive and sustainable digital learning ecosystem (Nurmahmudah et al., 2025). Long before that, universities had already begun digitizing their educational processes. This is clearly evident in the learning process, which has long made use of various digital devices and supporting applications (Gudoniene et al., 2025; Jnr et al., 2020).

This policy indirectly provides opportunities for faculty members to initiate and develop the digitization of the learning process, including by providing materials in the form of Word documents, PDFs, and videos shared through the Learning Management System (LMS) platform (Lazar et al., 2020). In practice, Zoom Meetings and Learning Management Systems (LMS) serve as the primary tools supporting the teaching and learning process. Higher education institutions have formalized and institutionalized digital learning through a hybrid system—that is, a combination of online (virtual) and in-person (face-to-face) learning. Over time, this hybrid method has become a popular learning approach among college faculty members (Gudoniene et al., 2025; Heilporn et al., 2021).

Hybrid learning offers a high degree of flexibility and ease of access. Instructors can provide a variety of literacy resources and learning materials that students can use to support their independent learning. These teaching materials are tailored to the current week's course content and presented in digital formats, such as scanned books, links to articles and journals, PDF files, instructional videos from video-sharing platforms, worksheets, and practical learning guides (Jnr et al., 2020; Gudoniene et al., 2025). In addition, the hybrid learning method supports the government's agenda in preparing for the era of the Fifth Industrial Revolution, which emphasizes the predominant use of digital media in the dissemination of information, public services, and social interactions. The use of digital media enables more effective communication and service delivery without being hindered by distance, time, or location (Gudoniene et al., 2025; Mishra et al., 2020).

In Fine Arts Education programs at various universities in Indonesia, practical courses such as Technical Drawing or Projection Drawing require students to master cognitive and psychomotor skills in an integrated manner. Students are not only expected to understand concepts and theories but also to be able to apply work procedures accurately, systematically, and in accordance with technical standards. In this context, the practical learning process should ideally facilitate students' cognitive development.

According to Jerome Bruner's cognitive theory, the learning process occurs through three stages of representation: enactive, iconic, and symbolic. The enactive stage occurs when students learn through direct action and concrete experiences; the iconic stage occurs when students understand concepts through visual representations; while the symbolic stage is characterized by the ability to represent learning experiences in the form of symbols, language, or written rules. These three stages are highly relevant to the characteristics of Technical Drawing practice, which emphasizes demonstration, visualization, and procedural understanding. (Bruner & Olson, 2014; Khoiriyah & Murni, 2021).

In technical drawing practices, the enactive and iconic stages are generally best facilitated through in-person demonstrations in the classroom. Instructors demonstrate the use of tools, measurement techniques, and the steps of the drawing process so that students can learn through observation and imitation. However, challenges arise when practical instruction is conducted online or in a hybrid format. Online learning tends to take students directly to the symbolic stage through verbal explanations and text-based worksheets, while the enactive and iconic stages are not adequately facilitated. (Chernikova et al., 2020; Gudoniene et al., 2025).

These conditions make it difficult for students to fully understand and remember the entire workflow. Errors in one step often affect subsequent steps because the Technical Drawing course is procedural and sequential in nature. Furthermore, the limited direct interaction and delayed feedback in online learning have further increased students' reliance on instructors' guidance. This indicates that the challenges in practical Technical Drawing practices do not lie solely in the online learning format but in the lack of support for students' cognitive representation processes in their entirety. (Chernikova et al., 2020; Rourke, 2019).

In this context, Jerome Bruner's cognitive theory, with its enactive, iconic, symbolic stages, serves not only as a conceptual framework but also as a pedagogical solution to address students' difficulties in understanding and remembering sequential work procedures (Khoiriyah & Murni, 2021; Bruner & Olson, 2014). Based on this analysis, Jerome Bruner's cognitive theory is considered relevant and strategic to serve as the primary foundation for developing digital teaching materials for practical learning.

The enactive iconic symbolic stages provide a clear framework in designing procedure-based learning so that the development of e-modules with the Procedural Orientation Structure (SOP) strategy becomes a logical and systematic solution to the SOP strategy in line with Bruner's theory because it places students in a gradual learning process from concrete experiences of visualizing work steps to symbolic understanding of rules and technical standards (Rahmagandi et al., 2024; Nafeli et al., 2024).

With this design, the practical e-module serves not only as a source of information but also as a self-study guide, capable of partially replacing live lecture demonstrations in online or hybrid learning. This is expected to help students develop a more comprehensive and sustainable procedural understanding.

Based on these problems, this study uses a Research and Development (R&D) approach with the ADDIE model which includes the Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate phases. This study aims to develop a practical e-module based on Jerome Bruner's Cognitive Theory, namely enactive, iconic, symbolic in the Technical Drawing/Projection Drawing course (Rahmagandi et al., 2024; Nafeli et al., 2024).

With the development of digital technology, the use of printed learning modules has gradually shifted toward e-modules or digital modules, including those for practical courses. However, most e-modules currently available still tend to focus on delivering theoretical material and do not optimally accommodate interactive, applied practice components (Rahmagandi et al., 2024; Cahyani et al., 2024). Furthermore, empirical studies on the effectiveness of practical e-modules in improving students' hands-on skills are still relatively limited, particularly in the context of fine arts education.

Several studies have also shown that important aspects such as student engagement, ease of navigation, and the impact of practical e-modules on long-term knowledge retention are often overlooked (Heilporn et al., 2021; Getenet et al., 2024). Therefore, this research, focused on the development and evaluation of practical e-modules that not only present theoretical content but also include step-by-step simulation guides based on SOPs and instant feedback mechanisms, is an important contribution to innovation in vocational and fine arts education in the era of digital transformation.

Method

Research Design

This study employed an observational method combined with an experimental approach in the form of research and development (R&D). The R&D method is a research approach used to develop a specific product and test its effectiveness (Sugiyono, 2009:297). The development model in this study follows a model adapted from the ADDIE instructional design model, which includes the analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation phases (Branch, 2009).

1. In the analysis phase, a needs analysis is conducted before designing the e-module product. The analysis begins with curriculum analysis, instructional analysis, and student characteristics analysis.
2. The design phase of the data obtained is followed by product design in the form of a learning e-module by formulating specific, measurable, useful, and realistic learning objectives. In this case, the e-module is realized with a description of each material per practical lecture along with syntax to assist students. The descriptions in the e-module are in the form of directives for students.
3. This development phase is carried out based on the results of the initial needs analysis by determining the course plan (starting from the initial mid-semester meeting to the final exam) in the form of an evaluation sheet. At this phase, a trial will be conducted by experts, faculty members, and students by filling out an observation sheet containing suggestions and input. The trial will be conducted by experts and students, namely against the criteria of the product being developed. Based on the results of the trial, suggestions and feedback will be obtained for improvements that will be used to revise the learning.
4. At this phase, the learning model is implemented in learning activities. The development results are applied to learning to determine their impact on learning quality, including effectiveness, attractiveness, and efficiency.
5. At this phase, an evaluation of the developed product is conducted, from design to learning evaluation. The evaluation in this study includes validation from subject matter experts, media experts, and language experts, as well as student assessments. Learning outcomes are assessed by measuring the achievement of product development objectives, assessing what the target audience has been able to achieve, and seeking information on what can help students achieve good results.

In general, the entire research and development process is to develop a specific product that is valid, practical, and effective for use as a medium in learning. Through this research, the researcher attempts to develop a product in the form of an e-module that is good and useful for the implementation of lectures on Technical Drawing courses. In this research, the resulting product is the Development of a Practical E-module using the Procedural Orientation Structure strategy for the Technical Drawing Course in Fine Arts Education, FBS UNP.

The following is a summary of the activities carried out during the 5 phases:

1. **Analysis:** Curriculum analysis was conducted by reviewing the learning plans material for the Technical Drawing Course from several other public universities, which includes an introduction to brainstorming at each meeting, an introduction to materials, tools, and practice media, as well as practice techniques and procedures, with a focus on important points for students in practical courses. Instructional analysis was conducted through discussions with the faculty member regarding material criteria, learning processes, and forms of assessment and evaluation. Meanwhile, student character analysis was conducted through discussions outside of class during free time, finding that students have a visual learning style and tend to utilize direct experience (real time) as learning material.
2. **Design:** This research produced a book containing content that encompasses three stages of representation: enactive, iconic, and symbolic. The book is an e-module for students, presented in digital form using the web-based flipbook maker Heyzine. The content presented in this e-module consists of course materials for Technical Drawing courses at both the college and high school levels. The e-module contains various visual elements that can be used according to the learners' characteristics, including text, video links, 3D models, and clips.
3. **Development:** In the development phase, researchers carry out several activities as follows: first, compiling an e-module prototype; second, self-evaluation with colleagues; third, product revision based on self-evaluation; fourth, validation of the research product with experts.
4. **Implementation:** The implementation phase is the research stage where the product is tested in the Technical Drawing course in one class using an e-module. In this phase, the researcher conducted a pretest at the beginning of the trial without using the e-module and a posttest using the e-module on 25 students taking the technical drawing course.
5. **Evaluation:** Various prototypes created during the development phase are reviewed using formative assessment techniques. Formative assessment is a process that begins with self-evaluation and continues with instrument validation and expert review (materials, educational planning, and language). Summative assessment is conducted through student assignments.

Instruments and Data Analysis

Aspects that are very important, especially in the development of teaching materials, which will later become the strength in the validity of an e-module product:

Table 1
Aspects Assessed in the E-Module

No	Rated aspect
1	Appearance
2	Contents
3	Construct
4	Criteria

The results of the E-Module validation were analyzed using validator scores for each criterion, validation using values from the Aiken's V formula (Bashooir & Supahar, 2018), determining the level of validity (Bayu et al, 2023).

Table 2
Aiken's V Coefficient Values and Criteria

No	Rated Coefficient of Aiken's V	Validity Criteria
1	$0 \leq V \leq 0.4$	Not Valid
2	$0.4 < V \leq 0.8$	Valid
3	$0.8 < V \leq 1$	Very Valid

To determine and determine the consistency and stability of the validators' assessments, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was used. The ICC value was calculated using SPSS 23.0 using the Rosner criteria (Murti, 2011).

Table 3
Interpretation of ICC Index

Index	Information
<0.40	Weak
0.40-0.75	Good
>0.75	Very well

The results of the effectiveness of the use of the Student E-Module, carried out the N-Gain (Normalized Gain Score) test, paired T-test and using Cohen's effect size.. The N-Gain test was obtained by comparing the difference between the pretest and posttest scores with the difference between the maximum score and the pretest score. The calculation results were interpreted using the Gain index (Yefterson, 2025).

Table 4
N-Gain Score Criteria

Index	Criteria
>0.70	High
0.30-0.70	Currently
<0.30	Low

Cohen's effect size is obtained from how big the influence or difference between the pre-test and post-test is in practice from a statistical treatment.

Table 5
Jacob Cohen Classification Standards

Indeks	Classification
0,20	Small Effect
0,50	Medium Effect
>0,80	Large Effect

Results

Based on the results obtained in this study, with various ADDIE series, analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation, but this article focuses on data exposure based on needs analysis on curriculum, instruction and students, followed by development based on expert validation, and finally the results of implementation on students.

Curriculum, Instructional and Student Needs Analysis

The results of the needs analysis indicate that the development of e-modules in Technical Drawing courses is not simply an alternative medium, but rather an instructional need arising from curriculum demands, learning characteristics, and student characteristics (Setiami & Maulana, 2021; Rahmagandi et al., 2024; Sujarwo et al., 2025). In development research, needs analysis serves to ensure that the developed product is truly born from real learning problems, not from the researcher's assumptions (Arif et al., 2022; Mizian, 2023). In this context, the need for e-modules arises because learning Technical Drawing requires mastery of concepts, procedural accuracy, and the ability of students to learn independently and repeatedly outside of face-to-face hours (Setiami & Maulana, 2021; Isnaini & Nuryanto, 2024; Nafeli et al., 2024). From a curriculum perspective, the learning outcomes of the Technical Drawing course demonstrate that students are not only required to understand the history, objectives, and benefits of technical drawing, but also to be able to adapt to drawing tools, master the procedures for projecting points, lines, planes, and objects, and design three-dimensional objects as a form of application (Sujarwo et al., 2025; Isnaini & Nuryanto, 2024). The scope of the material spread across one semester also shows that the material is structured in stages and is interconnected, with the projection of geometric objects being an important foundation for mastering subsequent material. This means that students need teaching materials that are not only informative, but also systematically structured, sequential, and accessible when they encounter difficulties at certain stages (Setiami & Maulana, 2021; Rahmagandi et al., 2024; Mizian, 2023). This condition strengthens the reason that e-modules need to be

developed as a learning tool that can maintain the continuity of students' understanding from basic concepts to more complex skills (Rahmagandi et al., 2024; Nafeli et al., 2024).

These findings align with the concept of e-modules as electronic teaching materials designed for independent learning, systematically structured, and capable of integrating text, images, animation, video, navigation, and evaluation into a single learning unit (Setiami & Maulana, 2021; Rahmagandi et al., 2024; Arif et al., 2022; Manggala et al., 2024). In learning that requires visual and procedural understanding such as Technical Drawing, the advantage of e-modules lies not only in their digital form, but also in their ability to present material in a gradual, flexible, and rich representational manner (Nafeli et al., 2024; Rahmagandi et al., 2024). Thus, the development of e-modules in this study has a strong theoretical basis because the electronic format allows students to review the material, pay attention to detailed steps, and learn at their own pace (Setiami & Maulana, 2021; Rahmagandi et al., 2024).

From an instructional perspective, the analysis shows that Technical Drawing learning adheres to Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and KKNI level 6, utilizing the Case Method and Project-Based Learning approaches. This means the learning process is directed not only at increasing knowledge but also at developing students' analytical, problem-solving, decision-making, and technical skills (Isnaini & Nuryanto, 2024; Sujarwo et al., 2025). The problem is, this learning model will struggle to run optimally if students lack learning resources that provide clear, step-by-step directions. Without a coherent material structure, students risk partially understanding assignments, relying on faculty members' explanations, and experiencing difficulties when working independently. Therefore, the need for e-modules in this study is logical, as a tool that bridges the demands of Case Method and Project-Based Learning with students' need for structured study guides (Rahmagandi et al., 2024).

The need for a clear structure can also be explained through the theory of Procedural Orientation Structure (SOP). The literature review explains that SOPs are relevant for use in procedurally demanding fields of study because they organize prerequisite relationships between steps, from simple to more complex. In Technical Drawing courses, sequences such as point projection, line projection, plane projection, and geometric object projection demonstrate a strong procedural-prerequisite relationship. Students cannot properly master advanced stages if they have not mastered the basic ones. Therefore, the results of the needs analysis not only point to the need for e-modules but also indicate that these e-modules must be designed based on coherent procedural logic, not simply a collection of digital materials (Setiami & Maulana 2021; Isnaini & Nuryanto 2024).

In terms of student characteristics, the analysis shows that Fine Arts Education students tend to learn through visual observation, real-life experiences, and the ability to re-present observed objects. Student responses that emphasize direct observation, studying the shape, then imagining and re-drawing it indicate that their learning process is strong in the aspects of visualization and manipulation of mental images. However, academically, these findings are more appropriately written as an indication of visual tendencies in learning Technical Drawing, rather than as an absolute conclusion that all students have the same visual learning style. This refinement is important to ensure a more careful and less generalized discussion. Nevertheless, these findings are still strong enough to indicate that the learning media developed need to emphasize the visual aspects of concrete examples and gradual representation (Santoso et al., 2021).

This trend reinforces the relevance of Robert Gagne's information processing theory in the development of e-modules. Gagne emphasized that effective learning occurs when information is presented in a structured manner through clear stages, starting from attracting attention, conveying objectives, activating prior knowledge, presenting stimuli, providing guidance, eliciting performance, providing feedback, assessing results, and strengthening retention and transfer. When linked to the results of the needs analysis, the developed Technical Drawing e-module should not stop at delivering material but also include clear learning objectives, engaging visual illustrations, demonstrations of work steps, exercises, and evaluations that provide feedback on student learning outcomes (Manggala et al., 2024; Setiami & Maulana, 2021). In other words, what is needed

for e-modules is not the digitization of printed modules but rather a learning design that is purposefully built to support students' thinking processes.

Furthermore, the need for e-module development in this study can also be explained through Jerome Bruner's cognitive theory. Bruner emphasized that good learning moves from concrete experiences to more abstract representations through the enactive, iconic, and symbolic stages. In learning Technical Drawing, students need to first understand objects concretely or through demonstrations, then see their visual representations, and finally be able to express this understanding in the form of accurate technical drawings. Thus, the developed e-module can be positioned as a medium that helps students move from the enactive stage to the iconic and symbolic. This is important because one of the main problems in learning Technical Drawing is the gap between seeing forms and understanding spatial relationships and producing procedurally correct drawings. A good e-module can bridge this transition process (Rahmagandi et al., 2024).

The results of the needs analysis in this study are also supported by relevant research studies showing that e-modules can improve learning independence, understanding of material, engagement, and learning outcomes, including in the context of Technical Drawing and art learning (Setiami & Maulana, 2021; Nafeli et al., 2024; Isnaini & Nuryanto, 2024). Furthermore, the application of a procedural orientation structure has also been shown to help students understand work sequences, increase learning motivation, and strengthen cognitive and psychomotor engagement (Isnaini & Nuryanto, 2024). This means that the development needs identified in this study are not isolated but consistent with previous research findings. Therefore, the decision to develop an e-module based on Bruner's theory and a procedural orientation structure has adequate empirical and theoretical basis.

Based on all the above discussion, it can be emphasized that the need to develop e-modules in Technical Drawing courses is rooted in three main things, namely the demands of a tiered curriculum, the instructional need for learning that remains structured in a case-based and project-based approach, and the characteristics of students who require visual-procedural support. Therefore, the developed e-modules must be designed with the main characteristics of a coherent presentation of material, strong visualization, explicit work steps, independent practice and evaluation with feedback. With such a design, e-modules have the potential to be a tool that not only helps students understand Technical Drawing material but also strengthens independent learning, the accuracy of the drawing process, and their readiness to complete assignments more systematically (Setiami & Maulana, 2021; Rahmagandi et al., 2024; Isnaini & Nuryanto, 2024).

E-module Validation (Development)

Table 6
Results of expert assessment using Aiken's V and ICC criteria

No	Aspect	V-Aiken	Category	ICC	Category
1	Appearance	0.941	Very Valid	0.936	Very well
2	Contents	0.947	Very Valid	0.785	Very well
3	Construct	0.952	Very Valid	0.889	Very well
4	Criteria	0.964	Very Valid	0.810	Very well
	Average	0.951		0.855	

Based on the validity test results in table 6 by expert validators on the e-module, the average score of the three validators was 0.951. Referring to the results obtained, it can be said that the e-module is very valid and very suitable for use in Technical Drawing courses. The results of the e-module reliability calculation using the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) formula obtained a reliability value of 0.855. This value illustrates that the e-module reliability level is in the very good category. Referring to the results described, it can be concluded that the e-module is very suitable for use in Technical Drawing courses.

Pretest and Posttest (Implementation)

Table 7
Results of Normalized Gain Score Pretest and Posttest

Material	Pretest Average	Posttest Average	Average N- gain	Category
Orthogonal Projection	60.22	77.13	0.73	High

Table 7 shows the pretest results for students in the Technical Drawing course, showing an average score of 60.22, categorized as “more than adequate.” This finding indicates that students have a basic understanding of the Orthogonal Projection material, but still experience inaccuracies in the application of procedures, dimensions, object positions, and drawing symbols, resulting in suboptimal technical consistency and motor skills. After implementing the e-module for five meetings, the posttest average increased to 77.13, categorized as “very good,” and an N-gain of 0.73, indicating a significant improvement in ability.

Further statistical analysis confirmed this finding, with the paired sample t-test showed a significant increase in scores after the subjects were given intervention, $t(24) = 12.00$, $p < .001$. The results of the data analysis showed an average difference in pretest and posttest scores of 16.91 with a standard deviation of 7.05. The measurement of the effect size produced a Cohen's d value = 2.40, which indicates that the application of the practical e-module using a flipbook maker with the reinforcement of Jerome Bruner's cognitive theory and procedural orientation structure strategy provided a very large effect in practice in improving the achievements of the research subjects, while normality and homogeneity of variance tests ensured the validity of the use of parametric analysis. The posttest results also showed higher consistency in the application of procedures, tool use, accuracy of projection plane identity, and drawing rules, although some aspects such as Z-axis coordinates, horizontal projector line alignment, and visual neatness still require additional attention.

The effectiveness of the e-module can be explained through a cognitive theory framework. Gagne's principles, including gaining students' attention, conveying learning objectives, stimulating prior memory, presenting structured material, guiding learning, providing performance activities, providing feedback, assessing performance, and enhancing retention and transfer of knowledge, are applied in the e-module design through interactive visual and audio elements, step-by-step guidance, and direct feedback, enabling students to process information and apply it in projective drawing practice. Furthermore, Bruner's constructivist approach emphasizes students' role as active builders of knowledge, through hands-on experiences that enable them to discover, transform, and evaluate knowledge from the concrete to the abstract. Improvements in technical skills and procedural understanding seen in the posttest indicate that students have successfully actively constructed knowledge in accordance with these principles.

The Procedural Orientation (SOP) structure in the e-module provides a sequential framework for students to understand the steps of drawing projections. The organization of the material from procedure-prerequisite to procedure-decision allows students to follow the steps systematically, improving mastery of technical procedures, motor skills, and conceptual understanding. The consistency of posttest scores in the range of 70–90 indicates that the SOP helps students apply the procedures in a more structured manner, while reducing error variation compared to the pretest. Student interaction with the module demonstrates the effectiveness of scaffolding, where interactive guides facilitate independent learning, increase motivation, and facilitate more accurate performance.

The long-term development strategy for e-modules should consider improving content and interactive features, such as 3D visualization-based coordinate exercises, a more detailed automated feedback system, and simulation modules for intensive practice, to improve fine motor skills, procedural consistency, and conceptual understanding. The use of Gagne and Bruner's principles should be reinforced through scaffolding, reflective activities, case studies, and collaborative activities that encourage self-regulation and problem-solving. SOPs can be developed into a multi-level hierarchy of procedures, supporting differentiated and personalized

learning, and utilizing analytical dashboards to monitor student progress. The integration of blended and distance learning will also increase flexibility, accessibility, and student engagement.

Overall, the integration of cognitive theory-based e-modules using the SOP strategy has been proven effective in improving the learning outcomes of Technical Drawing students, both in cognitive, motoric, and procedural aspects. This module strengthens mastery of technical procedures and motoric skills, supports the development of critical thinking, and facilitates more structured independent learning. Although some aspects such as visual neatness and Z-axis coordinates still need strengthening, e-modules have the potential to become interactive and adaptive learning media that can improve the quality of higher education in the fields of art and engineering, as well as prepare students to face the demands of the 21st century.

Conclusion

High validity, based on the assessment results by three expert validators, the e-module obtained an average score of 0.951, indicating a very high level of validity. The calculation of reliability using the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) produced a value of 0.855, indicating that the reliability of the e-module is in the very good category. Thus, this e-module is very valid and suitable for use in Technical Drawing courses. These findings ensure that the product is ready to be implemented in learning, both in class and for independent use, to assess its impact on improving student abilities more broadly.

The E-module product has been proven to be effective in improving the ability of Technical Drawing students in drawing orthogonal projections. The pretest results showed a basic understanding of students with an average of 60.22 (more than sufficient), while the posttest increased significantly to 77.13 (very good) with an N-gain of 0.73, supported by valid statistical analysis (significant t-test, normality and homogeneity of variance are met). This improvement is seen in the consistency of the application of procedures, the use of tools, the accuracy of the projection plane identity, and drawing rules, although some technical aspects such as Z-axis coordinates and visual neatness still require attention.

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Islamic Informed Environmental Governance in the Age of Ecological Crisis: A *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* Perspective

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This article examines the contribution of Islamic legal thought to the formulation of a Islamic informed environmental governance framework amid the increasingly complex global ecological crisis. Employing a normative critical qualitative approach and trans-disciplinary analysis, the study integrates classical and contemporary Islamic legal literature with theories of environmental governance and environmental ethics, as well as findings from modern ecological science. The findings demonstrate that Islamic legal principles can be reconstructed into environmental governance through two interrelated mechanisms. First, mutual critical reconstruction enables ecological science to expand juristic understandings of environmental harm and interdependence, while Islamic legal reasoning provides normative criteria for evaluating the justice and legitimacy of environmental responses. Second, these reconstructed principles are operationalized through a recursive governance cycle linking Islamic based normative sources, ethical translation, institutional mediation, policy implementation, and evaluative feedback. Based on these mechanisms, this study proposes a Islamic informed environmental governance model that moves beyond the normative integration of Islamic environmental values by providing a systematic pathway for translating Islamic legal norms into governance practices. Instruments such as *fatwas*, *fiqh* doctrines, and *waqf* mechanisms can thereby inform institutional deliberation, community action, and policy development. The model's distinctive contribution lies in combining mutual epistemological reconstruction with an institutionally mediated and continuously revisable governance process.

Keywords: ecology; environmental ethics; environmental governance; *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*; religion.

The global ecological crisis in the twenty-first century has reached an alarming level, marked by accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and widespread environmental pollution (Díaz et al., 2019). Recent scientific reports indicate that human activities have pushed the Earth system beyond safe planetary boundaries, thereby threatening the sustainability of life on the planet (Rockström et al., 2009). In this context, the ecological crisis is no longer merely a technical issue; it has evolved into a multidimensional crisis encompassing ethical, political, economic, and even spiritual dimensions (Ostrom 2009). Consequently, environmental governance requires a more holistic and transdisciplinary framework (Jenkins 2018).

Although various science based policies and instruments have been developed within the framework of modern environmental governance, purely secular approaches often reveal significant limitations, particularly in fostering long term moral commitment and collective behavioural change (Hitzhusen 2007). Studies in environmental ethics emphasise that the ecological crisis is also rooted in a crisis of values and the dominance of anthropocentric paradigms in modernity (Hitzhusen 2007). Furthermore, the failure of many

global environmental regimes to meet agreed upon targets reflects the limited internalisation of ethical values in environmental governance and public policy (Agrawal 2005). This situation creates an opportunity to explore alternative normative sources, including religion, as a foundation for public environmental ethics.

Over the past several decades, religion has increasingly been recognised as an important actor in global ecological discourse. Scholarship in the field of religion and ecology demonstrates that religious traditions possess significant potential to cultivate ecological awareness, mobilise communities, and strengthen environmental stewardship (Denny 2003). In this regard, Islam, as one of the world's largest religions, offers a rich normative framework through concepts such as *khilāfah* (stewardship), *amānah* (trust), and *maṣlahah* (public interest), which constitute important foundations for Islamic environmental ethics (Kamali 2010). Nevertheless, the contribution of Islamic legal thought to global environmental discourse remains underrepresented within mainstream environmental governance scholarship despite its significant normative potential (Marshall 2025).

Although recent scholarship has begun to connect Islamic legal principles with environmental policy initiatives at regional and institutional levels, including studies on green fatwas, Islamic environmental governance, and eco-*waqf*, these contributions remain largely sectoral and context specific. A comprehensive and systematic framework that integrates Islamic legal thought with contemporary environmental governance theory, policy design, and implementation across broader governance contexts remains insufficiently developed. Accordingly, this article seeks not to fill an absence of policy oriented studies, but to advance a more integrated legal governance framework that bridges Islamic legal thought, environmental ethics, governance theory, and ecological science within a coherent conceptual model. This gap highlights the need for an integrative approach that bridges Islamic legal traditions, environmental sciences, and modern governance theories.

Within the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, this article does not regard environmental protection (*hifẓ al-bi'ah*) as one of the original classical objectives formulated by early jurists. Rather, it adopts the contemporary *maqāṣid* perspective, which understands environmental protection as a logical extension of the preservation of life (*hifẓ al-nafs*), wealth (*hifẓ al-māl*), and the broader realization of *maṣlahah*. In this sense, environmental sustainability represents an evolving objective of Islamic law that responds to contemporary ecological challenges while remaining rooted in classical jurisprudential principles.

Against this background, this article addresses two principal questions: (1) How can Islamic legal thought contribute conceptually and normatively to modern environmental governance? and (2) How can such a framework engage constructively with contemporary science and ecology? This article argues that a Islamic informed environmental governance approach can not only enrich the ethical dimension of environmental governance but also offer a more holistic alternative paradigm based on *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, which incorporates environmental protection as an integral objective of Islamic law. Accordingly, the integration of Islamic legal thought into environmental governance may provide a significant contribution to addressing the global ecological crisis in a more just and sustainable manner.

Literature Review

The concept of environmental governance has undergone significant evolution from a state-centric regulatory approach to a more complex, multi-actor model involving markets, civil society, and various institutions. In contemporary scholarship, governance is understood not merely as a regulatory instrument but as a dynamic process encompassing the negotiation of values, the distribution of power and mechanisms of accountability across multiple levels (Newell et al., 2012). Key issues that have emerged within this discourse include sustainability, climate justice and the effectiveness of global policy regimes in addressing ecological crises (Koehrsen & Ives 2025). Nevertheless, an important critique is that modern governance frameworks tend to be technocratic and often fail to integrate substantive ethical dimensions, thereby limiting their capacity to foster enduring collective moral commitment (Jenkins 2018).

In response to these limitations, the field of religion and ecology has developed rapidly, incorporating spiritual and ethical dimensions into environmental discourse. Numerous studies demonstrate that religion can shape value orientations, strengthen moral responsibility and mobilise collective action on a broad scale. Furthermore, the science religion dialogue has become increasingly relevant to the construction of holistic ecological approaches, in which empirical knowledge is integrated with normative frameworks rooted in religious traditions (Bikku 2025). Within this perspective, religion is positioned not only as a source of ethical inspiration but also as an epistemological partner in fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the human nature relationship.

Within the Islamic tradition, concern for the environment can be traced through both classical sources and contemporary developments in Islamic legal thought. The environmental concern has evolved beyond its classical theological foundations into a dynamic field of contemporary Islamic legal scholarship. While many scholars continue to interpret *khilāfah* and *amānah* primarily as ethical obligations that cultivate environmental responsibility, others argue that these concepts should be operationalized within environmental governance, public policy, and sustainable development frameworks. Likewise, *maṣlahah* has developed from a classical juristic principle of public welfare into a broader analytical framework capable of legitimizing environmental protection, climate action, and intergenerational justice. These diverse interpretations illustrate that contemporary Islamic environmental thought is evolving from predominantly normative discourse toward more policy oriented and governance-based approaches. (Md Taha et al., 2025). Contemporary scholarship has further developed these concepts in response to the global ecological crisis, particularly through the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, which emphasises the protection of life and ecological balance (Nurholis 2025). However, much of this literature remains normative and descriptive and has yet to establish substantial connections with the concrete mechanisms of contemporary environmental governance. Moreover, engagement with modern environmental science and governance theory remains relatively limited, resulting in an underarticulated understanding of Islamic law's contribution to global environmental discourse (Sari et al., 2026).

In light of these gaps, this article adopts a normative critical theoretical framework combined with a transdisciplinary approach. In this study, transdisciplinarity is understood not merely as the combination of multiple disciplinary perspectives but as the construction of a shared conceptual framework through continuous interaction between Islamic legal thought, environmental governance theory, and ecological science. Contemporary ecological findings are first employed to identify the nature and urgency of current environmental challenges, while governance theory provides analytical criteria concerning institutional effectiveness, participation, accountability, and sustainability. These empirical and conceptual insights are subsequently interpreted through the normative principles of Islamic law, particularly *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, *maṣlahah*, *khilāfah*, and *amānah*, to formulate an integrated ethical governance framework. The outcome is not simply a juxtaposition of disciplines, but a reconstructed model of faith informed environmental governance in which scientific evidence defines environmental realities, governance theory structures institutional responses, and Islamic jurisprudence provides normative and ethical direction for policy and collective action.

The normative dimension is employed to explore the foundational principles of Islamic law, particularly within the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, as a basis for environmental ethics. The critical dimension serves to evaluate the limitations of contemporary governance models while opening avenues for dialogue between Islamic legal traditions and contemporary scientific knowledge. By integrating law, theology, ecology, and ethics, the transdisciplinary approach facilitates the development of an analytical framework that is not only conceptually robust but also practically relevant to contemporary public policy contexts. In doing so, this article seeks to transcend the dichotomy between religious normativity and scientific rationality.

Conceptually, the position advanced in this article is integrative rather than apologetic. The primary objective is not to defend Islamic tradition in a normative sense, but to foster a productive dialogue between

Islamic legal thought and contemporary environmental governance. This approach regards Islamic law as one of several epistemological resources capable of contributing both critically and constructively to responses to the global ecological crisis. The critical dimension adopted in this study does not seek to question the authority of classical Islamic legal sources, but rather to critically examine how classical juristic concepts can be reinterpreted and reconstructed in light of contemporary ecological realities. It evaluates whether traditional legal formulations remain adequate for addressing issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental governance, while employing the objectives of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* as a framework for contextualizing Islamic legal principles within present-day environmental challenges. In this sense, the critical approach is reconstructive rather than deconstructive, aiming to preserve the normative foundations of Islamic law while enhancing their contemporary relevance through dialogue with ecological science and governance theory.

By linking the principles of Sharī'ah with issues such as sustainability and ecological justice, this article seeks to broaden the horizons of global environmental discourse while proposing an alternative framework that is more ethical, inclusive, and sustainable.

The theoretical contribution of this article extends beyond the normative integration of Islamic values into environmental discourse. Existing scholarship in religion and ecology, Islamic environmental ethics, and Islamic environmental jurisprudence has made significant progress in demonstrating the ethical relevance of religious traditions to sustainability. However, these approaches generally remain either normative, focusing on ethical principles, or sectoral, concentrating on specific instruments such as green *fatwas*, eco *waqf*, or Islamic based environmental initiatives, without explaining the institutional and epistemological mechanisms through which Islamic legal norms can systematically interact with ecological science and contemporary environmental governance. To address this gap, this article develops the Islamic informed environmental governance framework based on two complementary theoretical innovations. First, the concept of mutual critical reconstruction conceptualizes an epistemological dialogue in which ecological science and Islamic legal reasoning reciprocally refine one another rather than occupying separate domains of facts and values. Second, the recursive governance cycle explains how Islamic legal norms are translated through ethical articulation, institutional mediation, policy implementation, and evaluative feedback into adaptive governance practices. By integrating these two mechanisms within a single analytical framework, this article advances a theory building contribution that provides a systematic explanation of how religious normativity can become institutionally operational while remaining responsive to scientific knowledge and changing ecological realities. Accordingly, the proposed framework offers scholars a more comprehensive analytical model for examining the interaction between religion, governance, and environmental policy than existing approaches that primarily emphasize ethical compatibility or normative integration.

A critical synthesis of the existing literature reveals that each major approach contributes important insights while also exhibiting significant limitations. Secular environmental governance has developed sophisticated institutional frameworks emphasizing participation, polycentric governance, adaptive learning, and policy effectiveness; however, it often treats ethical values as external variables and provides limited explanation of how enduring moral commitments are cultivated within society. Conversely, religion based governance and environmental ethics offer strong normative foundations capable of shaping ecological responsibility and collective behaviour, yet they frequently remain at the level of ethical affirmation without specifying institutional pathways through which religious values influence governance processes. Similarly, scholarship on Islamic environmental law has successfully articulated concepts such as *khilāfah*, *amānah*, *maṣlahah*, and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, but much of this literature remains normative and sector specific, focusing on particular instruments such as green *fatwas*, eco *waqf*, or Islamic environmental movements rather than developing an integrated governance framework. This article advances the literature by bridging these fragmented perspectives through the Islamic informed environmental governance framework, which combines mutual critical reconstruction as an epistemological mechanism and the recursive governance cycle as an institutional mechanism for translating Islamic legal norms into adaptive, evidence informed, and continuously evaluable environmental governance practices.

Method

This study employed a qualitative methodology with a normative-critical approach to explore and reconstruct the contribution of Islamic legal thought to contemporary environmental governance. The primary sources consisted of classical works of Islamic jurisprudence and legal theory representing the Sunni legal tradition, particularly texts discussing *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, *maṣlaḥah*, *khilāfah*, *amānah*, and environmental responsibility. These were complemented by contemporary scholarly publications on Islamic environmental law, environmental governance, religion and ecology, and sustainability published in peer reviewed journals and academic books. The literature was selected based on its relevance to environmental governance, Islamic legal theory, and contemporary ecological challenges.

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, relevant legal concepts were identified and extracted from the selected classical and contemporary Islamic legal literature. Second, these concepts were subjected to conceptual analysis to identify their normative meanings and underlying legal objectives. Third, the findings were comparatively examined alongside contemporary theories of environmental governance and ecological science to identify points of convergence, divergence, and complementarity. Finally, the results were synthesized into an integrated conceptual framework of Islamic informed environmental governance based on the principles of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*.

This analytical procedure enabled the systematic integration of Islamic legal principles, governance theory, and ecological science into a coherent conceptual framework capable of explaining the normative foundations of Islamic informed environmental governance.

Results and Discussions

Core Concepts of Islamic Legal Thought Relevant to Ecology

Islamic legal thought provides a set of ethical legal principles that are highly relevant to addressing contemporary ecological crises, particularly through the notion of human responsibility towards the environment. This principle is rooted in the conception of human beings as stewards of the Earth who bear a moral trust (*amānah*) to preserve the sustainability of life-supporting systems (Md Taha et al., 2025). Within this framework, the human nature relationship is not exploitative but grounded in responsibility and intergenerational accountability (Jenkins 2018). The environmental ethics literature similarly affirms the importance of an ethic of responsibility as a foundation for collective ecological behaviour (Kopnina 2012). Consequently, this principle may be understood as an ethical legal norm that encourages the integration of individual moral obligations into public policy frameworks in environmental governance.

Furthermore, the concept of balance and harmony constitutes a central element in the construction of an environmental ethic grounded in Islamic law. Islamic intellectual traditions emphasise the preservation of cosmic balance as an integral aspect of the order of creation, which, in a contemporary context, can be associated with ecosystem stability and planetary boundaries. This perspective resonates with contemporary ecological approaches that highlight the interdependence of biospheric components and the necessity of maintaining the integrity of natural systems (Steffen et al., 2015). Accordingly, the principle of balance is not merely metaphysical but also carries practical implications for the formulation of environmental policies grounded in sustainability and the precautionary principle.

Moreover, an orientation towards public welfare and sustainability is reflected in the concept of *maṣlaḥah*, which, in its contemporary development, can be articulated as an ethical policy framework aimed at maximising collective well being without compromising the interests of future generations (Mohd Zain et al., 2024). This principle bears a strong conceptual affinity with the notions of sustainable development and intergenerational justice in the modern governance literature. In this regard, Islamic law provides not only moral norms but also an evaluative framework for assessing environmental policies based on their impacts on social and ecological justice. This demonstrates that the principle of *maṣlaḥah* can function as a bridge between normative ethics and concrete policy practice.

On the other hand, the ethical prohibition of environmental destruction constitutes a key principle that establishes moral limits on human interaction with nature. The prohibition of actions that cause corruption or destruction (*fāsād*) may be understood as a preventive principle closely aligned with the harm-prevention approach in contemporary environmental ethics. Within the framework of Islamic law, this principle regulates not only individual conduct but can also be institutionalised through public regulations aimed at preventing excessive exploitation and ecosystem degradation (Nurholis 2025). Thus, the prohibition of environmental harm serves as an ethical-legal norm that emphasises collective responsibility and the need for oversight mechanisms within governance systems.

Taken together, these core concepts within Islamic legal thought demonstrate that the tradition possesses significant potential to contribute to contemporary environmental governance discourse. It is important to emphasize that these principles should not be viewed merely as religious doctrines; rather, they constitute ethical legal frameworks that can be operationalized within the contexts of public policy and global governance (Sari et al., 2026). By articulating the principles of responsibility, balance, public welfare, and the prohibition of harm in an inclusive and dialogical language, this article positions Islamic legal thought as a relevant conceptual partner in the effort to develop governance paradigms that are more just, sustainable, and environmentally responsible.

Engaging Contemporary Ecology: Dialogue with Science

Contemporary ecological science provides increasingly robust empirical evidence that ecological crises are systemic and interconnected (Ciullo et al., 2025). However, while science can diagnose ecological degradation and its consequences, it does not by itself determine the normative principles that should guide collective responses.

The dialogue between Islamic legal thought and contemporary ecological science, however, involves significant epistemological tensions that cannot be resolved through simple conceptual equivalence. Ecological science operates primarily through empirical observation, measurement, and continuously revisable explanations of ecosystem dynamics, whereas Islamic legal thought derives its normative authority from revelation and juristic reasoning oriented towards determining obligations, values, and the realization of *maṣlaḥah* (Foltz, 2000). This distinction raises a fundamental question concerning how evolving scientific knowledge can inform the interpretation and application of relatively stable normative principles without reducing Islamic law to scientific determinism or subordinating ecological evidence to predetermined theological assumptions. At the same time, contemporary ecology challenges Islamic legal thought to reconsider the traditionally human centred articulation of welfare and harm by recognizing the systemic interdependence of human and non human life (Khalid, 2010). The dialogue therefore requires a process of mutual critical engagement in which ecological science expands the empirical understanding of environmental harm, while Islamic jurisprudence provides normative criteria for evaluating responses to ecological risks that scientific knowledge alone cannot ethically determine.

Nevertheless, the limitations of technocratic environmental governance cannot be addressed merely by inserting religious values into existing policy frameworks. A more fundamental challenge concerns how Islamic normative principles can be translated into publicly accessible ethical and policy language within pluralistic societies without either losing their distinctive religious foundations or imposing particular theological commitments on diverse communities. Principles such as *maṣlaḥah*, prevention of harm, and responsibility may contribute to public deliberation when articulated through broadly shared concerns such as ecological justice, sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility, while remaining rooted in their Islamic normative foundations (Qi et al., 2025; Camponeschi 2022; Sanson & Masten 2024). At the same time, Islamic legal thought must engage critically with the epistemic authority of ecological science, whose findings are empirical, probabilistic, and continually revisable. Rather than treating scientific knowledge as either normatively self sufficient or subordinate to predetermined legal conclusions, Islamic jurisprudence can regard it as an essential source for understanding contemporary realities and assessing environmental consequences, while retaining its distinctive role in determining the ethical and legal significance of those realities.

Accordingly, the relationship between Islamic legal thought and contemporary ecological science should be understood not as a simple division of labour in which science supplies facts and religion supplies values, but as a process of mutual critical reconstruction. Ecological knowledge can challenge Islamic jurisprudence to reassess the scope of harm, responsibility, and public welfare in light of complex ecological interdependence, long-term uncertainty, and impacts extending beyond immediate human interests (Saputro et al., 2025). Conversely, Islamic legal reasoning can critically interrogate the normative assumptions embedded in scientific and technocratic responses, including questions concerning whose interests are prioritised, how environmental risks are distributed, and what constitutes a just and morally legitimate policy response. This reciprocal engagement neither grants science exclusive authority over environmental decision making nor instrumentalises Islamic law as a source of moral legitimation for predetermined policies (Marshall 2025). It creates a deliberative space in which empirical knowledge and normative reasoning can jointly reshape the conceptual foundations of environmental governance. In this sense, Islamic informed environmental governance emerges not from the mere addition of religious ethics to scientific expertise, but from their critical interaction in constructing ecologically informed, ethically accountable, and socially just responses to environmental crises.

Towards Islamic Informed Environmental Governance

The concept of Islamic informed environmental governance advanced in this article refers to a framework that integrates religion based ethical values into the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of environmental policies. Unlike purely secular approaches, which tend to be technocratic in orientation, this model positions religion as a normative source that shapes public values and collective moral orientations (Agrawal 2005). In this context, Islamic legal thought offers an ethical legal framework that is not only theologically relevant but also capable of being operationalised within modern governance systems (Denny 2003). Recent governance research further indicates that normative values alone are insufficient to generate effective public governance. Successful governance requires institutional capacity, organizational readiness, stakeholder collaboration, regulatory clarity, and adequate resource allocation. Consequently, Islamic informed environmental governance should also be understood as an institutional ecosystem in which ethical values are translated into effective governance through capable public institutions and collaborative governance arrangements (Prachumrasee et al., 2025). Accordingly, Islamic informed governance should not be understood as a form of policy theocratisation; rather, it represents an effort to enrich the ethical dimensions of environmental governance.

The primary contribution of Islamic legal thought lies in its capacity to shape public values oriented towards ecological responsibility. Principles such as human stewardship of the earth, balance and public welfare can be translated into universal ethical principles that support sustainability (Kamali 2010). From an environmental ethics perspective, these values serve as moral drivers that strengthen both individual and collective commitments to environmental protection. Moreover, such values can enhance the legitimacy of environmental policies, particularly within societies where religious affiliations play a significant role in shaping social norms and public behaviour.

With regard to social and behavioural change, general environmental behaviour research demonstrates that values, social norms, collective identity, and institutional arrangements play an important role in shaping environmentally responsible practices (Stern 2000; Whitmarsh & O'Neill 2010). Similarly, community based governance scholarship highlights the importance of local institutions and collective participation in translating environmental objectives into sustained social action (Agrawal 2005; Adger et al., 2003). These theoretical perspectives, however, do not in themselves provide direct evidence of the specific capacity of Islamic institutions to mobilise environmental action. Such claims require engagement with empirical scholarship examining how religious authority, Islamic institutions, and faith based social networks operate in particular environmental contexts.

Empirical studies of Islamic environmental initiatives in Indonesia, for example, provide concrete evidence of how religious institutions can translate normative values into collective ecological action.

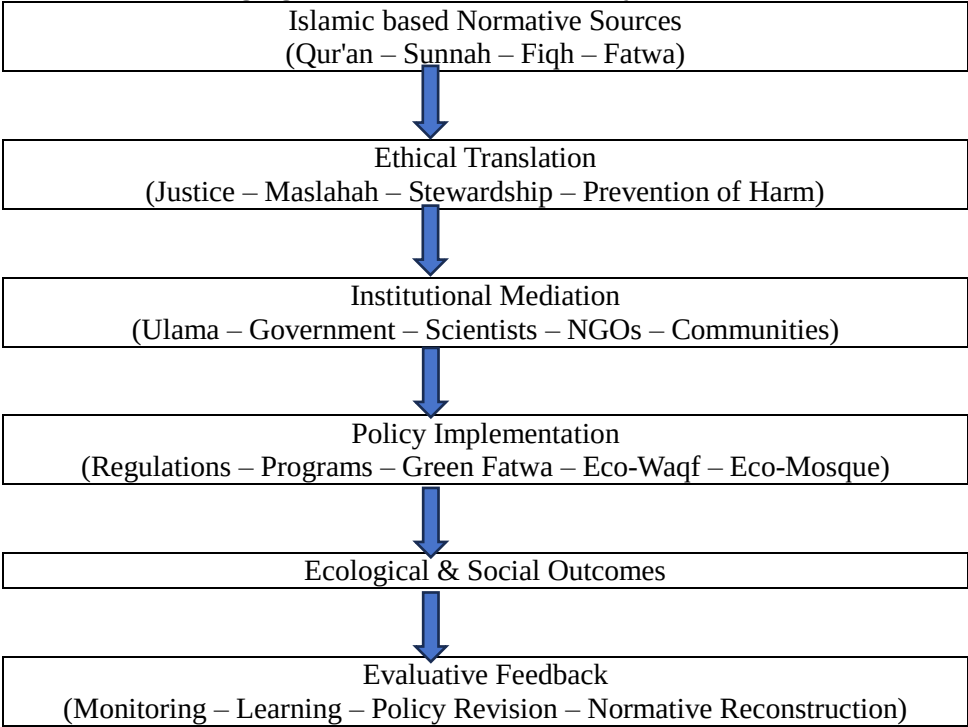
Research on *eco pesantren* demonstrates that Islamic boarding schools can integrate environmental awareness into religious education and institutional practices, thereby fostering environmentally responsible behaviour among students and surrounding communities (Herdiansyah et al., 2016; Supriatna, 2018). Similarly, studies of Indonesian green fatwas show how religious authority can articulate environmental protection as a matter of Islamic legal and moral responsibility, while also revealing the institutional challenges involved in translating non-binding religious rulings into broader environmental governance and legal compliance (Mangunjaya & McKay, 2012; Hidayat & Yahya, 2022). Mosque-based environmental initiatives further demonstrate that mosques can function not only as places of worship but also as institutional platforms for environmental education, community mobilisation, and collective ecological practices (Mangunjaya & McKay, 2012; Hidayat & Yahya, 2022). Taken together, these empirical cases demonstrate that the practical contribution of Islamic law to environmental governance depends not merely on the normative strength of concepts such as *amānah*, *maṣlaḥah*, and the prevention of harm, but also on the institutional capacity of Islamic actors to interpret, communicate, and translate these principles into sustained environmental practices and governance mechanisms.

As a conceptual contribution, this article proposes an integrative model that connects four key elements: faith, ethics, policy, and practice. Within this framework, religious values (*faith*) serve as a source of ethical inspiration (*ethics*), which is subsequently translated into public policy (*policy*) and ultimately implemented through social action (*practice*). The model emphasizes the importance of continuity between normative and operational dimensions, thereby minimizing the gap between values and action (Adger, 2006). Through this approach, Islamic informed environmental governance can serve as a framework that is not only normative but also practical and applicable in addressing the global ecological crisis in a more holistic and sustainable manner.

Operationally, the faith, ethics, policy, and practice model functions as a dynamic process of normative translation rather than a simple linear sequence. At the faith level, Islamic legal sources and instruments, such as Qur'anic principles, fiqha doctrines, fatwas, and waqf mechanisms, provide the normative foundations for environmental responsibility. These foundations are subsequently articulated into publicly relevant ethical principles, including the prevention of harm, ecological justice, stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility. At the policy level, these ethical principles enter processes of institutional deliberation involving religious authorities, policymakers, scientific experts, and affected communities, through which they may inform regulations, public programmes, or institutional mechanisms. For example, a fatwa prohibiting environmentally destructive conduct may provide normative legitimacy for community based conservation programmes, while an ecowaqf mechanism may translate the principle of enduring public benefit into the protection and sustainable management of ecological assets. At the practice level, implementation generates social and ecological outcomes that can be evaluated and fed back into subsequent ethical interpretation and policy revision. The model therefore operates as a recursive governance cycle, i.d. faith, ethical translation, institutional mediation, policy implementation, and evaluative feedback, rather than as a one directional pipeline. The importance of institutional mediation is also supported by empirical governance studies demonstrating that environmental sustainability is strongly influenced by institutional quality, regulatory effectiveness, technological capacity, and educational development. Green finance alone is insufficient to improve environmental outcomes unless accompanied by robust governance institutions capable of implementing and monitoring environmental policies (Edet et al., 2024). This finding reinforces the present framework by indicating that Islamic legal norms likewise require institutional mediation before they can effectively influence environmental governance.

Rather than representing a linear sequence, the Islamic informed environmental governance model functions as an analytical governance framework that explains the causal interactions among normative, institutional, and policy dimensions. Islamic based legal sources generate normative principles that are translated into publicly accessible ethical values, which subsequently influence institutional deliberation involving religious authorities, policymakers, scientific experts, civil society organizations, and local communities. Through these governance processes, ethical principles are transformed into regulations, policy

instruments, and collective environmental practices. The implementation of these policies generates ecological and social outcomes that are continuously monitored through evaluative feedback, allowing both policy adjustment and normative reinterpretation in light of new scientific evidence and changing environmental conditions. Accordingly, the model is recursive rather than linear, emphasizing continuous learning, institutional adaptation, and iterative interaction between religious normativity, scientific knowledge, and governance practice. The following figure shows the model of analytical structure:



The proposed Islamic informed environmental governance framework should be understood not merely as an ethical extension of existing governance models, but as a complementary analytical framework that engages directly with contemporary governance theory. While polycentric governance emphasizes the distribution of authority across multiple decision-making centres, the present model highlights the role of religious institutions as additional governance actors capable of generating normative legitimacy, mobilising collective action, and strengthening social compliance (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Likewise, adaptive governance stresses learning, flexibility, and institutional adjustment in response to ecological uncertainty. These principles are reflected in the recursive governance cycle proposed in this study, where evaluative feedback continuously informs both policy revision and normative reinterpretation (Armitage et al., 2009). From the perspective of collaborative governance, the model expands stakeholder interaction by incorporating religious authorities, Islamic institutions, scientists, policymakers, and civil society into shared deliberative processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Furthermore, the framework complements *social-ecological systems theory* by recognising that ecological resilience depends not only on institutional capacity and ecological knowledge but also on ethical commitment, public legitimacy, and culturally embedded value systems (Armitage et al., 2009). Empirical studies further reveal that community resilience is strengthened by social capital, disaster awareness, educational attainment, and institutional preparedness. Communities with stronger local institutions and higher levels of education tend to demonstrate greater preparedness and adaptive capacity in facing disasters (Jacinto et al., 2025). Rather than replacing existing governance theories, Islamic informed environmental governance enriches them by integrating normative, institutional, and epistemological dimensions that remain relatively underdeveloped within mainstream environmental governance scholarship.

Opportunities and Challenges

Islamic informed environmental governance offers several significant advantages in addressing the global ecological crisis. One of its primary strengths lies in its ability to establish a stronger ethical foundation

than purely technocratic approaches. Religion-based values, such as moral responsibility and justice, can reinforce the intrinsic motivations of both individuals and communities to engage in environmentally responsible behavior (Stern, 2000). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that religious institutions and traditions possess extensive capacities for social mobilization (Agrawal, 2005). Consequently, this approach has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of policy implementation through the internalization of ethical values.

Nevertheless, this approach also faces serious challenges within the context of global pluralism. The diversity of religious traditions and value systems may generate tensions if religious values are not integrated inclusively. Governance literature emphasizes the importance of deliberative approaches that accommodate value diversity and foster constructive dialogue among diverse stakeholders (Dryzek, 2000). In this regard, the contribution of Islamic legal thought must be translated into the language of universal ethics to ensure broader acceptance and applicability.

A further challenge concerns the dominance of secular paradigms in contemporary environmental governance. Many policy frameworks maintain a strict separation between religion and the public sphere, leading religious contributions to be perceived as irrelevant or inappropriate within policymaking processes (Habermas, 2006). Yet integrating normative values can strengthen the moral legitimacy of environmental policies and enhance public engagement. Accordingly, there is a need for models of coexistence that harmonize religious values with scientific rationality rather than pitting them against one another.

In addition, the risk of the politicization of religion represents a critical concern. Religious narratives and institutions may be instrumentalized for short term political interests, thereby undermining public ethics and weakening trust in governance processes (Asanova, 2006). For this reason, a critical approach is required, one that preserves the ethical autonomy of religious traditions while ensuring transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight within governance structures (Dryzek, 2000).

Despite these challenges, Islamic informed environmental governance possesses considerable potential to contribute to global environmental discourse and practice. Values such as responsibility, sustainability, and justice have a universal character that transcends specific religious traditions. Through an inclusive and dialogical approach, Islamic perspectives can participate alongside other faith traditions and ethical frameworks in a broader global conversation on environmental stewardship. As such, Islamic informed environmental governance has the potential to serve as a transdisciplinary framework that strengthens collective responses to the global ecological crisis.

Conclusion

This study concluded that the contribution of Islamic legal thought to environmental governance lies not merely in affirming religious concern for nature, but in its capacity to participate in a process of mutual critical reconstruction and institutional translation. The analysis demonstrates that ecological science can reshape juristic understandings of harm, responsibility, and public welfare by revealing complex ecological interdependence, while Islamic legal reasoning can critically evaluate the justice and legitimacy of scientific and technocratic responses. These interactions become operational through a recursive governance cycle linking Islamic based normative sources, ethical translation, institutional mediation, policy implementation, and evaluative feedback. The central implication is that Islamic environmental norms acquire governance relevance not automatically through their normative authority, but through institutional processes that translate, negotiate, implement, and continuously reassess them in response to ecological evidence and social contexts. Islamic Informed Environmental Governance therefore offers a framework for moving Islamic environmental thought from normative affirmation toward adaptive, institutionally mediated, and ethically accountable governance.

The conceptual and normative character of this study constitutes an important limitation, as the proposed Islamic informed environmental governance model has not yet been empirically tested within

specific institutional, political, or community contexts. Accordingly, the model should be understood as an analytical and theoretically grounded framework rather than as an empirically validated governance solution. Its practical relevance nevertheless generates testable propositions concerning how Islamic based norms are translated through institutional mediation into environmental policies and practices, and how evaluative feedback may reshape subsequent normative interpretation. Future research should therefore empirically examine these mechanisms through comparative case studies of green fatwas, eco *waqf*, mosque based environmental initiatives, or other Islamic based governance practices across diverse local contexts. Such empirical investigation would enable the model to be tested, contextualised, and refined, while identifying the institutional conditions under which Islamic informed environmental governance can contribute effectively to environmental policy and collective action.

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Reconfiguring Social Capital through Community-Based Beekeeping: From Livelihood Practice to Collective Agency in Southern Thailand

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This study re-examines the role of social capital in rural development by investigating how community-based beekeeping reconfigures social capital and contributes to the emergence of collective agency in Southern Thailand. Challenging conventional perspectives that treat social capital as a pre-existing resource, the study conceptualizes social capital as a dynamic and relational process that is continuously produced through everyday livelihood practices. Drawing on Husserlian phenomenology, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observation, and document analysis with beekeepers and community stakeholders in Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. The analysis focuses on participants' lived experiences and the relational processes through which economic activities generate social connections, shared meanings, and collective action. The findings reveal that beekeeping functions not only as a livelihood activity but also as a social arena in which trust, reciprocity, knowledge exchange, and institutional linkages are actively cultivated. Through these processes, social capital is reconfigured through new forms of participation and collaboration, strengthening community capacities and fostering collective agency. Community members gradually develop the ability to coordinate actions, negotiate identities, and engage with external actors such as state agencies and market institutions. At the same time, the study highlights uneven access to networks and resources, suggesting that community-based development may generate both inclusion and exclusion. The study argues that participation should be understood not merely as an outcome of social capital but as a generative mechanism through which social capital is produced and reconfigured. By linking social capital theory, community economy perspectives, and phenomenological inquiry, the research offers a process-oriented framework for understanding grassroots rural development in the Global South.

Keywords: social capital, community participation, beekeeping, community economy, collective agency, rural development

Social capital has long been recognized as a key factor in fostering cooperation, trust, and collective action within communities. In rural development contexts, it is often conceptualized as a resource that enables individuals to collaborate, share knowledge, and achieve common economic goals (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988). This perspective emphasizes the positive role of social capital in strengthening social cohesion and facilitating development outcomes. However, such interpretations tend to treat social capital as a pre-existing asset, thereby overlooking the processes through which it is constructed, reconfigured, and transformed in everyday social life.

Critical scholars have challenged this static understanding by highlighting the relational and power-laden nature of social capital. For instance, Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes social capital as a form of capital embedded within social structures that can reproduce inequality and reinforce existing power hierarchies. Similarly, Woolcock (1998) emphasizes the importance of linking social capital across different institutional levels, suggesting that access to networks is uneven and often shaped by structural constraints. These perspectives shift the focus from viewing social capital as inherently beneficial to understanding it as a dynamic and contested process.

Building upon these critical perspectives, recent debates conceptualize social capital as something that is continuously produced, negotiated, and reconfigured through social practices and economic activities (Lin, 2001; Portes, 2014). This processual perspective highlights the importance of examining everyday livelihood practices as key sites where social relations are enacted, sustained, and transformed. In this regard, community-based economic activities provide a valuable lens for understanding how social capital emerges through ongoing interactions, cooperation, and shared experiences.

Beekeeping represents one such community-based livelihood. Unlike many household economic activities, beekeeping relies on shared ecological resources, seasonal flowering cycles, continuous knowledge exchange, and collaborative relationships among producers, local communities, government agencies, and market actors. These characteristics require sustained interaction, mutual trust, and collective coordination, making beekeeping an appropriate empirical setting for examining how social capital is actively produced and reconfigured through everyday collaborative practices. Previous studies have demonstrated that beekeeping contributes to livelihood diversification, strengthens local capacities, and supports sustainable rural development (Ananga & Naiga, 2023; El Agrebi et al., 2021). However, existing research has primarily emphasized its economic and developmental outcomes, while paying relatively limited attention to the social processes through which participation, social capital, and collective agency are co-produced.

Na Bon District in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province provides a particularly relevant setting for examining these processes. Like many rural communities in Southern Thailand, households have traditionally depended on rubber plantations and oil palm cultivation as their primary sources of income. However, declining rubber prices and fluctuations in oil palm prices have increased economic uncertainty, encouraging many households to seek supplementary sources of livelihood. In response to these changing socio-economic conditions, community-based beekeeping has gradually expanded as an alternative livelihood strategy that utilizes local ecological resources while creating additional household income. Supported by local knowledge, community cooperation, and collaboration with government agencies, beekeeping has evolved beyond an individual income-generating activity into a community-based economic practice. This transformation provides an important context for examining how livelihood practices reshape social relations, strengthen participation, and foster collective forms of action within rural communities.

The success of community-based beekeeping depends not only on technical knowledge but also on the active participation of diverse community actors. Beekeepers regularly exchange practical knowledge, share equipment and production resources, coordinate production and harvesting activities, and collectively engage with government agencies and market actors. These everyday interactions illustrate that participation is embedded within routine livelihood practices rather than emerging only after strong social capital has already been established. Contemporary scholarship therefore suggests that participation should be understood as a dynamic social practice through which individuals negotiate roles, exercise agency, and engage with broader socio-economic structures (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2004). Through these ongoing interactions, participation contributes to the emergence of collective agency, defined as the capacity of communities to act together in shaping their own economic and social trajectories.

Although previous studies acknowledge the importance of social capital in rural development, they continue to conceptualize it primarily as a pre-existing community resource. Far less attention has been devoted to understanding how everyday livelihood practices actively generate, negotiate, and transform social capital

through participation. Consequently, the relational processes through which livelihood practices give rise to collective agency remain insufficiently understood, particularly within rural communities in the Global South.

Addressing this gap, this study examines how community-based beekeeping reconfigures social capital and facilitates the transition from livelihood practice to collective agency in Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, Thailand. Drawing on a phenomenological approach, the research explores the lived experiences of community members and investigates how social relations, participation, and economic practices are mutually constituted through everyday livelihood activities. In doing so, the study contributes to the reconfiguration of social capital theory by conceptualizing social capital as a dynamic, relational, and processual construct within community-based economic development.

Research objectives

- To examine how community-based beekeeping reconfigures social capital through everyday livelihood practices.
- To analyze the role of community participation as a mechanism shaping social relations, trust, and collaborative economic activities.
- To explore how beekeeping contributes to the emergence of collective agency and community economic development.
- To contribute to the theoretical reconceptualization of social capital as a dynamic, relational, and processual construct in rural development contexts.

Literature Review

Rethinking Social Capital: From Resource to Process

Social capital has been widely conceptualized as a resource embedded in social networks that facilitates cooperation and collective action (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). These classical perspectives emphasize trust, reciprocity, and shared norms as essential elements contributing to social cohesion and economic development. Within this tradition, social capital is generally viewed as a pre-existing community asset that enables individuals and groups to cooperate more effectively in pursuing shared social and economic goals. However, such interpretations have been criticized for their tendency to portray social capital as inherently positive and universally accessible, while paying insufficient attention to the social processes through which it is created, maintained, and transformed.

Critical perspectives challenge this static interpretation by emphasizing that social capital is deeply embedded in power relations and unequal access to resources. Bourdieu (1986) argues that social capital is accumulated through durable social relationships that provide differential access to resources and opportunities, thereby contributing to the reproduction of social inequality. Likewise, Portes (2014) contends that social capital may generate exclusionary effects, as dense internal networks can reinforce group boundaries, restrict access to outsiders, and reproduce existing social hierarchies. These critiques demonstrate that social capital should not be understood solely as a beneficial community resource but also as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by historical, institutional, and relational contexts.

More recent scholarship has moved beyond this resource-based perspective by conceptualizing social capital as a dynamic and relational process that is continuously produced through social interaction, participation, and everyday practices (Lin, 2001; Woolcock, 1998). Rather than treating social capital as a fixed asset possessed by communities, this perspective emphasizes how trust, reciprocity, and social networks are constantly negotiated, reinforced, and reconfigured through lived experiences and collaborative activities. Accordingly, the analytical focus shifts from asking whether communities possess social capital to examining how social capital emerges, evolves, and is reproduced through ongoing social practices within particular socio-economic contexts.

Contemporary transformations in post-industrial societies have further extended social capital beyond geographically bounded and exclusively face-to-face relationships. Institutional and digital networks increasingly enable social ties, information exchange, and reciprocal support to develop across spatial and

organizational boundaries (Castells, 2010; Ellison et al., 2007). These developments reinforce the need to conceptualize social capital as an evolving relational process rather than a fixed community resource.

Community Participation as Social Practice

Community participation is widely recognized as a central component of sustainable development and is commonly associated with empowerment, inclusivity, and local ownership (Cornwall, 2008). Traditional approaches conceptualize participation as a mechanism through which communities contribute to development processes, primarily through consultation, collaboration, and local involvement. However, such perspectives have been criticized for treating participation as a technical or instrumental process rather than a socially embedded practice. Gaventa (2004) argues that participation is fundamentally shaped by power relations and institutional arrangements, which influence who participates, how participation occurs, and whose voices are ultimately recognized. Accordingly, participation should be understood not merely as involvement in development activities but as a dynamic social practice through which individuals negotiate relationships, exercise agency, and collectively construct shared meanings and social identities.

This perspective is particularly evident in rural communities across Southeast Asia, where development initiatives frequently depend on collaborative relationships among local communities, government agencies, civil society organizations, and local markets. Rather than occurring only through formal planning processes, participation is embedded in everyday practices such as reciprocal labour exchange, collective resource management, local knowledge sharing, and community decision-making. These routine interactions strengthen social relationships and enhance communities' capacity to respond collectively to economic, social, and environmental challenges.

Evidence from Thailand further demonstrates that participation is closely associated with the development of social capital within community-based resource management and rural governance. Mahaarcha and Sirisunhirun (2023), for example, found that farmers' active participation in irrigation governance strengthened trust, cooperation, social networks, and collective decision-making, thereby improving institutional effectiveness and long-term resource management. This suggests that participation should be viewed not only as an outcome of existing social capital but also as an ongoing process through which social capital is continuously generated, reinforced, and transformed.

In this sense, participation becomes a key site for the production and transformation of social capital. Through participation, individuals establish networks, cultivate trust, exchange knowledge, and engage in collective action, thereby actively shaping both social relationships and local economic processes. Participation therefore functions as a generative mechanism through which communities continuously reproduce shared norms, reciprocal relationships, and collective capacities rather than simply reflecting pre-existing levels of social capital. Importantly, these processes also contribute to the emergence of collective agency, as communities progressively develop the capacity to organize, coordinate actions, and pursue shared development goals through sustained social interaction.

Community Economy, Collective Agency, and Livelihood Practices

The concept of community economy provides an alternative framework for understanding economic development beyond market-centric models. Gibson-Graham (2006) emphasizes diverse economic practices, including cooperation, reciprocity, and collective resource management, as central to community-based development. Within this framework, collective agency becomes a crucial analytical concept, referring to the ability of communities to mobilize resources, coordinate actions, and shape their own development trajectories. Unlike individual agency, collective agency emerges through shared practices, interactions, and institutional engagements, particularly within local economic activities.

Community-based livelihood practices provide an important empirical setting in which these processes become visible. Rather than functioning solely as income-generating activities, livelihoods create opportunities for repeated interaction, reciprocal exchange, collective learning, and the development of shared responsibilities among community members. Through these ongoing social practices, communities gradually strengthen

interpersonal trust, expand social networks, and enhance their collective capacity to respond to common challenges.

Beekeeping represents a particularly appropriate case for examining these dynamics because successful production depends on continuous cooperation rather than individual effort alone. Unlike many household livelihood activities, beekeeping relies on shared ecological resources, seasonal flowering cycles, coordinated hive management, regular knowledge exchange, and collective problem-solving among producers. Beekeepers must also cooperate in monitoring environmental conditions, exchanging technical knowledge, preventing disease outbreaks, maintaining production quality, and coordinating harvesting periods. Furthermore, collaboration with government extension agencies, local organizations, and market actors enables producers to improve production standards, expand marketing opportunities, and strengthen local value chains. These interdependent relationships make beekeeping not merely an economic activity but a socially embedded practice through which trust, reciprocity, social networks, and collective capacities are continuously developed.

Studies have shown that such livelihood practices can enhance local capacities, promote sustainable resource management, and strengthen community resilience (Ananga & Naiga, 2023; El Agrebi et al., 2021). Similar evidence has also been reported across Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, community-based rural development initiatives demonstrate that participatory governance, collaboration, and social innovation strengthen local resilience and sustainable rural development (Nadjib et al., 2023). Likewise, research in the Philippines indicates that participatory resource management encourages social learning, collective action, and long-term cooperation among community members (Allasiw et al., 2023). Complementing these findings, Yoopetch and Chirapanda (2024) argue that sustainable community development depends not only on economic opportunities but also on learning processes, local capabilities, and active participation in shaping development pathways. Collectively, these studies suggest that livelihood activities are not merely economic practices but also social processes through which relationships, trust, shared knowledge, and forms of collective agency are continuously constructed and strengthened.

Consequently, livelihood practices should not be viewed simply as outcomes of existing social capital. Rather, they constitute dynamic social arenas in which social capital is actively produced, negotiated, and continuously reconfigured through everyday participation, cooperation, and shared economic experiences. This perspective provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how community-based beekeeping contributes to the emergence of collective agency and the development of a community economy within rural development.

Research Gap and Theoretical Positioning

Although social capital and community participation have been extensively examined within rural development scholarship, existing studies have primarily focused on their developmental outcomes, such as improved livelihoods, community resilience, and local economic performance. Consequently, social capital is often treated as a pre-existing resource that facilitates participation and collective action rather than as a phenomenon that is itself produced through social practice.

Similarly, community participation is frequently conceptualized as either an outcome of development interventions or a mechanism for implementing development programmes. Far less attention has been devoted to understanding participation as a generative social process through which trust, reciprocity, social networks, and collective capacities are actively created, negotiated, and transformed within everyday livelihood activities. As a result, the dynamic relationships among participation, social capital, and collective agency remain insufficiently theorized.

This limitation is particularly evident in studies of rural livelihoods in the Global South, where economic activities are commonly evaluated in terms of productivity, income generation, and household welfare. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how everyday livelihood practices function as social arenas in which community members continuously construct relationships, exchange knowledge, negotiate shared identities, and strengthen collective capacities through repeated interaction and cooperation. Although

previous studies acknowledge that community-based livelihoods contribute to rural development, they generally assume that social capital already exists before collective economic activities take place. This assumption overlooks the possibility that livelihood practices themselves may constitute the very processes through which social capital is produced, reconfigured, and sustained over time.

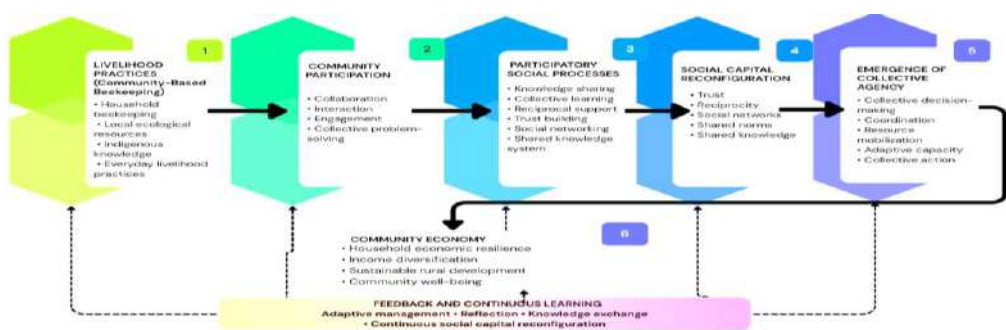
This study addresses these gaps by examining community-based beekeeping as a form of community economy through which social capital, participation, and collective agency are continuously produced and transformed. Drawing on Husserlian phenomenology, the study foregrounds the lived experiences of community members and explores how everyday economic practices shape social relations and collective action. Rather than viewing social capital as a fixed resource, the study conceptualizes it as a processual and relational phenomenon that emerges through participation, interaction, and shared livelihood practices.

Theoretically, this study advances the literature in three important ways. First, it reconceptualizes social capital as a dynamic and processual phenomenon that is continuously produced and reconfigured through everyday livelihood practices rather than existing as a stable community asset. Second, it positions community participation as a generative mechanism through which social capital is actively constructed, maintained, and transformed. Third, it explains how sustained participation in community-based livelihoods gives rise to collective agency, thereby providing an integrated theoretical framework for understanding the mutually constitutive relationships among livelihood practices, social capital, participation, and community economy in rural development.

Based on the reviewed literature and the identified research gaps, this study proposes a conceptual framework that explains the dynamic relationships among livelihood practices, community participation, social capital reconfiguration, and collective agency. As illustrated in Figure 1, community-based beekeeping is conceptualized not merely as an economic activity but as a participatory social process through which trust, reciprocity, shared knowledge, and social networks are continuously generated and transformed. These processes ultimately contribute to the emergence of collective agency and the development of a community economy.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Social Capital Reconfiguration through Community-Based Beekeeping



Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology, drawing on the philosophical tradition of Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology seeks to explore and understand lived experiences by examining how individuals perceive, interpret, and construct meaning in their everyday lives (Husserl, 1997). Rather than focusing on external causal explanations, this approach emphasizes subjective experiences and the meanings participants attach to social practices and interactions.

In the context of this study, a phenomenological approach was adopted to explore how community members experience and interpret their involvement in community-based beekeeping and how these experiences contribute to the formation of social capital, community participation, and collective agency. The study focuses on participants’ lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and the relational dynamics that shape community-based economic development.

Study Site and Participants

The study was conducted in Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, Southern Thailand (Figure 2), where community-based beekeeping has emerged as an important livelihood strategy and a mechanism for strengthening local economic resilience. The district was selected because community members have collectively developed beekeeping as an alternative livelihood in response to fluctuating agricultural incomes, particularly from rubber and oil palm cultivation. As shown in Figure 2, Na Bon District is located in the central part of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, Southern Thailand, an area characterized by abundant forest resources and diverse flowering plants that provide favorable ecological conditions for beekeeping. The research focused on individuals directly involved in beekeeping activities and community development processes, including beekeepers, community leaders, and relevant local stakeholders.

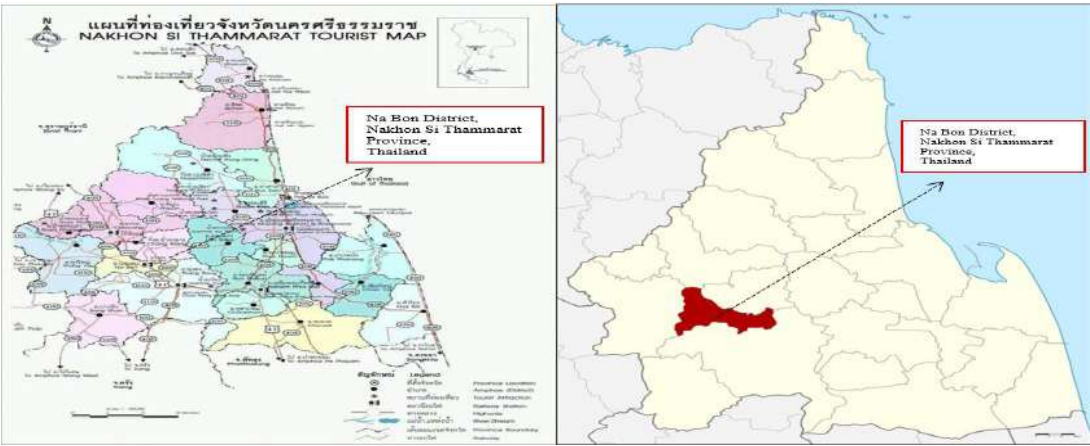


Figure 2. Location of Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, Southern Thailand.
Source: Adapted from Institutional Repository Walailak University (2026).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that all informants possessed direct experience and knowledge relevant to the research objectives. The participants consisted of community beekeepers, community leaders, and relevant local stakeholders involved in community-based beekeeping. Community beekeepers were required to have actively engaged in beekeeping activities for at least five years, while community leaders and local stakeholders were selected based on their direct involvement in supporting or coordinating community-based beekeeping initiatives. Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to identify additional participants through referrals from the initial informants, enabling access to diverse perspectives and social positions within the community network. In total, 15 participants took part in the in-depth interviews. Subsequently, eight participants representing the three participant groups were purposively selected to participate in a focus group discussion (FGD) to validate the emerging themes and deepen the interpretation of the findings (Table 1).

Table 1
Characteristics of Participants

Participant Group	Number	Selection Criteria	Contribution to the Study
Community beekeepers	10	Actively engaged in community-based beekeeping; at least 5 years of experience	Shared lived experiences of beekeeping practices, livelihood transformation, knowledge sharing, and community participation
Community leaders	2	Recognized leaders with knowledge of community development and beekeeping activities	Provided perspectives on community organization, participation, and local governance
Relevant local stakeholders	3	Representatives from organizations supporting community-based beekeeping and rural development	Provided insights into institutional support, knowledge transfer, and market linkages
Total	15	Purposive and snowball sampling	Diverse perspectives on the development of community-based beekeeping

A total of 15 unique participants were included in the study. All 15 participated in in-depth interviews, and eight of them also took part in the focus group discussion. Their extensive involvement in beekeeping and community development provided rich experiential knowledge regarding livelihood transformation, social relationships, and collective action. Community leaders also facilitated access to local networks and provided contextual insights that enhanced the depth and relevance of the data collected.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a five-month period through multiple qualitative methods to generate a comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences and the processes through which social capital and collective agency emerged within the community.

First, in-depth interviews were conducted with all 15 participants. The interviews explored participants' experiences, perceptions, motivations, and interpretations of beekeeping practices, community participation, knowledge sharing, and livelihood transformation. A semi-structured interview format was employed to allow participants to freely express their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews.

Second, a focus group discussion involving eight participants was conducted to explore collective experiences, shared meanings, and community dynamics associated with beekeeping activities. The discussion generated insights into collaborative learning, collective decision-making, and community problem-solving processes.

Third, non-participant observation was conducted on 20 occasions throughout the fieldwork period. Observations focused on beekeeping activities, community meetings, training programs, knowledge-sharing practices, and interactions among community members. These observations provided contextual understanding of everyday practices and social relationships that could not be fully captured through interviews alone.

Fourth, document analysis was undertaken using local records, community reports, project documents, and relevant secondary sources. Documentary materials were used to contextualize empirical findings and strengthen methodological triangulation.

Data collection followed an iterative process in which emerging insights informed subsequent interviews, observations, and discussions. The process continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new themes or insights emerged from additional data collection.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a phenomenological interpretive approach informed by Husserlian phenomenology. The analytical process began with repeated readings of interview transcripts, field notes, observational records, and documentary materials to gain familiarity with participants' lived experiences and interpretations of community-based beekeeping.

To maintain phenomenological sensitivity, the researcher engaged in reflexive bracketing throughout the analytical process in order to minimize the influence of prior assumptions and remain attentive to participants’ perspectives. Significant statements relating to participants’ experiences of beekeeping, community participation, social relationships, and collective action were identified and organized into meaningful units.

Thematic analysis was subsequently employed as an analytical technique to systematically organize and interpret the data. Initial codes were generated inductively from the empirical materials and continuously refined through constant comparison across interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and documentary sources (Table 2). Related codes were then grouped into higher-order themes representing the processes through which social capital was formed, participation was enacted, and collective agency emerged within the community.

Table 2
Illustration of the Thematic Coding Process

Informant Code	Participant Role	Sample Excerpt	Interview	Initial Code	Interpretive Meaning	Category	Theme
BK01	Community beekeeper	“We started sharing techniques...”		Knowledge sharing	Practical knowledge is collectively produced through repeated interaction	Community participation	Social capital reconfiguration
BK04	Community beekeeper	“Honey income helps us...”		Supplementary income	Beekeeping reduces vulnerability during agricultural price fluctuations	Livelihood adaptation	Household resilience
CL01	Community leader	“We meet regularly...”		Collective decision-making	Regular meetings transform individual practices into coordinated action	Group collaboration	Collective agency
ST02	Local stakeholder	“Government agencies provided training...”		Institutional support	External institutional connections expand access to technical resources	External networking	Linking social capital
BK07	Community beekeeper	“We exchange ideas...”		Collective learning	Experience-sharing creates a locally embedded shared knowledge system	Shared knowledge system	Social capital reconfiguration

To enhance analytical rigor, themes were repeatedly reviewed against the original data sources to ensure consistency, credibility, and interpretive validity. The final themes were interpreted through engagement with social capital theory and community economy perspectives, enabling the integration of participants’ lived experiences with broader theoretical explanations of community-based development.

Trustworthiness and Validity

Several strategies were employed to ensure the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study. Methodological triangulation was achieved through the integration of multiple data sources, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observations, and document analysis. The use of diverse methods enabled cross-verification of findings and enhanced the robustness of interpretations. Credibility was further strengthened through prolonged engagement in the field over a five-month period, allowing the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the community context and participants’ experiences. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to critically examine potential researcher biases and their influence on data collection and interpretation.

Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of research procedures, coding processes, and analytical decisions. In addition, the inclusion of participants with diverse social roles and experiences contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. These procedures enhanced the overall trustworthiness of the findings and ensured that the analysis reflected multiple dimensions of lived experience within the community-based beekeeping context.

Results

Beekeeping as an Emergent Livelihood Practice

The Na Bon community, located in Na Bon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, Southern Thailand, is characterized by ecological diversity, including forested hills, agricultural landscapes, and wetland ecosystems. These environmental conditions provide favorable habitats for various bee species, particularly stingless bees, which are commonly found nesting in trees, residential structures, and agricultural areas. Such ecological characteristics distinguish Na Bon from many other rural communities in Southern Thailand and have contributed to the development of community-based beekeeping as an alternative livelihood practice.

Initially, the presence of bees within household and farming areas was widely perceived as a disturbance and potential threat. Community members often attempted to remove bee colonies using smoke or physical methods to prevent bees from inhabiting residential spaces. However, repeated encounters with bees gradually altered local perceptions. Through observation and experience, villagers began to recognize the ecological importance of bees and their potential economic value as producers of honey and related products. This shift in perception marked the beginning of beekeeping as an emergent livelihood strategy within the community.

As one participant explained:

“At first, we were afraid of the bees and tried to drive them away from our homes. Later, we realized that they could generate income and become part of our livelihood.” (BK01)

Another participant reflected on the learning process involved in developing beekeeping practices:

“Nobody taught us formally. We learned by observing the bees, experimenting with different methods, and sharing experiences with one another.” (BK04)

These accounts illustrate how local knowledge was not transferred through formal training alone but emerged through experiential learning and continuous interaction with the environment. Through processes of observation, experimentation, and mutual learning, community members gradually developed practical techniques for hive management, including the construction of hive boxes using locally available materials. Knowledge was continuously adapted and refined according to local ecological conditions and collective experiences.

Importantly, the emergence of beekeeping was not solely an economic adaptation but also a social process through which villagers began to exchange knowledge, share experiences, and establish collaborative relationships. Early interactions surrounding hive management and bee conservation created opportunities for trust-building, reciprocal learning, and collective problem-solving among community members. These interactions gradually strengthened social ties and laid the foundation for broader forms of cooperation within the community.

From a phenomenological perspective, participants described beekeeping not merely as a means of generating income but as an activity that reshaped their relationships with nature, their neighbors, and the wider community. In this sense, beekeeping represents a socially embedded livelihood practice through which relationships between humans and nature are continuously reconfigured. At the same time, the practice facilitated the emergence of social capital by creating new spaces for interaction, knowledge exchange, and collective engagement. These processes provided the basis for subsequent forms of community participation and collective agency that developed through the expansion of beekeeping activities.

Beekeeping, Household Economic Resilience, and the Reconfiguration of Social Capital

At the household level, beekeeping functions as a supplementary economic activity that contributes to income generation while requiring relatively low investment. Households rely on locally available materials and indigenous knowledge to establish and maintain beekeeping practices with minimal financial input. Participants described how beekeeping emerged from everyday interactions with local ecology rather than formal training or institutional support. As one beekeeper reflected on the gradual shift in perception:

"At the beginning, we did not think much about the bees. They would come into our houses, sometimes under the roof or inside old wooden structures, and we saw them only as something disturbing our daily life. We would try to remove them, sometimes using smoke or other simple methods, but they kept returning. Over time, instead of only trying to chase them away, we began to observe them more carefully. We started to notice how they behaved, where they nested, and how they interacted with the environment around us. From these small observations, we slowly realized that what we once saw as a problem could actually become something meaningful for our livelihood. That is when we began to change the way we relate to them, not as pests anymore, but as part of our living environment that could also provide income if managed properly." (BK01)

This shift illustrates how livelihood transformation is grounded in experiential learning embedded in everyday human-nature interaction. Beekeeping is closely tied to environmental conditions. The absence of chemical use in agriculture is essential for sustaining bee populations, reinforcing environmentally sustainable practices within the community. A participant noted:

"In our experience, everything is connected. When people start using chemicals in their rubber gardens or crops, we immediately see the impact on the bees. Sometimes they disappear completely or move away to other areas. That is why many of us now try to avoid chemicals as much as possible. We have learned that if we want the bees to stay with us, we also have to take care of the environment around them, especially the forest areas and the plants that produce flowers. It is not just about protecting bees, but about maintaining a balance between our livelihood and nature." (BK04)

This interdependence highlights how economic practices are deeply embedded within ecological systems. Beyond income generation, beekeeping contributes to household economic resilience. Participants reported that income from honey production reduces financial vulnerability and reliance on external markets. One respondent explained:

"For our household, honey income may not be large, but it becomes very important during times when we have no other income, especially when rubber prices are low or when we cannot go to work every day. In those moments, even a small amount of money from honey helps us buy daily necessities and reduces pressure on the family. It gives us a sense that we still have something we can rely on within our own community." (BK01)

This account demonstrates that household economic resilience is experienced not only in material terms but also as a sense of security and self-reliance rooted in locally available resources and community-based support systems.

However, sustaining these livelihood benefits depends on continuous knowledge sharing, practical learning, and collaborative problem-solving among beekeepers. Participants explained that knowledge related to hive maintenance, honey harvesting, pest control, and environmental management is not acquired individually but is continually refined through observation, hands-on experience, and interaction with other members of the community. Traditional practices, including the use of locally available materials to prevent pests, are therefore preserved and improved through repeated exchanges among beekeepers rather than through formal training alone.

"I am very happy to have become involved in the community beekeeping activities because I do not have any other source of income. Beekeeping has provided me with additional earnings, but what is equally valuable is the opportunity to interact with and learn from other members of the community. We regularly exchange experiences, share practical knowledge, and help one another solve problems related to beekeeping. Through these interactions, I have gained not only new skills but also a stronger sense of belonging to the community." (BK07)

The above account demonstrates that knowledge exchange is embedded in everyday social interaction and functions as an important mechanism through which trust, reciprocity, and mutual support are strengthened among community members. Beyond its contribution to household income, beekeeping therefore serves as a mechanism for the production and reconfiguration of social capital at the household level. Participants described how knowledge regarding hive management, honey harvesting, and environmental conservation was regularly exchanged among relatives, neighbours, and fellow beekeepers, enabling households to access practical knowledge and collectively address production challenges. Economic resilience was therefore achieved not solely through income generation but also through continuous participation in knowledge sharing, reciprocal support, and collective problem-solving. These everyday interactions strengthened social relationships, expanded opportunities for collaborative learning and resource sharing, and ultimately contributed to the ongoing reconfiguration of social capital through community-based livelihood practices.

From Household Livelihoods to Community Economy through Participation

As beekeeping practices expanded, they evolved from individual household activities into a collective economic system at the community level. This transition was facilitated by processes of community participation, including group formation, knowledge sharing, and collaborative decision-making. Community members engaged in joint discussions to plan beekeeping strategies, exchange techniques, and address challenges such as environmental changes and pest management. These participatory processes enabled the circulation of knowledge and resources, strengthening both economic outcomes and social relationships within the community. A participant noted:

"At first, each household worked independently, but later we began sharing techniques and helping each other solve problems related to hive management." (CL01)

Participation extended beyond production activities to include market engagement, pricing strategies, and product development. Community members collaborated to create value-added products and establish connections with external markets, thereby expanding economic opportunities. These interactions also involved engagement with government agencies and external organizations, which provided technical support, training, and access to funding. Through these processes, beekeeping became a mechanism for transforming household-level activities into a broader community economy. This transformation reflects the role of participation as an active process through which economic practices are coordinated, negotiated, and expanded. Beyond economic coordination, participation also facilitated the reconfiguration of social capital. Through repeated interactions, community members developed stronger networks, reciprocal relationships, and shared norms that supported collective forms of economic organization. Participation therefore functioned not only as a mechanism for

economic expansion but also as a process through which social capital was continuously produced and transformed. A participant noted:

"After we formed the beekeeping group, it became much easier to collaborate with buyers and government agencies. Instead of working and selling individually, we were able to coordinate our efforts, negotiate better prices, and participate in training programmes that enhanced our beekeeping techniques and improved the quality of our honey products. Working together as a community has created far more opportunities than any of us could have achieved alone." (ST02)

Table 3 summarizes the iterative process through which household-level beekeeping evolves into a community economy through community participation. Rather than representing a linear sequence, the stages illustrate a dynamic and mutually reinforcing process in which knowledge sharing, collaborative decision-making, and institutional engagement continuously reshape social relationships. As participation expands, livelihood practices become embedded within a community economy characterized by cooperation, shared resource management, and collective governance.

As shown in Table 3, social capital is progressively reconfigured through successive stages of participation. Initial interactions generate trust and experiential knowledge exchange, which gradually develop into reciprocal relationships, shared norms, and broader institutional linkages. These cumulative processes ultimately strengthen collective capacities, enabling the emergence of collective agency and the development of a sustainable community economy.

Table 3
Process of Social Capital Reconfiguration through Community-Based Beekeeping

Stage	Livelihood Practices	Participatory Mechanisms	Social Capital Reconfiguration Process	Collective Outcomes
Emergence	Household experimentation	Informal interaction	Initial trust formation and experiential knowledge exchange	Livelihood adaptation
Group formation	Sharing equipment	Collaborative meetings	Reciprocity, mutual support, and network expansion	Group coordination
Production development	Joint production	Collective learning	Shared norms, collective learning, and strengthened bonding ties	Production capacity
Market integration	Joint marketing	Institutional collaboration	Linking social capital and external resource mobilization	Market expansion
Institutionalization	Continuous evaluation	Collective governance	Sustained social networks and adaptive collective capacity	Collective agency and community economy

Furthermore, Table 3 demonstrates how these participatory processes contribute to the co-production of social capital and the emergence of collective agency. Through repeated interactions, trust, reciprocity, social networks, and shared norms are progressively reinforced, enabling community members to coordinate actions, mobilize resources, and respond collectively to emerging challenges. Rather than simply summarizing the development process, Table 3 provides an analytical framework that explains how participation mediates the continuous reconfiguration of social capital and facilitates the transition from household livelihood practices to a community economy.

Co-production of Social Capital and Collective Agency

The analysis of community-based beekeeping in the Na Bon community demonstrates how social capital and collective agency are continuously generated through the interaction of ecological resources, social relationships, and locally embedded knowledge systems. Rather than existing as fixed or pre-established resources, both social capital and collective agency are dynamically reconfigured through everyday livelihood practices and collective participation. Social capital develops through ongoing relationships of trust, cooperation, and mutual support among community members, while a shared knowledge system emerges through the integration of local experience, collective learning, and external technical support, enabling the community to adapt continuously to changing environmental and economic conditions. Together, these

mutually reinforcing processes strengthen collective capacities that enhance household economic resilience and community-level coordination.

Importantly, these capacities are not static assets but are continuously reproduced through everyday social and economic interaction. Beekeeping functions as a relational livelihood practice in which economic production, environmental stewardship, and social relationships are closely interconnected. As community members engage in shared problem-solving, knowledge exchange, and collaborative decision-making, they simultaneously strengthen interpersonal relationships and expand their collective ability to respond to emerging challenges.

This process is reflected in participants lived experiences. One beekeeper described how a gradual change in everyday interaction with the local environment became a shared learning experience within the community:

"We did not start this as a business or even as something we thought would become an income source. At the beginning, bees would come into our houses and we only saw them as something disturbing our daily life. We tried many ways to remove them, but they always came back. Over time, instead of chasing them away, we began to observe their behavior more closely. We started sharing what we noticed with neighbors, and slowly we realized that these bees were not just part of nature around us, but something we could actually live with and learn from. That is how we started learning together, not from books or formal training, but from everyday experience." (BK04)

This account illustrates that learning emerged as a collective social process rather than an individual achievement. Knowledge was created through observation, shared experience, and continuous interaction among community members, gradually forming a shared knowledge system that supported both livelihood adaptation and stronger social relationships. At the community level, these learning processes gradually evolved into coordinated forms of collective organization. Beekeeping became more than an individual livelihood activity as members increasingly worked together to manage production, exchange technical knowledge, and coordinate market activities. A community leader explained:

"When we began to organize ourselves as a group, everything changed in the way we worked together. Before that, each household worked on its own, and we faced many problems alone, especially when pests attacked the bees or when we did not know how to improve production. But after forming a group, we started to meet regularly, discuss our problems openly, and share solutions. Some members had experience in building better hives, others knew how to manage pests, and some had connections with buyers outside the village. By bringing all of this together, we were able to solve problems faster, reduce losses, and sell our honey in a more organized way. It is not just about selling products anymore; it is about working together as one system." (BK07)

The quotation demonstrates that collective agency emerged through sustained coordination, complementary expertise, and shared responsibility rather than through the efforts of any single individual. Regular interaction enabled community members to mobilize diverse knowledge, coordinate production, and strengthen their capacity to respond collectively to economic and environmental challenges. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal that participation in these collective processes is uneven. Access to social networks, practical knowledge, and market opportunities varies according to the extent of members' involvement in community activities. One participant reflected:

"In our community, being part of the group makes a big difference. Those who join regularly and stay active in meetings tend to receive more information, more training opportunities, and better access to markets. But those who are not in the group or who rarely participate often miss out on these opportunities. Sometimes they want to join later, but they feel they are already behind because they do not have the same connections or knowledge. So even though we say everyone can participate, in reality, the level of benefit is not the same for everyone." (BK01)

This perspective highlights that social capital is relational rather than uniformly distributed. Participation creates valuable opportunities for learning, cooperation, and resource access, yet unequal levels of engagement also shape different capacities to benefit from collective action. The findings therefore reveal that social capital simultaneously enables inclusion while producing differentiated patterns of participation and access within the community.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social capital should not be understood as a pre-existing community asset but as a dynamic social process that is continually generated, negotiated, reinforced, and reconfigured through participatory livelihood practices. Community-based beekeeping provides an empirical setting in which ecological resources, social relationships, and shared knowledge systems converge through everyday interaction. Through these ongoing processes, participation facilitates not only the development of social capital but also the emergence of collective agency, enabling community members to coordinate actions, mobilize resources, and shape their own development trajectories. These findings support a process-oriented understanding of rural development in which social capital and collective agency evolve together through sustained community-based economic practices.

Policy Implications: Scaling Collective Agency for Sustainable Rural Development

The findings of this study suggest that sustainable rural development extends beyond the provision of economic resources and depends fundamentally on the social processes through which participation, trust, knowledge exchange, and collective action are cultivated. The Na Bon experience demonstrates that community-based livelihood practices can generate broader forms of social capital and collective agency, offering important implications for rural development policy and practice. Rather than being driven primarily by resource endowment, sustainable development emerges through socially embedded practices that strengthen cooperation, learning, and community coordination over time.

First, development interventions should shift from top-down resource provision toward participation-centered facilitation. Rather than introducing externally designed projects, government agencies should invest in creating interaction spaces where community members can collaboratively engage in livelihood practices. In this context, beekeeping should be understood not merely as an economic activity but as a social platform that enables knowledge exchange, trust-building, and collective problem-solving.

Second, policies should prioritize strengthening the social and knowledge-based processes that sustain community participation and collective action rather than focusing solely on economic outputs. Programs designed only to increase household income are unlikely to produce sustainable rural development. Instead, integrated support mechanisms should simultaneously strengthen natural capital through biodiversity-friendly and chemical-free practices, foster shared knowledge systems through the integration of local experience and technical expertise, and reinforce social capital through continuous participation, collaborative learning, and practice-based interaction among community members. Such an integrated approach can enhance communities' capacity to adapt to changing environmental and economic conditions while sustaining long-term collective action.

Third, state agencies and non-governmental organizations should adopt a process-oriented approach to development. The findings indicate that social capital and collective agency are not static assets but are continuously reproduced through shared practices and participation. Policy frameworks should therefore move beyond short-term output indicators and support long-term engagement, iterative learning, and adaptive community-led experimentation.

Fourth, policymakers should invest in community facilitators or local brokers who can mediate relationships between external institutions and local actors. Such individuals play a critical role in translating knowledge, sustaining participation, and maintaining trust, thereby creating conditions that support the emergence and expansion of collective agency.

Finally, policies should seek to institutionalize collective agency through the strengthening of community-level governance structures. This may include supporting cooperatives, producer groups, and informal networks that enable communities to manage production, access markets, and negotiate with external stakeholders. Such efforts can enhance community autonomy and reduce dependency on externally driven development initiatives.

Overall, the Na Bon model suggests that scalable and sustainable rural development does not depend on replicating specific livelihood activities such as beekeeping itself, but on replicating the social processes through which participation, social capital, and collective agency are generated. Policies that recognize and invest in these processes are more likely to produce resilient, inclusive, and context-sensitive development outcomes.

Discussion

This study contributes to ongoing theoretical debates on social capital and rural development by challenging the dominant assumption that social capital is a stable and pre-existing resource. In contrast to conventional perspectives that conceptualize social capital as an asset facilitating cooperation and coordination within communities (Putnam, 2000), the findings from the Na Bon community demonstrate that social capital is continuously produced, negotiated, transformed, and reconfigured through everyday economic practices. In this sense, beekeeping is not merely an economic livelihood but a generative site where social relations are actively constructed and reshaped.

The case of community-based beekeeping in Southern Thailand illustrates that livelihood practices themselves function as social infrastructures through which trust, reciprocity, and networks emerge. Rather than being a precondition for economic cooperation, social capital is an outcome of iterative interactions embedded in ecological and economic activities. This extends processual and relational perspectives on social capital (Lin, 2001; Portes, 2014) by empirically grounding them in rural, ecology-dependent livelihoods where survival and cooperation are tightly interwoven. This interpretation is also consistent with Toyon's (2022) argument that social capital should be understood as an interactive configuration of resources, relations, and returns rather than a fixed community asset. The Na Bon case further demonstrates that these dimensions are continually reproduced through everyday livelihood practices and collective participation.

A key contribution of this study lies in reinterpreting community participation not as a secondary effect of social capital but as a constitutive mechanism in its production. Participation in the Na Bon community operates through group formation, shared experimentation, collective problem-solving, and engagement with external institutions. These practices enable the coordination of resources and the expansion of economic activities while simultaneously reshaping social relations. This finding aligns with critical participation scholarship (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2004), while extending it by demonstrating that participation is not only shaped by power relations but also actively produces new forms of economic capacity at the community level.

Importantly, the study highlights the emergence of collective agency as a relational outcome of these participatory processes. Collective agency is not simply the aggregation of individual intentions but is constituted through sustained interaction, shared knowledge, and coordinated action. In the Na Bon context,

this is evident in the formation of beekeeping groups, the development of shared production strategies, and the ability of community members to collectively engage with markets and governmental actors. This finding contributes to rural development literature by linking social capital and participation to the production of collective agency as a distinct analytical category of community transformation.

Beyond the local context, the findings have broader theoretical implications for social capital theory in global development studies. In contrast to dominant Western-centric models that treat social capital as a relatively stable and institutionalized resource (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988), the Na Bon case demonstrates that in Global South rural contexts, social capital is more fluid, emergent, and deeply embedded in livelihood practices. Economic activities such as beekeeping operate simultaneously as economic, ecological, social, and institutional processes, thereby producing and reconfiguring social capital through practice rather than merely mobilizing it as a pre-existing condition.

When compared to dominant conceptualizations of social capital derived from Global North contexts, the case of Na Bon offers important theoretical contrasts. In many established studies, particularly those based on urbanized and institutionally dense settings, social capital is often assumed to operate within relatively stable institutional frameworks where trust and cooperation are reinforced by formal governance structures (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988). In such contexts, social capital is typically treated as an enabling resource that enhances coordination within already-structured systems.

In contrast, the Na Bon case demonstrates that in rural, ecology-dependent communities of the Global South, social capital emerges under conditions of institutional fluidity and environmental uncertainty. Here, cooperation is not primarily supported by formal institutions but is generated through livelihood practices that directly depend on ecological systems. Beekeeping functions simultaneously as an economic, ecological, and social practice, thereby collapsing the distinction between production and social organization. This challenges conventional models that conceptualize social capital as a stable resource and suggests that social relations are continuously reconfigured through interactions between livelihoods, ecological conditions, and community practices. Similar dynamics have been observed in informal agrifood systems in the Global South, where coordination emerges through everyday livelihood interactions rather than formal institutional arrangements (Salman et al., 2026).

Furthermore, unlike Western-centric frameworks that tend to separate economic activity from social relations, the Na Bon case illustrates their deep entanglement. Trust, reciprocity, and collective coordination are not preconditions for economic activity but are continuously produced through it. This suggests that existing theories of social capital may benefit from contextual refinement when applied to rural Global South settings, where livelihood security, ecological dependence, and collective survival are tightly interwoven.

These findings also have broader implications for understanding social capital in post-industrial societies, where social relationships increasingly extend beyond geographically bounded communities and are mediated through institutional and digital networks (Castells, 2010). While the present study focuses on face-to-face interactions within a rural community, its processual perspective suggests that social capital is generated through continuous social interaction rather than confined to particular organizational or technological settings. This interpretation is consistent with research demonstrating that social capital may be cultivated through both offline and online social networks, provided that sustained interaction, trust, and reciprocal exchange are maintained (Ellison et al., 2007). Consequently, the processual understanding of social capital advanced in this study may also provide a useful conceptual lens for examining how community relationships evolve in increasingly interconnected and digitally mediated societies.

At the same time, the findings reveal important tensions within these processes. The production of social capital and participation is not evenly distributed, and differential access to knowledge, networks, and resources may reproduce internal inequalities. This resonates with critical perspectives that emphasize the exclusionary dimensions of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 2014), highlighting that processes of community-based development can simultaneously generate cohesion and stratification. Notably, these

disparities are often intertwined with localized gender dynamics, as socio-cultural expectations may condition the degree to which women and men can access and actively mobilize these emerging networks. These tensions underscore the importance of analyzing power relations and gender differentiation within participatory economic systems rather than assuming inherently positive or egalitarian outcomes.

The findings also carry practical implications for rural development policy and community-based economic initiatives. Development programs should move beyond viewing social capital as a pre-existing community asset and instead recognize the importance of supporting participatory livelihood practices through which social capital is generated and strengthened. Policies that facilitate knowledge sharing, collective learning, and collaboration among local producers may contribute not only to economic improvement but also to the development of collective capacities necessary for long-term community resilience and sustainability.

Overall, this study advances theoretical discussions by repositioning social capital as a dynamic, processual, and practice-based construct that is continuously reconfigured through livelihood activities and community participation. It further demonstrates that participation is not merely an outcome of social capital but a central mechanism through which it is generated and transformed. By linking these processes to the emergence of collective agency, the study offers an integrated framework for understanding community-based economic development in rural and Global South contexts.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that community-based beekeeping in the Na Bon community is not merely an income-generating activity but a dynamic social process through which social capital, participation, and collective agency are continuously co-produced and reconfigured. Moving beyond conventional perspectives that conceptualize social capital as a pre-existing and stable resource, the findings show that social capital is actively produced, negotiated, and transformed through everyday livelihood practices, particularly through collaboration, shared knowledge, and sustained engagement with both internal and external actors.

By tracing the transformation from household-level livelihoods to a broader community economy, this study highlights participation as the central mechanism linking individual economic activities to collective development outcomes. Participation enables the coordination of resources, strengthens trust-based relationships, and facilitates the emergence of collective agency, allowing rural communities to actively shape their own development trajectories rather than passively respond to externally driven interventions.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the advancement of social capital theory by conceptualizing social capital as a processual, relational, and practice-based phenomenon. The findings challenge static and resource-oriented interpretations by demonstrating that social capital is not simply a prerequisite for development but is continuously generated, maintained, and reconfigured through lived economic and social practices. Furthermore, the study reconceptualizes community participation as a generative mechanism through which social capital is produced while extending rural development scholarship by demonstrating how everyday livelihood practices serve as critical sites for the emergence of collective agency.

Practically, the findings suggest that sustainable rural development policies should move beyond narrowly economic interventions and instead prioritize participatory governance, shared knowledge systems, and multi-level institutional linkages. Supporting community-based economies requires attention not only to material resources but also to the social processes that foster trust, collaboration, reciprocal learning, and collective decision-making. Such an approach is particularly relevant for grassroots economies in the Global South, where livelihoods remain closely intertwined with ecological systems and community relationships.

In conclusion, the Na Bon case demonstrates that sustainable rural development is fundamentally shaped by the ways communities organize, interact, learn, and act collectively within their local contexts. Rather than being driven solely by external resources or institutional arrangements, development emerges through the continuous reconfiguration of social relationships embedded in everyday livelihood practices. By offering a process-oriented framework that integrates social capital, community participation, and collective agency, this

study provides a conceptual foundation that may inform future research and community-based development initiatives across rural communities in the Global South.

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Deterrence and Innovation: Rethinking Strategic Stability in South Asia

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Airpower has become a crucial deterrent in South Asia, particularly in context of Balakot conflict in 2019 and its escalation in 2025. This article employs deterrence theory as an analytical framework to examine how Pakistan has strategically employed airpower to thwart Indian objectives, maintain regional stability and enhance credibility. Pakistan demonstrated professional restraint and restored legitimacy of deterrence with its measured response which included downing Indian fighters and employing precision targeting. Three fundamental principles of deterrence have been illustrated in this article: clear signaling, prompt and obvious action and credible capability. Pakistan's rapidly evolving airpower doctrine was further brought to light by 2025 escalation. Pakistan's deterrent posture was reinforced by outcomes, which showed that strategic moderation combined with technological innovation might prevent crises from spiralling out of hand. This article contextualizes South Asian events within a broader global discourse on airpower and deterrence. The lessons learned by Pakistan can be used by both great and regional powers: while careful use of airpower can avert or defuse crises, smaller nations can deploy advanced air capabilities to overcome inequalities .

Keywords: airpower, deterrence, global security, national security, regional stability

South Asia remains one of most strategically sensitive regions in world, where historical rivalries, territorial disputes and presence of nuclear weapons create a unique and volatile security environment (Iqbal & Khan, 2025a). Since Partition in 1947, India and Pakistan, the two main military powers in region, have fought numerous wars from Kargil conflict in 1999 to conventional wars in 1947–48, 1965 and 1971, separated by frequent border skirmishes and sporadic crises (Ganguly & Kapur, 2012; Khan, 2025). In this regard, airpower has become a vital tool for both operational advantage and deterrence, providing quick reaction, accurate strike capabilities and symbolic signals that can influence enemy behavior without instantly escalating into full-scale conflict.

The Balakot airstrike in 2019 and 2025 escalation are historic examples of airpower being viewed as a strategic tool to affect regional stability rather than just a tactical one (Mehmood & Asif, 2022; Khan, Mustafa, & Liaqat, 2022). These incidents highlight contradictory character of airpower: although it has capacity to intensify crises, when used strategically, with professional restraint and with accuracy, it may strengthen deterrence, maintain credibility and stabilize otherwise unstable situations. A great illustration of this dual role was provided by Pakistan's actions in these dynamic cases, which demonstrated that how a smaller state may effectively counter a larger adversary by leveraging technology innovation and a targeted approach.

A theoretical framework for understanding these processes is provided by deterrence theory. Classical deterrence stresses the necessity of credible capacity and the threat of retaliation to prevent adversary action, whereas extended deterrence stresses signaling and perception control as equally crucial elements (Freedman, 2004; Waltz, 1979). The Thomas Schelling Independence-Dependence Paradox and Jervis Ugly Stability theory (Jervis, 1989) both explain why nuclear-armed adversaries enjoy stability at the strategic level but volatility at the conventional level. These dynamics are especially noticeable in South Asia, where a highly precarious deterrent environment is created by nuclear weapons, compressed terrain and quick escalation cycles. Pakistan's calibrated use of airpower between 2019 and 2025 demonstrates how having dependable reaction alternatives, prompt operational preparedness and cautious signaling may help maintain strategic stability even in face of tremendous stress. This paper offers a thorough examination of these significant airpower events, contextualizing them within a broader conversation about crisis management, technological development and preserving strategic balance in nuclearized regions. In addition to countering Indian objectives, it argues that Pakistan's use of airpower, which was marked by precision, moderation, doctrinal advancement, enhanced regional deterrence and offered guidelines for the responsible use of advanced military technologies elsewhere. Pakistan has emerged as a proactive and strategic player that can influence dynamics of regional and international security by examining these events through the prism of deterrence theory.

Theoretical Framework: Deterrence Theory

Deterrence Theory offers a crucial analytical framework for comprehending strategic dynamics of airpower in South Asia. Fundamentally, the goal of deterrence is to stop hostile activity by posing real risks of retaliation or denial with fear of unacceptable loss (Freedman, 2004). According to traditional deterrence theory, a state must be able to punish an aggressor or impose unconscionable costs on them in order to prevent armed adventurism. In contrast, extended deterrence focuses on signaling, perception management and communication of resolve, which can often be as decisive as actual capability itself (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1989). In a region as nuclearized and volatile as South Asia, both elements are critical particularly in crises involving rapid-response forces such as airpower. The article's assessment of Pakistan's employment of airpower in South Asia is supported by diagram as shown in Figure 1, which depicts the deterrence triangle. Fundamentally, deterrence relies on Resolve (Political Will & Escalation control), Strategic Messaging (Signaling & Attribution) and third is the response options based on the conventional and nuclear spectrum with proven capacity to respond successfully.

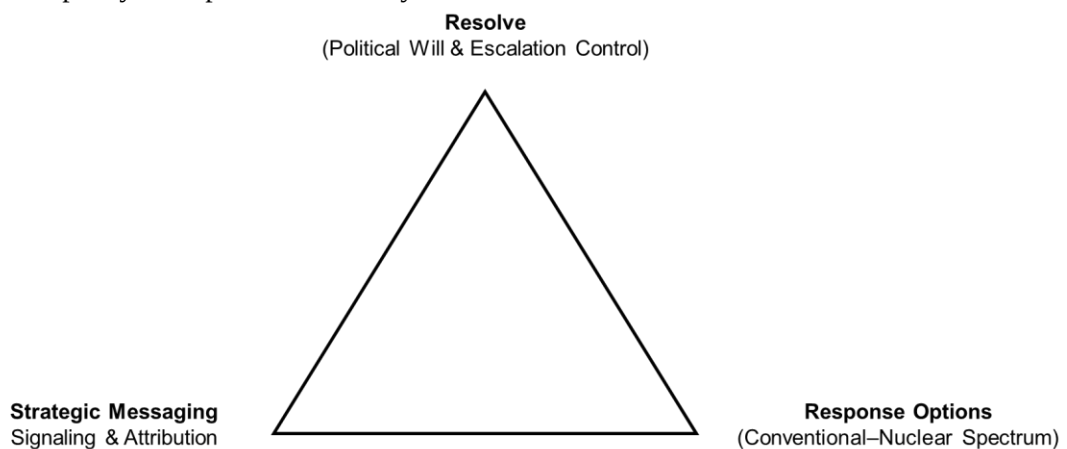


Figure 1 : Deterrence triangle

The 2019 Balakot crisis and the 2025 escalation demonstrate how Pakistan was able to successfully align these three components: it correctly attributed Indian actions, used calibrated air operations to signal restraint and resolve and supported those signals with reliable defensive and retaliatory capabilities. Deterrence theory was validated in a high-risk nuclear scenario when these dynamics worked together to reestablish deterrence, prevent escalation and strengthen regional stability.

Airpower is uniquely suited to implement deterrence in high-stakes contexts. Its rapid mobility, precision strike capability and visible demonstration of readiness allow a state to credibly signal both defensive and offensive potential without immediately resorting to full-scale war (Boyne, 2002; Lambeth, 2019). In South Asia, where both India and Pakistan maintain operational nuclear arsenals, the use of airpower requires careful calibration: demonstrating capability must be balanced with restraint to avoid crossing thresholds that could provoke uncontrolled escalation. Pakistan's responses during Balakot episode in 2019 and May 2025 conflict confrontations illustrate practical application of these principles (Mehmood & Asif, 2022). By combining technologically advanced aircraft, drones, surveillance and integrated command and control with disciplined operational planning, Pakistan was able to convey credible deterrence to India while maintaining strategic stability.

Furthermore, Deterrence Theory underscores the importance of perception management. A state's ability to maintain credibility is contingent not only on its actual capabilities but also on the adversary's belief that these capabilities will be employed if provoked (Jervis, 1989; Freedman, 2004). Pakistan's strategic use of airpower, including measured retaliatory strikes and precise defensive actions, reinforced India's perception that escalation carries significant risks, thereby enhancing deterrence without triggering a broader conflict.

Finally, the theory highlights interplay between capability and signaling in shaping regional stability. Pakistan's airpower posture demonstrates how a smaller state can offset asymmetries through careful application of doctrine, technology and professional judgment (Khan & Awan, 2022). In this sense, Pakistan's experiences provide a compelling case study of deterrence in practice, illustrating that judicious use of airpower can stabilize crises, secure national defense, and contribute to broader regional and global security.

Method

This study examines how airpower shapes crisis stability and strategic credibility in South Asia by using a qualitative theory driven research design based relying on deterrence theory. The analysis focuses on two crucial events by using a thorough case study methodology; the 2019 Balakot crisis, which was empirically documented and a doctrinal extrapolation of a likely expansion of airpower in 2025. Secondary sources such as academic literature, strategic studies, government declarations, and defense analyses are methodically examined to evaluate patterns of signaling, capability demonstration, restraint and perception management. In order to examine future deterrence dynamics, the 2025 example is specifically addressed as an analytical scenario rather than a historical event. It is based on discernible patterns in airpower modernization, doctrinal change and crisis behavior. The paper assesses how airpower can serve as both a coercive and stabilizing tool in a nuclearized environment by combining traditional and extended deterrence ideas, such as escalation control and signaling theory.

Data Collection

This article undertakes review of open source policy reports, strategic assessments and scholarly analyses relevant to Pakistan's security environment and deterrence posture in South Asia. Besides, the emphasis is placed on evaluating how Pakistan's doctrinal choices, force development and signaling practices respond to regional power asymmetries and evolving Indian capabilities. By synthesizing insights from international think tanks, regional experts and deterrence theory, the analysis prioritizes policy relevance over technical enumeration, offering a grounded understanding of deterrence stability from strategic perspective.

Airpower and Deterrence in South Asia

South Asia's unique strategic environment makes airpower a central element of deterrence and crisis management. The region's geography, characterized by long and porous borders, rugged terrain in Kashmir and dense population centers, amplifies both operational utility and risks associated with air operations (Ganguly, 2012; Cohen, 2010). In this context, airpower offers rapid mobility, precision strike capability and ability to signal resolve across both tactical and strategic dimensions. For Pakistan, a smaller but

technologically evolving state, airpower has become a tool not only for defense but also for reinforcing deterrence credibility against a numerically superior adversary (Mehmood & Asif, 2022; Ali & Khan, 2025).

Deterrence in South Asia is deeply intertwined with nuclear dimension. Both India and Pakistan possess operational nuclear arsenals, making conventional escalations highly sensitive (Khan, Mustafa, & Liaqat, 2022). Airpower, therefore, functions as a double-edged instrument: it can deter aggression by threatening rapid retaliation, but miscalculations or overreach could act as a catalyst for a nuclear-tinged crisis (Khan & Khan, 2025). Pakistan's air doctrine has evolved to navigate this paradox. By prioritizing precision, operational discipline and signaling, Pakistan ensures that its air capabilities maintain credibility without unnecessarily escalating tensions (Lambeth, 2019). The careful calibration of force demonstrates a practical application of Deterrence Theory, where capability and perceived resolve are equally important in shaping adversary behavior.

The ways in which Pakistan's air posture supports crisis stability are further clarified by current strategic studies discussions. According to academics, doctrinal consistency, calibrated signaling and defined procedures are essential for efficient escalation management. These characteristics are becoming more apparent in Pakistan's crisis behavior (Freedman, 2020; Kroenig, 2023). Transparency is necessary to prevent security-dilemma dynamics, but research on aerial denial and A2/AD indicates that layered air defenses and integrated command and control increase political and operational costs of coercive probes (Krepinevich, 2019; Biddle, 2021). According to research on risk calculus, professionalized, disciplined air forces typically respond in a controlled manner as opposed to impulsively (Posen, 2014; Talmadge, 2015). Nuclear signaling theory, on the other hand emphasizes that consistent, believable communications serve to uphold an upper limit on escalation by discouraging careless tactics without causing instability (Schelling, 1966; Narang, 2017). The idea that Pakistan's developing air doctrine enhances deterrence by combining aerial denial with institutionally based, responsible escalation control is supported by these discussions taken as a whole.

Pakistan's airpower posture incorporates both offensive and defensive elements. Advanced fighter jets, early-warning radar networks, robust command and control networks and drones provide the ability to conduct rapid interception of intrusions, while precision-guided munitions enable controlled retaliatory strikes (Boyne, 2002; Lambeth, 2019). These capabilities allow Pakistan to respond decisively to threats, creating a perception of risk for adversary without crossing critical escalation thresholds and raising escalation ladder. This approach was evident in both the Balakot 2019 and 2025 crises, where Pakistan successfully neutralized Indian actions while preserving strategic stability.

Another key dimension is psychological and signaling effect of airpower. Deterrence relies not only on actual capability but also on adversary perception (Jervis, 1989; Freedman, 2004). Pakistan's measured responses, including visible readiness and counterstrikes embedded with disciplined engagement rules, effectively communicated that aggression would incur costs while avoiding a spiral into uncontrolled conflict. In effect, airpower serves as a stabilizing instrument, reinforcing credibility of Pakistan's deterrence posture in real-time crises.

Finally, Pakistan's strategic use of airpower highlights broader lessons for asymmetric and nuclearized conflict environments. Smaller states can leverage technology, doctrinal innovation and professional execution to offset numerical disadvantages. By integrating airpower into a coherent deterrence framework, Pakistan demonstrates that capability, signaling and restraint are mutually reinforcing, enabling a smaller power to shape the behavior of a larger adversary while maintaining regional stability (Khan & Awan, 2022, Yaqub, Ali, Khan, & Jan, 2024).

Comparative Airpower Capabilities: Quantitative Mass versus Qualitative Edge

In the aftermath of the India-Pakistan May 2025 conflict, the so-called "Operation Sindoor" and Pakistan's resolute resolve in form of "Mark-e-Haq", marked a paradigm change in strategic landscape of South Asia's strategic landscape. What began as a localized confrontation escalated rapidly, demonstrating

how misperceptions, doctrinal ambiguities and conventional imbalances can endanger regional peace (Hassan, 2025). It aptly underscored the centrality of airpower in a highly volatile security environment that continues to witness increase in conventional domain under nuclear overhang. As the primary instrument of coercive diplomacy and force projection, the aerial capabilities of India and Pakistan now constitute a decisive variable in regional stability. Consequently, to delineate the operational and strategic contours of the subcontinent's airpower balance, a brief comparison of their aerial capabilities is tabulated below (Flight Global, 2024)

Parameter	India	Pakistan
Active Air Force Personnel	~170,000	~70,000
Defence Budget (Liang, 2026)	~92.1 Billion USD	~11.9 Billion USD
Combat Aircraft	~643	~449
4.5 Generation Fighters	Rafale, Su-30MKI (upgraded), Tejas Mk-1A	J-10CE, JF-17 Block III, F-16 Block 52/MLU
5th Generation Fighters	Nil	Nil
AEW&C Aircraft	06 (Netra & PHALCON)	11 (Saab Erieye & ZDK-03)
Air-to-Air Refueling Aircraft	06 x IL-78MKI	04 x IL-78MP
Strategic Airlift Aircraft	~40 (C-17, C-130J, IL-76)	~24 (C-130, IL-78)
Unmanned Aerial Systems (UASs)	Heron, Heron TP, Harop, Harpy, MQ-9B (induction)	Bayraktar TB2, CH-4, Shahpar II, Wing Loong II
Ground Based Air Defence Systems (GBADS)	S-400, Akash, Spyder, MRSAM	HQ-9B/P, LY-80, FM-90, Spada 2000
BVR Missiles	Meteor, Adder, AA-10C, Astra MK series	PL-15E, AIM-120C5, SD-10

India entered the 2025 conflict with a pronounced quantitative advantage across most conventional airpower metrics. Its substantially larger defence budget, manpower, combat aircraft inventory, aerial refuelling capability, and strategic airlift assets enabled the Indian Air Force (IAF) to generate sustained combat sorties, maintain greater operational endurance and project airpower across multiple theatres. Such force mass traditionally provides enhanced operational flexibility and campaign sustainability.

However, numerical superiority alone does not adequately explain the contemporary airpower balance. Despite operating a smaller fleet, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has pursued capability-driven modernization focused on network-centric warfare, integrated command and control and force multiplication. Its inventory of J-10CE, JF-17 Block III and upgraded F-16 fighters, integrated with Saab Erieye and ZDK-03 AEW&C platforms, AESA radars and long-range beyond-visual-range (BVR) missiles, has significantly enhanced situational awareness, sensor-to-shooter integration and engagement effectiveness. These capabilities have enabled the PAF to offset numerical asymmetry through improved decision superiority and precision engagement.

Conversely, the IAF retains qualitative strengths through Rafale fighters equipped with Meteor BVR missiles, supported by a larger aerial refueling fleet and layered air defence systems. Nevertheless, its heterogeneous fighter inventory continues to present challenges in logistics, maintenance, interoperability, and fleet standardization. In the absence of operational fifth-generation fighters in either air force, operational effectiveness increasingly depends on resilient command-and-control networks, electronic warfare, sensor integration and information superiority. Overall, the South Asian airpower balance reflects a contest between quantitative superiority and qualitative optimization. While the IAF retains advantages in force mass and endurance, the PAF has developed a credible regional air-denial and precision-strike capability through selective modernization.

PAF's Operational Success in Marka-e-Haq: A Network-Centric Approach

Despite numerical inferiority, Pakistan Air Force's (PAF) success in Marka-e-Haq was not a consequence of chance, but the culmination of a deliberate transformation into an adaptive, network-centric and multi-domain force. Rather than relying on numerical strength, the PAF invested in doctrinal innovation, technological integration and operational preparedness, enabling it to generate a decisive qualitative advantage over a larger adversary (Sidhu, 2026). The operation validated the shift from platform-centric warfare to a fully integrated "system of systems" approach, where airpower, cyber, electronic warfare (EW), space-enabled intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and unmanned systems functioned as a single combat enterprise.

Anticipating Indian military escalation, the PAF maintained the highest level of operational readiness by activating continuous Combat Air Patrols (CAPs), deploying its Integrated Air Defence System (IADS), and operationalizing multi-domain assets across the country in the shortest possible time. Simultaneously, deception measures, emission control, frequent re-deployments and unpredictable operational patterns concealed Pakistani force dispositions while denying the Indian Air Force (IAF) accurate intelligence regarding PAF deployments and intentions. This proactive posture ensured that Pakistan entered the conflict with a significant information advantage.

At the core of this success was an integrated command and control architecture that fused real-time inputs from airborne AEW&C platforms, ground-based radars, passive electronic support measures, cyber intelligence, space-enabled ISR and other surveillance assets into a unified operational picture. This network-centric architecture substantially compressed the Observe- Orient- Decide- Act (OODA) loop, enabling PAF leadership and field commanders to make faster decisions, decentralize execution and exploit fleeting tactical opportunities. Persistent surveillance through IADS provided comprehensive battlespace transparency, allowing Indian strike packages to be detected at extended ranges well before they approached their launch points.

The PAF simultaneously employed cyber and electronic warfare to shape the battlespace before the first missile was fired. Offensive cyber operations targeted critical communication networks, power infrastructure and navigational support systems, while EW assets degraded Indian datalinks, navigation services and electromagnetic connectivity. These actions reduced the IAF's ability to operate as a cohesive network-enabled force, disrupted command and control, and forced greater reliance on alternative communication pathways, thereby increasing operational friction and reducing tactical flexibility.

When India launched its large-scale air offensive on 07 May 2025, the PAF had already developed comprehensive situational awareness and promptly established a robust Defensive Counter Air posture. The ensuing engagement evolved into one of the largest beyond-visual-range (BVR) air battles in modern air combat. Although outnumbered, the PAF exploited superior battlespace awareness, advanced sensor fusion and integrated command and control to compel Indian aircraft to remain outside Pakistani airspace and launch stand-off weapons from extended ranges.

Crucially, the PAF rapidly transformed a defensive counter-air posture into an offensive campaign by employing its domestically developed integrated kill-chain. This indigenously architecture seamlessly fused cyber operations, electronic warfare, space-enabled ISR, airborne early warning, networked command and control, long-range precision strike capabilities, loitering munitions, unmanned systems and manned fighter aircraft into a single operational framework. The resulting sensor-to-shooter network enabled rapid target acquisition, real-time data fusion and time-sensitive engagement of high-value targets. Exploiting superior situational awareness and first-look first-shot capability, PAF fighters successfully engaged multiple frontline IAF aircraft, including Rafales, Su-30MKIs, Mirage-2000s and MiG-29s, while integrated air defence and counter-UAS assets simultaneously neutralized hostile unmanned systems. The speed and precision with which this kill-chain functioned fundamentally shifted the initiative to the PAF and proved that a fully integrated, network-enabled force could decisively overcome numerical inferiority.

Equally significant was the PAF's emphasis on realistic training, decentralized mission command and multi-domain operational doctrine. Years of intensive exercises emphasizing Defensive and Offensive Counter Air operations, electronic warfare integration and network-enabled combat produced aircrew capable of operating effectively in a highly contested electromagnetic environment. Unlike a platform-centric approach, the PAF fought as a single integrated combat system in which every sensor, shooter and decision-maker contributed to a unified operational effect.

Conclusively, Marka-e-Haq demonstrated that qualitative superiority, derived from doctrinal innovation, integrated multi-domain operations, information dominance and superior decision-making, can decisively offset numerical inferiority and redefine the application of airpower in contemporary warfare.

Case Study 1: Balakot 2019 – A Test of Deterrence

One of the most important incidents in modern South Asian security history was February 2019 Balakot airstrike, which put India and Pakistan's conventional and nuclear deterrent to the test (Mehmood & Asif, 2022; Khan, Mustafa, & Liaqat, 2022). Following a terrorist attack in Pulwama, India launched airstrikes targeting what it claimed were militant camps in Balakot inside Pakistani territory (Ahmed & Ashraf, 2019). Although operation was meant to serve as an offensive resolve show, it ultimately fell short of strategic goals, revealing limitations of attacking without taking into consideration Pakistan's preparedness, intelligence capabilities, and calculated deterrent stance (Ahmed & Ashraf, 2019).

Pakistan's response illustrates practical application of Deterrence Theory. Deterrence is not solely about threat of retaliation but also about signaling capability and resolve convincingly. Pakistan's military employed a carefully calibrated combination of defensive and retaliatory measures, demonstrating operational competence without escalating the conflict to a broader war (Mehmood & Asif, 2022). The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) rapidly mobilized fighter squadrons, deployed early-warning radar systems and maintained strict adherence to rules of engagement, ensuring that responses were precise and controlled; the downing of an Indian aircraft and capture of its pilot served both tactical and strategic purposes: neutralizing immediate threat while signaling Pakistan's readiness and credibility to both regional and global observers (Ahmed & Ashraf, 2019; Khan & Awan, 2022).

This episode highlights dual role of airpower in deterrence: the capacity to inflict damage deters future aggression, while demonstration of discipline and restraint reinforces stability. Pakistan's response showcased professional decision-making under high-pressure conditions, ensuring that deterrence was both credible and sustainable (Freedman, 2004). By avoiding excessive escalation and preventing inadvertent provocation, Pakistan demonstrated that smaller states could leverage airpower effectively against larger adversaries, aligning with the principles of classical and extended deterrence.

Global reactions further validated Pakistan's strategic handling of crisis. Analysts noted that while India's strike was politically high-profile, it failed to alter operational balance or undermine Pakistan's deterrent posture. International study showed that Pakistan's methodical approach preserved stability in a nuclearized environment and reduced likelihood of an escalation into a full-scale conflict (Mehmood & Asif, 2022; Khan & Awan, 2022). These assessments emphasize how important perception is in deterrence: Effective communication of Pakistan's strategic capability and resolve affected adversary calculations and prevented further attack.

The Balakot incident also sparked technological and doctrinal advancements in Pakistan's aviation strategy. Lessons learnt about precision engagement, integrated surveillance and rapid mobilization shaped later modernization initiatives, making PAF more equipped to handle future crises (Lambeth, 2019; RAND Corporation, 2024). Additionally, the operation reaffirmed the idea that successful deterrence is proactive rather than reactive, requiring a blend of capacity, signaling and disciplined execution (Freedman, 2004).

To sum up, Balakot 2019 is a perfect example of deterrence through use of airpower. India's limited strike was neutralized by Pakistan's calm but successful response, which also strengthened its strategic credibility and preserved regional security in a nuclear-armed world. By applying principles of Deterrence Theory- capability, signaling and credibility- Pakistan demonstrated that smaller states, through professionalism, precision and doctrinal evolution can manage high-stakes crises successfully, offering valuable lessons for both regional actors and broader international security community (Mehmood & Asif, 2022; Khan & Awan, 2022).

Case Study 2: Escalation 2025 – Reinforcing Strategic Credibility

The 2025 air confrontation between India and Pakistan represented a further test of deterrence dynamics in South Asia, occurring in a period of heightened geopolitical tension (RAND Corporation, 2024; SIPRI, 2024). It is crucial to make clear the methodological character of the "2025 escalation" before moving on. This episode uses doctrinal extrapolation to build a forward-looking analytical scenario. To put it simply, the analysis tests how deterrence dynamics can manifest in the near future using a realistic potential crisis based on current trends in India-Pakistan airpower development, crisis behavior, and doctrinal evolution. The analysis guarantees that the 2025 incident is analytically believable even if it is hypothetical by basing scenario on observable doctrinal shifts, such as Pakistan's concentration on integrated air defense, precise engagement, and calibrated signals. By avoiding factual uncertainty, this method allows researchers to investigate anticipated future evolution of airpower rivalry. Unlike Balakot episode of 2019, this escalation involved more sophisticated operations, reflecting both technological advancements and doctrinal evolution in Pakistan's airpower strategy (IISS, 2024; Carnegie Endowment, 2023). India's limited air intrusions aimed to assert tactical superiority and test Pakistan's readiness, but Pakistan's measured and professional response once again demonstrated credibility and effectiveness of its deterrent posture.

Pakistan's approach in 2025 exemplified practical application of Deterrence Theory, highlighting importance of capability, signaling and restraint (Freedman, 2004; Waltz, 1979). Furthermore, the crisis reflected more general theoretical dynamics like the Independence-Dependence Paradox (Schelling, 1960) and Ugly Stability (Jervis, 1982), in which nuclear-armed adversaries concurrently experience increased conventional volatility and strategic stability. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) leveraged integrated early-warning systems, advanced fighter jets, drones and precision-guided munitions to counter intrusions effectively while avoiding unnecessary escalation (Boyne, 2002; Lambeth, 2019). Rapid identification of threats, coordinated defensive measures and controlled retaliatory strikes allowed Pakistan to neutralize Indian actions decisively, sending a clear message that any aggression would be met with credible consequences (Khan & Awan, 2022).

This episode also highlighted Pakistan's technological and doctrinal innovations since 2019. Lessons from Balakot informed development of improved command-and-control systems, real-time intelligence sharing, and advanced surveillance techniques, enabling PAF to respond with greater speed and precision (RAND Corporation, 2024; SIPRI, 2024). The integration of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) provided enhanced reconnaissance and targeting capability, while precision-guided munitions allowed Pakistan to limit collateral damage, maintaining both operational effectiveness and international credibility (IISS, 2024). These innovations reinforced Pakistan's deterrence posture by combining capability with signaling, ensuring that adversary accurately perceives both cost of aggression and Pakistan's strategic restraint (Lambeth, 2019; Mehmood & Asif, 2022). In this way, deterrence was maintained not only by military might but also by cautious perception management, which is essential in nuclearized dyads with tight geography and quick escalation timelines.

The escalation spectrum at heart of the article's deterrence analysis is depicted in Figure 2, which illustrates how reactions change from tactical to strategic levels of conflict and from sub-conventional to nuclear threats. It demonstrates how doctrinal decisions can be made in response to militant attacks, ranging from airstrikes and surgical strikes to more extensive conventional operations; further escalation may result in the use of tactical nuclear weapons and widespread reprisal. Pakistan's intentional attempt to dominate this

escalation ladder is demonstrated by Balakot incident in 2019 and escalation in 2025. By reacting at conventional airpower level, Pakistan firmly repelled Indian activities without moving approaching strategic or nuclear thresholds. This strategic deployment of airpower maintained escalation control, strengthened deterrence through punishment and denial and demonstrated how measured conventional responses may settle crises in a nuclear armed environment.

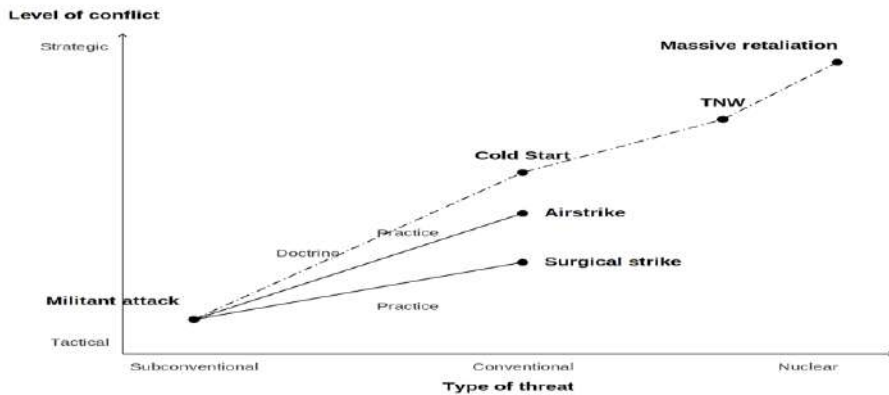


Figure 2 : Deterrence dynamics in Indo-Pak environment (Source : Aarten, 2020)

A critical aspect of 2025 escalation was emphasis on perception management. Deterrence is as much about shaping adversary calculations as it is about possessing capability (Jervis, 1989; Freedman, 2004). Pakistan's disciplined and measured responses conveyed resolve without provoking uncontrolled escalation.

Global security analysts noted that Pakistan's handling of 2025 confrontation prevented a broader conflict while preserving deterrence. India's attempts to assert dominance were effectively countered, demonstrating that professional airpower, when employed with precision and strategic foresight, could neutralize aggressive posturing without triggering escalation (RAND Corporation, 2024; SIPRI, 2024). The episode further solidified Pakistan's reputation as a state capable of managing high-stakes crises through disciplined application of airpower, technological innovation, and doctrinal evolution (IISS, 2024; Lambeth, 2019).

In conclusion, 2025 escalation reinforced key lessons about airpower in South Asia. Pakistan's responses confirmed that credible deterrence depends not only on military capability but also on signaling, operational discipline and strategic judgment (Freedman, 2004; Mehmood & Asif, 2022). It also emphasizes how theoretical tools - Deterrence Theory, Ugly Stability, and the Independence–Dependence Paradox - help explain crisis behavior in nuclear situations by framing the incident as a doctrinal extrapolation rather than an empirical event. By successfully navigating a complex and high-risk crisis, Pakistan demonstrated that smaller states could leverage advanced airpower effectively to counter larger adversaries, maintain regional stability, and offer valuable insights for international security scholars and policymakers (Khan & Awan, 2022; Carnegie Endowment, 2023). In contrast to Balakot 2019, the 2025 episode emphasizes the dual role of airpower as a tool for national defense and as a stabilizing force in unstable, nuclearized situations (Lambeth, 2019; Freedman, 2004).

Global Implications and Lessons

The airpower crises in South Asia in 2019 and 2025 provide insights that extend well beyond the region, emphasizing the challenges of crisis management, deterrence, and technological adaptation in contemporary security environments (Lambeth, 2019; RAND Corporation, 2024; Mehmood & Asif, 2022). Pakistan's strategic use of airpower demonstrates that even small countries may effectively deploy state-of-the-art weapons to counter more formidable adversaries, dispel ideas of power disparity, and maintain credibility in important wars (Khan & Awan, 2022; Carnegie Endowment, 2023). A fundamental principle of deterrence theory is emphasized by the South Asian experience: disciplined execution, perception control, and

signaling are equally as crucial in influencing adversary behavior and preventing escalation as capacity alone (Freedman, 2004; Jervis, 1989; Javaid, Begum, & Tariq, 2025).

On a global scale, these experiences provide guidance for major and regional nations negotiating nuclearized situations and asymmetric warfare. Airpower offers a quick and adaptable way to deter aggression without starting a full-scale confrontation, especially when combined with surveillance, drones and precision-guided systems (Boyne, 2002; Lambeth, 2019; RAND Corporation, 2024). Pakistan's responses demonstrate that technological sophistication, combined with professional doctrine and restraint can prevent crises from spiraling uncontrollably (Mehmood & Asif, 2022; SIPRI, 2024). This insight is particularly relevant in a world where military technology is proliferating and potential for miscalculation is rising (IISS, 2024; Carnegie Endowment, 2023).

The crises also highlight psychological dimension of deterrence. Smaller states must not only possess credible capabilities but also ensure that adversaries perceive these capabilities as effective and ready for deployment (Jervis, 1989; Freedman, 2004). Pakistan's professional execution, calibrated counterstrikes, and clear signaling reinforced India's perception of risk while avoiding uncontrolled escalation (Khan & Awan, 2022; Mehmood & Asif, 2022). The result was a restoration and reinforcement of deterrence credibility an outcome that has resonance for nuclearized confrontations and crises worldwide (Lambeth, 2019; RAND Corporation, 2024).

Comparative lessons can be drawn for other regions as well. In conflicts involving technologically asymmetric adversaries, the South Asian experience illustrates that smaller states can offset numerical disadvantages through doctrine, operational discipline and selective technological adoption (Khan & Awan, 2022; Boyne, 2002). In essence, Pakistan's airpower strategy demonstrates that careful planning, rapid response and precise execution can serve both defensive and stabilizing functions, providing a model for crisis management beyond South Asia (Mehmood & Asif, 2022; Lambeth, 2019).

Furthermore, the episodes underscore dual nature of airpower in modern conflict. While it carries potential to escalate tensions, when applied judiciously it can stabilize high-risk confrontations, enhance deterrence and prevent adversaries from testing strategic thresholds (Freedman, 2004; Lambeth, 2019). Pakistan's handling of both Balakot and 2025 crises demonstrates how smaller states can transform perceived vulnerabilities into strategic advantages, shaping adversary calculations while minimizing risk of wider conflict (Khan & Awan, 2022; Carnegie Endowment, 2023).

Finally, these lessons have broader implications for international security policymakers, military planners and scholars. The case of South Asia emphasizes that credible and capable deterrence are essential, that doctrinal evolution must accompany technological progress, and that disciplined airpower can be a stabilizing tool in unstable situations (Freedman, 2004; RAND Corporation, 2024; Lambeth, 2019). Pakistan's strategy provides a convincing illustration for international players of how smaller nations can properly handle high-stakes situations, preserve regional peace, and add to more general teachings on strategic restraint and professional military practice (Khan & Awan, 2022; Carnegie Endowment, 2023; Ali & Khan, 2025, Khan & Sultana, 2021).

Conclusion

The airpower crises of 2019 and 2025 scenario demonstrate how smaller states can leverage technological innovation, operational discipline and strategic foresight to manage high-stakes conflicts effectively (Mehmood & Asif, 2022; RAND Corporation, 2024). Pakistan's measured and professional responses in both episodes exemplify the practical application of Deterrence Theory, where capability, signaling and credibility work in tandem to prevent adversary aggression and stabilize volatile environments (Freedman, 2004; Waltz, 1979).

Balakot 2019 and 2025 scenario highlight dual role of airpower as both a defensive instrument and a stabilizing force. Pakistan's ability to respond rapidly and effectively demonstrates operational competence while reinforcing perception of credible deterrence (Boyne, 2002; Lambeth, 2019). The integration of advanced surveillance, drones and precision-guided weapons coupled with disciplined command and control ensures measured, proportional and strategically sound responses.

The global significance of Pakistan's approach extends beyond South Asia (Iqbal & Khan, 2025b). These episodes illustrate that smaller states, even when facing numerically superior adversaries, can shape strategic outcomes through innovation, professionalism and effective signaling (Khan & Awan, 2022; Carnegie Endowment, 2023). It takes more than just having cutting-edge capabilities to effectively deter; it also requires behaving responsibly and decisively, projecting resolve and keeping strategic equilibrium under duress.

In conclusion, the triumphs of Pakistan in 2019 and 2025 serve as an example of contemporary deterrence in action. By combining cutting-edge technology, controlled airspace and cautious signaling, Pakistan was able to successfully protect its territory, bolster its reputation and promote stability in region. The South Asian experience highlights a more general rule that applies everywhere: airpower can be a potent defensive weapon and a stabilizing force that can influence enemy behavior and maintain peace even in most difficult security situations when used with accuracy, moderation and strategic foresight. Pakistan's strategic example provides important lessons for global security, showing how professionalism, technological flexibility and doctrinal clarity may turn possible weaknesses into reliable deterrent tools.

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The Influence of the Digital Divide on External Political Efficacy: An Empirical Study from Khon Kaen, Thailand

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Digital inequalities pose a threat to democratic participation, especially at the local level where citizen–government interactions are most direct. This study examines how multidimensional digital inequalities influence external political efficacy—citizens’ perceptions of government responsiveness in Khon Kaen Municipality, Thailand. Moving beyond basic access, the study employs a three-level digital divide framework (access, usage, and benefits) and analyzes survey data from 399 respondents using multiple regression. Results show that both digital access and usage significantly enhance external political efficacy, while perceived benefits of digital engagement, though positive, are not statistically significant. Socio-demographic factors such as age, occupation, and political ideology also influence efficacy perceptions. These findings suggest that addressing digital inequality requires more than expanding infrastructure; it demands inclusive digital policies that foster meaningful engagement, build trust in institutions, and enhance democratic governance at the grassroots level.

Keywords: digital divide, digital inequalities, perception of government responsiveness, political efficacy, Thailand

Digital technology has transformed how people connect, access information, and engage in politics. The “digital divide” (i.e., disparities in access to digital resources) shapes political and civic participation (Boulianne et al., 2023; Norris, 2001; van Dijk, 2005, 2017). This divide separates those who can engage digitally from those who cannot, affecting political knowledge, institutional trust, and democratic involvement (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Digital tools enable citizens to access government information, track policies, and voice concerns, fostering transparency and responsive governance (Chadwick, 2006; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Where digital access is widespread, citizens can stay informed, express opinions, and hold leaders accountable (Lowatcharin & Menifield, 2015; Moon, 2002). However, without access, participation in the digital public sphere is limited, undermining democratic engagement (Mossberger et al., 2008).

These challenges are particularly relevant in municipalities undergoing rapid digital transformation. Khon Kaen Municipality, one of Thailand’s designated Smart City pilot areas and a major regional administrative and economic hub, has received substantial investment in digital infrastructure and e-government platforms as part of the national digital strategy (Kamnuansilpa et al., 2020; Taweesaengsakulthai et al., 2019). Internet penetration in Khon Kaen reaches 92.2% of residents aged six and above (approximately 1.5 million out of 1.6 million people), exceeding the national average of 88.4% (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2024). This positions Khon Kaen as a “most-likely case” for digital inclusion, where widespread connectivity would be expected to support equitable citizen engagement with digital government. Nevertheless, disparities in digital skills, usage, and the ability to derive meaningful benefits persist among older adults, informal workers, and

socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, limiting their effective interaction with digital public services (Prachumrasee et al., 2024; Pukdeewut & Setthasuravich, 2024).

A recent incident illustrates the governance implications of these inequalities. In 2023, residents raised safety concerns regarding the municipality's plan to launch New Year fireworks near densely populated wooden housing areas, including homes with bedridden residents. Although citizens attempted to communicate their concerns through both offline and digital channels, municipal authorities did not respond promptly. The issue only received official attention after social media posts generated broader public visibility (PPTV Online, 2023). This example highlights that digital connectivity alone does not guarantee meaningful citizen–government interaction or institutional responsiveness. Without inclusive digital capabilities and effective feedback mechanisms, digital government platforms may fail to strengthen citizens' perceptions of government responsiveness, particularly among digitally marginalized groups. Examining Khon Kaen therefore provides an analytically valuable opportunity to assess whether digital inequalities continue to shape governance outcomes even in digitally advanced municipalities. If such inequalities influence citizen–government relations in this context, similar or stronger effects may exist in less digitally developed municipalities across Thailand and other emerging economies undergoing digital transformation.

Thailand's digital initiatives, such as the Thailand Digital Government Development Plan (2023–2027) and Thailand 4.0, focus on infrastructure, such as e-government platforms and connectivity, measured by metrics like broadband coverage. However, “last-mile” efforts—digital literacy, outreach to marginalized groups, and citizen empowerment—are underfunded (Phochai et al., 2024; Robru et al., 2024). The Digital Economy and Society Development Plan aims to boost participation, but vague community-level guidelines hinder progress. Consequently, elderly, low-income, and rural migrant residents struggle with online systems, facing unequal access to services and limited participation in governance, reinforcing structural inequalities.

External political efficacy, the belief that government responds to public concerns, is central to this study (Anderson, 2010; Campbell et al., 1954; Craig & Maggiotto, 1982). High efficacy encourages civic engagement and trust, while low efficacy fosters alienation (Miller, 1974). Digital technologies raise questions about their impact on efficacy, as those with access can engage online, potentially feeling more influential (Boulianne et al., 2023; Hacker et al., 2009; Ognyanova & Ball-Rokeach, 2015; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Studies suggest digital access enhances efficacy by enabling participation (Boulianne, 2009; Xenos et al., 2014). However, benefits are uneven, especially in lower-income or rural areas. Western research shows unequal access creates a “participation gap,” limiting political knowledge, trust, and engagement for disadvantaged groups (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Schlozman et al., 2012). Less is known about non-Western contexts like Thailand, where socio-economic diversity may exacerbate marginalization, affecting perceptions of government responsiveness (Fuchs, 2009; Setthasuravich & Kato, 2020, 2022). Digital access can empower citizens but also allow state or corporate actors to shape discourse (Howard & Hussain, 2011).

Prior studies often measure the digital divide narrowly, focusing on physical access while neglecting skills, usage, and benefits (van Dijk, 2018). This study addresses this gap by examining Khon Kaen Municipality in Thailand, an emerging economy with significant digitalization and socio-economic inequalities. The research question is: ***“How does the digital divide impact external political efficacy among citizens in Khon Kaen Municipality, Thailand?”*** By exploring digital disparities' effects, this study deepens understanding of digital equity's role in fostering responsive, inclusive governance.

Literature Review

The Digital Divide and Public Administration

The digital divide emerged in the late 1990s with the rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs), highlighting disparities in technology access and skills (Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010; van Dijk, 2006). The OECD (2015) and Robinson et al. (2015) note that inequalities in resources, culture, and knowledge hinder technology use, affecting education, employment, and healthcare. This study defines the digital divide as disparities in device ownership (e.g., smartphones, computers), internet use, and derived benefits. Van Dijk (2018) categorizes the digital divide into three levels. The first, studied from the late 1990s to

early 2000s, focuses on motivation and access to technologies like computers and the internet, varying by income, education, and gender. The second, prominent since 2005, emphasizes skills and usage, including digital literacy and content creation. The third, emerging around 2015, examines benefits in economic, political, social, and cultural domains.

From a public administration perspective, the digital divide undermines social equity, responsiveness, and participatory governance (Frederickson, 1991; Vigoda, 2002). Governments, including Thailand, adopt digital platforms to enhance services, but unequal citizen capacities can exacerbate inequalities (Bannister & Connolly, 2012; Morte-Nadal & Esteban-Navarro, 2025; Prachumrasee et al., 2024). This study uses van Dijk's (2018) framework (i.e., access, usage, and benefits) to address public administration's focus on inclusive service access. The first level involves access to tools like smartphones and internet. The second level covers skills for navigating digital platforms, aligning with efforts to reduce administrative burdens (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). The third level, crucial for governance equity, focuses on benefits like better information access and decision-making influence, enhancing empowerment and trust (Pukdeewut & Setthasuravich, 2024). The digital divide impacts education, economy, society, culture, and politics. Strong digital infrastructure reduced educational disruptions during COVID-19 (Steele, 2018). Economically, gender-based access gaps cause significant losses (Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2021), and digital economy growth heightens competition. Socially and culturally, it creates disparities in development and drives changes in developed nations (Steele, 2018). Politically, digital skills influence e-government satisfaction, though skill gaps remain (Ebberts et al., 2016). These findings affirm the need to address the digital divide not merely as a technical deficiency but as a governance failure to ensure fair and inclusive service provision.

Importantly, the digital divide can be conceptualized both as structural inequality between social groups and as individual-level variation in access, skills, and the capacity to benefit from digital technologies. Van Dijk (2018, 2020) emphasizes that digital inequality operates as a continuum, where individuals possess differing levels of digital resources and capabilities that shape their opportunities for participation in economic, social, and political life. Accordingly, empirical research frequently operationalizes the digital divide using individual-level composite indicators of access, digital skills, and digital outcomes (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; OECD, 2021; Robinson et al., 2015). This approach allows researchers to assess how variation in individual digital capabilities influences governance outcomes, including civic engagement, institutional trust, and perceptions of government responsiveness.

External Political Efficacy as a Governance Outcome

In democracies, government responsiveness, public participation, and accountability are vital. Effective public involvement enables policies and services aligned with citizens' needs, enhancing governance quality. Political efficacy reflects citizens' beliefs in their ability to influence government and its responsiveness (Anderson, 2010). In public administration, this aligns with administrative responsiveness and accountability, fostering trust, compliance, and institutional stability (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003).

Political efficacy comprises internal and external types. Internal efficacy is an individual's confidence in understanding and participating in politics, often linked to participation and trust (OECD, 2021; Prats & Meunier, 2021). External political efficacy, the focus here, is the belief that government responds to citizens' needs, crucial for legitimacy (OECD, 2021). High external efficacy, driven by responsive policies and services, bolsters government legitimacy. Conversely, dissatisfaction from unaddressed needs lowers efficacy, risking distrust and reduced legitimacy (Bratton, 2012; Cho, 2010; Novikova & Liebert, 2021; OECD, 2019). This study defines external political efficacy as citizens' perception that government addresses their concerns.

Research typically uses surveys to measure efficacy. The OECD (2019, 2021) employed the European Social Survey, interviewing 1,500 citizens biennially, asking, "how much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?" (OECD, 2021, p. 208). Anderson (2010) used telephone surveys, asking, "*How much do you believe your local representatives (such as county commissioners and city council members) care about what you think is important for [city name]? Do you think they care very much, somewhat, only a little, or not at all?*" (p. 68). These tools assess perceptions of institutional

accessibility and responsiveness, key to effective public administration. In decentralized contexts such as Thailand's municipalities, such perceptions are critical for evaluating local government performance.

Digital Technology, Governance, and External Political Efficacy

Research highlights the digital divide's impact on public service delivery and political participation. Nam (2012) found higher socio-economic groups, with better technology access, engage more in online political activities, reinforcing offline participation inequalities. Boulianne's (2009) meta-analysis confirmed that internet use boosts civic and political engagement, but unequal access limits the internet's democratizing potential.

Wagner et al. (2017) showed that digital news consumption enhances external political efficacy by fostering perceptions of government responsiveness, particularly through transparent online platforms. However, this effect is stronger in democratic contexts than in less open systems. You and Wang (2020) noted internet use shapes efficacy differently: in authoritarian regimes, it may erode trust, while in democracies, it supports expression and mobilization, though benefits favor the digitally privileged. From a public administration perspective, digital engagement's empowerment depends on platform design, support structures, and state responsiveness. Marginalized groups face administrative burdens such as complex procedures and lack of assistance, which can frustrate efficacy (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Thus, digital tools' impact hinges on inclusive implementation.

Boulianne et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis of 193 studies across 37 countries found a modest positive link between digital media use and external efficacy, stronger in transparent democracies than in authoritarian or unresponsive systems. This context dependency is relevant for Thailand's municipalities, where digital and administrative capacities vary. Digital coproduction can enhance efficacy when citizens shape platform design and implementation (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). However, without digital literacy and outreach, participation remains elitist. Xu and Tang (2020) showed minority groups in Florida used digital platforms post-disaster to demand services, highlighting potential for equitable access if systems respond effectively.

Despite extensive research, many studies conceptualize the digital divide narrowly, focusing on access or use, overlooking van Dijk's (2018) multidimensional framework. This model includes access, skills, usage patterns, and benefits, offering a comprehensive view of how digital engagement influences external political efficacy, especially in diverse socio-political contexts like Thailand.

The Digital Divide and Digital Politics in Thailand

Research on Thailand's digital divide has expanded considerably over the past decade, moving in step with the international literature from questions of physical access toward skills, usage, and outcomes. At the policy level, critics of the Thailand 4.0 agenda cautioned that a technology-driven growth strategy could reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities and concentrations of power (Chiengkul, 2019), while the OECD (2022) documented both the rapid expansion of Thailand's digital government infrastructure and the persistent capability gaps that constrain inclusive service delivery. Empirical studies confirm that the first-level divide remains spatially and socially patterned: disparities in internet access have been shown to shape which areas and population groups benefit from national policy programs (Setthasuravich & Kato, 2022, 2026), and sub-district-level spatial econometric analysis reveals pronounced geographic clustering of internet adoption, with urban cores far outpacing peripheral areas (Setthasuravich et al., 2024). Scholarly attention has since shifted toward the second- and third-level divides experienced by vulnerable groups, including the determinants of internet use among visually impaired individuals (Phochai et al., 2024), health-related internet use among older adults (Robru et al., 2024), and the socio-demographic determinants of tangible digital outcomes (Pukdeewut & Setthasuravich, 2024). Collectively, these studies indicate that, although connectivity has expanded rapidly (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2024), inequalities in skills, usage, and realized benefits remain entrenched along lines of age, education, income, disability, and geography.

A parallel strand of scholarship examines digital politics and digital government in Thailand. Research on political communication shows that digital media have become central arenas of Thai political life: Sinpeng

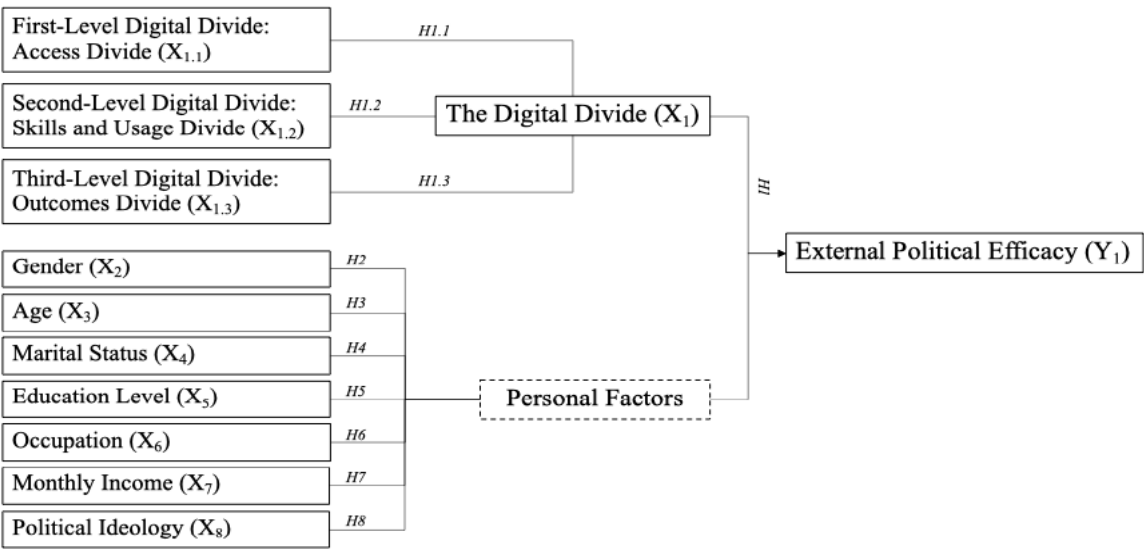
(2017) compared street protesters with Facebook-based supporters of rival political movements and found that online participants were younger and of lower socio-economic status than their offline counterparts, suggesting that social media can mitigate, rather than simply reproduce, participatory inequalities, while subsequent work has traced how social media were mobilized in Thailand’s contentious politics (Sinpeng, 2021). On the governance side, studies of Thailand’s Smart City program have examined implementation pathways and citizen awareness, with Khon Kaen frequently serving as a focal case (Kamnuansilpa et al., 2020; Taweesaengsakulthai et al., 2019). More recent work documents the growth of digital citizen–government interfaces, including the nationwide adoption of the Traffy Fondue civic issue-reporting platform (Hansen & Dahiya, 2025) and the use of social listening tools by local administrative organizations (Prachumrasee et al., 2024). Most directly related to the present study, Thonmanee and Lowatcharin (2024) reported that the digital divide was associated with citizens’ perceptions of government responsiveness in Udon Thani Municipality.

Taken together, Thai scholarship over the past decade has documented persistent multi-level digital divides alongside a rapidly expanding digital government landscape. However, most studies have concentrated on describing patterns of access and use, evaluating policy and platform implementation, or analyzing political mobilization and contention. Quantitative evidence linking the multidimensional digital divide to citizens’ political attitudes, and to external political efficacy in particular, remains scarce at the municipal level, where citizen–government interactions are most direct. Building on Thonmanee and Lowatcharin (2024), this study addresses this gap by applying van Dijk’s (2018) three-level framework in one of Thailand’s Smart City pilot municipalities, thereby connecting Thai digital divide research to the broader international literature on digital inequality and political efficacy.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

This study examines the digital divide’s impact on external political efficacy, using van Dijk’s (2018) multidimensional theory and governance literature (Anderson, 2010; OECD, 2021). External political efficacy is framed as a governance outcome influenced by digital access, skills, and benefits, with citizens perceiving greater institutional responsiveness when digitally empowered (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Vigoda, 2002). The framework, illustrated in Figure 1, includes socio-demographic factors (i.e., gender, age, marital status, education, occupation, income, and political ideology) known to shape efficacy.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



The Digital Divide and External Political Efficacy

The digital divide is no longer solely about connectivity; it is fundamentally a governance issue that affects equity, inclusion, and public trust (Bannister & Connolly, 2012; Frederickson, 1991). Van Dijk's (2018) multidimensional theory of digital inequality distinguishes between three levels: access to digital technologies, usage and digital skills, and the capacity to derive tangible benefits from digital engagement. These dimensions reflect increasing degrees of citizen empowerment, each of which may influence the likelihood that individuals perceive institutions as responsive to their needs.

Consistent with this framework, the digital divide in this study is conceptualized at the individual level as variation in access to digital resources, digital skills and usage, and realized benefits from digital engagement. Prior empirical research commonly operationalizes digital inequality using composite indices capturing these individual-level dimensions, as they directly reflect individuals' capacity to participate in digitally mediated governance processes (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; OECD, 2021; Robinson et al., 2015). Under this operationalization, higher index values indicate greater digital inclusion and correspondingly lower levels of individual-level digital disadvantage. This approach enables examination of how differences in digital capabilities influence governance outcomes, particularly citizens' perceptions of institutional responsiveness.

From a public administration perspective, digital inclusion enhances citizens' ability to access government information, communicate with public officials, and participate in policy feedback and service delivery processes (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Prachumrasee et al., 2025). These opportunities reduce informational asymmetries, lower administrative barriers, and strengthen citizens' sense that government institutions are accessible and responsive. Conversely, individuals with limited digital access, skills, or ability to benefit from digital technologies may face barriers to engagement, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and institutional indifference. Accordingly, greater levels of digital inclusion (reflected in higher access, digital skills, and realized benefits) are expected to strengthen external political efficacy. Therefore, we propose:

H1: Higher levels of digital inclusion are positively associated with external political efficacy.

Access to Digital Technology

Access to digital devices and stable internet connectivity forms the foundation of digital citizenship. Individuals without access are effectively excluded from e-government platforms, digital consultations, and online channels for service requests. Research shows that even when digital services are made available, access remains stratified along socio-economic and geographic lines, particularly in developing countries (Koiranen et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2015). This structural exclusion can diminish citizens' perceived influence and satisfaction with government performance. Thus:

H1.1: Greater access to digital technology is positively associated with external political efficacy.

Digital Usage and Skills

Beyond access, the ability to effectively use digital tools plays a central role in shaping perceptions of government responsiveness. The second-level divide, often described as the skills or usage divide, highlights the uneven distribution of digital literacy and functional competencies. Individuals with higher skill levels are more likely to search for public information, use municipal apps, and interact with government websites (Koiranen et al., 2020; Miras et al., 2023; Warschauer, 2004). These experiences reinforce a sense of agency and institutional accessibility. Therefore:

H1.2: Higher levels of digital technology usage are positively associated with external political efficacy.

Perceived Benefits from Digital Engagement

The third level of the digital divide emphasizes the outcomes derived from digital participation, including informational, social, and economic benefits (Ogbo et al., 2021; van Dijk, 2018). When citizens perceive that engaging with digital platforms results in tangible improvements (e.g., faster service, clearer communication, or increased responsiveness), they are more likely to trust institutions and believe their voice matters (Koiranen et al., 2020; Ogbo et al., 2021; Warschauer, 2004). This dimension aligns with public administration's focus on service performance, equity, and outcome-based governance. We therefore posit:

H1.3: Greater perceived benefits from digital technology are positively associated with external political efficacy.

Socio-Demographic Determinants of Political Efficacy

In addition to the digital divide, socio-demographic characteristics play a well-documented role in shaping political efficacy. These variables reflect both resource differentials and socialization experiences that influence how individuals interact with political institutions.

Gender

Gender gaps in political efficacy are long-standing and multifaceted. Women often report lower external efficacy than men due to a combination of structural barriers, lower digital engagement rates, and reduced trust in political systems (Boulianne, 2009; García-Albacete & Hoskins, 2025). In developing contexts, digital access is further stratified by gender, with women facing greater restrictions in skill development and online participation (Acilar & Sæbø, 2023; Kaguara & Wanjiru, 2012). As such:

H2: Gender is associated with external political efficacy.

Age

Age influences both digital inclusion and political socialization. Younger individuals are more likely to adopt digital technologies and engage with government online, while older citizens may experience barriers to access and navigation (Mossberger et al., 2008; Pukdeewut & Setthasuravich, 2024). At the same time, older individuals may develop political skepticism or disengagement based on long-term experiences with unresponsive institutions (Keith, 1977; Mossberger et al., 2008). Therefore:

H3: Age is associated with external political efficacy.

Marital Status

Marital status may shape how individuals perceive public service responsiveness. Married individuals, often with dependents or household responsibilities, may engage with local services differently than single or divorced citizens and may prioritize stability and predictability in local governance (Schlozman et al., 2012; Thonmanee & Lowatcharin, 2024). Accordingly:

H4: Marital status is associated with external political efficacy.

Education

Education is a key determinant of political knowledge and civic competence. Individuals with higher educational attainment typically report higher levels of political efficacy and greater confidence in navigating administrative systems (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Kaguara & Wanjiru, 2012; Yu, 2006). Education also correlates with higher digital literacy, making it a strong predictor of both actual and perceived responsiveness. Therefore:

H5: Education level is positively associated with external political efficacy.

Occupation

Occupational roles shape citizens' exposure to government services and information channels. Public employees or professionals may have more frequent interactions with bureaucratic systems, whereas informal workers or farmers may experience exclusion from formal channels of communication or service delivery (Fairlie, 2004; Ni et al., 2022). These variations can lead to differences in perceived institutional responsiveness. Thus:

H6: Occupation is associated with external political efficacy.

Income

Income is both a direct and indirect predictor of political efficacy. Higher-income individuals typically have greater access to digital tools, better education, and more consistent experiences with public institutions (Kaguara & Wanjiru, 2012; Korupp, 2006; Spyer, 2017; Yu, 2006). Economic security may also enhance individuals' ability to engage with government systems confidently. Accordingly:

H7: Income is positively associated with external political efficacy.

Political Ideology

Political efficacy is often shaped by the alignment between an individual's ideological orientation and the perceived orientation of governing institutions. Individuals whose views align with those in power are more likely to perceive government as responsive, while those in opposition may feel alienated or ignored (Cho, 2010; Xenos et al., 2014). Therefore:

H8: Political ideology is associated with external political efficacy.

Method

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a survey design. The population for this research includes the 99,873 residents of Khon Kaen Municipality in Khon Kaen Province, Thailand. To obtain a sample size of 399 participants, we employed probability sampling with a multi-stage sampling technique.

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire divided into three sections. Section 1 included questions on demographic and socio-economic information, such as gender, age, occupation, education level, and political ideology. Section 2 contained questions about access to, skills in, usage of, and benefits from digital devices and technology. Section 3 involved questions about the respondents' perceptions of the municipality's responsiveness to citizens' needs. The questions in Sections 2 and 3 were primarily in a Likert rating scale format, using a six-point interval scale, except for the digital access items, which were rated on a binary scale (i.e., 0 = no access, 1 = access). Data were collected between June and July 2023. We assessed the content validity of the questionnaire using an item-objective congruence (IOC) analysis and tested its reliability using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficient was 0.77, indicating that the instrument is suitable for research purposes as it exceeds the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70.

The data analysis methods included descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to describe general information about the respondents. Percentage values were calculated to highlight characteristics of the respondents and their views on the digital divide and perceptions of government responsiveness of Khon Kaen Municipality. For analyzing relationships between variables, inferential statistics were applied in Stata, specifically using multiple linear regression analysis to examine the relationship between citizens' perceptions of government responsiveness of Khon Kaen Municipality and various independent variables (see Table 1). The population model is as follows:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 DD_i + \beta_2 Sex_i + \beta_3 Age_i + \beta_4 Sta_i + \beta_5 Edu_i + \beta_6 Occ_i + \beta_7 Inc_i + \beta_8 Con_i + e_i$$

where y_i = external political efficacy, DD_i = the digital divide, Sex_i = gender, Age_i = age, Sta_i = marital status, Edu_i = education level, Occ_i = occupation, Inc_i = income, Con_i = conservative political ideology, β_0 = constant, β_1 to β_8 = regression coefficients of the independent variables, and e_i = error term.

Table 1

Expected relationships between independent variables and external political efficacy.

Variable	Operationalization	Expected Relationship
<i>Dependent variable</i>		
External political efficacy (ID: EPE)	Respondents' perceived level of government responsiveness of Khon Kaen Municipality was measured using an index derived from three survey questions rated on a Likert scale. This measure included three questions: whether Khon Kaen Municipality provided opportunities for citizens to express opinions and give feedback on administration, whether citizens felt their opinions influenced municipal decisions and operations, and whether the services provided by the municipality met their needs.	N/A
<i>Independent variables</i>		
First-level digital divide (ID: Divide1)	Respondents' access to digital technology and internet connectivity was measured using a composite index derived from six survey items rated on a binary scale (0 = no access, 1 = access). The items assessed ownership of digital devices and availability of internet access. The scores were summed to produce an index ranging from 0 to 6, where higher values indicate greater digital access and correspondingly lower levels of individual-level digital disadvantage in terms of technological access.	+
Second-level digital divide	Respondents' digital usage and skills were measured using a composite index derived from four survey items rated on a six-point Likert scale. These items assessed the	+

Variable	Operationalization	Expected Relationship
(ID: Divide2)	frequency and ability of respondents to use digital technologies for communication, information seeking, and online services. The scores were averaged to create an index, where higher values indicate greater digital proficiency and more active engagement with digital technologies, reflecting lower levels of individual-level digital inequality in digital skills and usage.	
Third-level digital divide (ID: Divide3)	Respondents' perceived benefits from digital technology were measured using a composite index based on six Likert-scale survey items assessing the extent to which digital technologies improved access to information, communication, and daily activities. The scores were averaged to create an index, where higher values indicate greater realized benefits from digital engagement and correspondingly lower levels of individual-level digital disadvantage in digital outcomes.	+
<i>Control variables</i>		
Gender	Gender of respondents (nominal variable: male = 1, female = 0)	+/-
Age	Respondent's age (ordinal variable: 18 – 19 years old = 1, 20 – 29 years old = 2, 30 – 39 years old = 3, 40 – 49 years old = 4, 50 – 59 years old = 5, 60 years old and over = 6)	+/-
Marital status	Respondent's marital status (nominal variable: single = 1, married = 2, divorced = 3)	+/-
Education level	Respondent's level of education attainment (ordinal variable: lower than primary school = 1, primary school = 2, junior high school = 3, high school = 4, associate degree, vocational certificate/diploma = 5, bachelor's degree = 6, master's degree = 7, doctorate = 8, others = 9)	+
Occupation	Resident's occupation (nominal variable: government officer = 1, private employee = 2, general laborer = 3, business owner = 4, farmer = 5, student = 6, unemployed = 7, retiree = 8, others = 9)	+/-
Monthly income	Respondent's monthly income in baht (ordinal variable: less than 15,000 baht = 1, 15,000 – 30,000 baht = 2, 30,001 – 45,000 baht = 3, 45,001 – 60,000 baht = 4, 60,001 and over = 5)	+
Conservative political ideology	The political ideology of the political party chosen by the respondents in the 2019 parliamentary election (binary variable: conservative = 1, liberal and others = 0)	+/-

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The data analysis, based on a survey of 399 residents in Khon Kaen Municipality, Thailand, revealed several insights into the digital divide and external political efficacy. These findings were derived from both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The demographic analysis in Table 2 showed that the majority of respondents were female (215 individuals, or 53.9%). The most common age group was 20-29 years, comprising 117 respondents (29.3%), with 50.4% (201 respondents) being single. In terms of education, most respondents held a bachelor's degree or equivalent (211 respondents, or 52.9%), and the most common occupation was private-sector employee (83 respondents, or 20.8%). Additionally, 39.6% (158 respondents) reported an income below 15,000 baht. Politically, the majority of respondents identified with a liberal ideology, voting for opposition party members in the parliamentary elections, accounting for 80.2% (320 respondents) of the sample.

Table 2
Demographic and Socio-Economic Factors of the Respondents (n = 399)

Factors		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	184	46.1
	Female	215	53.9
Age	18 – 19 years old	26	6.5
	20 – 29 years old	117	29.3
	30 – 39 years old	83	20.8
	40 – 49 years old	84	21.1
	50 – 59 years old	48	12.0
	60 years old and over	41	10.3
Marital Status	Single	201	50.4
	Married	188	47.1
	Divorced	10	2.5
Education Level	Lower than primary school	6	1.5
	Primary school	18	4.5
	Junior high school	24	6.0

Factors		Frequency	Percent
Occupation	High school	54	13.5
	Associate degree, vocational certificate/diploma	55	13.8
	Bachelor's degree	211	52.9
	Master's degree	31	7.8
	Government officer	75	18.8
	Private employee	83	20.8
	General laborer	38	9.5
	Business owner	64	16.0
	Farmer	7	1.8
	Student	80	20.1
	Unemployed	21	5.3
	Retiree	26	6.5
	Others	5	1.3
Monthly Income	Less than 15,000 baht	158	39.6
	15,000 – 30,000 baht	154	38.6
	30,001 – 45,000 baht	61	15.3
	45,001 – 60,000 baht	18	4.5
	60,001 and over	8	2.0
Political Ideology	Conservative	72	18.0
	Liberal	320	80.2
	Others	7	1.8

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the independent and dependent variables. As for the independent variables, the digital divide in Khon Kaen Municipality was assessed across three levels. Access to digital technology (Divide1), measured on a 0–6 scale, evaluated access to resources such as computers, smartphones, other digital devices, home internet, mobile internet, and social media accounts. The average summative index of access was 4.330 (SD=1.505), indicating high digital access. This index reflects the cumulative level of digital access resources available to each respondent. Digital technology usage (Divide2), measured on a 1–6 scale, assessed internet use for work, entertainment, and communication, with an average of 5.248 (SD=1.147), reflecting high daily usage. Benefits from digital technology (Divide3), also on a 1–6 scale, examined the importance of the internet for personal life, work, communication, skill development, and reliance on the internet, yielding an average of 4.892 (SD=1.178), showing notable benefits. As for the dependent variable, the level of external political efficacy (ID: EPE) was also measured on a 1–6 scale, where one indicated the lowest level of external political efficacy and six indicated the highest. The study found an average external political efficacy level of 3.199, with a standard deviation of 1.268, indicating that residents generally perceive the external political efficacy of Khon Kaen Municipality as relatively low.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of the Independent and Dependent Variables

Index	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Divide1	399	0	6.000	4.330	1.505
Divide2	399	1.000	6.000	5.248	1.147
Divide3	399	1.000	6.000	4.892	1.178
EPE	399	1.000	6.000	3.199	1.268

Inferential Statistics

The multiple regression analysis for this study was divided into three models, each using one of the three levels of the digital divide to examine the relationship with external political efficacy (see Table 4). Model 1 used access level (ID: Divide1) as the independent variable; Model 2 used usage level (ID: Divide2); and Model 3 used benefit level (ID: Divide3). All three models included seven control variables: gender, age, marital status, education level, occupation, income, and political ideology.

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was examined to check for multicollinearity among the independent variables. The VIF values for this analysis were all below 2, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues and confirming the accuracy and stability of the regression models. This high level of independence among variables ensures the reliability and validity of the findings.

Table 4
Estimation Results of the Linear Regression Models Showing the Determinants of External Political Efficacy

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Divide1	0.133	(0.053)	*						
Divide2				0.197	(0.073)	**			
Divide3							0.110	(0.062)	
Gender	-0.027	(0.123)		0.000	(0.123)		0.002	(0.123)	
Age	-0.168	(0.064)	**	-0.155	(0.064)	*	-0.157	(0.065)	*
Status									
Married	0.060	(0.167)		0.077	(0.167)		0.065	(0.168)	
Divorced	-0.226	(0.410)		-0.267	(0.410)		-0.263	(0.412)	
Education	-0.101	(0.052)		-0.097	(0.052)		-0.090	(0.052)	
Occupation									
Private employee	-0.556	(0.213)	**	-0.554	(0.212)	**	-0.511	(0.214)	*
General laborer	-0.813	(0.293)	**	-0.798	(0.293)	**	-0.886	(0.293)	**
Business owner	-0.377	(0.228)		-0.404	(0.223)		-0.473	(0.222)	*
Farmer	-1.284	(0.513)	*	-1.295	(0.510)	*	-1.467	(0.507)	**
Student	-0.650	(0.256)	*	-0.564	(0.254)	*	-0.544	(0.257)	*
Unemployed	-0.491	(0.342)		-0.366	(0.351)		-0.484	(0.350)	
Retiree	-1.072	(0.319)	**	-0.980	(0.328)	**	-1.202	(0.312)	**
Others	-1.789	(0.564)	**	-1.681	(0.564)	**	-1.738	(0.567)	**
Income	-0.112	(0.093)		-0.110	(0.093)		-0.074	(0.092)	
Conservative	0.588	(0.190)	**	0.626	(0.191)	**	0.611	(0.193)	**
Adjusted R ²	0.119			0.122			0.112		

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

In Model 1, which examined the relationship between access to digital technology (ID: Divide1) and external political efficacy, the findings indicated that access was positively associated with external political efficacy ($\beta = 0.133$, $p = 0.013$). This relationship suggested that as citizens' access to digital technology increased, their perception of municipal responsiveness also increased. Age showed a negative relationship with external political efficacy ($\beta = -0.168$, $p = 0.009$), indicating that older citizens tended to perceive less responsiveness from the municipality. Regarding occupation, with government officers as the reference group, the findings revealed that several occupational groups perceived lower responsiveness than government officers, including private-sector employees ($\beta = -0.556$, $p = 0.009$), general laborers ($\beta = -0.813$, $p = 0.006$), farmers ($\beta = -1.284$, $p = 0.013$), students ($\beta = -0.650$, $p = 0.011$), retirees ($\beta = -1.072$, $p = 0.001$), and other occupations ($\beta = -1.789$, $p = 0.002$). Conservative political ideology was positively associated with external political efficacy ($\beta = 0.588$, $p = 0.002$), indicating that individuals with conservative political views tended to perceive higher responsiveness from Khon Kaen Municipality compared to those with liberal ideologies.

The findings of Model 2 showed a positive association between digital technology usage (ID: Divide2) and external political efficacy ($\beta = 0.197$, $p = 0.007$). This relationship suggested that increased daily use of digital technology was associated with higher perceived responsiveness from the municipality. Age also showed a negative relationship with perceptions of responsiveness ($\beta = -0.155$, $p = 0.016$), indicating that older citizens perceived less responsiveness from the municipality. Regarding occupation, with government officers as the reference group, private employees ($\beta = -0.554$, $p = 0.009$), general laborers ($\beta = -0.798$, $p = 0.007$), farmers ($\beta = -1.295$, $p = 0.012$), students ($\beta = -0.564$, $p = 0.027$), retirees ($\beta = -0.980$, $p = 0.003$), and other occupations ($\beta = -1.681$, $p = 0.003$) all reported lower levels of perceived responsiveness. Conservative political ideology was positively associated with perceptions of municipal responsiveness ($\beta = 0.626$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that conservative citizens tended to perceive the municipality as more responsive compared to liberal citizens.

In Model 3, which examined the relationship between benefits derived from digital technology (ID: Divide3) and external political efficacy, the perceived benefits of digital technology showed a positive but statistically non-significant association with external political efficacy ($\beta = 0.110$, $p > .05$). Thus, although citizens who reported greater benefits from digital engagement tended to perceive somewhat higher levels of municipal responsiveness, the relationship did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, and H1.3 was not supported. Age again showed a negative association with external political efficacy ($\beta = -0.157$, $p = 0.015$), suggesting that older citizens perceived less responsiveness. In terms of occupation, with government officers as the reference group, the findings showed lower perceptions of responsiveness among private

employees ($\beta = -0.511, p = 0.017$), general laborers ($\beta = -0.886, p = 0.003$), business owners ($\beta = -0.473, p = 0.034$), farmers ($\beta = -1.467, p = 0.004$), students ($\beta = -0.544, p = 0.035$), retirees ($\beta = -1.202, p < 0.001$), and other occupations ($\beta = -1.738, p = 0.002$). Conservative political ideology was positively associated with external political efficacy ($\beta = 0.611, p = 0.002$), indicating that conservative citizens perceived higher responsiveness from the municipality compared to those with liberal views.

In summary, the regression results provide partial support for the study's central hypothesis (H1): digital access (H1.1) and digital usage (H1.2) are positively and significantly associated with external political efficacy, whereas the perceived benefits of digital engagement (H1.3) show a positive but statistically non-significant association.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigates how digital inequalities influence perceptions of government responsiveness by examining the relationship between the digital divide and external political efficacy in Khon Kaen Municipality, Thailand. Drawing on van Dijk's (2018) multidimensional framework (comprising digital access, usage, and perceived benefits), it positions digital exclusion not only as a technological or socioeconomic concern but as a governance issue affecting democratic legitimacy, service equity, and citizen–state relations.

Findings show that both digital access and usage are positively and significantly associated with external political efficacy, supporting prior research that links digital engagement with citizens' perceived ability to influence government (Boulianne et al., 2023; Wagner et al., 2017). These results suggest that digital tools, when broadly accessible and actively used, enhance perceived institutional responsiveness through both citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-state interaction. Several mechanisms explain this relationship. Digital access increases exposure to government information and services, enhancing transparency (Selvakumar et al., 2025; Valle-Cruz et al., 2015). Online platforms reduce communication barriers and simplify feedback processes, lowering administrative burdens (Shi & Wang, 2025; Vlad et al., 2023). Digital use also fosters civic networks that support co-production and collective political agency (Kavanaugh et al., 2008; Quynh & Thanh, 2025). In turn, these experiences reinforce perceptions of equity and responsiveness, which are core components of external political efficacy (Epstein et al., 2023; Li & Gu, 2026). However, while perceived benefits from digital engagement showed a positive association with efficacy, the relationship was not statistically significant. This implies that access and usage may promote procedural engagement, but perceptions of tangible benefits depend on contextual factors such as service quality and institutional trust (Bannister & Connolly, 2012; Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012).

Age negatively predicted political efficacy, consistent with prior studies showing that younger individuals are more proficient in using digital platforms for civic engagement (Mossberger et al., 2008; Pukdeewut & Setthasuravich, 2024). Older adults facing digital exclusion may perceive governments as less responsive, particularly without inclusive design and support mechanisms. Occupational differences also matter: individuals in informal sectors or low-bureaucracy roles reported lower efficacy, highlighting the importance of tailoring digital public services to varied occupational realities (Ni et al., 2022). Political ideology significantly shaped perceived responsiveness, with conservatives reporting higher external political efficacy. This aligns with findings that citizens ideologically aligned with governing authorities tend to view institutions more favorably (Cho, 2010; Xenos et al., 2014). In Thailand's politicized municipal context, such patterns suggest that responsiveness may be interpreted through partisan lenses. By integrating van Dijk's framework into a governance lens, this study highlights how digital inequality functions as a determinant of institutional trust and administrative legitimacy. It shows that external political efficacy is not merely a psychological trait, but a governance outcome shaped by digital access, usage, and the broader socio-political context.

This study presents key policy implications for promoting digital inclusion and enhancing democratic legitimacy through external political efficacy. First, the strong link between digital access, usage, and perceived government responsiveness highlights the need for a capability-based approach to digital equity. Municipalities should go beyond infrastructure by investing in digital literacy, especially for older adults, informal workers, and marginalized populations. Outreach programs, digital support centers, and intergenerational training can help translate access into meaningful engagement. Second, disparities in efficacy across occupations point to the need

for differentiated service design. Citizens engage with government based on their social and economic roles. To better include underrepresented groups, such as farmers, laborers, and retirees, public agencies should develop hybrid (online/offline) service models, community liaisons, and civic participation programs via local networks and civil society groups. Third, political ideology influences perceptions of responsiveness, with citizens aligned with ruling authorities perceiving greater efficacy. This underscores the importance of neutrality, transparency, and inclusive participation in digital governance to reduce ideological bias and strengthen trust. External political efficacy should be seen not just as an attitudinal measure but as a governance outcome. Digital reforms must be paired with accountability tools such as citizen feedback, performance audits, and user scorecards to ensure inclusive and responsive public service.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, as it captures relationships at a single point in time. Future research should employ longitudinal or panel data to examine how changes in digital access, skills, and usage influence political efficacy over time. Second, the study focuses on Khon Kaen Municipality, which may limit statistical generalizability. However, Khon Kaen represents one of Thailand's Smart City pilot municipalities and operates within the same national digital policy framework as other local governments. As such, the findings offer analytical insights into how digital inequalities may shape citizen–government relations in municipalities undergoing similar digital transformation. Future studies should conduct comparative analyses across multiple cities and regions to assess variation across different socio-economic and digital development contexts. Third, the digital divide was measured using individual-level composite indices rather than relative inequality measures comparing individuals to population benchmarks. While this operationalization is consistent with multidimensional digital divide theory and prior empirical research, future studies may incorporate comparative or distribution-based indicators to examine structural digital inequality more directly. Finally, although this study is guided by van Dijk's (2018) multidimensional digital divide framework, the survey-based approach may not fully capture citizens' lived experiences and everyday interactions with digital government. Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches, such as interviews, focus groups, or digital ethnography, could provide deeper understanding of how digital inequalities influence trust, satisfaction, and citizen engagement in governance processes.

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From 'Warm' to 'Cold': Political Relations between India and Burma, 1948-1988

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India and Burma formally established diplomatic relations in 1948, a milestone that opened a new chapter in the history of the two neighbouring states. Between 1948 and 1962, bilateral ties were generally characterised as 'warm': Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu, in particular, built a working partnership grounded in post-colonial solidarity, non-alignment, and a shared commitment to independent national development. General Ne Win's military coup of 1962, however, proved a decisive turning point, setting the relationship on a markedly different trajectory. Over the next quarter-century, from 1962 to 1988, the earlier pattern of engagement largely reversed. Burma's transition from civilian to military rule in 1962 inaugurated a long decline in relations with India, which grew progressively cooler and more strained as the years passed. During this later period, bilateral engagement was confined almost entirely to the political and diplomatic sphere, with other dimensions of the relationship remaining marginal. This article traces the fluctuating course of India–Burma political relations across the first four decades of Burmese independence, examining the shift from warm friendship to a colder, more distant footing.

Keywords: India-Burma relations; 'warmth' and 'coldness'; diplomatic history; Cold War; 1948-1988

India and Burma are neighbouring states whose ties extend deep into the past. Indian influence had already left its mark on Burmese trade, politics, religion, and culture by antiquity. After unifying the country and founding the Pagan dynasty in 1044, King Anawrahta established Theravada Buddhism as Burma's principal religion. Sanskrit and Pali, both of Indian origin, subsequently entered the Burmese lexicon alongside this faith: the former was applied to secular authority and kingship, the latter to the transcription of Buddhist scripture. Under British colonial expansion, India and Burma came to form part of a single imperial structure, with Britain annexing Burma to British India in 1886 and placing it under Indian administration (Hughes, 2013, 251). Throughout the period in which Burma remained a province of British India (1886–1937), colonial policy encouraged substantial Indian migration into the territory. Desai (1954) records that, a decade after annexation, some 18,000 Indian soldiers were garrisoned in the 'Burman Province' (Desai, 1954, 18), while by 1861 Rangoon's police force was composed entirely of Indians. By 1931, the Indian-origin population had reached over one million of Burma's fourteen million inhabitants, constituting roughly half of Rangoon's population (Egretreau, 2008, 938). At independence on 4 January 1948, Burma was home to an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 Indians, and this substantial community continued thereafter to sustain economic, cultural, and religious exchange between the two nations.

Following Burma's administrative separation from India in 1937, the leaders of the two national liberation movements offered one another support in their respective struggles against British rule. Burmese leaders monitored India's independence movement closely, particularly during the final years before 1947, and the parallel political standing of the two men who would head their countries' first governments – Aung San as Vice-Chairman of Burma's Executive Council and Jawaharlal Nehru in the equivalent Indian post – reinforced this sense of shared purpose. When Aung San and six colleagues on the Executive Council were assassinated on 19 July 1947, Nehru sent his condolences, declaring that 'Burma and Asia have lost one of their courageous

and visionary sons' and assuring the Burmese people that India would 'stand with them in the difficult days ahead' (Zaw et al., 2001, 88). Geography, culture, religion, shared scripts, and this common colonial history thus combined to shape the modern India–Burma relationship.

India and Burma formally established diplomatic relations in 1948, immediately following Burmese independence, on foundations that combined geopolitical, cultural, and historical considerations with long-standing traditional ties and the place each country occupied in the other's foreign policy. Between 1948 and 1962, the relationship was, on the whole, friendly and cordial. General Ne Win's coup of March 1962, however, which inaugurated a period of sustained military rule, set in motion a cooling and increasingly tense relationship that persisted for decades thereafter.

Method

This study draws on established historical-science methods, principally the historical and logical approaches. The historical method is used to reconstruct, in chronological sequence, the course of India–Burma political relations between 1948 and 1988 and to draw out its specific implications. The logical method, applied to the available source material, underpins the analysis of the relationship's fluctuations across this period, the dynamics and evolution of key events, and the factors that shaped bilateral ties. These are supplemented by analysis, synthesis, comparison, contrast, statistical treatment, and historical periodisation, deployed together to arrive at an accurate assessment of the subject.

The article's central hypothesis is that political relations between India and Burma shifted from warmth (1948–1962) to coolness (1962–1988) chiefly because of changes in Burma's domestic and foreign policy following the 1962 coup, compounded by regional and international upheavals during the Cold War that eroded the cooperative foundation laid in the early post-independence years. This overarching hypothesis is verifiable against historical sources, diplomatic records, and the declared policies of both governments, and it is supported by three subsidiary propositions. First, on Burma's domestic trajectory: the decline in political relations after 1962 stemmed primarily from the Ne Win government's implementation of the Burmese Way to Socialism, its pursuit of a neutral stance, and its restriction of external contact and cooperation with India. Second, on divergent political systems: the widening gap between India's parliamentary democracy and Burma's single-party military regime eroded political trust and narrowed the space for bilateral cooperation. Third, on the regional balance of power: the Sino-Indian rivalry following the 1962 border war, together with shifting regional security structures, exerted a significant influence on Burmese foreign policy, encouraging Rangoon to keep its distance from New Delhi.

This article sets out to clarify the formation, development, and transformation of India–Burma political relations between 1948 and 1988, to analyse the factors behind the shift from a warm, cooperative phase to a more distant one, and thereby to assess the character, nature, and impact of this relationship on the foreign policies of both states and on the wider South Asia–Southeast Asia regional context during the Cold War. Its scope is confined to the political dimension of the bilateral relationship. Temporally, the study begins in 1948, when the two countries established formal diplomatic relations following independence, and concludes in 1988, the year of Burma's political crisis, which opened a new phase in the country's domestic and foreign policy. Spatially, the research concentrates on bilateral ties between India and Burma, while taking into account such regional and international factors as the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the influence of major powers, to the extent necessary to illuminate the formation, development, and decline of the relationship.

Theoretical Framework

The article draws on three strands of international relations theory – idealism, realism, and constructivism – to analyse and explain the shift from warm, cooperative relations to a period of coolness between India and Burma across 1948–1988. Idealism holds that state behaviour is shaped not only by power and material interest but also by conceptions of peace, independence, sovereignty, cooperation, and international order (Weber, 2005). Applied to India and Burma, shared colonial experience, a common commitment to safeguarding national independence, and a mutual perception of pursuing a relatively

autonomous foreign policy during the Cold War together furnished a shared foundation of values that built trust and encouraged political cooperation between 1948 and 1962. On this reading, the 'warmth' of the relationship reflected not merely overlapping geopolitical interests but an ideological and perceptual affinity between the two leaderships, particularly under Nehru and U Nu. After 1962, however, the change of regime and the military government's adoption of the Burmese Way to Socialism, together with a turn towards foreign-policy isolation, eroded this ideological and perceptual affinity and thereby undermined trust, contact, and political cooperation. Idealism thus helps to explain the shift from 'warmth' to 'coldness' as a process in which shared values, norms, and perceptions progressively diminished.

Realism, by contrast, holds that states pursue power and, operating within an 'anarchic' international system, are compelled towards a strategy of 'self-help', competing with one another to secure their own survival; sustained cooperation is consequently regarded as unlikely (Kauppi & Viotti, 2019). This framework is used here to examine the part played by national interest, security, power, and the wider geopolitical environment in the transformation of India–Burma relations over the period. Because states in an anarchic system consistently prioritise their survival, security, and national interest, the degree of cooperation or competition between any two states depends largely on how far their respective interests align. The compatibility of Indian and Burmese interests, together with each state's need to preserve strategic autonomy, underpinned the warm political relationship of 1948–1962. Following the 1962 coup, the change of regime in Burma prompted a realignment of Rangoon's priorities around interest and security: the Ne Win government stressed sovereignty, self-reliance, and restricted external engagement while pursuing a more isolationist foreign policy, altering the degree to which Burmese and Indian interests coincided. The relationship was further shaped by the wider contest for power in Asia, by Sino-Burmese relations, by border-security questions, and by the broader upheavals of the Cold War, all of which reshaped both states' strategic calculations and narrowed the scope for bilateral political cooperation. Realism thus attributes the shift from 'warm' to 'cold' relations to changes in national interest, security priorities, and the geopolitical environment, and treats bilateral relations not as static but as continually adjusted by states in response to a changing strategic environment and the imperative to protect their interests.

Constructivism, finally, holds that identity, norms, beliefs, and values are themselves structural forces that exert a powerful influence on political and social conduct, and it accords normative structures an importance equal to, if not greater than, that of material structures. For constructivists, each state possesses a national identity – a particular way of perceiving itself – and this identity helps to define the goals it pursues, whether in security, foreign policy, or economic development (Kauppi & Viotti, 2019). In the case of India and Burma between 1948 and 1962, a shared colonial experience and their common status as newly independent Asian states fostered a post-colonial identity built around independence, sovereignty, peace, anti-colonialism, and a preference for autonomy in foreign affairs. This convergence of identity, norms, and perception facilitated political trust and, in turn, a friendly and warm relationship. The 1962 coup marked a decisive break: the change of regime and the adoption of the Burmese Way to Socialism shifted Burma's ideological outlook, political identity, and conception of sovereignty, intervention, and external relations, as the country placed growing emphasis on self-reliance and the restriction of outside influence while pursuing a more isolated foreign policy. These changes altered not only Burma's external conduct but also the shared perceptions and norms that had previously sustained its closeness to India. From a constructivist standpoint, then, the shift from 'warm' to 'cold' relations can be understood as a transformation in identity, perception, and norms within the bilateral relationship: as each state's understanding of itself, of the other, and of the international environment changed, their interests and foreign policies were redefined, with corresponding effects on trust and the level of cooperation. Constructivism therefore helps to explain not only the behavioural changes in Indian and Burmese foreign policy but also the deeper conceptual shifts underlying the evolution of their political relationship.

The 'Warmth' of Relations between India and Burma, 1948–1962

India and Burma formally established diplomatic relations on 4 January 1948, opening a new era in bilateral ties (Pradhan, 1981, 77). India marked Burma's Independence Day with congratulations that reflected the spirit of neighbourly solidarity, expressed in the words of Prime Minister Nehru: 'In the past and in the future, the people of India will stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Burma, and whether in good

fortune or misfortune, we will always share together. This is a great and solemn day not only for Burma but also for India and all of Asia' (Zaw et al., 2001, 89). The relationship was reinforced further by India's assistance in drafting foundational documents for the fledgling U Nu government, most notably the Constitution: at U Nu's invitation, the eminent Indian constitutional expert B. N. Rau travelled to Burma in 1948 to assist in this work (Gundevia, 1984, 15).

From 1948 onwards, the Burmese government introduced a series of measures intended to increase the economic benefits accruing to its own citizens and to curtail the rights of foreigners – measures that fell disproportionately on Indians, who formed the largest foreign-origin community in post-independence Burma. The Land Alienation Act, for instance, barred non-Burmese residents from purchasing land, while the Land Nationalization Bill, passed on 11 October 1949, prohibited non-farming citizens from holding more than fifty acres (roughly twenty hectares) and provoked fierce opposition from the Indian moneylenders, or Chettiyars, who controlled extensive landholdings in Burma (Hughes, 2013, 251). Nehru, mindful of relations between the two countries, declined to support the Chettiyars' campaign, maintaining that although the Bill affected Indians in Burma severely, it was not discriminatory in intent. The close personal friendship between Nehru and U Nu did much to prevent such episodes from escalating into open confrontation.

Independence brought Burma serious difficulties, not least entrenched ethnic conflict, including the Karen uprising and the activity of other rebel forces, and the new Prime Minister, U Nu (1948–1962), found himself in urgent need of assistance from India, the Commonwealth, and the United States. At the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference held in Ceylon in January 1950, India joined other member states in agreeing a loan of six million pounds to Burma, of which India itself provided one million (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1951b, 4), and in 1958 the Indian government approved a further \$46 million loan to the U Nu government (Gottschlich, 2015, 142). Such measures reflected a peaceful, friendly, and unconditional Indian foreign policy towards Burma. Addressing parliament on 17 March 1950, Nehru insisted that India's assistance did not amount to interference in its neighbour's internal affairs: 'that is not our purpose and we do not use any means to interfere in other countries, but whenever possible, we will be ready to help them without any conditions attached to intervention' (Nehru, 1961, 292–293).

India's engagement extended beyond addressing the immediate security and financial crisis: it also sought to establish a durable foundation for the long-term relationship, through regular consultation, the development of cooperative mechanisms, and the exchange of views on questions of world peace and international relations. This friendly, warm relationship in turn contributed to the growth of the Non-Aligned Movement, which campaigned for peace and national independence and against imperialist and colonial domination; both countries participated actively in the 1955 Bandung Conference and in the Non-Aligned Movement more broadly.

Barely three years after the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Burmese Minister of External Affairs, Sao Hkun Hkio, and the Indian Ambassador to Burma, M. A. Rauf, signed the Treaty of Friendship in Rangoon on 7 July 1951 (Pradhan, 1981, 81). The treaty proclaimed that 'peace and friendship between the two countries will be eternal and unchanging' and that 'the two countries will forever strive to strengthen and further develop the existing sincere relationship between their people', while further providing that 'the two countries agree that their representatives should meet regularly to exchange views on matters of mutual interest and consider ways and means for mutual cooperation between the two countries on these matters' (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1951a). This marked a significant milestone in the close, friendly relationship between the two states and stands, from an idealist perspective, as a representative case study: the treaty embodies a shared commitment to peace, to respect for independence and sovereignty, to the promotion of friendly relations, to the building of trust between two newly independent nations, and to the prioritisation of cooperation over competition.

Following the signing of the Treaty, diplomatic delegations travelled frequently between the two countries, drawing bilateral relations still closer. Nehru held the friendship in high regard, describing Burma as

a neighbour 'dear to us' and 'near to us' (Nehru, 1961, 294), and remarking on another occasion that 'we are in frequent touch with the Government of Burma on many matters. We are not only friendly in the normal sense of the word, but if I may say somewhat more friendly' (Pradhan, 1981, 84). In 1949 and again in 1958, India supplied military assistance, training, logistical support, and arms transfers that helped U Nu's democratic government withstand severe communist and ethnic insurgencies, although no formal deployment of Indian troops was ever authorised. This political, economic, and military assistance contributed materially to Burma's post-independence peace and socio-political stability, while the close political and diplomatic ties between the two states created favourable conditions for the Indian community in Burma to expand its role as entrepreneurs, investors, and workers across various sectors of the economy – a further important strand binding the two peoples together.

The Friendship Treaty consolidated India's position as Burma's closest political partner: the two countries went on to deepen political consultation and economic cooperation, address the position of Indians resident in Burma, and coordinate within international forums, sustaining India's considerable influence over its eastern neighbour throughout the 1950s. Although not directed against any third party, the Treaty carried significant strategic implications for both China and Pakistan, particularly against the backdrop of the Cold War and the shifting balance of power across South Asia and Southeast Asia. For China, it helped slow the expansion of Chinese influence in Burma during the early 1950s and encouraged Beijing to adopt a more flexible stance towards Rangoon – notably, the two countries' relationship during this decade came to be described as 'Pauk-Phaw', meaning 'blood brothers' in the Myanmar language. For Pakistan, a state of comparable strategic weight to India and China, the Treaty reflected New Delhi's broader effort to construct a 'friendly neighbourhood ring' around the subcontinent, and India's deepening ties with Burma reinforced Pakistan's search for security partners beyond the region as a counterweight to New Delhi, not least given China's own close relationship with Pakistan, India's principal adversary (Larik et al., 2022, 18). Pakistan's enduring strategic attractiveness to the major powers stems from its geography: it borders India, China, Afghanistan, and Iran to its east, northwest, west, and southwest respectively, fronts the Indian Ocean to the south, and links South, West, and Central Asia with China's western regions (Rahman et al., 2022, 124).

Following the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949), a Kuomintang faction retreated into Burmese territory pursued by units of the Chinese army, leaving the Burmese government deeply concerned at this foreign military presence within its borders. Having failed in 1953 to persuade the United States to press China into withdrawing its forces from north-eastern Burma, Rangoon brought the matter before the United Nations, where India lent its support to a resolution calling for disarmament and the evacuation of foreign troops from Burmese soil. During the ensuing UN debate on 5 November 1953, India's representative, V. K. Krishna Menon, warned that 'what harms Burma also harms us (India). We do not have a military alliance, but Burma is closely connected to us, and of course the situation in Burma is of great concern to us' (Zaw et al., 2001, 90).

When Chinese troops again crossed into Burmese territory in 1956, U Nu turned once more to India for support, and, through Nehru's mediation, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai made his first visit to Burma and agreed to discuss the border question directly with U Nu (Mohan, 2013, 6). U Nu and Nehru, moreover, shared broadly similar views on world affairs and were both committed advocates of Asian solidarity, and both countries pursued a 'non-aligned' stance in international relations, frequently supporting one another at the United Nations and other international gatherings. Burma aligned with India's position on China, for instance, supporting India's proposal in September 1950 to admit China to the United Nations, while India joined Burma in January 1951 in voting against the US resolution branding China an aggressor on the Korean peninsula (Gupta, 2013, 85) – the only two states outside the socialist bloc to do so, and a vivid illustration of the closeness between them during this decade.

As tensions along the Sino-Indian border intensified at the start of the 1960s, China moved to strengthen its ties with Burma, with which it had held formal diplomatic relations since June 1950. On 28 January 1960, the two countries signed the Friendly Agreement on the Question of the Burma–China Boundary and the associated Boundary Treaty, committing themselves to mutual recognition of sovereignty, the peaceful

resolution of disputes, abstention from any military alliance directed against the other, and cooperative economic and cultural development (Steinberg & Fan, 2012, 64). This non-aggression pact placed New Delhi at a considerable disadvantage, and Burma's subsequent neutrality during the 1962 Sino-Indian border war further eroded what had previously been a friendly relationship with India. China, for its part, extended its first aid package to Burma during this period, began purchasing Burmese rice above market prices, and discussed facilitating the transport of goods from Yunnan through Burmese territory. It was against this backdrop that General Ne Win seized power in a military coup on 2 March 1962, setting India–Burma relations on a markedly different course.

The India–Burma relationship of 1948–1962 thus rested on a solid foundation: close geographical, historical, and cultural ties; Burma's importance to India's own development; and the close personal friendship between Nehru and U Nu. This friendship, combined with Burma's strategic significance for India, fostered a moderate and tolerant approach to issues bearing directly on both countries. Although the rise of Burmese nationalism after independence carried the potential to strain the relationship, Burma's resources and strategic position remained sufficiently important to Indian policymakers that Nehru recognised the need for patience and understanding in cultivating a long-term partnership with his eastern neighbour. In this early period, India–Burma relations centred primarily on political and diplomatic matters, with bilateral trade cooperation playing a comparatively minor role; nevertheless, the relationship established during these years laid the groundwork for the more comprehensive cooperation of subsequent decades.

India–Burma Political Relations, 1962–1988: 'Cold and Tense'

Where 1948–1962 had been marked by friendly, neighbourly relations, the following quarter-century, 1962–1988, saw those ties decline almost to the point of freezing altogether. General Ne Win's coup of March 1962 marked the decisive turning point, ushering in a period of military rule and bringing Burmese democracy to a close after just fourteen years. Having seized power, Ne Win concentrated all authority in his own hands and subjected Burma's political, social, economic, and cultural life to strict military control (Clapp, 2007, 6). The coup drove many former democratic leaders, including U Nu himself, into exile in India, where Nehru welcomed U Nu warmly and permitted his family to remain without regard to any reaction this might provoke from the Ne Win government. India, along with numerous other states, voiced its opposition to the establishment of military rule in Burma.

Once in power, Ne Win pursued a series of policies damaging to Burma–India relations. On 30 April 1962, the Revolutionary Council announced the Burmese Revolutionary Programme on the Path to Socialism, setting out the new regime's development goals and asserting that it 'does not serve the interests of any group, organization, class, or party, but rather aims for an economy whose sole objective is to satisfy the highest material, spiritual, and cultural needs of the entire nation' (Vu, 2005, 462). The Programme envisaged a multi-sector economy comprising state, cooperative, and private components, with the state sector accorded a foundational role, the cooperative sector given support, and the private sector permitted only within strict limits. To this end, the Ne Win government ordered the expulsion of the foreign community, including Indians and Chinese, so as to eliminate rapidly the role of Indian and Chinese business interests and to establish state socialism as the sole route to Burmese economic independence. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of Indians left Burma during the 1960s and 1970s, with roughly 100,000 departing in 1964 alone (Routray, 2011, 301), a development that further deepened the antagonism between India's civilian, democratic government and Burma's military, authoritarian one.

Between 1962 and 1972, the Ne Win government focused its attention on balancing relations among the three major powers – the United States, the Soviet Union, and China – and paid little heed to India, which, despite its status as a neighbouring power of international standing, featured only marginally in Burmese foreign policy. Rangoon pursued instead a policy of passive neutrality that minimised contact with all states other than China, culminating in its withdrawal from the Non-Aligned Movement at the 1979 Havana summit, a move driven by fear that continued membership would displease Beijing and interpreted as an attempt to preserve good relations with China at a time when the Movement was drawing closer to the Soviet Union amid strained

Sino-Soviet relations (Selth, 1996, 221). India responded with concern, expressing the hope that Burma would rejoin the Non-Aligned Movement (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1980, 8).

From the moment he took power, Ne Win – a committed nationalist deeply suspicious of foreign influence – set about eliminating foreign economic, political, and cultural presence from Burma under the banner of the Burmese Way to Socialism, ordering an end to all ongoing foreign programmes and abolishing foreign private ownership in banking, commerce, and industry. Emphasising self-reliance and declining to play an active role in international affairs, his government pursued a policy of passive neutrality that minimised Burma's contact with the wider world throughout his tenure, and his domestic and foreign policies together exerted a consistently negative effect on relations with India, marking the gradual transformation of the bilateral relationship from the warmth of the U Nu years into a cold and underdeveloped one.

When the Sino-Indian border war broke out in October 1962, Burma adopted a position of neutrality that Indian officials interpreted as tantamount to a pro-Chinese stance (Zaw et al., 2001, 91). Taken together, Ne Win's growing alignment with China, the internal transformation of the military regime, the adoption of the Burmese Way to Socialism, and Burma's neutrality during the border war combined to send India–Burma relations into steady decline. Of the three major powers, Burma maintained by far its closest relationship with China, and the Burmese military government accordingly grew increasingly reliant on, and influenced by, Beijing's pragmatic foreign policy.

In 1964, the Burmese military government launched a programme of nationalisation that struck hard at Indian businesspeople, who at the time controlled as much as sixty per cent of Burmese trade (Dam, 2015, 18), forcing the majority of Indian and Pakistani residents to emigrate, often stripped of their possessions, and further souring relations between the two governments. From the end of 1964, however, ties began to normalise as the two sides held a series of meetings and agreed on a peaceful resolution. High-level visits between the two countries also resumed: at the invitation of the President of India, Ne Win paid an official visit to India in February 1965, during which the two sides affirmed a shared commitment to non-alignment (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1966, 1), declaring in their Joint Statement that 'a common position on international issues stemming from the pursuit of a non-aligned policy has helped to develop close and good neighbourly relations between the two countries' (Zaw et al., 2001, 92). The visit fostered a greater mutual understanding of the difficulties facing each country, a result made possible by both governments' shared pursuit of non-alignment as a means of repairing their previously strained relationship.

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi paid a reciprocal visit to Burma in March 1969 (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1970, 22), an occasion that allowed both governments to exchange and publicly set out their views on bilateral and international questions. Together, Ne Win's 1965 visit to India and Gandhi's 1969 visit to Burma helped normalise and sustain political and diplomatic relations through the 1970s, following the strain and stagnation of the early 1960s. Throughout Ne Win's rule (1962–1988), high-level exchanges between the two countries continued, but remained largely formal and diplomatic; India maintained a broadly neutral stance and showed limited interest in its Burmese neighbour, its leaders continuing to prioritise a rhetorical commitment to 'democratic values' while treating 'security concerns' as a secondary consideration in policy towards Burma (Singh, 2007, 1).

From the mid-1980s, a broader trend towards peace and dialogue emerged across international relations generally and within Asia and Southeast Asia in particular. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Burma in 1987 following a long period of frozen relations, and the two leaders used the occasion to discuss ways of further strengthening and expanding their countries' friendly ties in a spirit of mutual understanding. During the visit, Gandhi called at the Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's most sacred Buddhist site, and returned to the Burmese people the palm-leaf manuscripts of General Maha Bandula, which had been confiscated by the British and held at the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1988, 5) – a gesture that marked a notable shift in Indian foreign-policy thinking towards Burma.

Events in Burma the following year, however, drove India back towards the democratic, 'idealist' values that had traditionally informed its foreign policy. On 8 August 1988, thousands of students and other citizens took to the streets of Rangoon and other major cities to protest against government corruption, the suppression of democracy, and economic mismanagement – an episode known in Burmese history as the '8888' uprising. The military government's brutal suppression of the protests claimed the lives of thousands of Burmese students and civilians,¹ and the episode proved the final catalyst both for the founding of the National League for Democracy under Aung San Suu Kyi on 27 August 1988 and for the coup, led by Defence Minister General Saw Maung, that removed Ne Win's government on 18 September 1988. Saw Maung and his close associates thereupon established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), with Saw Maung as its chairman (Devi, 2014, 48).

The '8888' uprising triggered protests around the world and prompted the United Nations, the United States, and Western governments to impose an embargo and economic sanctions on Burma. The US, for example, enacted legislation barring investment in Burma and the import of Burmese goods, prohibited Burma's access to US financial services including dollar transactions, and barred Burmese military and government officials and their families from entering the United States and the European Union. Through their leading positions within international financial institutions, the US and its Western allies also blocked the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank from pursuing development programmes in Burma. The resulting isolation cut Burma off from crucial funding, as major donors curtailed or suspended support and development programmes were halted, leaving the country unable to draw on the World Bank, the IMF, the Asian Development Bank, or other international financial institutions.

Even before the '8888' uprising, Sino-Burmese relations had shown clear signs of improvement: during Ne Win's visit to China on 4 May 1985, Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping remarked that 'there are no major problems to be solved between China and Burma' (Steinberg & Fan, 2012, 139). Throughout the Ne Win era, far from opposing the Burmese military government, China actively supported and funded it, while Burma in turn allowed Chinese enterprises to operate across a range of economic, financial, and commercial sectors. After the 8888 crackdown, China was virtually alone among major powers in maintaining diplomatic relations with Rangoon and continuing to provide aid, while openly opposing Western interference in Burma's internal affairs. On 22 September 1988, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman expressed Beijing's deep concern at recent developments while stressing that 'China had firmly believed in and followed the five principles of peaceful coexistence; China would not interfere in the internal affairs of Burma and hoped that the Burmese government would resolve internal problems on its own in a sound way, avoid bloodshed, and restore normalcy as early as possible' (Myoe, 2011, 107).

During a visit to Thailand on 13 November 1988, Chinese Premier Li Peng set out Beijing's approach towards Burma in similar terms: 'China has consistently adhered to a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and Burma is no exception. Burma is a neighbouring country of China. We hope that the situation there can be stabilised. There exist trade relations between China and Burma, which have not been suspended' (Myoe, 2011, 107). The events of 1988 are widely regarded as marking a decisive shift in the bilateral relationship compared with what had gone before: bilateral trade between the two countries nonetheless still reached US\$1.5 billion (Selth, 1996, 214), and Chinese firms were given priority by SLORC in investment, equipment supply, production, and the provision of other services. In 1991, the two governments signed a bilateral agreement on economic and technical cooperation under which China extended a substantial aid package, directed mainly towards civil infrastructure such as bridges, roads, railways, and seaports (Selth, 1996, 214); China went on to provide further loans and aid and to forgive numerous debts, contributing some \$100 million in aid by 2005, while between 1991 and 2005 the Bank of China and the Export-Import Bank of China together extended credit exceeding \$1 billion (Hong, 2008, 5). Because Sino-Burmese rapprochement had

¹Myanmar government sources put the death toll at around 350, though other sources suggest it was considerably higher, running into the thousands. Bertil Lintner, for instance, estimates that some 3,000 protesters were shot dead in Rangoon and elsewhere following the military's intervention (see also Lintner, B. (2009). *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 44).

begun before 1988 and intensified considerably once international sanctions took effect, the new military government was able to withstand the isolation imposed by the US and its Western allies, and the steadily strengthening relationship between Burma and China came correspondingly at the expense of Burma's ties with India.

In the aftermath of the 1988 protests, India emerged as one of the most vocal critics of the Burmese military regime in international forums, declaring its support for the pro-democracy movement and praising the 'unwavering will of the Burmese people in their struggle for democracy' (Hughes, 2013, 254). India's forceful reaction to the suppression of protesters, many of them of Indian descent, brought bilateral relations to their lowest ebb in 1988 (Yhome, 2009, 1). During the uprising, the Indian Embassy in Rangoon lent active support to pro-democracy figures and organisations, including Aung San Suu Kyi, former Prime Minister U Nu, and the All Burma Federation of Students' Unions. In July 1992, India permitted the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma to establish its headquarters in New Delhi (Haacke, 2006, 34), and in the same year joined the US and other Western states in supporting a United Nations resolution condemning the Burmese military government's inhumane treatment of pro-democracy activists and its human-rights violations (Routray, 2011, 303).

India was, moreover, the only country in the region to declare open support for Burmese pro-democracy forces and political refugees, granting activists, dissidents, and refugees residency and freedom of expression from which to oppose the Saw Maung regime. In late 1988, the Indian government sanctioned the establishment of refugee camps in Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam to assist Burmese students and pro-democracy activists (Ayob, 2015, 50). Rangoon regarded these measures as blatant interference in its internal affairs, yet the military government lacked any legitimate basis on which to press New Delhi to reconsider its stance.

Between 1989 and 1990, India launched an All India Radio campaign broadcasting nationwide in support of Burma's pro-democracy movement (Hughes, 2013, 254), a step the Burmese military junta condemned as interference in its internal affairs. SLORC Vice-Chairman General Than Shwe charged that India had 'encouraged and supported insurgent groups within the country' and 'interfered in Burma's internal affairs, actions inconsistent with the normal conduct of a friendly neighbour' (Hughes, 2013, 254). Burmese military leaders further accused the Indian government of colluding, through its embassy in Rangoon, with pro-democracy activists, and of supporting the Kachin and Karen ethnic groups in conflicts along the Burma–India border – accusations that, on both sides, further strained the relationship.

In sum, across the prolonged fluctuations of the 1962–1988 period, India appeared to allow Burma to slip beyond its sphere of influence, particularly in the economic and security domains, even though Burma continued to hold considerable strategic and economic importance for India. This thirty-year period of coolness drove the two countries further apart and afforded China substantial political, economic, and military advantages within Burma. India was ultimately brought to recognise, at considerable cost, that its condemnation of the Ne Win dictatorship and its efforts to isolate Burma had damaged the security of its own north-eastern region. These lessons, combined with the shifting international, regional, and domestic contexts of both countries, made it increasingly urgent for India and Burma to work towards improving and strengthening their bilateral relationship for their mutual strategic benefit.

Conclusion

India–Burma relations evolved over a long historical trajectory, beginning with early trade and political contact, deepening under British rule, and taking on new significance once both countries achieved independence. In the early years following the formal establishment of diplomatic relations, from 1948 to 1962, the relationship was close and cordial, reflecting the personal friendship between Nehru and U Nu, while India's economic and military assistance to Burma's government and people during this period laid a solid foundation for warmth and goodwill. Given their long-standing geographical, cultural, religious, and commercial ties, and their shared land and maritime borders, India and Burma have come to occupy increasingly important positions

in each other's foreign policy across the political, economic, and security domains, a trend that has become still more pronounced from the end of the Cold War through the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The relationship that unfolded between 1962 and 1988 stood in stark contrast to this earlier period of friendship and cordiality. Ne Win's rise to power through the 1962 coup transformed Burma from a civilian into a military regime and set in motion a decline in relations with India that became increasingly strained, and at times openly tense, in the years that followed. Socialist economic and social policy, nationalization, the large-scale expulsion of Indians under Ne Win, the broader Cold War context, and the expansion of Chinese influence within Burma together rendered the relationship fragile and exposed its many limitations; from 1962 to 1988, bilateral engagement was confined largely to the political sphere, with other areas of cooperation remaining marginal, while the Burmese military government's domestic and foreign policies severely curtailed democratic activity within the country. From 1988 onward, the military government's suppression of pro-democracy protesters in the '8888' uprising, India's consequent opposition to the Burmese dictatorship in international forums, and the isolationist policies pursued by the US and Western states towards Burma combined to drive India–Burma relations to their lowest ebb in the years 1988–1991.

It was, in effect, precisely at the moment India turned cold towards the Burmese military government that Burma was pushed further into China's orbit, a relationship that developed to the point of being described as a 'brotherly' one, or *Pauk-Phaw*, in Burmese usage. China's growing weight in Burma has thus exerted a substantial influence on India–Burma relations, and it was this reality, together with the changing international and regional environment after the Cold War, that ultimately compelled India to adopt a more 'realistic' approach to improving, sustaining, and developing its relationship with its eastern neighbor.

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Authors' Contributions

Nguyen Tuan Binh: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing.

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Do Digital Literacy Skills Mitigate Technostress? Validation and Insights from Gen Z

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Although digital literacy and technostress are interrelated, a distinct research gap remains in exploring their multidimensional relationship, particularly among Generation Z students. This research investigated how various digital literacy dimensions influence technostress. The measurement tool applied here evaluates digital literacy across six specific sub-components. The construct comprises the following sub-components: ethic and responsibility, general knowledge and functional skills, daily usage, advanced production, privacy and security, and social dimension. The research is designed with a quantitative and correlational method. Data has been collected from 204 students at the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences of a state university in Türkiye. The average age of this Gen Z sample was 21 ($M = 20.93$, $SD = 5.35$). The findings suggest that there is a negative correlation between general knowledge and functional skills and technostress. Moreover, having robust general knowledge and functional skills serves as a significant negative predictor of technostress. The effects of the other sub-dimensions on technostress were not significant. Another original output is the Turkish adaptation of the technostress scale. Theoretically, not all digital skills alleviate stress equally. Practically, universities should prioritize enhancing students' general knowledge and functional skills.

Keywords: cross-sectional study; digital literacy; survey technique; technostress; techno-behavior.

Coping with ongoing transformation has become an enduring challenge for individuals. Since the post–World War II period, advances in technology and digitalization, together with individuals' responses to and use of these developments, have contributed to the emergence of new theoretical perspectives. One notable example is Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model. According to this model, individuals' behavioral intentions toward information systems are influenced by their perceptions of the usefulness and ease of use of such technologies. Accordingly, technology acceptance is associated with perceived utility, user-friendliness, and individual attitudes (Yahşi & Hopcan, 2021).

Technological progress has expanded the range of communication tools available to individuals and has substantially increased the volume of information produced and disseminated. As digital environments have become embedded in diverse domains, including education, healthcare, commerce, and entertainment, individuals increasingly rely on digital technologies to access and meet their everyday needs. Consequently, the ability to use digital technologies effectively and appropriately has gained increasing importance, bringing digital literacy to the forefront of contemporary research.

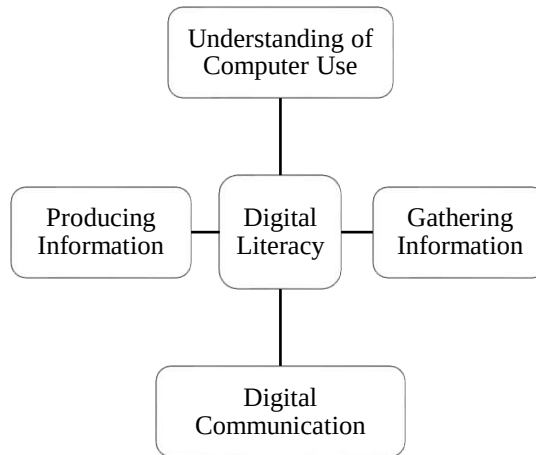
The expansion of internet-based technologies has transformed the ways in which individuals communicate, socialize, and access content and services (Onursoy, 2018). As digital technologies have become increasingly integrated into everyday life, their consequences for individuals can be both beneficial and adverse (Develi et al., 2022; Kul, 2020; Nasim et al., 2022; Özen, 2023). This situation has also raised concerns regarding the digital literacy capabilities of younger generations and has increased scholarly interest in the intersection of technology, media, and education (Onursoy, 2018). Therefore, digital literacy has emerged as an increasingly important concept in understanding individuals' interaction with digital environments.

Digital literacy encompasses the ability to access reliable information, utilize and communicate information, and generate new information through digital devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones (Aksoy et al., 2021; Develi, 2023). The growing emphasis on lifelong learning has further strengthened the need for individuals to effectively use technological tools, particularly computers, thereby increasing the relevance of digital literacy (Özerbaş & Kuralbayeva, 2018). In addition to technological proficiency, digital literacy involves the ability to protect personal information, evaluate and benefit from reliable information sources, and communicate safely in digital environments (Gençtürk-Erdem et al., 2021).

Figure 1. shows a conceptual framework to provide an overview of the areas of digital literacy.

Figure 1

Areas of Digital Literacy



Note. Source: Wang (2024)

According to Figure 1, the areas of digital literacy are given as gathering information, digital communication, producing information and understanding of computer use. Digital literacy areas start with information gathering. It is important to gather the right information through the right channels. Readiness is necessary to determine the right information. When users do not take the information gathering step correctly in digital literacy, they will have problems in other steps. Digital communication is the process of delivering the desired message to the right address on time through the right channels after the information collection step. It is very important that digital communication is carried out securely. The issue of cyber security is also important for security to be carried out smoothly in digital environments. Users who access the right information through the right channels can produce information. In this way, computer integrity will also be ensured. With all these steps, digital literacy areas will be functional for users (Wang, 2024).

Digitally literate people are those who show the new information they obtain through digital media. Digitally literate people find information effectively, reach the correct information by distinguishing the information they find from the wrong ones through analysis, use the correct information they obtain, and synthesize new information (Hwang et al., 2023; Kozan & Bulut-Özek, 2019). Acquisition of digital literacy skills is necessary for all age groups. Being digitally literate has become a necessity in order to adapt to the transformations and developments in the media and our age.

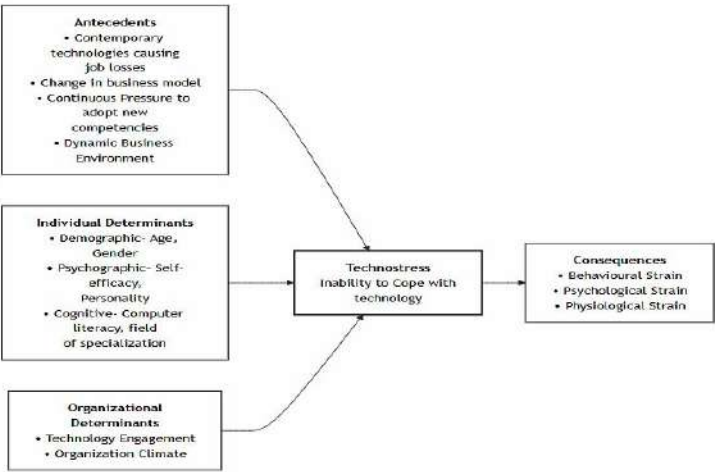
The widespread adoption of digital technologies has also brought attention to technology-related forms of stress. The term technostress is generally considered to have been introduced by clinical psychologist Craig Brod in 1984 (Brod, 1984). The concept describes a contemporary condition associated with difficulties in appropriately managing information and communication technologies (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004). From a psychological perspective, technostress can be understood as the strain that emerges when individuals have difficulty incorporating technology into their lives in a healthy and manageable manner (Tarafdar et al., 2015).

Technostress may arise when individuals perceive that they are unable to adequately meet the demands associated with digital technology use. Previous research has identified several technological stressors, including techno-complexity, techno-overload, techno-insecurity, techno-invasion, and techno-uncertainty (Tarafdar et al., 2007). Such stress may emerge when individuals’ physical, social, or cognitive needs are insufficiently addressed (Tarafdar et al., 2010). Prolonged and intensive interaction with information technologies may consequently be accompanied by various psychological and physiological difficulties. Among the psychological responses associated with technostress are anxiety, fear, anger, and worry. Laspinas (2015) further associates technostress with outcomes such as burnout, information overload, underworking, and the performance of routine tasks. The concern that computers may eventually replace human roles may also undermine employees’ motivation and sense of team spirit. Providing appropriate technical assistance and strengthening users’ technology literacy and active engagement with technological systems have therefore been proposed as ways of reducing these negative effects (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008).

The specific conditions contributing to technostress can take different forms. Techno-overload refers to situations in which technology increases employees’ workload, the amount of information they must process, or the demand for technical competencies. *Techno-complexity* is associated with difficulties in understanding new technologies, insufficient knowledge, and limited opportunities to develop the skills required to use them effectively. *Techno-uncertainty*, in contrast, is linked to the rapid evolution of technological systems, continuous learning requirements, and frequent changes in software and hardware. Other contributing factors may include unstable or slow internet connections, difficulties experienced by customers when using technological systems, and the need to maintain continuous security measures against potential information theft (Erer, 2021).

Antecedents, determinants and consequences related to technostress are given in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Technostress Framework: Antecedents, Determinants and Consequences



Note. Source: Bhatt & Kothari (2022)

For Generation Z, digital competence is particularly relevant because university students are expected to engage with technology not only as users but also as potential creators in their future professional lives (Bukhari et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2013). Developing adequate digital literacy may consequently help students

manage technology-related demands more effectively and may contribute to limiting the negative experiences associated with technostress. From this perspective, strengthening digital literacy represents an important means of preparing university students for technology-intensive academic and professional environments.

Digital literacy is also relevant to individuals' ability to navigate the opportunities and risks of digital environments. Developing these competencies may support students in becoming more informed and responsible users of digital media while contributing to their academic engagement and success. Accordingly, examining digital literacy alongside technostress may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how students experience and respond to technology-related demands.

Against this background, the present study investigates the relationship between digital literacy and technostress among Generation Z university students. Although previous research has addressed digital literacy and technostress, digital literacy has frequently been conceptualized as a general or unidimensional competency. This approach may obscure differences among specific digital literacy capabilities. Moreover, empirical evidence concerning the relationship between the distinct dimensions of digital literacy and technostress among Generation Z university students remains limited. Therefore, this study extends the existing literature by examining the predictive effects of multiple digital literacy dimensions on technostress. In addition, the adaptation and validation of the Technostress Scale in the Turkish higher education context provides a further contribution by extending the availability of a measurement instrument for this population.

Based on the related information, the research hypotheses developed as follows, and the research model is created in Figure 3.

H₁: Ethic and responsibility negatively predict technostress.

H₂: General knowledge and functional skills negatively predict technostress.

H₃: Daily usage negatively predicts technostress.

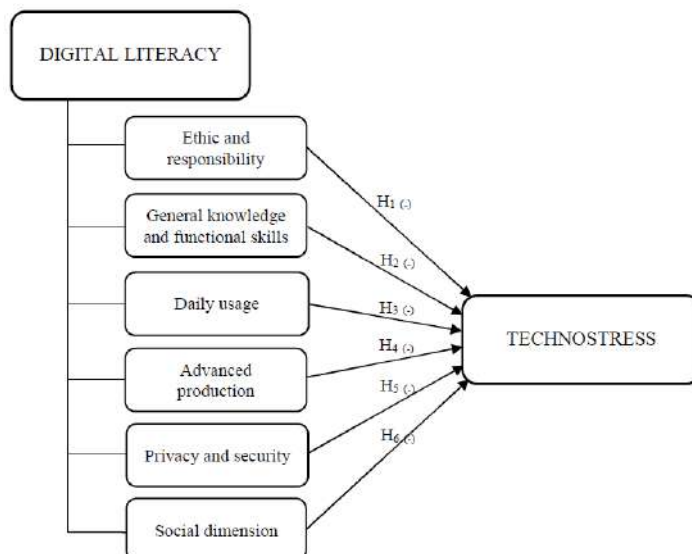
H₄: Advanced production negatively predicts technostress.

H₅: Privacy and security negatively predict technostress.

H₆: Social dimension negatively predicts technostress.

Figure 3

Research Model



Method

Sample

Participants included 204 undergraduate students registered at a Turkish state university's Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences during the autumn semester of 2023-2024 ($n = 204$). The students in the sample took the Digital Literacy course via distance education for a 14-week period during the education and training period. The survey form prepared for the research was sent to the students electronically. University students completed the online survey voluntarily. Of the 204 students participating in the research, 97 were male (47.5%) and 107 were female (52.5%). The average age of this Generation Z (Gen Z) sample was 21 ($M = 20.93$, $SD = 5.35$). The distribution of students according to their departments is as follows: 22 students in the economics department, 31 students in the business department, 48 students in the politics and public administration department, 23 students in international relations, 51 students in international trade and logistics, and 29 students in management information systems.

Measures

The survey instrument was divided into three distinct segments. Initial questions gathered demographic data (age, gender, and department). The subsequent sections presented the digital literacy metric and the technostress inventory. The Digital Literacy Scale developed by Bayrakcı and Narmanlıoğlu (2021) was used in the research. The scale consists of 29 items and 6 dimensions which are ethic and responsibility (7 items), general knowledge and functional skills (6 items), daily usage (6 items), advanced production (2 items), privacy and security (4 items) and social dimension (4 items). Technostress scale developed by Wang, Tan, and Li (2020) to measure students' technostress levels was translated into Turkish and validated within the scope of this research. This short instrument is unidimensional and contains exactly 8 items. The Turkish translations of these questions are detailed in the *Appendix*. The five-point Likert type scales are scored between (1) strongly disagree and (5) strongly agree. Increasing scores from the scale indicate that students' digital literacy and technostress levels have increased.

Procedure

This investigation utilized a quantitative, correlational framework. Data gathering was conducted via a cross-sectional approach. Statistical evaluations were executed utilizing IBM SPSS software along with its AMOS module.

The execution of this research strictly followed established scientific ethics regarding human subjects. We ensured complete anonymity and data privacy for all respondents at every stage.

Within the scope of this research, the technostress scale developed by Wang et al., (2020) was adapted into Turkish. A specific procedure was followed in translating the items of this measurement tool, originally written in English, into Turkish to achieve an accurate linguistic conversion and to prevent any subjective bias that a solo translator might introduce (Ægisdóttir et al., 2008; Develi & Çavuş, 2024; Hambleton, 1993). For this purpose, the committee approach and parallel translation methods, which are frequently employed in cross-cultural studies to minimize errors, were adopted (Brislin, 1980; Hambleton, 2005). Accordingly, a committee was established consisting of three faculty members who are experts in the fields of management and organization, and management information systems, and who possess advanced proficiency in English. In the first stage of the process, the committee members independently translated the scale items into Turkish. In the second stage, the independent translations were compiled and subjected to a comparative analysis, where semantic differences and terminological inconsistencies were discussed. Revisions and refinements were made until a consensus was reached on the expressions that best represented the comprehensibility of the items within the context of Turkish culture, thereby giving the items their final Turkish forms.

Results

Preliminary analysis

It was found that there were no missing values in the data obtained ($MVA = 0\%$). In the test conducted for each item and variable to question the normality assumption, it was seen that the largest skewness coefficient was -2.10, and the largest kurtosis coefficient was 7.44. These coefficients showed that distributional normality was confirmed because the values remained within the ± 3 skewness and ± 10 kurtosis limits (Kline, 2011). Finally, to screen for potential common method variance, Harman's single-factor assessment was executed (Harman, 1979). All items examined with non-rotation principal component analysis exhibited a multidimensional structure consisting of 7 dimensions, and the single-factor structure of the items explained not the majority of the total variance but a low part of 31.07% ($s^2 < .50$; Develi et al., 2022). Accordingly, it was concluded that the possible common method bias in the data was not a problem (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Validity analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test the validity of the measurement instruments based on their fit with the data. In the applied analyses, the 0.50 criterion suggested by Hair et al. was taken into consideration as the lower limit criterion for factor loading (Hair et al., 2014). Therefore, one item belonging to the ethic and responsibility dimension, one item belonging to the daily usage dimension, and two items belonging to the advanced production dimension (i.e., the dimension itself) were removed from the model. The results obtained are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of the validity analysis

Measures	χ^2	p	χ^2/df	CFI	SRMR	Factor loadings
Digital literacy (first-order correlated)	532.208	.000	2.039	.902	.068	(.540 - .863)***
Technostress	62.907	.000	3.700	.959	.050	(.644 - .838)***

Note. $n = 204$, χ^2 : Chi-square, p : Statistical significance level, χ^2/df : Chi-square/degrees of freedom, CFI : Comparative fit index, $SRMR$: Standardized root mean square residual.

*** $p < .001$.

The result of the confirmatory factor analysis demonstrates that all measures provided the desired goodness of fit indexes (Anderson & Gerbing, 1984; Kline, 2011; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Reliability analysis

Both corrected item-total correlations and Cronbach's alpha metrics were evaluated to establish the reliability of the measurement tools. The findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of the reliability analysis

Measures	Item quantities	Corrected item-total correlations	Cronbach alfa
Ethic and responsibility	6	.663 - .803	.903
General knowledge and functional skills	6	.573 - .694	.853
Daily usage	5	.557 - .694	.818
Privacy and security	4	.604 - .670	.809
Social dimension	4	.489 - .567	.727
Technostress	8	.649 - .800	.921

The findings revealed that item-total correlations exceeded the 0.30 threshold, demonstrating that the relationship between the general structure of the scales and the items is at a sufficient level (Field, 2009). In addition, since Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients meet the threshold value of $\alpha > .70$, all measures are reliable (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally, 1978).

Hypothesis testing

Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis was performed to test whether the research concepts change together. The results obtained are seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of the correlation analysis

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Ethic and responsibility	4.287	.689	1					
2. General knowledge and functional skills	3.633	.840	.518**	1				
3. Daily usage	4.152	.685	.698**	.630**	1			
4. Privacy and security	4.273	.649	.696**	.549**	.763**	1		
5. Social dimension	3.504	.831	.368**	.541**	.526**	.543**	1	
6. Technostress	2.463	.931	-.036	-.189**	-.100	-.097	.008	1

Note. $n = 204$, M : Mean, SD : Standard deviation

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The correlation outcomes demonstrated that a statistically significant association only exists between general knowledge and functional skills and technostress ($r = -.189$, $p < .01$). Accordingly, it is understood that the general knowledge and functional skills, which is a dimension of digital literacy, increase, their technostress levels will decrease. The other relationships between the variables are statistically insignificant ($p > .05$).

Regression analysis

A regression analysis evaluated how well the independent variables predicted the dependent construct. The results obtained are seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of the regression analysis

Independent variables	Dependent variable	β	R^2	Adj. R^2	F	$D-W$	VIF
Ethic and responsibility	Technostress	.148	.064	.041	2.729*	1.902	2.292
General knowledge and functional skills		-.281**					1.885
Daily usage		-.029					3.155
Privacy and security		-.127					2.957
Social dimension		.189					1.652

Note. $n = 204$, β : Standardized beta coefficient, R^2 : Coefficient of determination, Adj. R^2 : Adjusted coefficient of determination, F : F -statistic, $D-W$: Durbin-Watson coefficient, VIF : Variance inflation factor.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

According to the regression analysis results, firstly, the variance inflation factor coefficients show that multicollinearity is not a problem ($VIF < 5$) in the model (O'Brien, 2007). In addition, the Durbin-Watson coefficient proves that there is no autocorrelation problem ($D-W < 2$; Durbin & Watson, 1971). Digital literacy dimensions significantly predicted technostress ($F = 2.729$, $p < .05$). Accordingly, the digital literacy dimensions explain 04% of technostress (Adj. $R^2 = .041$). When the effect of each dimension on technostress is analyzed, it is seen that the only significant effect belongs to the general knowledge and functional skills dimension ($\beta = -.281$, $p < .01$). Accordingly, the general knowledge and functional skills dimension contributes negatively to explaining technostress. The H_2 hypothesis was supported, but the rest was not supported.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper investigated how different digital literacy dimensions might predict technostress. According to the results obtained, there is a negative correlation between general knowledge and functional skills and technostress. In addition, general knowledge and functional skills contribute negatively to explaining technostress. Another original output of the study is that the technostress scale used was adapted into Turkish.

Lots of research indicates a complex relationship between digital literacy and technostress. On the one hand, higher levels of digital literacy can mitigate technostress by empowering individuals to effectively manage digital tools and information overload (Muslimin et al., 2023). Individuals with advanced digital skills are better equipped to filter and prioritize information, thus reducing feelings of overwhelm and anxiety. Additionally, digital literacy enables individuals to adopt adaptive coping strategies, such as mindfulness practices and digital detoxes, to counteract the negative effects of technology (Lim & Teh, 2026). Conversely, inadequate digital literacy can exacerbate technostress by increasing individuals' susceptibility to information overload, cyberbullying, and privacy concerns (Lei et al., 2020). For instance, individuals with limited digital skills may struggle to discern credible sources of information online, leading to heightened anxiety and confusion. Moreover, they may face challenges in safeguarding their personal data and privacy in an increasingly digitalized world, further contributing to technostress.

Improving one's digital literacy is crucial for utilizing technology's advantages and efficiently handling technostress. People can traverse the digital environment with more resilience and confidence by learning essential digital literacy skills like information assessment and online safety procedures (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Furthermore, digital self-care and mindful technology use are hallmarks of a healthy digital mindset, which can enhance psychological well-being and lessen the negative effects of technostress (Can & Aydın, 2022; Rikard et al., 2016).

The findings of this study reveal that among the six dimensions of digital literacy, only general knowledge and functional skills significantly and negatively predict technostress. This specific result suggests that for Gen Z university students, possessing fundamental and practical technical competence is the primary buffer against technology-related strain. While this generation is often characterized by high social media engagement and advanced content production, these activities do not necessarily alleviate the stress associated with academic or technical technology use. Instead, the ability to troubleshoot functional issues, navigate software interfaces effectively, and possess the know-how of digital tools (functional skills) directly reduces the frustration and sense of inadequacy that leads to technostress. In other words, for Gen Z, social or ethical digital awareness may be a lifestyle norm, but functional proficiency is the actual tool for stress management in a digital learning environment. This explains why other dimensions, despite their importance in digital citizenship, did not show a statistically significant impact on reducing stress levels in this particular sample.

In the higher education context, promoting digital literacy among students is crucial for fostering a productive and resilient learning environment. Universities should move beyond providing general IT infrastructure and instead offer targeted training programs that enhance students' functional digital skills. By equipping students with the necessary technical troubleshooting competencies and software proficiency, educational institutions can mitigate technostress-related academic burnout and 'inaction thoughts'. Additionally, university policies should prioritize student well-being by integrating digital self-care modules into the curriculum, thereby helping Gen Z navigate the heavy reliance on technology-enhanced learning without compromising their mental health.

At a societal level, addressing the digital divide is essential for promoting equitable access to digital literacy resources and reducing technostress disparities (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). Efforts to bridge the digital divide should focus not only on providing access to technology but also on fostering digital literacy skills among marginalized populations (Warschauer, 2003). By empowering individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds with digital literacy, society can mitigate the negative consequences of technostress and promote greater digital inclusion and participation (Van Dijk, 2005).

While offering valuable insights, the current research presents certain limitations that pave the way for subsequent investigations. Initially, the participant group was restricted to 204 students from a single faculty

at a state university in Türkiye. While this provides a targeted insight into Gen Z, the findings may not be fully generalizable to students in different geographic regions, private institutions, or diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Subsequent scholars are encouraged to utilize broader and heterogeneous groups to enhance generalizability and examine the digital divide broadly.

Second, the research model focused primarily on the direct predictive relationship between digital literacy dimensions and technostress. As noted in the literature, technostress is a complex phenomenon influenced by various individual and organizational factors. Future research could expand this model by incorporating variables such as self-efficacy, specific coping strategies, or technology anxiety as mediators or moderators to provide a more holistic understanding.

Finally, this study utilized a cross-sectional design, which captures a snapshot of the relationship at a specific point in time. Longitudinal studies are recommended to elucidate the dynamic interplay and causal relationships between digital literacy interventions and technostress outcomes over time. Additionally, incorporating qualitative research methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of individuals, informing more evidence-based strategies for digital well-being.

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Appendix

The Turkish version of the items from the scale developed by Wang et al. (2020), validated in this study.

1. Teknoloji destekli öğrenmeye uyum sağlamak için stresli hissediyorum.
2. Sınırlı zaman ve çabam nedeniyle teknoloji destekli öğrenmeyi etkin bir şekilde kullanmakta zorlanıyorum.
3. Mevcut kapasitemle teknoloji destekli öğrenimin yüksek beklentileriyle başa çıkma konusunda stresli hissediyorum.
4. Teknoloji destekli öğrenmenin gerekliliklerini karşılamak için mevcut öğrenme alışkanlığımı ve tercihimini değiştirmekte zorlanıyorum.
5. Teknoloji destekli öğrenmenin eğitimimin her alanına yayılmasından rahatsızım.
6. Teknoloji destekli öğrenmenin çok çeşitli olması beni rahatsız ediyor.
7. Teknoloji destekli öğrenmenin çeşitli biçimleri çalışmamı zorlaştırdığı için kendimi stresli hissediyorum.
8. Okulumda teknoloji destekli öğrenime olan yoğun bağımlılık normal çalışma düzenimi bozduğu için kendimi stresli hissediyorum.

Not. Ölçüm düzeyi: (1) Kesinlikle katılmıyorum, (2) Katılmıyorum, (3) Ortadayım, (4) Katılıyorum, (5) Kesinlikle katılıyorum.

Underpinning China's Approach in Institutionalizing Interdependence and Regional Order in Central Asia

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Under the administration of XI Jinping, China has significantly reshaped its extended patterns of interaction in Central Asia across security, institutional governance and development. This increased engagement has already observed in existing scholarly literature under economic perspective, whereas shaping regional order through institutional mechanism remains rather unresearched. By using the lens of complex interdependence theory, the study examines Beijing's approach towards the Central Asia, particularly, focusing on how issue linkage, policy coordination and institutional interaction influence governance mechanism and outcomes in the region. It further analyzes how Chinese engagement intersects with governance outcomes related to stability, peace and strong institution in relations to the targets of SDG-16. This research utilizes qualitative document analysis and process tracing of official policy papers and secondary literature, dealing Central Asia as a regional case with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and institutions under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as embedded units of analysis. The results show that Chinese institutional mechanism supports patterns of asymmetric interdependence which is contributory to an evolving regional order in the region pigeonholed by institution-based governance, cooperation and infrastructural development or connectivity. An extensive debate is provided under this research on institutional mechanism and governance, regional order and Chinese foreign course of action by emphasizing on the role of institution in linking development and security .

Keywords: China, Central Asia, Regional order, SDGs, BRI

China's rise significantly transforming the Eurasian geopolitical framework through the expansion of multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the institutionalized structure of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing aims to enhance regional cooperation, promote economic interdependence and enhance technological partnerships through these institutional channels; these developments collectively intend to reshape power structure in the Central Asian region. This region is the prime focus of the study as all the Central Asian republics enjoy strategic partnership with China. Within the passage of time, Chinese engagement in the region has evolved from bilateral ties to multifaceted institutionalized one, including infrastructure connectivity, security cooperation, investments and regional governance. Beijing's regional role was predominantly framed under realist perspective by early scholarly analysis emphasizing energy security and great power competition. These approaches only partially explain its growing regional influence. However, this study primarily adopts complex interdependence theory to address this gap, to capture Chinese multidimensional institutional regional approach and to establish how institutional structures themselves act or serve as a tool of order-building. Since China has institutionalized economic cooperation within BRI and security cooperation through SCO, embedding Central Asian republics within a long-term institutional structure.

Realists assume that interstate relations are the standard means of communication. Trans-governmental interaction emerges when realist assume that states behave coherently as units is relaxed,

whereas, the realist view that states are the sole units challenged by transnational relations (Keohane & Nye, 2012). According to the neorealist perspective, the growing Chinese economic and institutional presence in the region can be understood as a strategy to protect its strategic interests and enhance its position in the regional balance of power (Waltz, 1979). However, this perspective puts greater emphasis on power maximization and competition rather than cooperative institutional mechanisms, examining the China and Central Asian engagements. Power Transition Theory argues that potential contention arises when emerging power dissatisfied with the prevailing order led by a status quo power and it seeks to reshape that order according to its own interests (Organski & Kugler, 1980).

Instead of military power or coercion to shape regional dynamics China give precedence to institutional engagement, which needs theoretical reassessment of how power function and regional order evolve. For that the concept of complex interdependence theory is highly applicable to comprehend Beijing's presence in the region, where counterterrorism, economic growth and regime stability are interconnected and the hierarchy of issues is overlapping and increasingly blurred. BRI-related mechanisms have outlined a pattern of asymmetric interdependence in which states are interlinked and connected while preserving their sovereignty. This interdependence facilitates the emergence of a regional order that is neither truly multipolar nor overtly hegemonic, but instead it is structured over rule-based and soft hierarchical governance.

Yunling identifies that Central Asia is contributing in advancing the Silk Road Economic Belt, a foundational pillar of Chinese BRI since it was introduced in 2013 by the President Xi Jinping (Yunling, 2017). Chinese increased engagement towards this region has been received by the political elites for the opportunities it generates for sustainable development with varying degree of open-mindedness or uncertainty among civil societies. To understand the conception of Sustainable development, the World Commission on Environment and Development describe it as a progress that meets the necessities or requirements of the present-day without compromising the competence of upcoming generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). Most of the states see China as reliable and non-aggressive regional power and a constructive partner (Shambaugh, 2005). Moreover, China has established regional mechanisms that provide fertile ground for dialogue and facilitate regional engagement according to its own standards and norms. Regional identity-building is a fundamental stage in the formation of region and regionalism; however, regionalism can only be achieved when nation-states share common interests and mutual trust guided by a leading state that plays a central role in facilitating and advancing regional integration process (Veicy, 2023).

Literature Review

Professor Lukin in his study titled "Mackinder Revisited: Will China Establish Eurasian Empire 3.0?" links Chinese attempt to construct Eurasian empire with the two historical attempts, first was made by Mongol conquests as they build largest land empire in history; the same attempt was made by another Russian Tsars which was only partly successful (Lukin, 2015). But the distinction in technique is clear where the former ones use military force and coercion to do so as the China is trying to install economic power to build its own version. Another argument was made by Xuetong, while dealing with the question of diplomatic priorities either to the relationship with the US, the existing power, or to the peripheral diplomacy. If observed historically, every global power arose as regional power before becoming a global power (Xuetong, 2015).

An expert on Chinese studies while deciphering Beijing's vision for the region argues that Beijing is using ostensibly innocuous terms, for instance, the "Community of shared destiny" to form regional order through its grand geopolitical approach BRI (Rolland N., 2017). Solingen and Malnight define regional order as the combination of regionalization and regionalism within a particular region. Regionalization is described as a process of socio-political, economic and cultural exchange while regionalism refers to state-driven institutional projects encompassing both formal and informal arrangements (Solinigen & Malnight, 2016). So, regional orders are shaped through the interplay of domestic, regional and global forces.

While talking about the importance of regional order for the world order in "Think globally, act regionally" Thomas Wright argues that many analysts conceptualize the international system through a top-down prism, where global concerns dominate regional priorities. However, the truth is quite the opposite. It is resilient and healthy regional orders in strategically vital areas that form the foundations for the world order,

not global institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the United Nations (UN). If these regional orders collapse, it will trigger a chain reaction that will destabilize the entire world order (Wright, 2015). That is why the actions of Beijing and Moscow in their respective neighborhoods are more indicative of their strategic outlook than their explicit policies on global concerns. It is conventional that both states are more focused regionally and prioritize their immediate geopolitical setting, as historically great powers tended to secure influence close to home instead of chasing abstract ideas of global governance. The reviewed scholarly literature presents diverse perspectives on Beijing’s growing role in Central Asian region. To synthesize these perspectives more systematically, the given table categorizes the existing scholarship into four analytical dimensions.

Categorization of Existing Literature

Category	Key argument and relevance
Facts: (Lukin, 2015); (Xuetong, 2015)	China’s rise shifted from military influence to economic and institutional engagement, as consolidating regional power before becoming a global power which demonstrates strategic rationale behind Beijing’s institutional approach.
Events and Current Issues: (Solingen & Malnight, 2016); (Rolland, 2017)	BRI and the ‘Community of shared future’ expanded the bilateral engagement to institutional cooperation and provided conceptual basis for examining Beijing’s institutionalized interdependence in Central Asia.
Concerns: (Wright, 2015); (Lukin, 2015); (Rolland, 2017); (Solingen & Malnight, 2016); (Xuetong, 2015)	Existing studies focus primarily on geopolitical competition or China’s grand strategy, raising concerns related to the institutional dimensions of Beijing’s regional approach which is addressed in the current study.

Source: Compiled by the Author

This table demonstrates that the existing literature remains largely focused on geopolitical competition and strategic intentions, while the institutional processes through which China constructs regional interdependence that accelerates the realization of UN SDGs remain comparatively underexplored. This gap provides the analytical foundation for the present study.

Method

To examine the Beijing’s institutional engagement in Central Asia this study adopts qualitative research design. Instead of evaluating the entire United Nations’ 2030 Agenda, the analysis focuses on how Chinese regional approach in Centra Asia influences governance mechanism and outcomes linked with peace, stability and institution resilience aligned with the targets of SDG-16. Regarding Central Asia as a regional case, institutional mechanisms particularly the SCO and BRI related governance structures serve as an embedded analytical unit. The study was relied on document analysis and process tracing, as this approach enables to analyze how institutional relations and policy synchronization link development and security to shape regional governance mechanism and outcomes. Data collected through both primary and secondary sources, where official policy documents, white papers and speeches by Chinese and Central Asian leadership as well as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports and think tank publications were included.

Theoretical Framework

Institutionalized structure refers to the interconnected network of economic, security and governance institutions through which Beijing embeds regional countries into long-term patterns of complex interdependence, establishing an order without military force or formal hegemony. Complex Interdependence Theory developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye serves as a primary theoretical lens to analyze Chinese institutionalized interdependence in Central Asia. The theory is mainly applicable as it offers a useful alternative to traditional realist approaches by putting emphasis on multiple channels of interaction, multiple issues with the absence of a clear hierarchy, and the irrelevance of threat and use of military force in foreign relations (Nye & Keohane, 2004).

In this context, interactions are not confined to state-to-state dealings only but also encompass private enterprises, financial institutions and multilateral development actors, reflecting or signifying the presence of

multiple channels of engagement. The realist belief that states are unitary entities is challenged by this multidimensional structure which emphasizing on the increased intricacy of international engagement. These various channels are readily apparent in the framework of China-Central Asian engagement under the BRI, as collaboration between ministries, infrastructure agencies, development banks and private businesses goes beyond formal diplomatic agreements. Such interactions improve regional connectivity and make it easier to carry out massive development projects. Therefore, the complex interdependence offers a suitable analytical lens to comprehend how such multi-dimensional institutional interactions enable collaboration and contribute to extensive development objectives as well as the advancement or the realization of the UN SDGs in Central Asia.

China's Institutionalized Mechanism for Order-Building in Central Asia

China's economic rise has become one of the most significant developments of the 21st century, prompting policy and scholarly debates regarding the implications of its increasing capabilities. Currently, being one of the most important players in Central Asia, China is expanding its influence through trade, diplomacy and infrastructure progressively building what the Pantucci and Petersen, term an 'inadvertent empire', an order designed through the consolidation of power rather than an absolute conquest (Pantucci & Petersen, 2012). Dr. Jessica Neafie from Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan stated that BRI infrastructure has improved Central Asia's connectivity, especially through roads, railways, logistics hubs, energy pipelines and border infrastructure. Its contribution is not simply 'growth' in a narrow GDP sense, but the reduction of isolation for landlocked states, as better corridors can lower transport times and expand access to markets (Neafie, 2026). As the General Liu Yazhou of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) put it, Central Asia is "the thickest piece of cake given to the modern Chinese by the heavens" (Hung & Herman, 2013).

Foreign policy of China under administration of Xi Jinping has become more visible, unlike previous governments, it has taken more dynamic and self-confident diplomatic initiative. Christoffersen highlights that Xi Jinping redefined the order of diplomatic priorities at the 2013 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) work forum, making peripheral diplomacy the top strategic priority reversing Deng's major power orientation (Christoffersen, 2024). An ancient concept revived to manage the potential problems with neighboring states, so, the quest for a coherent approach towards bordering relations turned out to be a critical part of the BRI. At home when China's National People's Congress adopted its 13th Five-Year Plan in 2016, 17 SDGs organically incorporated into its medium and long-term strategies and plans (Li, Chen, & Jiang, 2025). This ensures that the investment and projects under BRI are framed around sustainability and inclusivity which will create a network of common dependence. Sheng says that China being a member states of UN attaches great importance to SDGs by embedding them into its state development policy where the coordination mechanism is established for handy interaction with the UN branches. Moreover, China is regularly participating in High-level Political Forums and issuing progress reports on SDGs (Sheng, 2023).

Community of common destiny and community of a shared future for humanity are the articulated ideas of the Xi's administration to frame Chinese peripheral engagement emphasizing peace, cooperation and justice as guiding principles which are shared values of humanity (Singh, 2022). Beijing seeks to transform neighborly relations beyond confrontational politics to extensive global partnership, with its above stated global visions projecting a positive image and reflecting its desire to peacefully transform and even change regional or global order. Keith, noted that President Xi Jinping stated, during a conference in 2014 that Asian Problems must be solved by Asian countries, and China will do more for the protection or security of Asian and seek substitute to American Strategic Pivot (Keith, 2017).

China established multilateral financing institution called Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016 as part of BRI to institutionalize development finance embedding Asian developing states especially Central Asian (Zreik, 2022). Tanaka argues that in an international financial architecture, AIIB has advanced into a significant player by 2023, as it has become the largest multilateral development bank after the World Bank (WB) including largest European economies such as Britain, Germany, Italy and France as its founding members (Tanaka, 2024). The most assertive strategies of Chinese foreign policy are AIIB, BRI and New Development Bank (NDB), as Wang argues that these evolving global strategies based on Beijing's economic power aims to increase its influence at the regional and international levels (WANG, 2017). These

newly established Chinese led financial institutions are expanding their influence as an alternative to western-backed monetary institutions such as IMF and WB in terms of financing and investment. Dr. Jassica Neafie stated that the institutional architecture is layered that includes bilateral agreements, strategic and security partnerships, BRI, SCO, China-Central Asia mechanism, development finance, Confucius Institutes, media cooperation and UN-linked discourse. She said that it has normalized China as a long-term regional actor, not just an investor or trade partner and reinforced norms of sovereignty, non-interference, stability and government-to-government cooperation (Neafie, 2026).

Cooley and Nexon identify that many scholars believe that the NDB was created as an alternate to Western dominated Bretton Woods institutions which reflects PRC's long-term strategy to establish analogous institutions and norms that might dilute or weaken the influence of US-led liberal global order (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). New Zealand and Australia became its founding participant in an open defiance of the American request not to join the bank, so, the subsequent divergence between the US and its partners constitute a major diplomatic success for Beijing (Tanaka, 2024). Cai states, that some analysts put AIIB and BRI as critical components of Beijing's grand strategy which aims to promote its influence in the Eurasian region and beyond (Cai, 2020). The governance framework of AIIB emphasizes transparency, anti-corruption, accountability and multilateral decision-making, thereby aligning with the SDG-16 targets 16.6 and 16.7, which promotes effective, accountable and transparent institutions and inclusive decision-making respectively.

Zimmerman argues that the developing countries' unhappiness with the under-representation in Bretton Woods institutions not only spurred the creation of AIIB but also contributed to the establishment of NDB at Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) summit in 2014, officially launched in 2015 (Zimmerman, 2015). It has been reported through BRICS Post that the first investment by the NDB will be issued in Yuan (Chinese renminbi) not in dollars (BRICS Post, 2015). According to Harsana, the China Development Bank (CDB) and the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) signed a landmark BRICS Yuan loan agreement worth 2.1 billion Yuan (around \$290 million) (Harsana, 2025). Dominated completely in yuan is a significant shift in evolving global finance architecture marking a historic breakthrough in both international de-dollarization trend and BRICS economic integration. With collective governance and equal contribution of capital among BRICS members, the NDB mirrors principles coherent with SDG-16 by encouraging more inclusive and archetypical global financial institution.

The China-Central Asia summit of 2023 serves as key evidence of China's expanding influence, resulting in new investment of 3.7 billion dollar in Central Asia, bringing the total to over 63 billion dollars (Ozat, 2023). Ozat further argues that this significant influx of capital has reinforced regional development and cemented China's position as a leading trading partner in the region. While talking about the advancement of new regionalism, Fawcett called rising powers as core states that act as leaders in promoting strategies, ideas and other incentive to process the collaboration and integration. Examples include the United States in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), China in SCO, France and Germany in European Union (EU) and Saudi Arabia in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), all are serving as the drivers in their respective regional projects (Fawcett, 2015). Khan and Sultana argue that SCO was establish after the productive partnership between Beijing and Moscow from boundary formation to protect economic and strategic interest in Central Asian region. As both considered the presence of NATO in their backyard not only a threat to their security but to the development of Eurasian Silk Road as well (Khan & Sultana, 2019). Below an analysis is given to examine the Xi's approach towards Central Asia through SCO and BRI, which have emerged as a key driver in shaping a regional order grounded in Chinese norms while also contributing to realize UN SDGs in the region.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Since the 1990s, Central Asian states repeatedly pledged regional cooperation but most initiatives remained on paper, the creation of SCO emerges as one of the most important attempts. Its history goes back to mid of 2000s, when China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan came together to create the Shanghai Five, and soon after the addition of Uzbekistan it became SCO and today its geographic reach extended towards South Asia, Eastern Europe and Middle East (Yuan, 2022). Dadabaev points out, the SCO was mainly focused on security and territorial issues, such as border demarcation and coordination in the fight against the three social evils; terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Dadabaev, 2013). With the initial success,

the member states were in favor to broaden the scope of this cooperation in economic sphere and the development of shared infrastructure like pipeline routes and transportation corridors. Today this regional integration platform characterizes as one of the central means to synchronize multidimensional cooperation in Central Asia. Najwa argues that the SCO, as an enabler, have significantly strengthened China's role as a regional leader in Central Asia, where it challenges western dominance by fostering regional stability, building new narratives and creating new avenues to reshape the global order (Najwa, 2025).

According to Huntington, the defeat of Soviet Union in the hands of Afghan Islamic Mujahidin resulted in the emergence of trans-Islamic links in Central Asia (Huntington, 1996). Terrorist and violent extremist activities are seriously posing challenges to peace and exacerbating the separatist conflict in the region where to control this menace multilateral efforts are required. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) serves under SCO being organization's main coordination center to conduct joint training and military exercises, exchange data and develop strategies to combat terrorist and extremist groups. Moreover, Norov argues that RATS actively collaborates with many international organizations such as the United Nations and International Criminal Police Organization, the CSTO, the International Drug Control Agency and the Center for Internet Security, to address transnational threats (Norov, 2024). China's engagement in Central Asia demonstrates several considerable linkages with SDG-16. These mechanisms contribute particularly to SDG-16.1 by supporting efforts to reduce violence, and SDG-16. A by strengthening relevant national and regional institutions.

However, the effectiveness of SCO remains constrained by several structural limitations. The decentralized and consensus-based institutional structure restricts its implementation capability and constrains the extent to which shared decisions are translated into binding action (Bailes, Dunay, Guang, & Troitskiy, 2007). Furthermore, to enforce collective security commitments, it lacks a permanent military force although joint military drills are conducted regularly. Relationship between Russia and China inevitably heading towards competition particularly over regional influence and agenda-setting within the Eurasian space (Gabuev, 2016). After the accession of India and Pakistan in SCO, the stalemate between them not often delayed cooperation for counterterrorism but also weakened the consistency of responses to security (Jamal, 2025). Despite these challenges, the organization sustains regularized coordination, security dialogue, and confidence-building, conducive to institutionalized interdependence in Central Asia.

Over the past two decades, SCO is greatly contributing in counterterrorism efforts and successfully preserving peace and security in the Central Asian region. As its member states recognize that the above mentioned three social evils are constituting a danger to international peace and security and undermining the fundamental social rights and freedom. So, they are engaged in many counterterrorism exercises or joint military drills reflecting SCO's collective commitment to deal with this menace. China is particularly playing a prominent role in conducting such operations known as 'Peace Missions' with Central Asian and other member states for sustainable peace and security in the region (Jin & Dehang, 2019). This SCO counterterrorism cooperation directly supports SDG 16.1 and 16. A, which are reducing violence and strengthening security institutions respectively. Peace Missions accomplished through joint military exercises were conducted biennially; this security based collaborative efforts are successful especially in the realm of combating terrorism, serving the most significant purpose of SCO which is common security (Pradt, 2020).

Kazi & Nabi say that at all levels, different approaches were adopted under the SCO-RATS framework to counterterrorism. In this regard, the SCO conducted 'Interaction-Antiterror-2024' in Xinjiang, strengthening coordination, experience-sharing, and mechanisms for joint responses to terrorism. Bilaterally, the 'Hand-in-Hand 2018' counterterrorism drills between China and India involving 130 soldiers from each side is a comprehensive exercise to enhance mutual trust (Kazi & Nabi, 2025). Domestically, all member states have adopted a mechanism to combat terrorism accordingly, for example, Beijing is pursuing counterterrorism through its campaign against the 'three evils'.

After gaining regional consensus related to these issues, PRC prioritizes a concrete security cooperation over transnational crimes such as drug trafficking, law enforcement, police assistance and training

personnels to create a stable and peaceful environment for collaboration (UNODC, 2025). Yau argues that beyond drills, PRC has conducted various joint patrols with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and extensive anti-drug operations over the years, highlighting practical collaboration on security grounds (Yau, 2022). Moreover, in addition to its engagement through SCO, China now organizes its alternative security initiatives in Central Asia excluding Russia, such as C5+China, Global Security Initiative (GSI) and other bilateral or multiparty initiatives (Hosaka & Hanso, 2025). China advances a state-led yet market-oriented model of development within the framework of SCO that many Central Asian states see as a decolonizing alternate to both models of Russian dependency and Western liberal democracy. PRC's global development visions mentioned above are ideas that mirror its desire to transform peacefully the regional as well as global order to its advantage as part of its peripheral diplomacy. Drawing on the work of (Dian & Silvia, 2025), Azmat Ullah and Sultana argues that under Xi Jinping, Chinese grand strategy based on ideologically driven initiatives of global security, development and civilization are to secure its position as a global leader by challenging the prevailing Western-led liberal international order (Ullah & Sultana, 2025).

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed to join hands developing a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) with modern or innovative cooperation mode in his first speech under the title 'Promote people-to-people relationship and make a better future' at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2013). Quintáns argues that President Xi Jinping called for an 'economic belt along the Silk Road' connecting PRC with Central Asian Republics (CARs) through trade and economic development (Quintáns, 2024). Furthermore, Penghong argues that the other part of OBOR was the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), a product of maritime partnership between China and other Southeast Asian nations that was presented after a month in his second speech at Indonesian Parliament, aiming to advance maritime partnership in cooperation with ASEAN (Penghong, 2015).

Mazuelos argues that China under Xi Jinping seeks to shape a Community with a common future with Chinese characteristics and a New Model of transnational relations built on fairness, equally beneficial for collaboration and morality (Mazuelos, 2022). This approach is understood as involving effort to reform global order, institutions and norms and to nurture networks of economic interdependence through the BRI. After the success story of more than a decade, this initiative has grown broader than its original design as Quintáns argues, it integrates more continents including Europe, Africa and America, new geographic ranges such as the Arctic, and new realms such as cyberspace (Quintáns, 2024). It envisages the creation of a extensive transnational network of energy pipelines, infrastructure programmes, power plants, railways, ports and highways which are often interpreted as contributing to build China-influenced regional order and reflecting its historic positioning in global connectivity (Akdağ, 2024). PRC leaders at various levels have promoted the diplomacy of 'dui jie' (link) highlighting the role of BRI in building regional networks and addressing skepticism. As Wang explains that duijie means aligning BRI with the other states' development initiatives with the broader aim of reviving the ancient Silk Road (Wang, 2016). This approach is framed in terms of shared responsibility as Beijing emphasizes intergovernmental collaboration and co-finances through institutes such as AIIB and Silk Road Fund (SRF) rather than unilateral decision-making.

China was viewed as 'norm shaker' under Mao Zedong due to its challenge to the Western rules and regulations but it was shifted in post-Mao era, as Lanteigne notes, towards a 'norm taker' position through participation in international institutions. In 21st century under Xi Jinping, China is increasingly described seeking to 'shape norms' and influence global governance through new institutions and policies (Lanteigne, 2020). While talking about BRI and its new ideas to global governance, Yafei argues that changes in global order are associated with prodigious development, structural adjustment because the overall power of developing economies including China has augmented, thereby altering the power pattern of the world. He argues, in 2017 IMF identifies that the share of GDP to the global total by Western developed states in purchasing power parity (PPP) fell from 64% in 1980 to 42% (Yafei, 2017). He further argues that Global governance is increasingly described as moving away from purely Western-centric model towards a more diversified structure involving both Eastern and Western powers.

Several monetary institutions have been established for infrastructural projects. Smith, argues that China International Commercial Court (CICC) was established to address the disputes related to the BRI. Furthermore, two branches under CICC were launched by the Supreme People's Court (SPC) one in Xi'an to deal with overland belt disputes and other one in Shenzhen to deal with disputes in relations to the Maritime road (Smith, 2018). This mechanism (CICC) can be linked to SDG-16.6 and 16. A, in terms of enhancing institutional transparency and dispute resolution mechanism through its transparency in proceedings that may contribute to reducing the likelihood of inter-state disputes and violence, respectively. This material (AIIB) and legal (CICC) infrastructures are designed to support BRI projects through principles of Justice and transparency which may contribute to conditions associated with peace and stability for sustainable development. Institutions such as the AIIB, the SRF, and China's policy banks provide financing, technical expertise and project oversight that may enhance the operational capacity of host states, supporting their ability to manage complex infrastructure, trade and energy networks. These institutional expansions can be further studied in data-driven perspective through governance outcomes in beneficiary republics, particularly in relation to political stability, rule of law, and control of corruption. Selected Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) for Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan are presented below, between 2013 to 2024; these indicators present an overview of governance trends in political stability, rule of law and control of corruption.

Governance Trends in Central Asia Based on Selected WGI Indicators (2013–2024)

Indicator	Economy	Year	Governance Score
Political Stability	Kazakhstan	2013	58.18
		2024	61.06
	Kyrgyz Republic	2013	51.95
		2024	57.28
	Tajikistan	2013	47.89
		2024	61.19
Rule of Law	Kazakhstan	2013	45.26
		2024	50.40
	Kyrgyz Republic	2013	40.67
		2024	40.85
	Tajikistan	2013	35.22
		2024	36.59
Control of Corruption	Kazakhstan	2013	29.06
		2024	46.50
	Kyrgyz Republic	2013	24.08
		2024	24.85
	Tajikistan	2013	20.89
		2024	23.21

Source: Compiled from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators/interactive-data-access>

The table presents varying governance indicators from 2013 to 2024 in Central Asian republics. Improvements in control of corruption, political stability and rule of law are generally gradual and uneven across the region. Kazakhstan shows relatively sustained improvement while marginal changes were recorded in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, demonstrating the largest gain in political stability, whereas progress remain modest in rule of law and control of corruption. In this context, the BRI should be understood as an evolving and long-term developmental process, whose infrastructural and institutional effects are shaped by domestic, regional and global factors that unfold gradually.

BRI has been widely interpreted as a catalyst for connectivity and infrastructure development. However, some important criticism has been raised by the existing literature that requires careful consideration. A prominent criticisms and the most debated issue is debt-trap diplomacy which links Chinese lending to debt stress in recipient states. Nevertheless, some empirical studies such as Jones and Hameiri, indicates that debt distress is typically an outcome of multiple internal (misconduct of local elite) and external (Western-dominated economic markets) weaknesses rather than a singular Chinese creditor strategy (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). Hurley et al., (2018) argues that concerns highlight that increased debt challenges will establish a negative and unfavorable degree of dependency on China especially, where its dealings with debt related problem has already aggravated bilateral and internal stresses in some BRI states (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). Furthermore, they argues that project related investments are sometimes announced

publically by Chinese commercial banks as there is no consistency in it and to disclose loan information is highly uncommon in debtor states. So, it highlights the questions of transparency that weakens accountability mechanism.

Competing Mechanism for Order-Building in Central Asia

Russian Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's SCO and BRI related institutional mechanisms function in a competitive relationship, where they are cooperating for trade and connectivity and competing for regional order. Lynch noted that near abroad has been a priority of Moscow's foreign policy which is intertwined with the policy of regionalism, as Russia seeks to limit Chinese and western influence in its near abroad (Lynch, 2000). Rozman noted that one Chinese expert wrote that both China and Russia have different positions on economic globalization, where the former one shows positive attitude through its high degree engagement while the Russia views it negatively and critically. It is Russian choice and way out to break the current world order as China prefers gradualism and enhancement to make it more impartial and just (Rozman, 2025).

Christoffersen argues that Russian President Putin considers EAEU as a means to prevent growing Chinese sphere of influence in Central Asia, although it is a fact that EAEU is not as dynamic as BRI that is what shifted the balance of power in the lap of China due to its extensive hydrocarbon and infrastructural investment in the region (Christoffersen, 2023). While dealing with the theme of opposing the BRI, Shakhanova and Garlick says that according to officials the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) should be regarded as an answer to the prevailing regionalization developments predominantly regional trade initiatives by America and the Chinese BRI (Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020). Whereas, Russia's full-scale incursion of Ukraine has unswervingly affected its interests and influence in the region, destroying severely its status and self-proclaimed role as the only security manager for the region.

The 2022 Russia-Ukrainian War has weakened and reshaped Russian influence in Central Asia, accelerating multi-vector foreign strategy, thereby increasing engagement with China and the European Union. Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests a decline in public support for Moscow across the region. Following public opinion, several Central Asian governments such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan canceled performances by Russian artists in support of the war in Ukraine, indicating growing societal sensitivity toward the actions of Russia in Ukraine and ultimately damaging its soft power influence in the region (Primiano & O'Neill, 2025). In this evolving perspective, The Global gateway, a flagship initiative of European Union which was launched in 2021, has increasingly positioned itself as an economic actor in the region, emphasizing sustainable infrastructure development and connectivity partnership. It also boosts EU's interests while strengthening development in partner states (Bilal, 2025). The geopolitical repercussions of the war between Russia and Ukraine have created opportunities for the EU to increase its role in the region like China, however, Tonchev argues that despite its growing engagement, EU will remain as an economic and development partner in the region as it cannot be a security broker or guarantor (Tonchev, 2023). Paralyzing the Northern corridor, Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought a new perspective for the Middle Corridor or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, as an alternative to diversify trade routes and promote economic resilience. Middle corridor connects China to Europe through Central Asia, Caspian Sea, Caucasus and Türkiye bypassing Russia (World Bank, 2023). This deepens the structural rivalry between China and Russia, as the former supports diversified connectivity while the latter seeks to maintain long-established transit dominance.

The decisive goal of powers like Russia and China is to reshape their respective regional orders, where Professor Wright argues that if it goes unnoticed or unchallenged (by the west), the world will see a return to multipolar system of sphere of influence (a less liberal and democratic). Thus, future orders will be shaped by the geopolitical shifts in East Asia and Eastern Europe (Wright, 2015). Patnaik argues that certain developments are underscoring the weakening of United States' influence in the region as he says that the US-led frameworks such as C5+1 (a diplomatic medium) and the New Silk Road (NSR) strategy cannot serve as a substitute for the real security and economic demands of Central Asia or to be compatible with China in the region. Compared to Chinese infrastructure-heavy initiative, the US economic engagements require both scale

and permanency (Patnaik, 2025). Whereas, Dr. Jildiz Nicharapova stated that China is treating all the Central Asian countries equally, not dominating like Russia (Nicharapova, 2026).

Rolland agreed that BRI is as much geopolitical strategy as it is economic to form a Sino-centric regional order using ostensibly innocuous terms, for instance, the “community of common destiny (Rolland N. , 2017). Malashenko argues that China has become successful in containing post-Soviet gang-style corruption, hitherto, another example of the China’s miracle (Malashenko, 2013). Thus, through the analysis of official and unofficial sources, the article has traced the linkage between the visions, institutions and conduct in Xi Jinping’s engagement in Central Asia. As Callahan claims that Beijing is merging new ideas like Asia Dream and China Dream to build what Xi Jinping calls ‘community of shared destiny’ and to weave peripheral states into Sino-centric network of relationship (Callahan, 2016).

Conclusion

China has embedded Central Asian republics under the complex network of asymmetrical but stable interdependence primarily through the multilateral SCO and the institutional architecture of BRI that establishes foundation for regional order. In this sense, a significant transition has observed in Chinese foreign approach from dominance-driven regional structure to a 21st century model of regional governance. China’s journey from the ancient Silk Road to the advanced Belt and Road is more than economic and geopolitical engagement as it represents human narrative of coexistence, cooperation and shared destiny. By aligning BRI with the UN SDGs, Beijing presents its investments as contributions to global development efforts, while simultaneously influencing the structure of regional governance in Central Asia. Chinese scholars emphasize on development, connectivity and mutual benefit whereas, Central Asian scholars generally acknowledge the economic opportunities, infrastructural development and connectivity breaking isolation through diversified ties while highlighting asymmetrical dependence and sovereignty. A more critical assessment was provided by western scholars, focusing on strategic competition, institutional effectiveness and governance concerns.

The triangulated evidence demonstrates that the institutional engagement of China has transformed bilateral ties progressively into institutionalized regional interdependence. Security cooperation through the multilateral SCO, connectivity and interdependence through the grand BRI and financial support via AIIB collectively supports emerging regional order and global development efforts. In contrast, Russian approach in the region is to preserve post-soviet hierarchical model of integration which may have implications for the autonomy of regional states. Washington’s regional engagement remains modest and often perceived as comparatively inadequate economic commitments and periodic diplomatic initiative. These insights are particularly relevant for the policymakers and scholars seeking to comprehend the evolving regional dynamics. Future scholarly studies can further delve into how Central Asian republics respond to such evolving dimension of order and whether alternate institutional arrangements emerge to maintain balance or complement growing influence of China.

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Narendra Modi's Foreign Policy Towards Pakistan and Decline of its Fascist Approach

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Since the Partition of British India (1947), the relations between Pakistan and India marked by tensions and conflicts due to consequential factors including Jammu and Kashmir which is one of the unfinished agenda of partition and relations are defined by persistent hostility and antagonism. India perceived to be adopted Pakistan centric foreign policy based on strategic autonomy, prioritizes national interest with the active participation in the Global South, and cultivates balanced partnerships with major powers. Narendra Modi since 2014 has shifted dialogue-oriented foreign policy with Hindutva nationalism and strategic assertion, marked with belligerence, firm deterrence, and coercive diplomacy mean doctrine of isolation of Pakistan diplomatically and frequently retaliating offensively. Therefore, Modi policy towards Pakistan built on the principle to isolate Pakistan, especially following the 2019 revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status under the article 370 and unilaterally withdrawal from the Indus Waters Treaty, which is against the spirit of international law. Further, under the Modi's regime relations between Pakistan and India have arrived in the lowest ebb. His aggressive policy failed to achieve key objectives, include counter-terrorism, regional economic initiatives and to minimize Pakistan's influence. However, Modi foreign policy has collapsed to produce the intended results, and in some cases, has led to a diplomatic decline and Pakistan has emerged as a key diplomatic bridge in shifting global power dynamics and its efforts has enhanced its global standing and increased its international influence .

Keywords: Modi foreign policy for Pakistan, Hindutva doctrine, Offensive policy, Kashmir and Efforts to isolate Pakistan

Foreign policy is not a monolithic, homogeneous, or not static but rather a complex and diverse discipline and rightly described as a first line of country security. It is a continuously changing process in the fluctuating environment and the country can change its internal and external dynamics as per their own choice, priorities and capabilities. In most of cases, foreign policy is an extension of country's domestic policy and its formulation or articulation require very careful thought and judgement (Kissinger, 1969). Certainly, foreign policy reflects the interests, values, and preferences of the country. Its success and failure perceived to be mirror of the decisions and behaviors of its leadership in the regional or global arena. As per the words of James Rosenau, foreign policy is a course of action in which state can compete its interests or any miscalculation or external pressure can affect negatively (Rosenau, 2008). In this regard, foreign policy is also a political gamble which highlights the inherent risks and uncertainties in international relations, where decisions can have unpredictable and far-reaching consequences, sometimes leading to escalating conflict or sometimes pushed towards the worst scenario. However, each government normally used foreign policy as an instrument to influence other countries or using foreign policy as a tool to achieve various goals including regime or state survival.

The scholars of world politics are agreed that foreign policy is one of the greatest instruments in the hands of country's leaders to pursue its national interests. It is considered as a full political activity of the country which can obviously lead a country in the highest level among the comity of nations and any wrong decision can put the country in awkward position. In the post-Cold War era, the religious and ethnic nationalism has shaken the world and this wave has changed the ideological dimension of international relations. The world has seen worst form of ethnic or religious nationalism in some parts of Eastern Europe and its severe implication also seen in Asian countries including Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. The world has seen the new form of nationalism which has become the fundamental element of contemporary politics and it is not just a matter of politics but its mix-up with culture and national identity. Its mean in the modern time, religious and ethnic nationalism has occupied an important position in the present political scenario, and it has to replace and alter it contemporaneously (Maia, 2022). It has confirmed that nationalism is one of the leading sources to reshape the global values and has increases the intensity of power in domestic politics of the countries, mainly by increasing the capacity of individuals and mobilise spirit of self-sacrifice. As Schrock-Jacobson, identifies some fundamental possible influence of contemporary nationalism and its use in domestic politics which entails to defamation of 'others, provoke violence in society, promotes biased strategic assumptions and encourage belligerent nationalist foreign policy (Jacobson, 2012). Under this type of nationalism leaders or elites can successfully create favorable environment and easily marginalize opposition and successfully exploit external threats to gain in internal political arena. It is also obvious that the research matter particularly emphasis on the affiliation of nationalism and the concerned incidents in different parts of the world mainly in Asian region (Shahzad & Rubab, 2024). Hence, foreign policy is often seen as a collection of intentions that drive countries to exhibit particular behaviour's essentially functioning as a blueprint or a series of strategies related matters in international affairs. According to Karl Deutsch, foreign policy is the reflection of country's behaviour and its priorities to interacts with other countries. In this regard, the some developing countries rulers normally used religious sentiments in domestic politics as an instrument to gain more strength against the internal or external rivals (Deutsch, 1960).

Formation of India's Foreign Policy

In the beginning, India's foreign policy was mostly influence by the Jawaharlal Nehru being a founding father of modern India. He has profound impact in the formation of country's foreign policy with the principles of secular credential, non-alignment and coexistence. It was well defined concept to deal the India's domestic scenario and international context, apart from the complex era of Cold War in which there was difficult to protect national interests in the presence of great powers. Although it is reality, external developments are heavily influenced by a country's domestic scenario is a cornerstone of foreign policy and international relations theory. Thus, India's foreign policy makers run the country's affairs with the vision of Nehru but the post-Cold War has changed dynamics and radically influence its domestic and external dimensions. According to Joyati Bhattacharya, from the foundation of India, the country is facing difficulty to manage its relations with Pakistan and later with China (Bhattacharya, 2018). It is necessary to understand because Pakistan came into being in a hostile environment and the country was in search of great friend to protect its security from Indian threats. So, earlier the country's policy makers joined western club just for the protection of external security threat and later shake hand with People Republic China (PRC) as a counterbalance of India. In the situation, Pakistan become successful to bring Kashmir on the global agenda and created serious situation in the doorstep of India. Moreover, China has emerged as a "real elephant" of the region and Nehru's effort to bring them on board failed due to non-cooperation of great powers (Bhattacharya, 2023). Above all, India as a nonaligned country put all eggs in one basket and annoyed the Western bloc which greatly upset to India's foreign policy and still in falling position because the US new administration shifting policies towards New Delhi. According to Ashok Kapur, from the inception of India, the country never holds its freedom in foreign policy including Nehru's era could not find way out to face the challenges of foreign policy (Kapur, 2016). No noble tool has worked to gain support against Pakistan and China because of geopolitical changes in the region and globe. Further, the US and Western powers resist New Delhi to change policy towards Pakistan and this factor destabilize and falloff India. Thus, it is fact that successive Indian governments normally compromise with the ongoing situation and shown hesitation to disturb the normal system. However, India's geography and diverse culture worked to popularize the country

and the government earned huge money from the tourism rather to gain from foreign policy or from the circumstance of world politics.

Indian Foreign Policy and Pakistan's Security

Historically, from the day of birth, Pakistan is engaged with antagonistic and unpleasant situation for its existence due to India's hostile attitude. The country is a victim of India's desire of dominance and wish that it should be satellite country. The two countries have fought six major or minor wars (1947, 1948, 1965, 1971, 1999 and 2025) and have experienced a number of crises, but not a single one incident has changed the power structure in substantial way. The event of 1971 war had the most shocking consequences because dismemberment of Pakistan has left severe impact on the political and strategic landscape of the country. After the breakup of country, Pakistan merged its military resources on the Western front which helped to strengthen its strategic position and also improved military capability to prevent India from larger conventional attack along the international border. On the other side, India failed to merge Kashmir with Indian union and under the agreement both countries converted Kashmir ceasefire line into the Line of Control (LoC) as the de facto border and agreed to resolve differences peacefully. Moreover, it was widely accredited that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto diplomatic skill beaten Indra Gandhi on the table and successfully manage the difficult situation and to keep the Kashmir issue alive and prevented region from India's capitalization.

Some Indian experts have opinion that India's victory in the 1971 war has given message to Islamabad that never fight with India and also have shown intention to live with the territorial status quo mean Kashmir dispute have settled once and forever (Prott, 2022-2023). At each stage of the hostility and proactive strategies of adversary such as in 1947–1948 and 1965 wars were imposed on Pakistan. There was also series of proxy wars between Pakistan and India alongside conventional wars, started from 1989 and the Kargil war (1999) was the extreme which the whole direction of Kashmir issue. In this regard, the 1971 India-Pakistan war is a significant historical moment, where both sides took deliberate military initiatives, transforming an internal Pakistani crisis into a full-scale international war. India was involved in cross border military engagement and openly supported anti-Pakistan elements to liberate Bangladesh. In this war both challenger and defender took military initiatives and ultimately dismembered Pakistan, and then New Delhi initiated forceful action in the western front just to create more vulnerability for military leaders but the United States threat to both New Delhi-Moscow prevented to move forward (Kissinger, 1979). India again mobilise its troops during the 2002-2003 crisis (Operation Parakram) in the rection of attacks on the Indian Parliament by terrorists but no evidences were provided to Pakistan by New Delhi and complained that attackers based on Pakistan (Stolar, 2008). Thus, as per the empirical record, it is sensible to argue that India failed to produce evidences and refused for mutual investigation about the incidents but it is reality that the groups who were involved to attacks on Indian souls are unchallengeable in terms of their capabilities, strategies and training because they have potential to boost rivalry between India and Pakistan.

In this regard, the perception cleared by security management of the country that Pakistan would never accept India's hegemony or dominance in South Asian region and it would never make any compromise on the Kashmir dispute, will neither forget Kashmir nor abandon it (India Today, General Asim Munir, 2025). Moreover, there is no secret that the main Indian political parties including Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are like a Coca-Cola-Pepsi Cola, mean company names are different but water colour is same mean both have similar policies and have no soft corner for Pakistan. Both parties are the prison of partition syndrome and both have consensus not to given up its claim of a united India (Khan, 1967). Thus, India has inability to reconcile itself with Pakistan existence as a sovereign country and from the beginning, India is determined to make things difficult for the country. In the situation, the notion of security has always been a vital pillar in the formation of Pakistan security policy since any complacency can lead to the country's collapse (Chotisut, Bunyavejchewin & Krisathian, 2023). Many Pakistanis are agreed that economically and militarily stable Pakistan is a precondition for achieving security and peace with India and it is also necessary for the stability of the region. So, threats from India to Pakistan, as argued by Alexander Wendt, are the result of socio-cultural interactions (Wendt, 1992). Thus, Pakistan's case resembles, to a tremendous extent, how religious aspects alter the Muslim state's behaviour. In this way, security is a primary concern for Pakistan

because the way country's vanguard perceive security threats significantly contributes to shaping the policies of the country at large (Cheema, 1990).

Narendra Modi and its Foreign Policy Trends

The scholars quipped that "India has no foreign policy, they have only fixed adversary i.e. Pakistan and have domestic politics based on Hindu fundamentalism," (Joseph, 2025) as James Rosenau said, "developing countries have no foreign policy, have only foreign relations based on domestic political trends, which they can use as a tool in foreign policy (Rosenau, 1969). So, this observation can easily apply on India because since Narendra Modi came into power (2014), he has changed its foreign policy by moving away from idealism to pragmatism, focus on geo-economic and becoming more active in domestic and regional affairs. He believes on the philosophy of Machiavelli and Chanakya, and used all means to achieve objectives in the realm of domestic politics and foreign policy (Pande, 2017). He has given emphasis on Hindutva philosophy for the strength of Hindu-nationhood with the belief to practically establish Hindu hegemony in the region. Thus, Modi era perceived to be departure of early idealism or moral posturing which was dominated in the country's foreign policy and adoption of "self-help" realist approach with the end of the Cold War and focus on material power by embracing the pragmatic policy. So, it is clear that Modi has assumed such a hard policy and utterly prepared to face Pakistan and China in all the forum.

It is evident that Modi promoted hatred against minorities particularly Muslims and adopted Pakistan centric foreign policy to isolate in the world. He perceived to be a vital player in body politics of India and alone controlling India's internal and external environment at the diplomatic and strategic levels. He basically initiated Identity based (religion) politics in India and given the rise of Hindu extremism. However, this situation emerged after 40 years of secular Congress governments rule and during that time the conflict with Pakistan became embedded. It is reality that Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of Atal Behari Vajpayee in 1999 and 2003 was also equally responsible who harbors extremist groups such as the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) as an identity in the mainstream politics at the cost of other religious communities. There is no reason to deny this fact that national identity has played an important role in the India-Pakistan conflict. In this regard, Pakistan directly reliant on religious identity and India too dependent on religion just for supremacy. So, India under Modi have used Hindu identity to defend their own political positions and interests, which benefit from the continuation of the rivalry. The absence of an unambiguous national identity or secularism thus allows the territorial conflict with Pakistan to serve as a beacon for national unity, thereby prolonging and embedding the conflict.

Muni affirms the pragmatic behaviour of Modi which is pivotal to understand his determination to achieve regional and great power prestige and has introduced ultra-right politics and focuses on the resurgence of nationalistic, populist, and Hindu extremist notions in foreign and domestic policies to become champion of modern India" (Muni, 2015). Thus, it is confirmed that his policies are basically influenced by India's grand strategy and perceived to be a main security player in the region. Moreover, Modi's assumptions for greater India are the reflection of his strategic cultural anxiety and he is committed to continuing the policies because without that India cannot attain regional hegemony and global power status. On this way, Modi is facing great challenges, because his administration is navigating a significantly more complex in the regional landscape in South Asia and India is facing growing frustrations and diplomatic setbacks that Pakistan continuing to challenge India's power position and difficult to accept New Delhi domination (Kumar, 2025). However, it is difficult for India to prevent China that the country should not support and back to Pakistan in the field of economy and modernization of weapons which has increased its diplomatic power. It is also the indicator that India cannot move forward as a soft and hard power and seems too difficult that it can achieve regional or great power status (Ranjan, 2021). There is no doubt that the current India's strategic approach and foreign policy focus on isolate Pakistan diplomatically which India failed because of Pakistan's successful diplomacy and its reliance on asymmetrical warfare as well as nuclear deterrence. It seems at the moment, albeit in a manner India failed to protect its traditions, culture, and global vision. Moreover, the analysts mentioned that after the May 2025 short war with Pakistan, India has faced major setback for regional hegemony and global ambitions to become a 'world power' (White, 2025).

With this background, Narendra Modi emerged as one of the most popular leaders in India's political history. He always used Pakistan card to attract Hindu majoritarian votes for winning election. In the modern political setup, political parties in developing countries normally using selective notions and even nationalism as rhetoric to influence the common people or using sentiments as a propaganda tool to lure voters. So, political parties are the prison of trends and exploiting sensitivity of people more likely to win election for their conservative and nationalist agenda (Andorno, Neves, & Laukyte, 2023). In this regard, everywhere the election result shows the rise of right-wing politics in the world and India is leading country where religion and identity of the country is used for winning election and policy implementation. With this reference, Modi seems to be the most effective leaders in India who formed first majority government in nearly four decades. With a substantial list of foreign policy, he declared strong commitment towards its neighbours other than Pakistan and to engaging in alignment with other nations. For instance, with the restrictions of the space and time, Narendra Modi has transformed Indian foreign policy by introducing more pre-emptive, assertive and hostile style while maintain fundamental strategic continuity. Moreover, Prime Minister Modi highlights that foreign policy can only influence by the time in which it formulated and only can take influence by its historical, and geographical factors. It has proved that his "multi-alignment," approach, proactive diplomacy, and neighborhood first initiatives is not as per the ground reality.

In the situation, Modi attitude and behavior is not exceptional which can be explained only in pathological terms. He is member of extreme right wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which have a deep hatred against Pakistan and the Muslims. So, Modi's alleged hostility towards Muslims is not hidden because when he became Chief Minister of Gujarat (India) in 2002 he intentionally permitted anti-Muslim violence in the state in which more than 5000 innocent Muslims were killed. According to Sanjiv Bhatt, Modi attended a meeting in which he allowed Hindus masses to vent their anger against Muslims (*BBC News*, 2011). It is therefore essential to draw lessons that Pakistan is still the victims of India's continual poisonous propaganda which they are spreading falsehoods to cover up its domestic failures. They are involved in sponsoring terrorism through RAW and their associate agents in the province of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to destabilize Pakistan. However, Pakistan is committed to resist such actions and uphold its national interests and security. In this regard, Stephen Cohen is agreed that in the contemporary world where awful practices exist, then why a country like Pakistan adopted a specific offensive policy which helps the country's security guardian to take suitable measure for the protection of country's security. It is inevitable that a country who knows the destructive actors in the globe, then the country has an option to use all possible means to protect its national security and external threats (Cohen, 2003). However, in case the states failed to miscalculate the state of affairs and taking erroneous steps which can damage national security and this situation perceived to be dangerous and can benefit to adversary. As a result, states policy makers and decision makers have to diagnose the nature of threat.

In fact, Narendra Modi is the only regime in India who most notably change the shape of India's foreign policy. He changed Cold War version of bipolar policy and chose the path of pragmatism for proactive foreign policy and isolate non-alignment in all forum and trying to emerge as the developing world leader. Previously, pragmatic aspect was mostly missing in Indian foreign policy and leaders were hesitant to adopt proactive policy at the cost of other nations interests (Miller & de Estrada, 2017). However, Modi has built new policy on the view to focus on strengthen defence just to stabilize its regional status which is the gate way of its global ambitions. Therefore, Modi's vision of foreign policy based on the argument that coexistence is no more a core principle of foreign policy because the world has changed and it cannot prevent conflict and failed to foster cooperation. He emphasizes that countries with different ideologies is difficult to stay under one umbrella. Thus, achieving peaceful coexistence is challenging because countries are more inclined towards national interest and eager to gain more power for peace and stability (Ganguly, 2015).

It is highest desire of Modi that the South Asian region should be under India's influence and great powers including China must avoid to involve in the regional affairs. Domestically, he replaced secularism and with Hindutva for the socio-cultural strength of Hindu nationalism and promote his political ideology in which he replaced Nehruvian notion of diversity in India to achieve Indianization or Hindu renaissance. He

openly used “realist or pragmatic” approach that “state needs an enemy for survival” (Antunes & Camisao, 2018) and used ‘Pakistan’ for regime and state survival. For this purpose, he decided that country have to live in a context of anarchy and have to manage the country’s concerns in relation to persist in the highly competitive environment. He often-used analogy ‘not leave a chance for enemy to call someone for help and try their best to impose their will to stay under their own environment. In the situation, Modi central objective of foreign policy has been to isolate Pakistan regionally and globally. His external affairs machinery is involved to mobilise world against Pakistan and categorise that the country is a mothership of terrorism just to ratchet up international pressure but India failed to achieve nefarious objectives. In fact, the world knows that Pakistan has experienced significant impacts from terrorism and the country has faced numerous horrific terrorist attacks, resulting in substantial loss of life, infrastructure and economic damage.

Although on ground India’s position was different and other than to takes measures to overcome internal and external challenges. He announces in the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2014, that “The destiny of a country is linked to its neighborhood and New Delhi has given the top precedence of friendship with neighbors” (Modi Speech at the United Nations, 2014). Apart from the global level commitment, Modi initiated new approach particularly in the perspective of the necessary strategic race with Pakistan and China. Under his leadership, Modi reassess its priorities in foreign policy and used propaganda tools to address issues with Pakistan, especially used diplomatic machinery to reduce Islamabad influence in the region and globe (Pal P, 2018). He continues accelerate strains with Pakistan with reference to Kashmir issue, and terrorism, which India perceived to be threats to its national security and regional peace (*Al Jazeera*, 2023). In fact, Modi’s strategies for Pakistan are not normal activity as usual in bilateral diplomacy, he adopted policy of “smile and stick” mean engaging in dialogue and keeping distance from the country and trying to defame in all the manners (Kumar, 2017). In this regard, Pakistan reiterated willingness for a “meaningful and comprehensive dialogue” with India on all outstanding issues including Kashmir dispute and water distribution (See *Dawn*, 2025). However, it was Modi regime who disengaged from the composite dialogue with Pakistan and shown unwillingness to restart negotiation and demand actions against the offenders of the attack. It is also reality that India has not produced the single one evidence of attacks as they charged on Pakistan. With this excused, his regime has not restored negotiation with Pakistan but instead has sought repeatedly to engage and casting India’s leading role. According to Clary, India disengaged with Pakistan because Islamabad always asserted that dialogue must be on the Kashmir issue rather than only on terrorism (Clary, 2021).

Modi Foreign Policy Towards Pakistan

Since the division of British India (1947), India and Pakistan both countries are hostile each other and it has been categorized by a complex web of partition syndrome and characterized by a geopolitical factor, extraordinary tensions, and less time of tranquility. In fact, no Indian government have intention to stabilise relations with Pakistan rather they become aggressive and offensive as Prime Minister Modi has also adopted significantly calculated strategy towards Pakistan which categorized by strong posture and forceful measures. In addition, once the Modi gained power, his administration implemented its zero-tolerance policy towards Islamabad and carried out “surgical strikes” in Pakistan’s areas including its administered Kashmir, which called Azad Kashmir. On the other hand, Modi represented an arrogant policy which perceived to be departure of India’s customarily diplomatic policy and presented provocative policy. He initiated well-organized crusade against Pakistan in the international and regional forums to accused Pakistan for aiding terrorists and supplying weapons, training and financing to non-state actors but the world vehemently denounced the New Delhi claims against Pakistan.

In this regard, Narendra Modi’s campaign to Pakistan undergone a drastic change and appeared to the highest level of assertive engagement rather than restraint. The situation is still a serious and it seems two nations have risky standstill because until the Kashmir dispute, which is the main issue between the two countries, the condition cannot normilise. Pakistan says Kashmir is our jugular vein and India declares Kashmir is just like head of our body (Lati & Bhandari, 2020). In general, there are dim chances to bring two nations closer because there are three fundamental interests of Modi government to keep continue extremely

tense relations with Pakistan which are necessary for his regime existence. First strategy towards Islamabad is to remain pressurize the country by hook or crook. Secondly, Modi is using Pakistan and religious card in domestic politics and do not need to develop cordial relations. Thirdly, Modi is not willing to settle outstanding dispute including Kashmir with Pakistan through dialogue as a goodwill gestures, and continue exploiting terrorism to blackmail the country. These are the obvious reasons which Modi government is using as toughened approach in dealing with Pakistan. This is particularly true, mutual relations of the two countries are not cordial and both are involved to counter each other in the regional and global forum and has put the peace in the danger (Dubey, 2025). According to T. V. Paul, India and Pakistan have violent and ferocious enmities and both differ in many ways, including socio-political, linguistic, economic, and religious lines. In fact, Modi regime has made no tangible efforts to stabilize its relations with smaller neighbors including Pakistan. For this reason, they have resolved only minor issues but not interested to sort-out major disputes with neighboring countries (Paul, 2005). Moreover, Modi's believes on Hindu Supremacists and Hindutva ideology which they are using these belligerent policies to oppose Pakistan and to discover the factors that paved the way for the xenophobic posture of its administration.

Furthermore, Modi's "Muslimphobia" and anti-Pakistan rhetoric are nothing but just to gain popularity. He also used anti-Pakistan rhetoric as Giriraj Singh, Bihar BJP leader, once said "those who want to stop Modi against Muslim and Pakistan have no place in India (*The Times of India*, 2014). In other words, Modi emerge as a hardliner and become unconcerned with the parties or leaders who have soft corner with minority Muslims or Pakistan, categorically mentioned, "sympathisers have no place in India," and they should move to Pakistan (*The Times of India*, 2014). In this regard, Modi's unapologetic communalism policy created deep negative impact with neighbouring countries particularly with Bangladesh and Pakistan. He always targeted Muslims just to admire right wing extremist Hindu community to gain in election and it is one of the fundamentalist policies of BJP party (Sen, 2022). It is also broadly held view among political analysts and viewers that Narendra Modi have commonly used rhetoric about Pakistan as a part of political gambling to fascinate the Hindu nationalist vote bank and project a strong national security agenda. Moreover, he encouraged followers to become aggressive with time towards other religions. Allowed to beat Muslims because of eating cow meat and become biased and intolerant for other minorities and different low casts. Additionally, Modi has displayed a harder line policy against India's opponents and domestically also used religion in a violent manner just to show Hindu domination in the country.

Modi Influence Neighbours Against Pakistan

Modi prompted to pursue particular relationships with its neighbors and compelled them to keep out from Pakistan. He particularly used his influence on Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Maldives to keep distance from Pakistan if they need cordial relationships with New Delhi. On the one hand, India acknowledged that Pakistan is the greatest threat to its security rather China, which once defeated India in its border war in 1962 and New Delhi perceived to be not capable to face China in land, air or sea (Khan, Dawar & Wei, 2025). Indian leadership using China card to gain potential economic and strategic advantageous from the US, Europe and Japan. They are showing growing concern about Beijing strategic activities and trying to take greater role in the Indo-Pacific region (Lin, 2024). Furthermore, Modi and its party BJP views Pakistan through a lens shaped by Hindutva ideology and have psychologically partition syndrome. They are using Pakistan as a shield of national security and possessing hardline stances to keep India's unity, aiming for regional dominance and have desire for global power status. According to Barry Buzan, India views Pakistan as a significant obstacle to achieving its regional dominance and global aspirations. This perspective has confirmed by the continue enmity and ongoing geopolitical rivalry (Wojczewski, 2014).

However, India and Pakistan mutual relations have worsened under the Modi era, excluding the short time of Nawaz Sharif period when Prime Minister Modi visited Pakistan to congratulate Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on his birthday, but his reconciliatory visit failed because he did not shown flexibility to talk over the issue of Jammu and Kashmir which is the one of bone of contention between the two countries and its military establishment, who is dominated in the policy making of country and has prevented Nawaz Sharif to not cross the red line (Wani, 2016). Additionally, Pakistan refused to accept terrorist attacks on Indian

military bases, which India claimed attackers based on Pakistan Jahidi organizations, who weakened environment between the traditional adversaries. In this regard, New Delhi felt fear that Pakistan is using cross-border terrorism and extremism as an instrument against India which New Delhi feel threaten for its national security (Gupta, 2025). For instance, Pakistan feels uncomfortable by India's involvement in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which threatens Pakistan's security (General Musharraf, 2006). However, India has taken many decisive steps in the near past including unilaterally withdrawal of Article-370 and 35-A (August 2019) of the Indian constitution, mean removed of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir once and for all. Pakistan rejected the one-sided changes about the Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir which is perceived to be against the will of international law, UNSC resolutions (1947-1948) and bilateral agreements (Mehta, 2019). International community including China also condemned Indian action and internalize the matter on behalf of Pakistan and given hard time to India's soft diplomacy. In response of Pakistan proactive policy, Modi has taken turning point in term of relations with neighbours-hood and used US global war on terror as a shield and directly focused on Pakistan (Sreeram, 2016). So, in the second term Modi has taken strict action under his 'doctrine,' targeted Pakistan and reaffirming India's place as a regional power in the world (Angana, 2016). In order to exert substantial influence to play in the global politics, Modi has given deep association to domestic politics particularly to Hindutva philosophy which is a cultural justification of Indian nationalism and its diplomacy. To achieve its goals, Modi pursued dynamic foreign policy to encircle Pakistan through its economic and defence power rather to establish relations through dialogue (IISS, 2025). In this context, China helps Pakistan to increase presence, boost its defence and economic capacity and created significant influence in South Asia, which counter India's strengthen in the region.

It was recorded that Modi bilateral diplomacy failed to bring anti-terrorism pressures on Pakistan and also Western and leading Muslim countries refused to support Indian stance and insisted to involve in dialogue with Islamabad. Though, it was Modi's utmost desire to blackmail Pakistan on the issue of terrorism but its central focus idea never appreciated in the world. Shekhar Gupta explained Modi's failure and mentioned that Pakistan is equally vital as a leading Muslim nuclear power and it is not easy to be ignored or isolated by the world community which have one of the powerful militaries (Gupta, 2016). However, Modi become rigid and signaled that India will only focus terrorism and refused to discuss on Kashmir. Shyam Saran, former diplomat and Foreign Secretary, argues that Modi's have constructed policies for the revival of Hinduism which are unconvincing like other predecessors to boost India's cultural style (Mohan, 2015). But Raja Mohan, mentioned that Modi's rule seems to be 'Third Republic' which was marked by social unrest and deep religious divisions and it also reflect in his foreign policy (Mohan, 2015). His main agenda is to deal only Pakistan as a country's chief rival and exploiting China to impress the Western world. As explained by Brahma Chellaney that Indian foreign policy makers failed to understand the China-Pakistan strategic partnership which is the integral part of South Asian scenario, which has changed security dynamics of the region. No one can realize the decades-old flow of Chinese military assistance to Pakistan which prop up the country as a counterweight of India, can be understood only in the context of Asian geopolitics (Chellaney, 2010). In fact, under the Modi regime, India's strategies to Pakistan based on a stance of slow-to-anger in mutual diplomacy and his bilateral diplomacy or more explicit coalition diplomacy with the objectives 'Acting West', 'Acting East' and 'Acting South' decline because of Modi's perceptions which largely absent from its logical end (Haokip, 2011). There is no doubt that India, at the moment is a world's growing economy and have the six largest military but not influencing the power position of neighbouring countries of China and Pakistan. He also tried its best to moving India towards partnership with other regional and global power but not succussed to take support against Pakistan and China (Bajpai, 2017).

Surgical Strikes and Modi Foreign Policy

After the failure of Modi's diplomacy and foreign policy, he carried out series of surgical strikes on so-called terrorists' sanctuaries in Pakistan. It was the operational attacks itself, and started subsequently global diplomatic campaign against Pakistan to highlight that strikes are against the state-sponsored terrorism. Moreover, strikes were the part of the Cold Star Doctrine and India's broader strategic designs to aggressively deal Pakistan. The time period of these strikes was from September 2016 to 2019 which created more

hostilities between the two countries and greater escalation risks between the nuclear-armed countries. India justified its actions with the pretext of self-defense and under international law and mentioned that the events of 9/11 (2001) has given justification, the countries who are responsible for providing shelter to non-state actors, can be handle with offensive means (Begoore, 2016). In response of that Pakistan claimed that Indian airstrikes are against the rules of international law and United Nations charter and universal norms do not allow India to use forces against the country. Pakistan declared that Indian actions constitute an act of war and the country will react accordingly. It has no training camps and Kashmir freedom movement is indigenous and Indian move will consider well-planned intervention in Pakistani areas and it would be strongly response (Sasikumar, 2019). *The New York Times* also mentioned that Pakistan's authorities declared that India's cross-border strikes will consider "an act of war" (Barry & Masood, 2016). However, it was proved the effective way of peace in the region is only possible by the reasonable solution of Kashmir issue which need careful diplomatic efforts from the both sides to bring the two sides back from the brink.

It was Modi government decision to target Balakot (2019), Hazara region, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, by airstrike to prove the global community that India is a regional bully and no country is beyond its approach. But Indian dream collapsed when Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had shot down two Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft, (MiG-21) and captured Indian pilot Abhinandan Varthaman who landed on Pakistani area and later pilot released by the US involvement (*Daily Dawn*, 2019). In this incident, India not only lost aircrafts and also failed to target so-called training sites of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) as Modi government claimed that these organisations has been involved in terrorist attacks on India but New Delhi failed to dismantle and also failed to provide credible evidences about the infrastructure in Pakistan soil (*Daily Dawn*, 2019; Perkovich & Dalton, 2016). On the other hand, Indian expert of foreign policy continues emphasis to Modi's to improve its relations with Pakistan because without that India cannot achieve the target of economic growth and the time has come to recognize Pakistan as an important actor of the region (Nanda, 1999).

However, Modi preferred to use pressure against Pakistan and used robust and proactive actions to sideline the country. In this regard, his policy marked a significant transformation in India's strategic doctrine, signaling a decisive move to counter Islamabad moves apart from stabilization of relationships with Pakistan. In fact, Modi policy towards Pakistan remains one of the most enduring objectives based on the periodic resumption to unjustified the partition which has affected every dimension of interstate relations and there are no signs of abating (Tandon, 2016). Indeed, Pakistan as a new-nation state is not the only country who born in the era of decolonization and it was not the gift of great powers geopolitical sitting rather it comes out by the long struggle of South Asian Muslims. In fact, Indian has become sensitive with the division of British India which was as usual business and they should come out from the post-World War II changes which are inevitable and emergence of Pakistan is one of the realities in the world. Thus, history is witnessed that Pakistan always offered for meaningful talk and taken many peace initiatives but Modi government like the Congress leadership adopted delaying tactics to involve with Pakistan for comprehensive negotiation including Kashmir but it was India who avoided for conflict resolution with Pakistan. Thus, India has nothing to do but continuing blamed Pakistan for supporting terrorist activities in India to destabilize the country. While Pakistan offered for joint investigation against terrorist attacks in India but New Delhi claimed that Pakistan has offered insufficient cooperation and the New Delhi have no option to disagreed with Islamabad offered (Pandalai, 2011).

Modi Foreign Policy After Pahalgam Incident

In the recent past, Narendra Modi once again designs plots against Pakistan just to defame the country through the violent activities as they did before in different cities of India and accuse Islamabad without credible evidences. It was normal practice of Modi government to allege that Pakistan has become a "facilitation center for terrorists" and informed the world body to take notice (Perkovich & Dalton, 2015). Pakistan consistently rejects accusations of state-sponsored terrorism, labelling Indian allegations are baseless propaganda with the designed to tarnish Pakistan image and isolate it internationally (*Daily Dawn*, August 21, 2022 and April 16, 2025). With this background, as per the well-organized Indian plan on April 22, 2025,

some RAW trained group attacked on the innocent tourists in the Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, Anantnag district of Indian controlled Kashmir. The attackers executed in mass-style killing, mostly Hindus and it perceived to be one of the worst assaults in Kashmir since the February 2019 Pulwama suicide bombing that killed 40 TRF (*Al Jazeera*, 2025). India claimed that Pakistan based resistance groups were involved in Pahalgam attack and engaging in hostile activities which leading to significant diplomatic and military escalation.

In response of Indian traditional anti-Pakistan-hostile propaganda, Pakistan outrightly rejected baseless allegations and said attack is a ‘false flag operation.’ In an interview with *Al Jazeera*, Pakistani Defence Minister Khawaja Asif claimed, without providing any evidence, the attack was “orchestrated” and rejected India’s claims that Pakistan was involved (Amours, 2025). Indian media claimed, the Pahalgam attack is the severe security failure of authorities which basically appeared in rural side which is greatly militarised zone under the intensive observation of forces. According to Indian sources, the militants were already in the area but security guardian has taken no notice, showed no threat of mishap (See *Frontline Magazine & Dawn*, 2025). Many observers including Abhijnan Rej have critically analyse the attack and mentioned that India have to investigate the rising fault lines within the internal security governance (Rej, 2025). On the other hand, Indian official media plot to defame Pakistan through social media as part of a malevolent and planned effort to accused Pakistan. Raw based media wing has viral widespread propaganda and fabricating stories to implicate Pakistan in terrorist activities. More importantly, it has confirmed that Modi government has taken well-prepared action against Pakistan but the global community has seen that it was untrue and baseless data based on self-created assertions (*BBC News*, 2025). Moreover, foreign media and their secret services have not found any clue of Pakistan’s involvement in the attacks. India basically abortive to produce sound evidence and used false tactics to cover its domestic failure. Equally important, Pakistan exposed a record based on indisputable proves of India’s involvement in the internal affairs of the country and requested to the global community to take notice of New Delhi’s rebellious actions against Pakistan and prevent to destabilize the South Asian region.

After Pahalgam incident (May 2025), which marked a turning point of the South Asian politics because India with the excuse of attack, immediately initiative limited military offensive named “Operation Sindoor” against Pakistan followed by Operation Mahadev to track and eliminate the militants involved in the freedom struggle of Kashmir. In order to reply Indian aggression, Pakistan was fully prepared to response under the operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos mean Indian attack will be answerable. The situation perceived to be severely threatening and challenging in the contemporary global conflicts which potentially created worst scenario between the two nuclear arms neighbors’ and also become alarming for regional and global politics. However, it was the fifth time (April 2025) that India and Pakistan involved in war which perceived to be the major escalation between the South Asian neighbors. India made responsible Islamabad for the attack in which many tourists were killed in Indian controlled Kashmir area (Pahalgam) in April 2025 and an accusation strongly rejected by Islamabad. Pakistan’s Air Force successfully targeted Indian fighter jets and shot down Russian Migs and advanced French-made Rafales. Pakistan response to India by Chinese-made fighter jets (JF-17) and shot down multiple Indian Air Force (IAF) fighter jets, including the Rafales (Stockwell, 2025). Indian officials initially refused to confirm the aircraft loss, as Anil Chauhan, the chief of defense staff of the Indian Armed Forces, in the beginning denied the veracity of the claim, but later Air Chief Marshal Staff Amar Preet Singh admitted that India’s S-400 air defence systems made it vulnerable by the Pakistani aircraft (*Al Jazeera*, August 2025).

In the same way, one of the senior French intelligence official also inform to CNN that Rafale fighter jets had been downed by Pakistan (*CNN News*, May 31, 2025). The US President Donald Trump has repeatedly mentioned that a number of “brand new, beautiful planes” were shot down by the Pakistan Air Force, with figures ranging from five to as many as eight aircraft. Indian official also claimed, its forces had made a “tactical mistake,” in a fight with Pakistan and acknowledged their weaknesses (*Al Jazeera Media Network*, 2025). According to foreign media, Pakistan informed to United States that by all means Pakistan will defend its territory against India, even can go to extreme level. In the situation, the US Secretary of State,

Marco Rubio, actively intervened and reported to the President Donald Trump about nuclear escalation, resulting in a ceasefire between Pakistan and India (Chrostou, 2025). In fact, Pakistan's civil and military leadership was ready to use nuclear deterrence to counter India's conventional military superiority (Lawal, 2025). According to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation sources, Pakistan rejected no first use policy and signaling readiness to use nuclear weapons to protect its sovereignty and independence (CACNP, 2025). Therefore, in the prevailing security environment, Pakistan has extended deterrence, which has served to contain the adversary aggressive position in response of expansive conventional threats and India failed to pursue its limited options. There is no doubt that nuclear weapons have emerged as a guarantee to prevent full-scale war and created strategic stability. There is no doubt that nuclear weapons have potential capacity to de-escalate the pressure of greater conventional forces through effective deterrence and compellence which work as a coercive diplomacy, reduce the chances of war in the region.

Furthermore, the India-Pakistan May 2025 short war has underscored the multifaceted nature of modern warfare, where Pakistan used its strategic diplomacy and credible deterrence against India. The event exposed India's military and strategic vulnerabilities and Pakistan has emerged as a key strategic player on the global stage as well as the country gained significant strategic position in the world. Moreover, Modi decline with its key pillars of foreign policy such as strategic autonomy, multilateral institutions, and technology for global development. Its idea of digital diplomacy, economic growth and South-South cooperation also turned down (Malone DM, 2025). The leading global media highlighting Pakistan's momentous diplomatic victory and its proactive engagement with the United States and key regional partners. The daily *Telegraph* described that Pakistan adopted a front foot strategy on both military and diplomatic fronts and declares Pakistan rising global power under strong civil-military leadership led by Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir (Crilly, 2025). Furthermore, the global landscape has transformed Pakistan and country becomes blue eyed and secure a trade deal with the United States and signed defense agreement with Saudi Arabia (Mosly, 2025). Its international position has strengthened dramatically and its deterrence contributed to revive the Kashmir issue on the global stage, and also helped to contain India's diplomatic standing. Additionally, Narendra Modi's plans to isolate Pakistan in the region and global level have decline diplomatically and his strategy of bilateralism on Kashmir has also faced setback. Moreover, Pakistan gained psychological confidence and improve its standing in the eyes of the world and began to view ties with Pakistan as a matter of honor and pride. On the other hand, his Act East Policy, infrastructure-led diplomacy, and the Indo-Pacific strategy declined along with regional and global security frameworks.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy has experienced a significant change since its independence to Narendra Modi's period of Indianisation. Jawaharlal Nehru's ideology of neutrality, secularism and idealism replaced by Modi's idea of Hindutva, 'multi-aligned,' and 'strategic autonomy.' He perceived to be built cordial relations with all great powers and neighbouring countries with Indian conditions. He presented India with the new orientation of governance, economy, and national identity. Modi's background and ideological leanings towards Hindu-nationhood, stemming from his early association with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is preaching chauvinism, prejudism, hatred and communal tensions and marginalization of minorities. His domestic politics, electoral considerations and foreign policy significantly influence by anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim rhetoric and a strong, assertive posture to appeal to a nationalist voter base. He exploited terrorism as a part of a broader foreign policy strategy to defame Pakistan with the sole objective to consolidate the Hindu nationalist vote and project an image of a strong leader capable of safeguarding national interests. Of course, Modi played a destructive game in Pahalgam incidents (April 2025), arranged by RAW to pressurize Pakistan but balloon punctured and pay back Modi's 'Kashmir' narrative at a dead end. Its aggressive posture against Pakistan failed to influence the world and the new situation harms India's international standing and disappointed domestic audience. Its objectives to elevate its status as a global player and a regional hegemon went into dream. Nevertheless, the response of its foreign and domestic policy and particularly in the areas of strategic, economic and socio-cultural front become rhetoric and less gains. Moreover, India needs time to recover its wounds because its economic ambitions, multilateral engagements and proactive diplomacy once decline cannot reemerge as a leading force in global and regional level.

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The Mediating Role of Work Engagement on the Relationship between Emotional Self-Awareness and Occupational Fatigue among Manufacturing Sector Employees

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Occupational fatigue, marked by feelings of emotional and physical exhaustion, continues to be a significant issue in contemporary work environments. Understanding the psychological factors that protect against fatigue is thus crucial. This study aims to examine whether work engagement mediates the relationship between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue. This study examines the mediating role of work engagement in the connection between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue. Drawing on Affective Events Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, the research asserts that employees who understand and control their emotions can better maintain engagement, which acts as a personal resource to resist fatigue. A quantitative approach was taken, gathering survey information from 312 full-time white-collar employees in the manufacturing sector in Türkiye (response rate = 69.3%) with established scales for emotional self-awareness, work engagement and occupational fatigue. The findings show that emotional self-awareness was found to be negatively correlated with occupational fatigue ($b = -.60$, $p < .001$), placing the hypothesis that those with higher levels of awareness feel less fatigue. Further, the findings show that work engagement partially mediates between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue (indirect effect $b = -.38$, 95% CI $[-.51, -.27]$), implying that being emotionally self-aware means employees are more engaged at work, reducing fatigue in challenging working situations. The findings highlight the imperative of facilitating emotional self-awareness and engagement among organizations. Enhancing emotions understanding and directing emotions into productive behaviors, organizations can foster resilience, maintain energy, and promote psychological satisfaction, thus alleviating the negative impacts of occupational fatigue.

Keywords: emotional self-awareness; work engagement; occupational fatigue

JEL Codes: L20, M10, M12

Current working circumstances have a rapidly changing and dynamic nature nowadays. To adapt to these challenging conditions, employees are often exposed to intense job demands, heightened performance expectations and rapid organizational changes. This competitive work environment has a direct negative impact on employees' psychological, emotional and physical resources. One of the most essential consequences of challenging working environment can be defined as occupational fatigue. In terms of organizations, occupational fatigue does not only remain a personal issue rather it influences organizational performance, productivity and effectiveness. Therefore, understanding the reasons of this term is crucial for both employees' well-being and organizational purposes.

Fatigue can be defined as multidimensional state of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion (Åkerstedt, Knutsson, & Westerholm, 2004; Boksem & Tops, 2008; Mehta & Parasuraman, 2014;). Unlike stress in workplace, fatigue shows itself in long-term. It appears after a long-term effect of reduced energy, decreased motivation, over workload or heightened stress. Although stress can be reaction of a particular work issue, fatigue

is the accumulated outcome of stress and job-demands. This long-term accumulation of physical exhaustion, mental and emotional strain can have consequences on employees' emotions, psychology and cognitive world. Decreased concentration, lowered working reactions or impaired decision-making can be observed cognitively. Most crucially, irritability, low motivation and diminished psychological aspect can affect individuals' emotions unintentionally. Although lowered productivity, effectiveness or absenteeism can be outcomes of fatigue in terms of organizations, the effects of fatigue in one's psychology should be understood to prevent it. Unlike workplace stress, which is a proximal reaction to a specific demand, and burnout, which is a chronic syndrome combining exhaustion with cynicism and reduced efficacy, fatigue here refers to the cumulative depletion of energy that can also appear acutely and is reversible with recovery. In addition, there are several forms of fatigue in the literature such as physical fatigue, cognitive fatigue, emotional fatigue or compassion fatigue (Barnes & Van Dyne, 2009; Pessiglione, Blain, Wiehler, & Naik, 2025; Zhang, Xiang, Guo, Ma, Guan, & Zhou, 2023). To illustrate, physical fatigue refers to lack of physical energy where cognitive fatigue represents difficulty in concentrating and decision-making problems. Similarly, emotional fatigue means irritability and losing empathy, on the other hand, compassion fatigue is exhaustion due to continuous exposure to others' suffering. One of the most essential type of fatigue can be identified as occupational fatigue. Occupational fatigue is a well-recognized concept in organizational behavior in social work research in recent years.

Occupational fatigue can be defined as multidimensional state of tiredness and reduced functioning caused by prolonged or intense work demands (Di Fabio, Svicher, & Gori, 2021; Satterfield & Van Dongen, 2013; Techera, Hallowell, Stambaugh, & Littlejohn, 2016). Physical, mental and emotional exhaustion caused by occupational fatigue can appear acutely and be reversible with proper recovery. Workplace precursors such workload, time pressure, role stressors, emotional labor can be the key antecedents of this term. In line with this, recent evidence from working adults indicates that emotional labor intensifies psychosocial and emotional strain and, in turn, undermines mental health, while supportive relational resources buffer this process (Zafar, Zahra, & Saleem, 2026). To illustrate, employees working under constant deadlines and perform multiple tasks can have more tendency to feel occupational fatigue. On the other hand, role conflict, ambiguity or any other unsafe working conditions may cause this term. In this aspect, employees can experience decreased motivation, self-efficacy or concentration where risks of heightened stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout feelings. These personal outcomes also influence organizational productivity and presenteeism in negative way. Furthermore, individuals can have higher turnover intentions where they face increased safety risks and workplace accidents due to fatigue in the workplace.

Occupational fatigue can have different sub-dimensions in the workplace (Marvin, Schram, Orr, & Roberts, 2024; Pignatiello, Martin, & Hickman, 2020; Ren, Zhou, Zhang, Yang, Li, & Liu, 2024). Physical fatigue represents loss of energy and tiredness due to long work hours which accompanies mental fatigue causing reduced concentration and poor decision making. Essentially, decision fatigue, reduced ability to make effective choices can be observed where critical sequences of decisions needed in the workplace. Lastly, emotional fatigue has an effect on psychological state on individual who experience loss of emotional control and empathy which are crucial in social relationships in the workplace. In other words, occupational fatigue is often described as psychological early warning signal that employees' resources are being depleted.

The adverse effects of occupational fatigue make it a growing concern for organizations. While occupational fatigue can lead to unintended outcomes for both employees and organizations, it can be alleviated through certain behavioral and organizational factors. Elements such as organizational culture, climate, trust, and supervisor support are fundamental in preventing fatigue at work (Dopolani, Arefi, Akhlaghi Pirposhteh, & Pourmohammadi, 2022; Dohrmann, Herttua, & Leppin, 2019; Perel, 2015). Because such organizational-level variables lie outside the present research model, this study focuses instead on individual psychological resources emotional self-awareness and work engagement as protective factors against occupational fatigue (Sim et al., 2023). On the other hand, psychological and emotional aspects are also essential to mitigate this unintended situation.

Occupational fatigue, marked by a diminished psychological and physical capacity to sustain effort and recover effectively. It remains closely tied to how employees evaluate their work experiences and manage their recovery processes. Understanding the psychological constructs that diminish this fatigue is thus crucial. Among these constructs, emotional self-awareness stands out as a particularly influential factor, as it enables employees

to recognize and regulate their emotions in response to workplace challenges. Grounded in Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and consistent with empirical evidence that emotional self-awareness is negatively associated with occupational stress (Millette, 2023), emotional self-awareness is expected to function as a personal resource that lets employees detect emotional strain early and regulate it before their energy is depleted. These considerations highlight the role of emotional self-awareness in fostering resilience, maintaining energy, and alleviating the negative impacts of occupational fatigue.

Emotional self-awareness can be defined as one's ability to identify, perceive and understand his/her emotions and their effects on his/her thoughts and behaviors (Killian, 2012; Salzen, 1998; Tamunomiebi & Owhorji, 2018). Emotional self-awareness is a multidimensional construct that captures how people respond to their own emotional experiences. It can be represented as key element of emotional mechanism underlying self-regulation and interpersonal functioning. In workplace settings specifically, this capacity enables employees to interpret emotionally demanding work events accurately and to respond adaptively rather than reactively (Huggins, Williams, & Sato, 2023). Furthermore, individuals with high emotional self-awareness can recognize their emotional experiences allowing for understanding nuances. It also involves continuous awareness of emotional state over time where adaptability and emotional capacity of individuals are enhanced. To illustrate, individuals can integrate emotional information with rational thought processes which support decision making and problem-solving skills in complex and stressful situations. In terms of organizational behavior research, this point is relatively essential for employees to cope with challenging working tasks in the workplace.

On the other hand, emotional self-awareness extends beyond mental recognition of emotions rather it provides control of physiological or behavioral outcomes where individuals can analyze their emotional experiences, derive meaning and learn from them. Hence in organizations, employees with higher emotional self-awareness can contribute to their personal growth and emotional maturity which in turn can mitigate occupational fatigue in the workplace. By understanding their own emotions, employees can be more capable of managing their attitudes and social relations which are essential for creating culture of mutual support. Emotional stability and resilience under stress are also enhanced by emotional self-awareness which improves individual and collective performance (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Hills & Argyle, 2001). The resilience under stress also is a central determinant of occupational fatigue which is undesired in the workplace.

In line with these arguments, emotional self-awareness provides a capacity to individuals where they recognize early signs of stress, allowing them to regulate their emotions before occupational fatigue escalates. Being aware of emotional limits can help employees manage work and emotional demands more effectively which can prevent demotivation and depletion of psychology causing fatigue. In addition, individuals with emotional self-awareness can have more tendency to recognize their need for rest and self-care which provides a chance recovery from stressors in the workplace. These mechanisms represent the theoretical rationale for the expected relationship rather than pathways directly tested here; the present study examines the overall association between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue and the mediating role of work engagement (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Millette, 2023). Consequently, demanding conditions and challenging situations require sustainable performance and strong psychological construction to cope with in terms of employees, where emotional self-awareness can foster resilience and psychological support to employees, thereby preventing occupational fatigue.

Although emotional self-awareness can reduce occupational fatigue directly, this relationship can be further clarified through the mediating role of work engagement. Work engagement is proposed as the mechanism because, following Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), employees who are aware of their affective reactions to work events regulate them constructively, and the resulting positive states crystallize into engagement, which per COR Theory acts as a motivational resource that protects energy from depletion. This reasoning is consistent with recent evidence grounded in Affective Events Theory showing that positive psychological states function as mediating mechanisms through which work-related experiences shape employee outcomes (Durukan & Basım, 2026). When individuals are highly aware of their emotions, they are better able to channel their psychological energy into positive attitudes and active involvement in their work. This heightened work engagement characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption serves as a personal resource that protects against fatigue (Bakker, 2011; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Keyko, Cummings, Yonge, & Wong, 2016; Leiter & Bakker, 2010). Work-engaged employees experience their work as

meaningful and stimulating rather than exhausting, sustaining motivation and psychological energy even under demanding conditions. Emotional self-awareness can directly contribute to this engagement by enabling individuals to recognize and regulate their emotional states, focus their energy on purposeful goals, and maintain a positive connection with their tasks. In turn, higher work engagement can reduce occupational fatigue by fostering enthusiasm, concentration, and emotional resilience, which buffer against the depletion of personal resources. Therefore, work engagement serves as a concrete mediating mechanism through which emotional self-awareness alleviates occupational fatigue. To date, however, these constructs have largely been studied separately, and no study has tested work engagement as the mechanism linking emotional self-awareness to occupational fatigue; the present study addresses this gap among employees in Türkiye's manufacturing sector.

Theoretical underpinnings and research hypotheses

The link between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue

Occupational fatigue can be represented as physical, emotional and cognitive exhaustion due to long-term work demands which exceed one's capacity of internal resources (Di Fabio, Svicher, & Gori, 2021; Marvin, Schram, Orr, & Roberts, 2024; Palazzeschi, 2025; Satterfield & Van Dongen, 2013). It has a multidimensional structure affecting attitudes, emotions and cognitions of individuals. Decline in energy, motivation and performance caused by accumulated work-related stressors construct occupational fatigue for the employees. Unlike burnout, which is a chronic syndrome combining exhaustion with cynicism and reduced efficacy, occupational fatigue can also appear acutely and is reversible with adequate recovery (Winwood, Winefield, & Dawson, 2005). In this respect, high job demands with long working hours, and heavy workloads are the preceding factors for occupational fatigue causing burnout in the end. Occupational fatigue can be caused by both psychological and physical antecedents (Hotopf, 1998; LeGal, Rhéaume, & Mullen, 2019; Levenson, 2017; Techera, Hallowell, Stambaugh, & Littlejohn, 2016). On the other hand, employees need sufficient recovery elements such as rest, sleep, work-life balance to prevent chronic fatigue accumulation. In addition, workplace stressors as time constraints, interpersonal tensions can accelerate fatigue levels.

Furthermore, occupational fatigue can affect the employees' psychological state in negative way. Fatigued employees can experience reduce concentration and decrease performance which in turn increase absenteeism and turnover intentions. Moreover, occupational fatigue can damage engagement of employees with their work by burnout symptoms and health problems. Hence, reduced productivity and workplace safety can be observed among employees. This fatigue can be categorized into three main sub-dimensions as acute fatigue, chronic fatigue and recovery (Burley, Cox, & Findley, 2007; Heilbronn, Doma, Sinclair, Connor, & Orr, 2023; Mounstephen & Sharpe, 1997). To illustrate, acute fatigue represents short-term tiredness and energy depletion due to intensive work periods. Whereas chronic fatigue has a long-term characteristic reflecting prolonged imbalance between work demands and personal resources. If workload is intensively high in long periods, recovery of employees' psychological state is needed. Recovery is the ability to restore motivation and energy where effective rest practices can be applied to fatigued employees. From organizational behavior viewpoint, occupational fatigue is a critical element determining individuals' well-being and performance.

Occupational fatigue does not only affect individuals but also it is a strategic concern from organizational perspective. Higher levels of occupational fatigue undermine employees' psychology by reducing engagement, concentration and effectiveness. Hence, management of occupational fatigue is critical for sustaining both subjective and collective performances. In this manner, organizational aspects such as leadership styles, organizational culture or colleague support can be key elements to mitigate this kind of behavior. On the other hand, psychological and emotional factors such as well-being, resilience or emotional self-awareness can buffer occupational fatigue. In line with this discussion, employees being aware with their emotions can identify early signs of fatigue, recognize emotional strain and regulate their responses before exhaustion intensifies.

Self-awareness can be defined as one's ability to understand own thoughts, emotions, values and their impact on personal behaviors (Blakemore & Frith, 2003; Carver, 2003; Cook, 1999). Self-awareness is viewed as a core component of emotional intelligence defining as "*ability to advantageously deal with one's own emotions, thoughts and behaviors in problem solving and decision making*" Mayer and Salovey (1993, p. 434). Common subdimensions of self-awareness can be represented as accurate self-assessment, self-confidence, social

awareness or emotional self-awareness (Greenacre, Tung, & Chapman, 2014; Panadero, Jonsson, & Botella, 2017; Wegner & Giuliano, 1982).

In this aspect, emotional self-awareness is specifically focused on individual's emotions and their influence on cognition, behavior and social relationships. According to organizational behavior literature, emotional self-awareness can be defined as ability to perceive, understand and identify one's emotions and their consequences on attitudes and thoughts (Huggins, Williams, & Sato, 2023; Morin, 2011; Thompson, 2022). It is narrower than emotional intelligence, of which it forms the intrapersonal perception component; in the present study it is treated as a unidimensional construct consistent with the measurement instrument used (Tatar et al., 2018), rather than through the descriptive sub-dimensions outlined below. In this manner, higher level of emotional self-awareness provides a capacity for individuals to interpret emotional events accurately and respond adaptively. Furthermore, this ability can serve as a personal resource while employees with higher emotional self-awareness can experience some positive outcomes which can mitigate fatigue or burnout. To illustrate, this ability can help employees to prevent occupational fatigue while recognizing emotional strain early by controlling impulsive reactions and handling stressful situations effectively.

Emotional self-awareness has five common sub-dimensions in literature which can mitigate occupational fatigue in the workplace. First sub-dimension as emotional identification is recognizing one's emotions accurately that helps employees to identify fatigue-related emotions such as anxiety and frustration before they intensify. This recognition can interrupt the occupational fatigue in earlier stages which gives employees a chance to recover. On the other hand, emotional differentiation and emotional understanding are two other sub-dimensions which allow individuals to apply right coping strategy between misinterpreting emotions. These dimensions enable employees to manage emotional triggers effectively which avoid emotional tension lowering occupational fatigue. Lastly, emotional expression awareness and emotional regulation awareness help employees to regulate interpersonal communication which prevents conflict, miscommunication and emotional labor which are all major sources of occupational fatigue. This cognitive and emotional balance protects employees from occupation fatigue by strengthening self-composure in demanding situations.

At this point, it is necessary to emphasize the theories that this study depends on. According to affective events theory, the experiences gained in the workplace trigger affective reactions that has impact on employees' behaviors, psychology and emotions. Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) introduced this theory by stating that workplace behaviors are the key determinants of personal emotions. Applied to the present model, AET predicts not only the direct ESA–fatigue link but specifically the engagement pathway (H2), since cumulative positive affective reactions shaped by how accurately employees perceive and regulate them crystallize into the attitudinal state of work engagement. In this aspect, emotional self-awareness can play a central role by allowing employees to recognize and regulate their emotional responses to work events. Workplace events processed by employees can be evaluated by individuals in a balanced way that prevent negative accumulative effects causing occupational fatigue. Consequently, employees enabled to manage workplace experiences effectively can avoid maladaptive reactions such as stress or exhaustion.

Second theory that this research is founded is the conservation of resources theory. This theory is developed by Hobfoll (1989), and states how people tend to acquire, protect and maintain valuable resources to manage stress, fatigue and psychological well-being. This theory emphasizes that stress and fatigue occur when employees lose their personal resources or feel a threat of resources loss in the workplace. Employees continuously invest in cognitive and emotional resources to handle workplace demands. When workplace stressors exceed one's available resources, occupational fatigue can arise. In this model, emotional self-awareness is the personal resource, work engagement is the energized motivational state produced by successful resource investment, and occupational fatigue indexes resource depletion.

In this respect, emotional self-awareness is a personal resource that prevents loss of psychological energy where employees can conserve emotional resources reducing risk of fatigue. Emotionally self-aware employees can allocate their emotions more effectively which in turn withdraws unnecessary emotional strain causing occupational fatigue.

Emotional self-awareness refers to capacity to recognize, understand and regulate emotions and how these affect behavior and decision-making. Emotionally aware employees are more capable of managing

emotional demands and sustaining psychological balance. By recognizing emotions and regulating them in necessary circumstances, it can allow employees to prevent the accumulation of negative emotional strain and stress contributing to occupational fatigue. To illustrate, Millette (2023) conducted research and found that emotional self-awareness is negatively associated with occupational stress among mental health professionals. Similarly, Kikuchi and Ishii (2015) emphasized the importance of self-awareness which prevents fatigue symptoms in the workplace. Furthermore, emotional self-awareness can foster emotional balance that constructs psychological barriers to interrupt occupational fatigue. When emotional experiences are understood constructively, employees can be more likely to cope with job demands without any stress or exhaustion. In line with these arguments, emotional self-awareness functions as a self-protective resource that mitigates the negative emotional consequences of workplace demands, leading to lower levels of occupational fatigue and greater overall well-being. Drawing on these theoretical perspectives and previous empirical findings, the first hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H1: Emotional self-awareness is negatively associated with occupational fatigue.

Workers with greater emotional self-awareness tend to be less susceptible to severe levels of occupational fatigue; however, the nature of this link might be driven by different organizational, behavioral, and psychological factors. The link between emotional self-understanding and occupational fatigue may be further elucidated by offering a mediating construct relating to employees' psychological energy and motivation at work. In particular, work engagement could be a vital mechanism accounting for how emotional self-awareness affects employees' capacity to maintain performance and well-being in demanding working situations. Work engagement allows employees to leverage their emotional self-understanding into a positive energy and focus of mind, thus enhancing their resilience and lowered probability to suffer from fatigue. More emotionally self-aware employees can detect early signs of stress, thus regulating their emotions effectively, and being psychologically engaged with their job. Such an increased engagement increases their effectiveness in coping with workload-related demands and can allow them to recover fast from work-related stressors.

The mediating function of work engagement in the connection between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue

Work engagement can be conceptualized as “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Engagement represents a persistent emotional and attitudinal state where employees can dedicate themselves to their work. Being energetic, enthusiastic and deeply involved in job activities are the main characteristics of work engagement. By definition, work engagement has three core dimensions as vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Zainab et al., 2022). In this respect, vigor refers to enhanced levels of mental resilience and emotional energy where employees are willing to work and persist to difficulties. Dedication represents experiencing enthusiasm, inspiration and pride while individuals are sharply involved in work activities. On the other hand, absorption means deep concentration and immersion which comprehends full focus and time deep engrossment. Beyond its definition, recent evidence shows engagement operates as a protective resource: emotional competencies promote engagement while reducing burnout (Pangket et al., 2025), and engagement mediates the link between employees' emotion-regulation strategies and positive work outcomes (Yagil, 2012), supporting its role as the mediator between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue. Work-engaged employees can have high energy, strong involvement and deep concentration which in turn lessen unintended outcomes in the workplace. To illustrate, engagement can act as a buffer against emotional exhaustion where individuals experience higher satisfaction and lower workplace fatigue.

As a dynamic construct, work engagement can be affected by daily work experiences both from job activities or social relationships. This dynamic aspect can be strengthened through personal resource enhancement, supervisor or leadership support or other psychological variables. Although work engagement refers to a positive and supportive state of mind constructed by vigor, dedication and absorption, it can be influenced by some psychological and emotional factors. While organizational factors such leadership styles or colleague and organizational support can foster engagement of employees to organizations, personal attributes such as emotional intelligence or emotional self-awareness can be essential determinants of this variable.

By enabling employees to manage and regulate their emotions effectively, emotional self-awareness can allow individuals to respond to workplace challenges more constructively and maintain motivation during challenging situations. This awareness can also enhance emotional resilience and motivation which is vital for consistent work engagement. Interpreting emotions effectively can provide an ability to stay calm, patient and composed under pressure. This helps employees to stay focused and productive which maintain steady engagement to work. As discussed, vigor component can be strengthened through sustained energy and endurance. As a result, emotional self-awareness can give employees a chance to manage stress and energy to reinforce work engagement.

Greater levels of work engagement, in turn, might lower occupational fatigue by nurturing enthusiasm, persistence, and sustained psychological energy. Engaged workers tend to hold a profound sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation, which allows them to approach demanding tasks with optimism rather than depletion. They perceive their job as meaningful and rewarding, thus turning potential stressors into challenges stimulating personal growth instead of leading to exhaustion. Such a positive frame of mind enables them to recover more efficiently from daily strain, thereby preventing fatigue from accumulating over time.

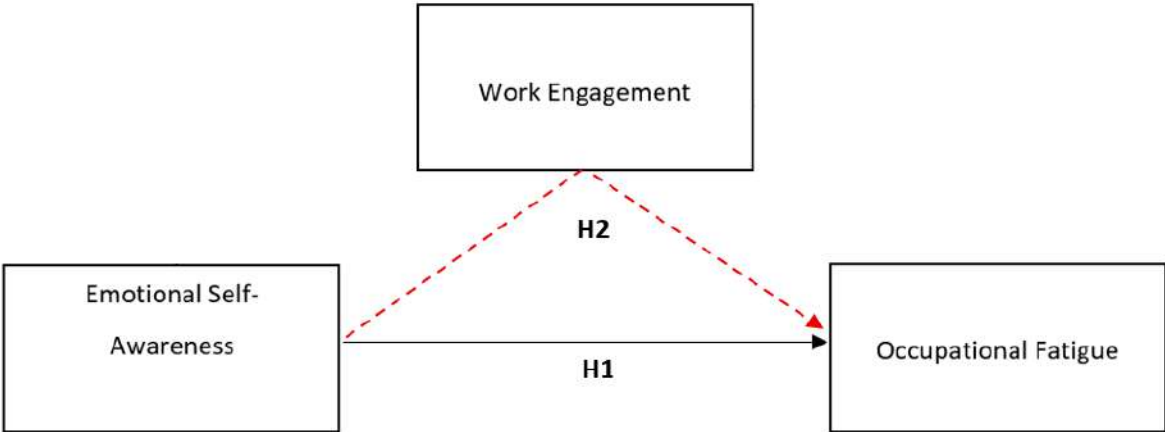
Accordingly, work engagement could function as a vital mediating mechanism linking emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue. Emotional self-understanding fosters engagement by allowing employees to cope with their emotions constructively, while engagement leverages this awareness into a positive energy and dedication. By means of this process, emotional self-awareness may indirectly diminish occupational fatigue by sustaining workers' motivation, enthusiasm, and psychological well-being (Mubeen et al., 2022).

In light of the foregoing discussions, the following hypothesis was put forward.

H2: Work engagement will mediate the relationship between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue.

The research model illustrated in Figure 1 was developed in accordance with the hypotheses derived from the theoretical foundations discussed above.

Figure 1 Research Model



Method

Data Analysis

In the present study, statistical analyses were performed by means of IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 along with the AMOS software. To assess construct validity, a separate confirmatory factor analysis was run for each scale, and model fit. The reliability of the measurement instruments was established through the examination of Cronbach's alpha coefficients, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. Descriptive statistics, together with Pearson correlation coefficients, were computed for all study variables. The proposed mediation model was tested via the PROCESS Macro 3.5.3 (Hayes, 2017), relying on 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Sample

The research was conducted among currently employed white-collar employees. Out of 450 individuals invited via e-mail, 312 provided valid responses (response rate = 69.3%). Convenience sampling technique was used to gather responses from participants. Participants were full-time employees from Türkiye's manufacturing sector. The survey, administered in Turkish, was carried out between October and November 2025. The sample displayed a balanced gender distribution, with 47.1% male and 52.9% female respondents. In terms of education, 82.1% held a bachelor's degree, and 17.9% had a postgraduate qualification. Regarding marital status, 51.3% were married, while 48.7% were single. Most participants were aged between 30 and 45 years. Regarding total work experience, the largest group (42.5%) reported 11–20 years, followed by 28.2% with 6–10 years, 25.6% with 1–5 years, and 3.7% with 21+ years, consistent with Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information (N = 312)

	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	47%
	Female	53%
Marital Status	Married	51%
	Single	49%
Education	Bachelor's	82.1%
	Master's	12.3%
	Doctoral	5.6%
Work Experience	1–5 years	25.6%
	6–10 years	28.2%
	11–20 years	42.5%
	21+ years	3.7%

Measurement instruments

To investigate the mediating function of work engagement in the connection between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue, three validated instruments emotional self-awareness, work engagement, and occupational fatigue were employed. All scales were previously translated and adapted into Turkish by researchers in the relevant literature. Emotional Self-Awareness and Work Engagement scales employ a 5-point Likert format ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5). Rather, Occupational Fatigue scale employs 6-Point Likert Format.

Emotional Self-Awareness Scale: Originally developed and validated by Tatar, Özdemir, Çelikbaş, and Özmen (2018), this 10-item instrument measures individuals' ability to recognize, differentiate, and interpret their own emotions. The measure has one dimension. Reliability and validity analyses confirmed its suitability for assessing emotional awareness within Turkish samples.

Work Engagement Scale (Short Form – 3 Items): Adapted to Turkish by Güler, Çetin, and Basım (2019) from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. This short-form version has one dimension includes and three items. Because work engagement served as a single mediating variable rather than being analyzed by sub-dimension, the unidimensional UWES-3 was sufficient and appropriate.

Occupational Fatigue Scale: Originally developed by Winwood, Winefield, and Dawson (2005) and later adapted into Turkish by Havlioğlu, Ortabag, and Winwood (2019). The scale has fifteen items and 3 sub-dimensions. Turkish adaptation demonstrated robust reliability and validity, confirming the scale’s effectiveness for evaluating occupational fatigue among Turkish employees.

Results

Measurement model: validity, reliability, and fit indices

The findings indicate that the three constructs; Emotional Self-Awareness, Work Engagement, and Occupational Fatigue displayed a high level of internal reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha values of .88, .75, and .95, respectively. Moreover, the measurement model for Emotional Self-Awareness yielded an excellent fit to the data, as evidenced by the indices CMIN/DF = 2.237, GFI = 0.949, RMSEA = 0.063, and CFI = 0.996, thus confirming the adequacy of the model (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016).

Since the work engagement scale contains only three items, the confirmatory factor analysis model was just-identified (df = 0), making it impossible to compute global model fit indices. Consequently, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to assess the construct validity of the scale. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value was 0.66, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 208.02$, $p < .001$, confirming the data’s suitability for factor analysis. The exploratory factor analysis results indicated a single-factor structure explaining 49.4% of the total variance. Standardized loadings of questions were 0.74 for WE1, 0.90 for WE2, and 0.52 for WE3, all above the acceptable threshold of .40. Although the loading of WE3 was lower than those of the other two items, it exceeds the .40 criterion and is consistent with prior findings that the absorption item tends to load more weakly in ultra-short engagement measures. Moreover, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a composite reliability (CR) of 0.77 and an average variance extracted (AVE) of 0.54, both meeting recommended standards. Overall, the findings support that the Work Engagement Scale has a unidimensional structure with adequate reliability and convergent validity in this sample.

The Occupational Fatigue model demonstrated a satisfactory overall fit, with goodness-of-fit indices of CMIN/DF = 1.926, GFI = 0.934, CFI = 0.976, RMSEA = 0.055, and AGFI = 0.906.

In summary, the results indicate strong reliability and adequate validity across all three measurement models. The constructs showed solid composite reliability (CR) values 0.89 for Emotional Self-Awareness, 0.77 for Work Engagement, and 0.96 for Occupational Fatigue along with average variance extracted (AVE) values of 0.45, 0.54, and 0.61, respectively. These results confirm the models’ adequate convergent validity and overall sound measurement quality. Although AVE for Emotional Self-Awareness fell below the conventional threshold, convergent validity was deemed adequate given that its composite reliability (.89) well exceeded the .60 criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), indicating that convergent validity remains acceptable.

Table 2
Model Fit Indices and Reliability/Validity Statistics

Variables	CRA	CMIN/SD	GFI	AGFI	CFI	NNFI	IFI	RMSEA	χ^2	df	p
ESA	0.88	2.237	0.949	0.945	0.996	0.985	0.965	0.063	76.120	34	<.001
OF	0.95	1.926	0.934	0.906	0.976	0.952	0.973	0.055	161.756	84	<.001
	CRA	KMO	BTS	TV	CR	AVE	p				
WE*	0.75	0.66	208.02	49.4%	0.77	0.54	<.001				

Notes: Fit thresholds: CMIN/DF ≤ 5 (good ≤ 3); GFI, CFI, NNFI, IFI ≥ 0.90 (good ≥ 0.95); AGFI ≥ 0.85 (good ≥ 0.90); RMSEA ≤ 0.08 (good ≤ 0.05). KMO = Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin; $\chi^2(3)$ = Bartlett's test; TV = total variance; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; ESA = emotional self-awareness; WE = work engagement; OF = occupational fatigue. Exploratory factor analysis conducted.

To measure common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was accomplished, and the consequences exposed that the first (unrotated) factor explained 36.57% of the total variance, remaining well under the recommended 50% cutoff. This indicates that common method bias does not pose a significant threat to the

validity of the findings in this study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nevertheless, because Harman's single-factor test is a necessary but not sufficient diagnostic and all constructs were self-reported by the same respondents, the possibility of common method variance cannot be entirely excluded. This is noted as a limitation.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion; the square root of the AVE for each construct Emotional Self-Awareness (0.67), Work Engagement (0.74), and Occupational Fatigue (0.78) exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations, thereby confirming the distinctiveness of the three constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

1.1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

Informative information, reliability coefficients, and intercorrelations between the study variables were calculated and are displayed in Table 3. The purpose of this analysis was to explore the unique effects of the variables under examination. Because descriptive statistics alone cannot establish normality, univariate normality was assessed through skewness and kurtosis values, which fell within the ± 2 range considered acceptable. Furthermore, the bivariate correlation analysis pointed to significant associations among the main variables incorporated in the model.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

	Mean	SD	Gender	Marital Status	Education	Sector	Exp.	Age	ESA	WE	OF	
<i>ender</i>	1.53	.50	1									
<i>Marital Status</i>	1.49	.50	.111	1								
<i>Education</i>	2.31	.30	.064	-.029	1							
<i>Sector</i>	2.04	.66	.030	-.081	-.055	1						
<i>Work Experience</i>	10.82	6.86	-.028	-.002	.157**	-.090	1					
<i>Age</i>	35.61	7.37	-.052	-.041	.156**	-.116*	.155**	1				
<i>ESA</i>	4.04	.62	.065	-.019	-.087	-.065	-.043	-.096	1			
<i>WE</i>	4.00	.85	-.037	-.053	.051	-	.007	-.019	.517**	1		
<i>OF</i>	2.33	.92	.032	.011	-.072	.164**	.309**	-.076	.112*	-.659**	-.705**	1

Notes: Coding: gender (1 = male, 2 = female); marital status (1 = married, 2 = single); education (1 = diploma, 2 = bachelor's, 3 = master's, 4 = PhD); sector (1 = public, 2 = private, 3 = freelance). ESA = emotional self-awareness; WE = work engagement; OF = occupational fatigue. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Regression and mediation analyses

The mediation assessment in the present analysis was carried out by means of SPSS version 26 and the PROCESS macro established by Hayes (2017), using Model 4 (simple mediation) with emotional self-awareness as the independent variable, work engagement as the mediator, and occupational fatigue as the dependent variable; no covariates were included. This macro enables the testing of complex mediation forms by estimating direct and indirect effects simultaneously within a unified analytical framework. In this research, 5,000 bootstrap samples were utilized to establish the significance of the indirect effects, thus yielding bias-corrected confidence intervals for enhanced precision. Such a bootstrapping technique reinforces the dependability of the mediation analysis by lowering reliance on normality assumptions in the sampling distribution. All coefficients reported below are unstandardized (b), as produced by the PROCESS macro by default. Variables were measured on their original Likert metrics stated in Section 4.1.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that emotional self-awareness is negatively associated with occupational fatigue. The results of the analysis showed that emotional self-awareness explained 44% of the variance in occupational fatigue. Emotional self-awareness significantly predicted occupational fatigue, explaining a significant proportion of variance in fatigue levels. In particular, emotional self-awareness displayed a significant negative

relationship with occupational fatigue ($b = -.5981, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.7187, -.4775]$). The detailed results are displayed in Table 4. Accordingly, Hypothesis 1 was supported by the findings.

Table 4
Direct effect of emotional self-awareness on occupational fatigue

Coefficient (b)	Se	t	P	LLCI	ULCI
-.5981	.0635	-9,7569	<.001	-.7187	-.4775

Secondly, Hypothesis 2 was formulated on the expectation that work engagement would mediate the link between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue. The analysis showed that the indirect effect of emotional self-awareness on occupational fatigue was significant, given that the 95% confidence interval did not contain zero ($b = -.3816, \text{BootLLCI} = -.5069, \text{BootULCI} = -.2733$). Such a finding verifies the mediating role of work engagement. In particular, emotional self-awareness proved to exert a positive effect on work engagement ($b = .7125, p < .01$), which in turn was negatively related to occupational fatigue ($b = -.5356, p < .01$). Furthermore, the direct effect of emotional self-awareness on occupational fatigue remained significant ($b = -.5981, p < .01$), thus indicating that work engagement partially mediates the link between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue.

Table 5
Indirect effect of emotional self-awareness on occupational fatigue

Coefficient (b)	se	p	BootLLCI	BootULCI
-.3816	.0592	<.001	-.5069	-.2733

The total effect analysis showed that emotional self-awareness exerted a significant negative influence on occupational fatigue ($b = -.9797, SE = .0635, t = -15.4299, p < .001$). The 95% confidence interval ($\text{LLCI} = -1.1047, \text{ULCI} = -.8548$) did not contain zero, thus verifying the robustness of this effect. Such findings imply that workers with greater emotional self-awareness experience lower levels of occupational fatigue when both direct and indirect effects are taken into account together. The detailed results are displayed in Table 56.

Table 6
Total effect of emotional self-awareness on occupational fatigue

Coefficient (b)	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-.9797	.0635	-15.4299	<.001	-1.1047	-.8548

All in all, summary of research hypothesis whether they are supported or not, can be seen on Table-7 below.

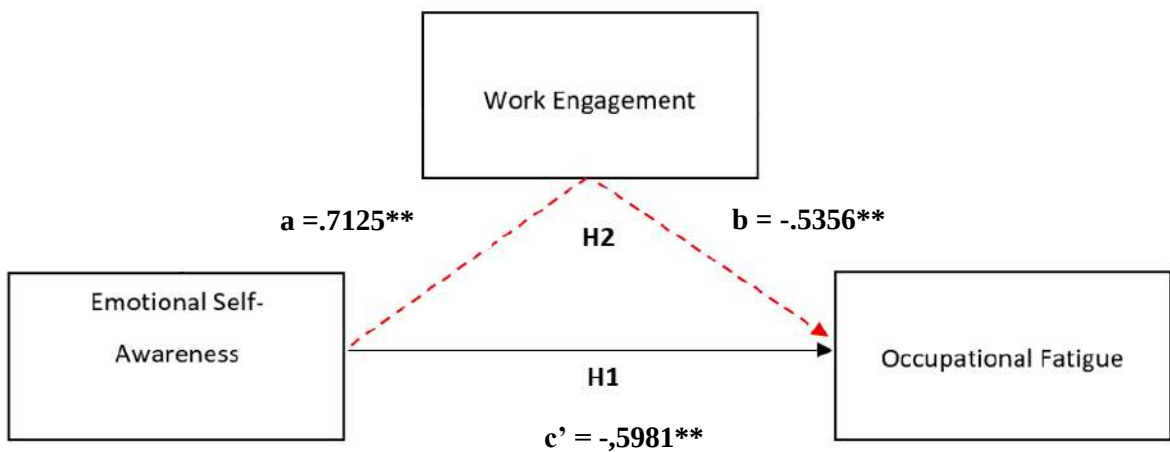
Table 7
Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient (b)	95% CI	Result
H1	ESA → OF (direct effect)	-.5981	[-.7187, -.4775]	Supported
H2	ESA → WE → OF (indirect effect)	-.3816	[-.5069, -.2733]	Supported (partial mediation)

ESA = emotional self-awareness; WE = work engagement; OF = occupational fatigue.

Figure 2

Research findings



Mediation path diagram: $a = .7125^{**}$ (ESA→WE), $b = -.5356^{**}$ (WE→OF), $c' = -.5981^{**}$ (direct), $c = -.9797^{***}$ (total); indirect effect = $-.3816$, 95% CI $[-.5069, -.2733]$. $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of the present study indicate that emotional self-awareness significantly and negatively associated with occupational fatigue among workers. The results verified a significant and negative link between emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue, thus implying that individuals capable of recognizing and regulating their emotions experience lower levels of fatigue. Such a finding is in line with prior research; for instance, a study on mental health professionals reported that greater emotional self-awareness nurtures purposeful stress reduction by means of adaptive coping skills and positive emotional experiences, thereby buffering the exhaustion arising from chronic occupational stress. In a similar vein, research on workers across demanding occupations showed that emotional stability was significantly and negatively related to chronic, acute, and total occupational fatigue, thus supporting the protective function of emotion-related competencies against fatigue (Magnano et al., 2021). Furthermore, work engagement proved to be a significant partial mediator in this link. This pattern suggests that emotionally self-aware employees are better able to recognize and regulate emotional strain early, which helps them channel psychological energy into work engagement and, in turn, buffers the depletion of personal resources that manifests as occupational fatigue. Such a mediating pattern is consistent with the work of Pangket et al., (2025), who showed that emotional intelligence enhances work engagement while simultaneously lowering burnout among employees, thus indicating that emotional competencies operate through engagement-related mechanisms. In a comparable manner, Yagil (2012) reported that engagement mediated the link between employees' emotion regulation strategies and positive work outcomes, thus reinforcing the role of engagement as an explanatory pathway connecting emotional processes to well-being. The fact that work engagement only partially mediated this relationship indicates that emotional self-awareness is also linked to lower fatigue through additional pathways not tested here such as adaptive coping, recovery experiences, or self-efficacy which future research should examine.

Taken together, these results underline that fostering workers' emotional self-awareness and engagement could serve as an effective strategy for lowering occupational fatigue and promoting psychological resilience in demanding working situations.

From a managerial standpoint, such findings stress the importance of incorporating emotional self-awareness into organizational well-being and performance strategies. Managers should promote self-reflection and emotional regulation practices by means of workshops and leadership programs that reinforce employees' capacity to understand and cope with their emotions. Establishing supportive organizational climates that nurture work engagement through recognition, autonomy, and meaningful job design may further prevent fatigue. Additionally, organizations are encouraged to develop mentoring and emotional intelligence training initiatives

aimed at improving workers' emotional competence and engagement. This recommendation echoes Kravariti et al., (2021), who observed that emotionally intelligent employees tend to be more engaged owing to their enhanced capacity to manage stress, communicate effectively, and build positive workplace relationships. By cultivating emotionally aware and engaged employees, managers can mitigate fatigue, boost productivity, and sustain long-term organizational effectiveness.

From a theoretical perspective, the present study contributes to the literature by identifying work engagement as a key mechanism through which emotional self-awareness affects occupational fatigue. Grounded in Affective Events Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, the research accounts for how emotional regulation and psychological resource conservation jointly diminish fatigue levels. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how emotional processes and engagement interact to shape employee well-being. Furthermore, the resource-based reasoning of the present study is in line with research grounded in Conservation of Resources Theory (Zhang et al., 2026), which showed that individuals in a state of chronic resource depletion are more susceptible to occupational fatigue, whereas emotion-regulation capacities help replenish those resources. In addition, the study broadens the conceptualization of occupational fatigue beyond physiological exhaustion, positioning it as a psychological outcome shaped by emotional self-regulation and engagement dynamics.

Final Considerations and Conclusion

To sum up, the present study shows that emotional self-awareness is significantly and negatively associated with occupational fatigue among workers, with work engagement functioning as a key partial mediator in this link. The findings indicate that employees capable of effectively recognizing and regulating their emotions tend to be more engaged in their job, which in turn is associated with lower fatigue in demanding working situations. By integrating Affective Events Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, the present research advances both the theoretical understanding and the practical strategies for cultivating emotionally aware, engaged, and resilient employees within organizations.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research has numerous limitations that should be counted in understanding its results. First, the study employed a cross-sectional, self-report design, which cannot establish causal or temporal precedence among the variables; the mediation findings should therefore be interpreted as associational rather than causal, and common method variance cannot be fully ruled out. Longitudinal or multi-source designs are recommended for future research. The sample was limited to white-collar employees in Türkiye's manufacturing sector, which restricts generalizability to other occupational or cultural perspectives. Future studies could adopt comparative or longitudinal designs to examine whether these relationships hold across different job types and time periods. Future research could include other mediators such as psychological empowerment, resilience, or emotional regulation to deepen the understanding of mechanisms linking emotional self-awareness and occupational fatigue.

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The United States' Renewed Engagement in Central Asia: Great-Power Competition after Russia's Attacks on Ukraine

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The research delves into the strategic, geopolitical, and economic motivations behind the shift in U.S policy towards Central Asia. It examines the new wave of U.S involvement in Central Asia after 2022 and assesses its implications for regional security, connectivity, and evolving great-power dynamics. The research is qualitative, and employs document analysis of primary and secondary sources published between 2014-2025. Primary sources include U.S Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025, the 2023 C5+1 Leaders' Joint Statement (New York Declaration), and the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic literature and policy reports. Thematic analysis is categorized into three interconnected subthemes of geostrategic competition, energy security, and counter-terrorism. Findings of the research identify four strategic drivers of U.S. re-engagement with the region: opening alternative trade routes (such as the Middle Corridor), enforcing and monitoring sanctions against Russia, diversifying access beyond Russia's sphere of influence, and securing access to critical mineral resources. Concurrently, Central Asian states have sought to pursue a 'multi-vector' foreign policy, which enables them to hedge among competing alliances while maintaining their sovereignty without displeasing neighbouring great powers. However, in Central Asia, where there is a multitude of overlapping interests, unilateral strategic prescriptions are unlikely to succeed. Rather, the most viable means of promoting regional stability are sustained multilateralism, economic engagement, and a policy of mutual accommodation within the context of a changing multiplex order.

Keywords: Central Asia, U.S. Foreign Policy, Great Power Competition, Regional Stability, Afghanistan.

The disintegration of the former Soviet Union in 1991 and the formation of five Central Asian independent republics Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as well as the new geopolitical landscape, have played important roles. For over one hundred years, the area was under Russian and subsequent Soviet domination. With the end of the Cold War, a power vacuum emerged, requiring renewed involvement by international powers. The U.S. was among the first states to recognise the Republic of Austria??? newly independent states as a new state? Sovereign and independent states and has since seen its relationship progress from diplomatic recognition to a strategic partnership. Though the initial U.S. interest was

very low, later concerns included aspects of sovereignty, economic transition, and regional security as the region near Afghanistan, with its enormous energy reserves, increasingly became a U.S. security focus.

Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and the resulting power vacuum, several regional and global actors sought to expand their influence in the strategically and economically significant region (Afridi et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2025; Rashid, 1994). The emergence of terrorist networks (Rashid, 1994) and the Taliban takeover in neighbouring Afghanistan created a centre of instability with severe implications for regional stability. The September 11, 2001 attack on the US by members of Al-Qaeda was transformative not just for international politics but also for the South and Central Asian region. Afghanistan became a sanctuary for terrorist hideouts, and the US was adamant about apprehending the culprits of the attacks on the US, leading to the 'War on Terror'. Central Asia served as the strategic pivot for the United States' security operations in Afghanistan in the post-9/11 world (Ryan, 2019).

But since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, the geopolitical environment has transformed, and America's strategic interests, outside of the Afghan context, have been reawakened. Recent literature has identified this change as a regional sovereignty push aimed at avoiding the circumvention of international sanctions (The White House, 2023). This new perspective is embodied in the U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 that prioritises promoting Central Asian economic prosperity and resilience (U.S. Department of State, 2020). The Middle Corridor remains one of the most crucial strategic routes through which the U.S. can diversify its routes away from Russia (Rossi, 2023). In addition, the launch of the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue underscores a new urgency and the need to ensure the supply chains for rare earth elements essential to the global energy transition (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This paper aims to examine how multifaceted and complex the motivations for the recent re-engagement of the U.S. may be, and to assess its implications for the region's security outlook, using official statements and recent academic analyses (Rizvi, 2024).

The security zone that had been forged in the last 20 years, which was centred on Afghanistan, was sent back to Russia with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The new round of engagement is evident in the key U.S. Strategy for Central Asia (2019-2025) and the 2023 C5+1 summit, which focused on regional sovereignty, economic resilience, and diversified partnerships (U.S. Department of State, 2020; The White House, 2023). One implication of such a study has not been to disaggregate issues of connectivity and resource security from the broader issue of NATO and great-power competition but rather to see these as “overlapping aspects of a larger U.S. effort to improve regional resiliency” and increase strategic options for governments in the region. This paper examines the key motivating factors behind the renewed U.S. involvement and their impact on the changing regional order. Central Asia emerged as a significant region in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse owing to its geostrategic importance, abundant natural resources, and critical position between major powers.

A theoretical approach combining defensive neo-realism and hegemonic stability theory is used to analyse U.S. engagement. Through a defence-based neo-realist lens, U.S. strategy is seen as a structural one designed to maintain a regional balance of power, in this case between U.S. influence and that of China and Russia, with China's Belt and Road Initiative (Heydarian, 2019; U.S. Department of State, 2020). Moreover, an enlightenment of the hegemonic stability theory as a multipolar or 'multiplex' order helps to account for the U.S. contribution to the underpinning of regional security and trade norms, including the facilitation of the Middle Corridor, which must include the strategic interests of other regional actors (Monteiro, 2014; Rossi, 2023). There are theoretical implications as well that explain the 'multi-vector' foreign policy of Central Asian countries, which is a hedging strategy centred on protecting their autonomy and diversifying their economic relations (The White House, 2023; Economist Intelligence, 2023).

Problem Statement and Research Gap

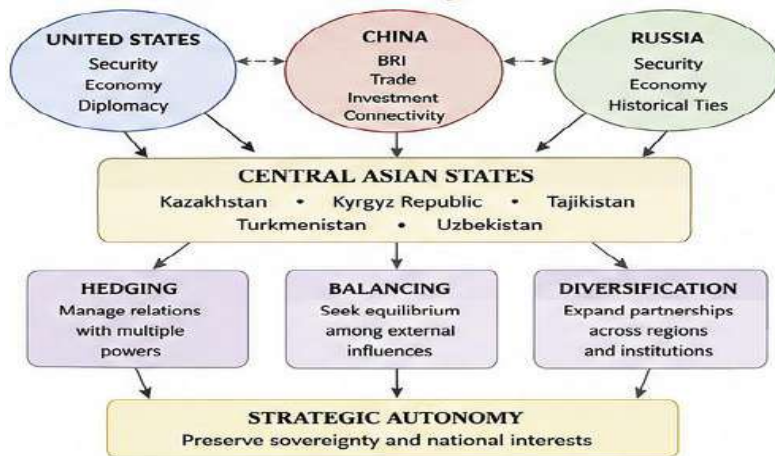
The post-2022 geopolitical situation has posed a dilemma between the U.S. unilateral, security-centric approach of the past and the present security- and development-oriented needs of Central Asian countries, which are unwilling to play zero-sum geopolitics. The main difficulty is that as the U.S. tries to enter the region, engage with it, build supply chains for critical minerals, monitor sanctions, and diversify trade routes, it is doing so against a backdrop of entrenched historical ties with Russia and rapidly growing Chinese economic investments. The external balancing aspirations of the United States and 'multi-vector' autonomy within the region have not been adequately synced in existing foreign policy efforts.

There is a body of literature describing the overall shift toward great-power competition in Eurasia, but it remains a neglected area of study. Often, the elements of connectivity, sanctions and resources are disjointed, and scholars do not view them within a comprehensive geopolitical paradigm. Moreover, orthodox theories of International Relations (IR), including hegemonic stability theory (Let's consistently capitalize or lowercase the initial letters of the theory names throughout the article. They shouldn't be capitalized in one place and lowercase in another; let's standardize them all), are misused in analyses of Central Asia, and their unipolar perspective oversimplifies the relationship with the U.S. as an unchallenged hegemon. This study attempts to fill this void by combining the defensive neo-realist approach with a modern, multifaceted explanation of Hegemonic Stability Theory (based on Monteiro's theory of unipolar politics). It does this in an integrated, multi-layered way, shining a spotlight on the strategic hedging and regional autonomy that Central Asian states have in mind, and addressing how U.S. security, diplomatic, and trade initiatives align with (or intersect with) them.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical framework applied to the study. Section 3 outlines the detailed research methodology. Section 4 traces the geo-strategic and geo-economic significance of Central Asia. Section 5 discusses the historical and contemporary evolution of U.S. engagement strategy in the region. Section 6 outlines strategic approaches and policy recommendations for strengthening U.S. engagement. Section 7 assesses the implications of U.S. involvement for regional security and key external stakeholders. Finally, Section 8 provides a brief conclusion and outlines the study's critical limitations.

Theoretical Framework

Existing theories of International Relations offer an analytical lens for viewing U.S.-Central Asia relations through a security framework, owing to the situation in the Afghanistan-centred phase (Hill, 2001) or to great power competition in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Rumer, 2016). This study draws on the complementary theoretical perspectives from realism and hegemonic stability theory. Realist theory argues that states are driven by the pursuit of the national interest to maximise their security or power. This can be explained through the defensive and offensive variants of realist theory. In the context of this study, the US presence in Central Asia is understood through the lens of defensive neo-realism, in which US actions aim to preserve influence relative to Russia and China (Malik & Mirza, 2019). The USA is using external balancing to maintain its presence in Central Asia and protect its geostrategic interests by strengthening regional partnerships. (Offensive hegemonic theory would make more sense for the US. It is appropriate to explain, in a single sentence, why the "defensive" label was chosen for the US superpower (sources on this subject are quite extensive). The term "defensive" as it appears on the official US website holds no academic significance.)

Figure 1: Multiplex Order and Power Diffusion in Central Asia

Source: Author's conceptualisation based on Acharya's multiplex-world perspective and Monteiro's analysis of unipolar politics.

Complementary perspectives are offered by hegemonic stability theory, which explains international security in the presence of a dominant power, arguing that there is a greater likelihood of security and stability in the system when a single hegemonic power underwrites the rules and provides security guarantees (Gilpin, 1981). After the end of the Cold War, the US emerged as a sole hegemon in the international system; therefore, by extension, its presence portends regional tranquillity in Central Asia.

However, Classic Hegemonic Stability Theory (Gilpin, 1981) is more relevant to the immediate post-Cold War period. With the rise of multiple centres of Power (Zakaria, 2008), it may be argued that the 'unipolar moment' has passed and that the world is now moving towards a multiplex order, with power diffusing across multiple centres. In this respect, Nuno Monteiro's Theory of Unipolar Politics (2014) captures the essence of this transition by arguing that while the US remains the strongest power in the system, it does not command unchallenged primacy. In these circumstances, the stability of the international order rests on the dominant power accommodating the interests of other rising powers. Within Central Asia, where Russia's influence is entrenched and China's growing economic outreach is welcomed, the US approach to engaging with Central Asian states needs to rest on accommodation rather than the suppression of other stakeholders' interests.

(Although the term "Regional Security" is frequently used, let us briefly touch upon the theory of the "Regional Security Complex Theory, and its meaning in the context of a region." See: Barry Buzan, various sources)

Method

This work has a qualitative research design to examine the strategic interests, policy adjustments, and geopolitical consequences of U.S. reengagement in Central Asia. The methodology is designed to be systematic, transparent, academically rigorous, and empirically grounded for understanding a piece of text and the strategy learned from it.

Research Design and Approach

This research is qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive, adopting qualitative document analysis (QDA) as its primary method. QDA is a process in which documents (printed or electronic) are reviewed and/or evaluated in a systematic way. Through document analysis, as with other analytical approaches in qualitative research, documents must be examined and interpreted to reveal their meaning, understanding, and empirical knowledge. It fits particularly well with the study of foreign policy, which involves formal diplomatic language

and documents exchanged, government strategy papers, and peer-reviewed academic research on intentions, strategies, and regional responses.

Purposive Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data for this study. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling, in which the researcher chooses the elements to sample according to his knowledge and the research's purpose. Given that capturing this change in U.S. foreign policy is the objective, the temporal window of the sources used was narrowed to 2015-2025. Why 2015? 2014 is more significant due to the annexation of Crimea. Data collection was split into two streams:

- **Primary Sources:** Official policy documents, joint declarations, strategic announcements and declarations that represent the government's intentions. Sampled texts were the U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 (U.S. Department of State, 2020); the C5+1 Leaders' Joint Statement / New York Declaration (The White House, 2023); and official diplomatic statements on the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue (U.S. Department of State, 2023).
- **Secondary sources:** peer-reviewed journal articles, regional security papers, and thorough research studies by leading foreign policy think tanks around the world. This encompasses published Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) analysis (Rumer, 2016), the RAND Corporation (Stoll, 2023), Lowy Institute (Rossi, 2023) and regional security frames (CSAG Strategy Paper, 2024; Rizvi, 2024).

Procedure and Data Analysis

This process of data analysis was carried out in four progressive steps that follow each other:

- **Phase 1: Familiarisation and Preliminary Coding** is the first step in ACTS???. All the collected documents were read and used to gather a contextual view of the geopolitical transition. This resulted in an initial codebook on commonalities in sanctions, supply chains, regional self-governance, and bilateral partnerships.
- **Phase 2: (Qualitative Content Analysis).** Thematic coding was used systematically across the sampled texts. Content was divided into three broad theme areas to demonstrate the overlap of the U.S.-Central Asian interaction, which are: (a) Geostrategic Competition (Balancing Russian influence, Managing Chinese expansion, and Regional presence); (b) Energy and Resource Security (Critical mineral supply chains, Green infrastructure investments, and Transit routes including the Middle Corridor); and (c) Counter-terrorism and regional security (State Partnership Program, Troop rotations, and Afghan border stability).
- **Phase 3: Conceptual Integration.** All the thematic codes that were examined were correlated with the theoretical lenses: defensive neo-realism (systemic balancing) and Monteiro's multiplex order of hegemonic stability (strategic accommodation).
- **Phase 4: Synthesis.** Findings were coded and then organised into a logical narrative with clear interpretations of U.S. diplomatic actions, based directly on official statements and objective academic scholarship.

Validity and Reliability (Data Triangulation)

Data Triangulation in this qualitative study was conducted across three layers to enhance the study's trustworthiness, validity, and reliability. Triangulation is a practice used to check for consistency of data from several sources. For this research, official government statements containing claims about U.S. strategy, enforcement of sanctions, and the dynamics at play in this region were systematically compared with studies and analyses from a diverse set of independent, peer-reviewed academic literature as well as other independent international security and economic intelligence sources, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023). Due attention was paid to careful reconciliation of any discrepancies in interpretation/reporting. To ensure the

reliability of the procedure, clear and standardised coding guidelines were established for the research team to facilitate thematic categorisation and reduce interpretive bias among individual members.

Geo-strategic and Geo-Economic Significance of Central Asia

The importance of Central Asia stems from its proximity to the Eurasian landmass. In the north, it borders Russia; to the east, China; and to the South, Iran and Afghanistan, while the Caspian Sea forms its Western boundary (Hiro, 2011). Its location places it at a central position where the interests of regional and global powers intersect. Although the region was widely known as Turkestan, the name was changed to Central Asia starting in the early 20th century, in line with the general strategies of Britain and Russia (Yalçinkaya, 1997, 434).

Figure 2: The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor)



Source: World Bank; author adaptation.
 Note. The route connects Central Asia with the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe while providing an alternative to the northern route through Russia.

Two key external actors influence Central Asia's strategic environment, namely the Russian Federation and China; their influence manifests in different ways. Russia still has deep political, security, and historical ties with the region, and China has expanded its economic footprint through investments, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), infrastructure, and trade (Afridi et al., 2017; Feifer, 2007; Heydarian, 2019; Mariani, 2013). This puts the United States in competition with other powers, while Central Asian governments have generally tried to steer clear of aligning exclusively with any major power. They value a variety of external partnerships, and it is in that context that renewed engagement with the United States has emerged. Washington thus has to contend with the not insignificant difficulties of providing alternatives to Russia and China, as well as sustaining the region's current security and economic ties (Khan et al., 2025; Rumer, 2016; The White House, 2023).

Central Asia is also geographically close to Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan's instability and unrest have also spilt over into Central Asia. Having invested over two decades in Afghanistan, maintaining a foothold in Central Asia supports US objectives in Afghanistan. At the same time, Iran-US ties have been strained due to Iran's nuclear programme and Israel's Middle Eastern policy. Maintaining a presence in Central Asia allows the US to exert leverage over Iranian nuclear developments alongside its military bases in the Middle East.

Kazakhstan is a good example of the new strategic role of Central Asia's geographic location and resource wealth. It has boosted the significance of the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), which links Kazakhstan via the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, and to European markets, as an alternative to routes passing through Russian territory (Rossi, 2023). Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's

stocks of rare earth elements and critical metals have made it a more important partner in the West's quest to diversify strategic supply chains. These developments indicate that the significance of Central Asia is not only related to traditional security factors, but also that connectivity and access to strategic resources are becoming intertwined parts of its geopolitical role (Rossi, 2023; Economist Intelligence, 2023). The multi-vector foreign policy approach in Kazakhstan also exemplifies how Central Asian states are seeking to capitalise on these opportunities to diversify their external partnerships while maintaining strategic autonomy (Economist Intelligence, 2023). Kazakhstan's 'multi-vector foreign policy' of maintaining balanced relationships with major global powers, including Russia, China, the EU, and the USA, a policy outlined by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, allows the nation to maintain ties with various powers. Kazakhstan has avoided explicitly supporting Russia in its aggression against Ukraine. However, it has simultaneously sought to avoid provoking the larger nation and to ensure that the West does not undermine Russian sanctions against the nation, with provisions requiring its financial and trade systems to monitor international sanctions (Economist Intelligence, 2023).

In recognising the increasing importance of Central Asia, the United States has taken substantial steps to foster engagement in the region. In September, the C5+1 Summit was held, with the President of the United States, Joe Biden, inviting and hosting the leaders of Central Asian states in New York. This was the first time that a President of the United States participated in such a forum and addressed the key issues of regional security, economic cooperation, and sustainable development. The region also has immense natural resource potential. Many Western states, including the US, are striving to make their supply chains more flexible and reduce dependency on a single provider state. Opportunities for joint work on renewable energy could also help address global climate change challenges while securing future energy supplies. Alongside economic interests, cooperation has geopolitical significance for regional security and stability and could create opportunities to counter terrorism, combat illegal drugs, and address environmental challenges (Rizvi, 2024). Realising that a new geopolitical stage is emerging, it is in the interest of the US and its partners to deepen ties with Central Asian countries for greater prosperity, stability and regional influence.

Figure 3: *Central Asia's Location in the Eurasian Landmass*



Source: www.quora.com

Figure 4: Central Asia and its Neighbouring Powers

Source: www.nationsonline.org

The Evolution of U.S. Engagement amid Shifting Geopolitics

The US engagement towards the Central Asian region has passed through three distinct phases. The first phase comprised the US diplomatic recognition of the newly established states following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During this phase, its relations remained largely nominal. The second phase of this engagement was in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001 and the US decision to engage in hot pursuit in Afghanistan to eliminate terrorist networks. Central Asia's importance as logical hubs during the war on terror reinvigorated the interest of the US in this region; however, after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan post-2021, US concerns with the region took a backseat as the US began to focus more on the Asia Pacific region in the context of an increasingly powerful China (Atlantic Council, 2021). The third phase of renewed interest in the Central Asian region arose after Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent occupation of border regions.

Figure 5: Evolution of U.S. Engagement with Central Asia, 1991–2025

Source: Author's compilation based on U.S. government documents and the present study.

(For Phase III, let's use a phrase like "attacks and the occupation of border regions" instead of "Russia's invasion of Ukraine." The entirety of Ukraine has not been occupied.)

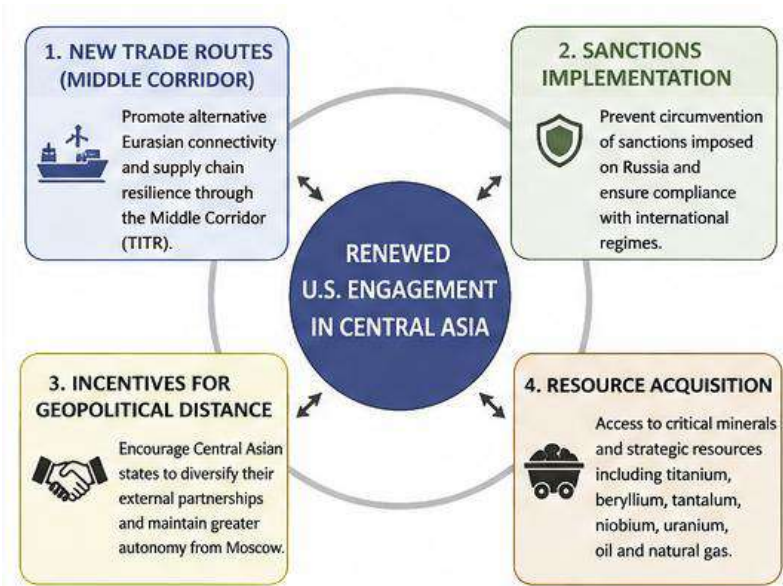
Central Asia's strategic importance to the United States has reached an unprecedented level as a direct result of the conflict in Ukraine. The latest phase of the US-Central Asia engagement is based on four distinct drivers:

- **New Trade Routes:** The US administration, as well as Western states, sees Central Asia as a strategic region for developing new global trade routes that circumvent Russian territory, particularly through the Middle Corridor, as part of an effort to reduce reliance on Russian infrastructure.
- **Implementation of Sanctions:** Washington has also worked hard with governments in Central Asia not to become centres for circumventing sanctions imposed on Russia in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War.
- **Incentives for Non-Geopolitical Distance:** The US wishes to give certain incentives to Central Asian leaders whose traditional political leanings have been in line with Moscow, to turn away from its geopolitical orbit, and to not provide any diplomatic support for the Russian military aggression.
- **Resource Acquisition:** Central Asia is considered an important resource base for access to various resources of oil, uranium, and other critical raw materials, in an effort to diversify their supply chains and reduce reliance on a single state.

The economic and strategic drivers are embedded in the logic of geopolitical contestation. The US continues to view itself as the dominant power of the 21st century. Friedman (2009) argues that a single power will shape the current century, as it did in the past. Owing to the pivotal location, resource endowments, and geostrategic importance of South Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, American policymakers view it as necessary to maintain an overarching presence to prevent Russian and Chinese control in the region.

Concurrently, leaders of Central Asian states are keen to diversify their relationships in order to reduce their dependence on Russia (politically, economically and security-wise), while they want to maintain good relations with Russia in order to continue trade and investment relationships; an overreliance on Russia is considered both undesirable and dangerous; therefore, Central Asian states are trying to diversify their relations without provoking Moscow’s ire. Central Asian States have historically perceived the United States as a temporary player with short-term interests in the region. With Central Asian states' apprehensions towards Russia, along with growing scepticism towards Chinese influence, there is an opportunity for the United States to enhance its standing through increased long-term engagement in the region. Given that the U.S. cannot match China's or Russia's level of investment, its strategy should be carefully targeted to maximise returns. The Sino-Russian cooperation which is, in a sense, necessitated by the post-Soviet US unipolarity also limits Washington's effectiveness (Khan et al., 2023; Yalçınkaya & Hatipoğlu, 2020, 2013).

Figure 6. *Strategic Drivers of Renewed U.S. Engagement*



Source: Author's conceptualisation based on the present study and cited literature.

Central Asian countries have observed Russia's military interventions and support for separatist movements in former Soviet states since the 1990s. However, Russia's role is viewed with scepticism since the onset of the war in Ukraine. Kazakhstan seems the most prepared to distance itself from Russia. Despite seeking CSTO assistance during violent unrest in January 2022, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev challenged Russian President Vladimir Putin on several fronts. Tokayev affirmed that Kazakhstan will not assist Russia in evading Western sanctions and has refused to acknowledge Russian-backed entities like Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (CSAG Strategy Paper, 2024). Moreover, Tokayev refused to accept the Order of Alexander Nevsky from Russia and, soon after the Wagner Group mutiny, called the situation Russia's "domestic problem". As with most leaders in Central Asia, Tokayev's policy is geared toward maintaining Kazakhstan's sovereignty and not over-relying on any one power. While some of the current officialdom, most of whom are products of the Soviet era, remains very influential within Central Asian political circles, the younger, rapidly growing population under 30, much less concerned with ties to the Soviet past, shows declining allegiance to Russia. In this changing landscape, the United States aims to establish a positive and enduring role in the region by strategically focusing its efforts on fostering strong and positive relationships with the younger generation in Central Asia.

Strategic Approaches for Strengthening U.S. Engagement

For the US to reengage in Central Asia, a country-by-country approach must be developed to serve each country's interests and politics. This may involve measures such as economic support, expanding private-sector opportunities, encouraging language courses, and increasing counter-terrorism support. (Are you presenting your recommendations to the US administration, or are you analyzing current policies? Let's use more appropriate wording..) The U.S. needs to revive economic interaction in Central Asia. In early 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the first visit of any sitting U.S. Secretary of State in three years. While in these two Central Asian states, Secretary Blinken reaffirmed American commitment to their sovereignty and territorial integrity. He announced that the U.S. would add \$20 million to the \$30 million already pledged for the Economic Resilience Initiative in Central Asia (ERICEN) since September 2022. ERICEN works toward three areas of enhancement in Central Asia: trade routes, the private sector, and human capital (training, education, etc.). In this area, feedback on ERICEN has been divided; some believe its limited scope is beneficial for Central Asia and the U.S., and that it can utilise its comparative advantages to achieve long-term gains based on American international standards (Khasanov, 2021). Others point out that it is quite small compared to what other powers, such as China, are investing; on May 18-19 of 2023, China unveiled a \$4 billion investment plan for Central Asia (which highlights the expanding scale of Chinese involvement). American interaction does not have to involve government alone; the private sector can also play a huge role. Private sector investment in Central Asia exceeds \$31 billion, according to the U.S. State Department; a much larger private sector presence could help increase energy exports as Europe seeks an alternative to Russian fuel. It also helps Central Asian countries achieve greater energy security through increased investment in renewables and the construction of green energy infrastructure, so that Central Asia has the fuel to power its growth and can contribute surplus to neighbouring states.

Another effective means for the U.S. to advance its profile within Central Asia is through English-language programs. Organisations such as the American Councils for International Education have put forth what they call the 'C5+ONE' initiative, which seeks to improve the English skills of mid-level professionals in the government, non-governmental, and private sectors of Central Asia. It can help foster closer ties between the people of Central Asia and the US and promote greater integration worldwide.

The US can also strengthen its position in Central Asia by supporting counterterrorism efforts. Stationing a large number of troops in Central Asia could spark outrage from Russia or China. (Is this a suggestion or an analysis? If you are quoting as part of an analysis, please specify "according to whom.") A more measured approach would serve it best in terms of creating positive relations; the U.S. State Partnership Program has helped to create ties between the U.S. National Guard and Central Asian states since 2002 (Virginia NG with Tajikistan since 2002, Arizona & Montana NG with Kazakhstan & Kyrgyzstan respectively,

Mississippi NG with Uzbekistan since 2012, and the Nevada NG partnered with Turkmenistan until 2011). In addition, it has hosted many Steppe Eagle exercises that include American, British, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Kazakh troops (Somzhurek, 2018). Building on existing relationships, the US can rotate forces through the region to participate in counterterrorism operations while keeping its footprint small; this aligns with the US goal of operating through an 'over the horizon' approach. For such operations, the 3rd Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) is an appropriate tool to utilise, as it falls under the jurisdiction of CENTCOM and is involved in 'advising and assisting allied and partner nations' as opposed to occupation (as the presence of forces would have to be kept small to avoid Russian and Chinese opposition).

Figure 7. *U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program in Central Asia*



Source: U.S. National Guard; Congressional Research Service.

Implications for Regional Security and Key Stakeholders

The US presence in Central Asia creates implications across different domains.

The security of the region has been vitiated due to the rise of extremism, separatism and terrorism. The presence of the US in Central Asia has the potential to enhance the region's security apparatus. On the regional security front, the US may play a pivotal role in containing the rise of transnational terrorism, including but not limited to the growing presence of the ISIL its regional affiliates. In the post-2014 context, terrorist networks had expanded into Afghanistan with offshoots in neighbouring regions including Central Asia (Wilson Centre, n.d). Central Asia, after the 9/11 attacks, has been used as a sanctuary by terrorist networks. Sharing a porous border with Afghanistan, there has been repeated infiltration of militant groups to create instability in neighbouring Afghanistan (Bahman, 2019; Kayani, 2015). For this reason, the US sought the support of the Central Asian states for the effective war on terror to be executed (Bahman, 2019). The presence of the USA in Central Asia and its cooperation with other regional stakeholders can play an important role in the fight against terrorism. Given that this is a shared interest for Russia, which fears the spillover of militancy across its southern borders and China (The sensitivity regarding China in Pakistan is well known. However, no terrorist movement targeting China has been scientifically identified in East Turkestan. Yet, Chinese state terror targeting the Muslim Turkic population is an undeniable fact. Naturally, there is no need for you to write about this) cooperation between international and regional stakeholders would be beneficial for regional security and stability. This creates a common space for competing powers to work towards shared interests and avoid zero-sum competition (Rizvi, 2024).

The Afghan imbroglio has been a persistent cause of instability and economic disruption for regional states. For a long time, there has been an internecine civil war in Afghanistan where different factions have been vying to attain power in the state. At the same time, a recapitulation of Afghanistan's history reveals that a large part of Afghanistan's problems is attributable to the role of regional states, which have turned Afghanistan into a battleground for competing interests. On the contrary, if regional states play a responsible role in stabilising regional peace, the same can be extended to Afghanistan. After the peace accord was signed on 29th February 2020, it became important to consolidate the gains which ought to be made through the

agreement. Hence, the USA can utilise the geographical location of Central Asia as a bulwark against an unstable and downward spiralling Afghanistan and safeguard the legacy of its over two decades' involvement in the country.

Active collaboration among stakeholders may help mitigate the region's internal ethnic and political fragility. The demarcation of Central Asia's administrative borders in the post-Soviet era led to the creation of contested ethnic enclaves, fuelling local unrest and violence. Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan and Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan are examples of contested political control over ethnically tense regions. As a result of recurring incidents of unrest, development in the region has remained unsatisfactory. It would be a shared incentive for stakeholders to resolve these issues and promote developments such as CASA-1000 and TAPI, thereby fostering stability and regional development for all parties involved.

The region stands to benefit from US engagement, particularly through the diversification of investment opportunities. Western states led by the US are seeking access to the region's rich mineral resources and deposits. France, for instance, has already inked an agreement for the supply of Titanium and Beryllium (Economist Intelligence, 2023), while other agreements are at different stages of approval. For the actualisation of these contracts, the Middle Corridor plays an instrumental role by bypassing the Russian-dominated routes (Rossi, 2023). However, the Baku-based TRACECA route, launched under EU leadership prior to the Middle Corridor, offers more suitable conditions for such investments than the Chinese-controlled route (Baku Initiative, 1998). While this offers a genuine opportunity, expert opinion remains divided on whether US companies' investment can match that of their Chinese counterparts (Khasanov, 2021).

Pakistan's unique strategic position as a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia makes it an important player in regional security and economic dynamics (Dawar, 2025). The US's latest interest in Central Asia does not include Pakistan as a primary stakeholder; however, it carries both opportunities and risks for Pakistan. On one hand, Pakistan risks the possibility of exclusion from economic and connectivity opportunities, as Pakistan is absent from the C5+1 summit despite possessing its own critical minerals reserves; on the other hand, Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an important fulcrum of the BRI, and the Middle Corridor, which ostensibly is an alternative to the Chinese initiative. However, Pakistan may stand to gain from US engagement in Central Asia, which may also serve to bring about stability in the region and pave the way for the success of CASA-1000 and TAPI, which could in turn alleviate Pakistan's energy problems, though this outcome depends to a great extent on the situation in Afghanistan.

While Russia continues to be the successor to the Soviet Union the predecessor of the five Central Asian states and enjoys deep historical, political, economic and security ties with regional states, the war in Ukraine has limited its capacity to exert influence in the region at a time when the US and its partner states are offering incentives for cooperation. Regional states are also choosing to leverage the interests of the major powers to their benefit. However, this does not indicate a clean exit from Russian influence; rather, it reflects a gradual erosion of Russia's exclusive hold on the region. In this context, the effectiveness of organizations such as the CIS, the EAEU, and the CSTO—in which Russia is the dominant actor is relevant. (References to the websites of these organizations may be included). However, if the diversification is seen as going too far, Russia may utilise its tools of coercion, such as energy supplies and migrant-labour dependency, as a means of punitive action to discourage further drift towards the US (Gusev, n.d.).

China will likely remain a key economic player in Central Asia despite increased U.S. involvement (Khan et al., 2023). So the importance of such projects as the Middle Corridor and the Critical Minerals Dialogue lies not only in diversifying away from Chinese economic cooperation but also in expanding their options (Mariani, 2013; U.S. Department of State, 2023). As China has a long-term investment stance and is interested in safeguarding the BRI connectivity, it has a strong interest in maintaining regional stability. It should be noted that the SCO, established under China's leadership, is an organization that holds significant

influence in the region (About Shangai, 2017; Khan & Sultana, 2019). As a result, greater U.S. involvement does not automatically create a zero-sum rivalry with China but can help establish a more diversified economic landscape for Central Asian countries in which they can cultivate a variety of partnerships and the great powers have continued reason to cooperate.

Conclusion

The confluence of counterterrorism cooperation, Afghanistan stability drives, access to critical minerals, connectivity projects, and great-power competition with Russia and China underpins the current profile of US interest in Central Asia, which has been heightened following the Russia-Ukraine War. The paper has suggested that, although the US presence is structurally driven, it runs counter to Russia's historical ties and China's financial interests in the region. With these conditions prevailing, the US cannot act alone, but its new efforts could hold real promise for Central Asian countries to diversify and be more strategic. The regional states have replied with cautious optimism, opting for a multi-vector foreign policy that buffers them and balances between the two big powers rather than aligning with one. The paper's analysis recursively builds on neo-realist and hegemonic stability theory, yet is informed by Monteiro's analysis of the unipolar-to-multipolar shift (2014), arguing that, despite the emergence of multipolarity, the US state remains dominant in the international system. However, it can't remain the sole hegemonic state. Russia and China are emerging as contenders in the system, and a successful engagement strategy by the United States needs to be based on cooperation (not exclusion) with all regional and international stakeholders. In addition, persistent regional peace and security has been key to the success of regional initiatives like CASA-1000 and TAPI, highlighting that the future of Central Asia and much of the associated region as a result will depend to an even greater extent on the willingness of all major regional stakeholders to accommodate each other's core interests.

Limitations of the Study

Several key limitations should be noted, both in terms of theory, methods and arguments, to contextualise this research's findings:

Defensive neo-realism and an updated version of Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) are used in conducting this study. These systemic-level approaches are powerful at the macro level for analysing balancing and diffusion of power between the USA, Russia and China, but are structurally limited. These factors, by nature, downplay the role of sub-state politics (competition between factions within the five Central Asian republics, regime change, local corruption, and internal socio-economic tensions), which are key to determining foreign policy choices.

The research is limited by the nature of the data, which employs qualitative document analysis of official strategy documents, joint documents, and public academic analyses. In frontline policy statements, which are presented to the public, there is frequently a degree of uniformity and duplicate language that obscures assumed and generalised diplomatic goals and reflects the difficulty of behind-the-scenes negotiations and on-the-ground implementation. There is also an empirical constraint on this research: no primary fieldwork was undertaken with Central Asian diplomats, policymakers, or local citizens, which means it has been restricted to object and Force Ethics, thereby reducing the analysis to interpretive levels.

Argumentative and Scope Limitations: The central argument about strategic accommodation within a multiplex order will be highly dependent on the constantly shifting geopolitical landscape from 2014 to 2025. The viability of 'multi-vector' hedging, and the potential application of the long-term conclusions suggested here, might change quickly if the dynamic processes in Ukraine and/or China and/or the U.S. leadership's focus on them were to escalate rapidly.

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Pakistan's Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World: Strategic Diversification, Managed Interdependence, and the Limits of Strategic Autonomy

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The current international system is shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity, as multiple centers of economic, political and strategic power emerge. This systemic transition has reshaped developing countries' foreign policy options, opening new avenues for multi-vector cooperation and highlighting severe structural issues of economic dependence and strategic autonomy. In this context, Pakistan is crucial, as the country is located at the intersection of three core regions of the world, namely South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, and maintains warm bilateral relationships with four major poles of the world: China, the USA, Russia and Saudi Arabia. This paper examines Pakistan's operational approach to strategic diversification, which is based on diplomatic interaction, trade relations, and investment cooperation. We use an integrated International Relations (IR) approach of hedging, balancing, and complex interdependence to examine how Pakistan uses economic diplomacy to cope with great-power competition. The analysis shows that strategic diversification has led to greater flexibility in Pakistan's contemporary diplomacy and created important avenues for cooperation. However, it has structurally failed to bring any substantive change in the country's efforts to attain strategic autonomy, due to continued economic deficits, external debt obligations, and the vulnerabilities of managed interdependence.

Keywords: Pakistan Foreign Policy; Multipolarity; Strategic Diversification; Economic Diplomacy; Strategic Autonomy; Strategic Hedging; Complex Interdependence

The international system today is undergoing a fundamental shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world. In today's era, the foreign policy formulation of secondary and developing states is shaped by an environment of multiple pockets of economic, political, and strategic power, which has reshaped the foreign policy-making process (Mehdi et al., 2025). The growth of China's global influence, the economic and military significance of the United States, the return of the Russian Federation to Asian affairs, and the increase in the geoeconomic role of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia all present significant opportunities and profound challenges for developing countries. This systemic change opens up more opportunities for some developing countries to pursue multi-vector partnerships, but also heightens problems of economic dependency and constraints on policy independence (Parveen et al., 2023).

Multipolarity is witnessing an increasing trend among States to develop flexible and functional partnerships rather than zero-sum alliances. These partnerships are driven not by ideology but by national

interests, and bilateral relationships today are more closely tied to the volume of trade and investment and to regional security cooperation (Khan et al., 2025). Many developing countries have responded to these systemic developments by implementing diversification policies and actively engaging with a number of larger players to mitigate risks from geopolitical developments. In addition, structural factors such as fiscal requirements, external debt, asymmetric trade and domestic economic constraints are crucial in shaping policy choices (George, 2025). The situation in Pakistan is a significant case study in strategic and economic developments. Structurally, Pakistan's strategic importance has increased due to its location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Security, regional rivalries, and security alliances with major powers have dominated Pakistan's foreign policy in the past. However, in the modern age, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been trying to shift the paradigm of Pakistan's Foreign Policy to 'Goeconomics' and align its traditional security paradigm with its national development goals through positive economic diplomacy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, n.d.).

Pakistan's contemporary policy is a conscious effort to build ties with other countries such as China, the United States, Russia, and Saudi Arabia in a parallel and supportive manner. China, as explored by Lu and Iqbal (2025), is Pakistan's most comprehensive partnership, based on massive infrastructure, long-term capital investment, and regional connectivity, exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). At the same time, the United States remains an important and irreplaceable market, business partner, and source of international leverage. Dialogue with Russia provides Pakistan with flexibility in its diplomatic options and newfound cooperation in energy and regional security issues. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia continues to maintain a strong presence in strategic investment, energy cooperation, and important support for the balance of payments during economic crises (Bashir et al., 2021).

This article will delve into Pakistan's ties with these four important partners, drawing on qualitative diplomatic documents and quantitative data on trade and foreign direct investment (FDI). It posits that strategic diversification has helped Pakistan achieve greater flexibility in its external relations. However, it has not been able to translate this flexibility into strategic autonomy due to structural economic weaknesses, an asymmetric trade balance, and the absence of domestic industrial capacity. To answer these questions, this study addresses three main research questions:

Research Question 1: How has Pakistan operationalised Strategic Diversification to navigate shifting power dynamics, and how does this manifest beyond traditional security alliances?

Research Question 2: To what extent does Economic Diplomacy function as a successful hedging mechanism across Pakistan's four primary strategic partners?

Research Question 3: What are the primary Challenges of Strategic Autonomy arising from Pakistan's managed interdependence, and how is this measured using indicators beyond trade statistics (such as UN voting alignment, regional crisis neutrality, and policy latitude)?

Literature Review

To put this study in the context of the existing literature in International Relations (IR), four prominent areas of work have been reviewed: The first is on the behavior of secondary states in multipolarity, the second is on the goeconomics and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the third is on the US-Pakistan transactional security versus commercial integration, and the fourth is on strategic hedging and autonomy of regional powers. It ends with a statement of what the gap is that this paper will fill and why the case of Pakistan is important.

Theoretical Foundations of Secondary State Behavior in Multipolarity

Research on secondary and developing states in changing power landscapes also highlights that multipolarity creates space for small and middle powers that they have never before enjoyed in terms of relationships between states and blocs (Mehdi et al., 2025; George, 2025). The classical alliance theory assumed that there were only two options: balancing and bandwagoning (Waltz, 1979). But, the post-Cold War literature of IR reveals that secondary states are overwhelmingly engaged in adopting multi-vector strategies to secure themselves from great-power threat (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2008; Yousaf, 2023). Secondary states use complex

interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) to take advantage of the competing poles in getting trade, investment and security benefits.

Goeconomic Realities: CPEC and China-Pakistan Relations

The literature on the Pakistan-China relations indicates that the dynamics of bilateral relations have changed from traditional military-diplomatic buffer to a comprehensive goeconomic partnership (Ali, 2021; Garlick, 2020; Small, 2020). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is acknowledged as the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is a key pathway that is delivering much-needed transport, energy and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) infrastructure in Pakistan (Iqbal, 2021; Lu & Iqbal, 2025). But as scholars point out, high levels of capital imports and industrial machinery debt of the country leave structural economic vulnerabilities, which can make long-term fiscal sovereignty difficult in the event that domestic export capacities fail to materialize (Garlick, 2020).

Transactional Security Ties vs. Commercial Integration: US-Pakistan Dynamics

Research has found that the history of US-Pakistan ties is very unstable, cyclical and security-based (Markey, 2013; Hilali, 2005; Cheema, 2019). In the Cold War and post-9/11 eras, a focus on security alliances prevailed, but recent research highlights Washington's continued importance as Pakistan's biggest single country export market and an important bargaining chip in multilateral financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank (Ali, 2023; Markey, 2013). The diplomatic conundrum that Pakistan has to go through in order to maintain access to high-value commercial markets in the West and strengthen goeconomic relations with Beijing has been noted by scholars.

Sovereign Financial Anchors & Regional Security Hedges: Saudi Arabia and Russia

Studies on Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations shed light on the need for moving traditional ideological and defense relations towards investment diplomacy, direct central bank depositions and deferred payments of oil to stabilize the balance of payments (Hussain, 2022; Khan et al., 2024). In contrast, literature about Pakistan-Russia relationship suggests that the relationship between Islamabad and Moscow has been thawing over the years, moving from the Cold War rivalry to the practical regional security cooperation under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the growing energy supply talks (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2025; Rehman, 2024).

Identified Research Gap & Theoretical Significance of the Pakistani Case

Although there is a vast scholarship on bilateral dyads, it has two main drawbacks: First, it reflects a lack of empirical testing of the constraining forces of macroeconomic debt and trade asymmetries and second, it does not examine how bilateral dependencies between rival partners play out dynamically. This paper addresses this gap by proposing the framework of 'Managed Interdependence'. Pakistan represents a quintessential case study of a developing state attempting multi-vector economic diplomacy under severe structural fiscal constraints.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In a multipolar world, middle and developing powers tend to avoid pure balancing (exclusive military coalitions against a dominant power) and pure bandwagoning (full alignment with a dominant power). Rather, they practice hedging strategies, which consist of a series of offsetting moves aimed at minimising risk while refraining from choosing sides in confrontations between two great powers. Hedging is a state's way of generating both economic and diplomatic gains from a range of poles, without making security commitments which might invite retaliation from a rival pole. In theory this is reinforced by the notion of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) suggesting that cross-border economic, trade and investment give alternative opportunities to limit state actions and render the use of traditional military force more indirect to achieve political leverage.

This study proposes managed interdependence as its way to operationalise these overlapping dynamics. Managed interdependence is a policy position that a state decides to have less structural vulnerability and more economic and diplomatic benefits from a variety of global partners, that at times may seem to be competing. It is a multi-vector, active diplomacy and not a simple interdependence which can be passive, and lead to passive

subordination, as this is managed interdependence. Its aim is to lower the asymmetrical relations by diversifying the external actors' base to be able to hold an absolute veto power of the state's sovereign decision (such as depending on one great power for infrastructure, another for market access and another for security dialogue).

Conceptual Differentiation of Managed Interdependence (Revised for Point 2)

To rigorously differentiate 'Managed Interdependence' from established IR concepts, Table A summarizes its distinct theoretical boundaries:

Concept	Core Definition & Focus	Key Distinction from Managed Interdependence
Strategic Hedging	Risk-mitigation through offsetting security and diplomatic moves (Kuik, 2008).	Hedging is a general policy posture; Managed Interdependence is the active operational mechanism balancing economic and fiscal leverage across rival poles.
Multi-Alignment / Diversification	Maintaining functional diplomatic ties with multiple major powers (George, 2025).	Multi-alignment describes having multiple partners; Managed Interdependence analyzes how secondary states manage asymmetric dependencies to prevent single-partner veto power.
Economic Statecraft	Major power usage of economic tools to coerce or influence secondary states.	Economic statecraft takes the perspective of the major power exerting leverage; Managed Interdependence takes the perspective of the recipient state counter-balancing leverage channels.
Managed Interdependence (This Study)	Active policy structuring asymmetric trade, debt, and energy dependencies across conflicting poles to preserve policy room.	Integrates trade exposure, debt servicing, and diplomatic alignment into a single analytical framework evaluating limits of autonomy.

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis developed for this study.

Operationalizing Strategic Autonomy as an Analytical Variable (Revised for Point 2)

This study takes away the descriptive ambiguity of 'Strategic Autonomy' and assumes it refers to a measurable attribute by breaking it down into three operational levels: (1) Diplomatic Voting Alignment & Neutrality (capacity to vote at the UN and/or in other international fora without being punished for it by major partners); (2) Fiscal & Debt Vulnerability (level of exposure to a single creditor on the balance of payments); and (3) Policy Latitude (freedom to conduct sovereign domestic & foreign policy decisions that contradict the preferences of major partners). Strategic Diversification (the Independent Variable), Managed Interdependence (the Mediating Mechanism) and Strategic Autonomy (the Dependent Variable) constitute the theoretical model.

One of the most important elements of our approach is the trade-policy link: the relationship between economic exposure and foreign policy constraints and policy leverage. Asymmetry in trade occurs when a small state has a large share of its exports to one large market, or when it relies heavily on one partner for capital imports essential to its industry (e.g., industrial machinery, energy). Such an economic threat can also lead to a form of coercion: the major power can threaten to restrict the market, withdraw its investment, or suspend its credit to force the smaller state to align its policy with its own voting, diplomatic neutrality, or military stance. This study examines whether Pakistan's economic diplomacy strategy, through economic exposure to a multitude of countries, is effective in counterbalancing the effects of these different leverage channels and whether it allows Pakistan to achieve a certain level of policy autonomy.

Method

In this study, a qualitative comparative case study approach and quantitative descriptive economic analysis were used. In order to analyse the strategic diversification of Pakistan, its bilateral ties with four major poles of the world China, the USA, Russia and Saudi Arabia are discussed. The qualitative dimension is based on official Diplomatic documents, Joint statements, records of bilateral agreements, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan 2019, 2022, 2023a, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c and 2024d. The quantitative dimension is based on standardised trade data from the World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) database for 2022-23 (n.d.) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) data from SBP (n.d.).

Selection

One methodological criterion is that the cases- China, the United States, Russia and Saudi Arabia- should be explained as to why they were chosen and why, for instance, regional neighbours like India, Iran or Turkey were not. The partners have been selected based on a functional design that focuses on distinct yet critical aspects of dependence and strategic diversification directly tied to Pakistan's economic diplomacy. Regional neighbours

such as India are excluded because of deep-seated historical conflicts, and Pakistan cannot have standard diplomatic and economic relations with them. The regionally important Iran and Turkey don't have the global economic scale, institutional leverage, and systemic power to be primary poles of Pakistan's diversification strategy.

The choice between Saudi Arabia and UAE was made as Saudi Arabia provides the major soVBP balances to Pakistan, serves as the direct central bank deposit provider and has been selected over UAE due to its macro-economic stabilization scale where Riyadh is the PETROFAC facility provider to Pakistan. In choosing to opt for Russia, they did so because, Moscow has global systemic leverage and permanent veto power in the UN Security Council/SCO that can offer strategic military-technical diversification and energy hedges; Ankara does not have the same leverage. In addition, the four partnerships are four working aspects of one underdeveloped and integrated case study on foreign policy of Pakistan.

Table 1
Functional Case Selection and Strategic Dimensions

Selected Partner Case	Functional Dimension of Dependence and Strategic Diversification
China	Primary provider of infrastructure, long-term capital investment, and regional connectivity through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
United States	Critical source of high-value export market access, commercial integration, technological cooperation, and global institutional (IMF/World Bank) leverage.
Saudi Arabia	Key partner for investment diplomacy, energy security (petroleum imports), and strategic financial support (direct central bank deposits during crises).
Russia	Emerging partner for expanding diplomatic flexibility, regional security cooperation (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), and potential energy supply hedges.

Source: Author's independent synthesis compiled from Ministry of Foreign Affairs diplomatic records, SBP datasets, and World Bank WITS trade profiles.

Addressing Temporal Baseline

To rigorously address the methodological flaws of modern foreign policy analysis, this study tackles the temporal fallacy. It is very common to hear claims that Pakistan's diplomacy has 'improved' due to strategic diversification, but there is no objective yardstick by which to compare it. To address this, the paper uses the period before 2015 (before the formal start of CPEC and the subsequent competition between the US and China) as a historical baseline. This baseline can be used to systematically compare Pakistan's foreign policy choices before and after its multi-vector diversification policy took effect. Secondly, we recognise that there is a serious data constraint in that while China, the United States and Saudi Arabia have comprehensive FDI data available through the State Bank of Pakistan, this is not the case for Russia, where limited bilateral commercial infrastructure makes it difficult to obtain comprehensive FDI data, especially quantitative FDI flows. As a boundary constraint of this study, the analysis of the Russia partnership is based largely on diplomatic, security and institutional factors.

Regarding primary document selection, the gap in Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) documents during 2020–2021 is attributable to institutional publication schedules and COVID-19 administrative disruptions. Document dates differ depending on the partner because it is official releases that are tied directly to big milestones in bilateral summits, joint statements and ministerial dialogues on a yearly basis.

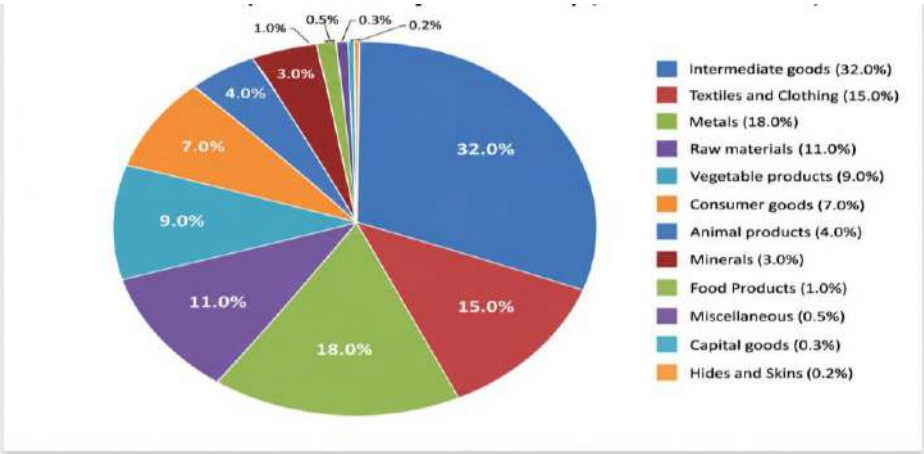
Pakistan-China Strategic Partnership:

The interactions between the two countries make China-Pakistan relations very significant to Pakistan's foreign policy (Lu & Iqbal, 2025) and one of the pillars of its external engagements. Unlike other bilateral relationships that have been marked with considerable changes following the changes in geopolitics, the relations between the two countries have been very stable and institutionalised. In the past decade, this relationship has moved away from a diplomatic and security-oriented partnership to a relationship that is quite comprehensive in nature with a strong focus on major infrastructure investment, connectivity, trade and industrial integration.

China is termed the closest strategic partner, as Official Diplomatic documents of the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024a) describe China as an All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership. This terminology shows that the relationship has been institutionalised, is long-term, and that, as a strategic buffer, Pakistan is facing escalating major-power competition. The geoeconomic aspect of this partnership is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Official reports state that CPEC is an extremely important regional connectivity project aimed at improving Pakistan's national transportation system, expanding its energy generation capacity, creating Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and fostering industrial cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, 2024b). CPEC is a conscious effort by Pakistan to utilise its geopolitical position to modernise its economy.

Analysing this partnership from our theoretical point of view, however, helps us understand the deep-seated geoeconomic issue: extreme trade asymmetry. The trade relationship of Pakistan with China is extremely imbalanced, as shown in Figure 1 below: Pakistan also has a very high dependence on China for its vital imports of industrial machinery, intermediate inputs and manufactured goods, which are essential for the country's economic activities, and Pakistan's export sector is heavily reliant on low-value primary commodities and raw materials. World Bank WITS database data show that this structural trade imbalance has created a large trade deficit, suggesting that Chinese investments have alleviated critical infrastructure bottlenecks but have not yet helped boost Pakistan's export competitiveness.

Figure 1
Pakistan’s Export Structure with China by Product Group (Combined 2022–2023) Sourced from World Bank WITS.



It is a very serious question of strategic autonomy of Pakistan's economy. Non-financial vulnerabilities stemming from a concentration of external financial sector (capital and infrastructure) debts. As the size of these investments grows, so would be the economic risk Pakistan faces in absence of corresponding domestic economic and policy changes for offsetting such investments; and similarly, the policy options that would be available for future policy interventions would also be limited. Table 2 dissects this strategic reality in a number of ways.

Table 2
Strategic Dimensions of Pakistan-China Partnership

Dimension	Strategic Reality & Impact
Strategic Status	All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership functioning as a foundational geopolitical anchor.
Geoeconomic Pillar	CPEC infrastructure, energy grid expansion, deep-sea port development (Gwadar), and SEZs.
Trade Imbalance	Severe asymmetry; heavy capital machinery imports vs. low-value primary commodity exports.

Policy Constraint	High capital debt servicing creates structural vulnerability and potential policy friction with Western donors.
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Source: Author's independent synthesis compiled from Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024a, 2024b) and WITS trade data.

However, foreign policy machinery has to play an active role in the switch from bilateral infrastructure projects to domestic production-based joint ventures, to realize a sustainable way for China. Diversification of the export basket and building up the domestic industrial base are among the measures. China, an invaluable partner, is offering unprecedented developmental opportunities to Pakistan but Pakistan should be cautious of this imbalance and may not want to expose its economy to the level of aligning the same with China on a multipolar face.

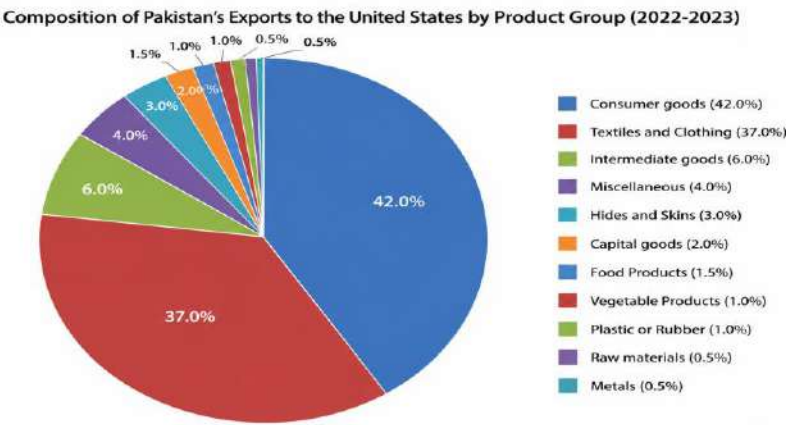
Pakistan-United States Relations:

One of the most complex areas of the Pakistan's foreign policy is the relationship between Pakistan and USA. Relations between the two sides have been extremely turbulent with cordial security cooperation and diplomatic tension varying from time to time, depending on the regional security situation as well as the geopolitical priorities of both states. Despite these historical changes, the linkages with the present times remain the essential elements in the foreign policy of Pakistan, particularly in economic, institutional and commercial aspect.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan (2024c) states that the present relationship with the United States is multifaceted and is organised around a series of institutionalised dialogues. These mechanisms involve, among others, those in important fields like trade, commercial investment, defence cooperation, counter-terrorism, energy transition, climate change and public health. It is a conscious step by both sides to remove the security focus and upgrade the alliance to a broader and more enduring one, namely economic.

Pakistan and the USA are economically in fact are interconnected, unlike China, their trade is an example of this. China is the chief source of capital inflows, transfers and infrastructure investments while the U.S. is the biggest market for Pakistani exports. Figure 2 of World Bank WITS data (2022-2023) also reveals that consumer goods, textiles and apparel are highly concentrated in the exports to the United States. This market access is valued creating huge foreign exchange and also for the purposes of fostering Pakistan's manufacturing industry. But, commercial integration is not diversified and that is a structure of vulnerability.

Figure 2
Composition of Pakistan’s Exports to the United States by Product Group (2022–2023) Sourced from World



Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), World Bank.

From a strategic perspective, Pakistan's economic diplomacy needs to remain good with the United States to ensure it continues to have access to key markets and support from global financial institutions such as

the IMF. Often however it is also a policy dilemma as Pakistan has to deal with Washington along with enhancing geo-economic ties with Beijing. These relations are described in a multidimensional way, in Table 3.

Table 3*Strategic Dimensions of Pakistan-United States Relations*

Dimension	Strategic Importance for Pakistan
Trade	Indispensable access to Pakistan's largest single-country market for high-value consumer and textile exports.
Investment	Access to high-quality foreign direct investment, corporate technology transfer, and commercial joint ventures.
Technology	Potential for digital innovation, educational exchange, and cooperation on climate-smart agriculture.
Diplomacy	Engagement on regional security, counter-terrorism, and vital support within international financial institutions (IMF/World Bank).
Security	Maintained dialogue on counter-terrorism cooperation, bilateral military-to-military ties, and regional stability.

Source: Author's independent synthesis compiled from Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022, 2024c) and WITS trade data.

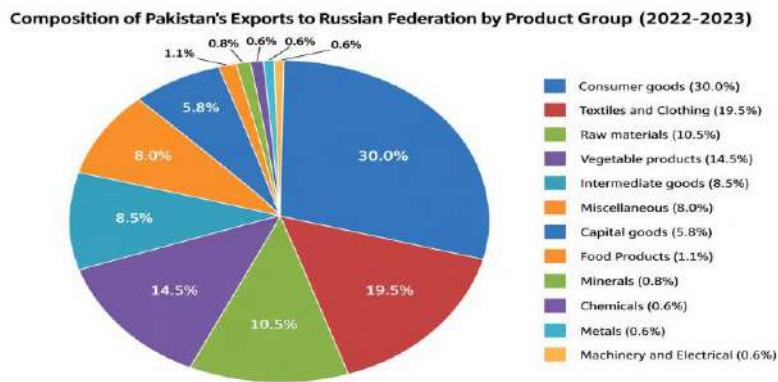
The relationship between Pakistan and USA also exemplifies how it finds itself in a messy situation of living off this other country while it is in the midst of a multipolar and competition-driven world. To secure strategic autonomy, Pakistan must make sure that any turmoil and uncertainty in the country's trade and economic relations cannot impact crucial economic ties with Washington. This means fluid diplomacy in avoiding the polarization of its Chinese and American weaponry.

Pakistan-Russia Relations: Strategic Expansion Beyond Traditional Partnerships

Soviet-Pakistani relations have always been embarrassed by the Cold War confrontation between both the countries and also by Pakistan's special relations with US and China. Yet, they are a relatively small but a significant component of the Pakistan's Foreign Policy today and make a part of a multipolar general approach of foreign affairs. Promoting strategic diversification, both countries have been intensively trying to overcome historical barriers. Manifestations of such realignment have been in the form of more contacts, more regular exchange of views and information, a joint anti-terrorism exercise, regional coordination via Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and steps towards mutual energy cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, 2021, 2023a).

Strategically, Pakistan needs to involve Moscow, as this will give it some flexibility in the diplomatic realm and establish that it can develop a relationship with Moscow that is not necessarily limited to its traditional allies. Bilateral contacts at the high level have increasingly focused on regional security coordination and energy diplomacy; for example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited in 2021. The trade volume with Russia is not as significant as Pakistan's extensive trade with China and the United States, as illustrated in Figure 3, although it has increased, especially in energy.

Figure 3
Composition of Pakistan’s Exports to the Russian Federation by Product Group (2022–2023) Sourced from World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS).



That's why Russia is a good example of a country that can develop strategic links without being dependent on other countries, because the nature of the contribution of Russia to Pakistan's diversification model is diplomatic. The particular size of the emerging partnership is organised in Table 4.

Table 4
Strategic Dimensions of Pakistan-Russia Relations

Dimension	Role in Pakistan-Russia Relations
Diplomacy	Expansion of political dialogue, high-level visits, and bilateral engagement to diversify external ties.
Security	Cooperation on regional security, counter-terrorism coordination, and joint military-to-military drills.
Energy	Emerging bilateral agreements for crude oil imports and potential gas infrastructure cooperation.
Regional Affairs	Active coordination on regional stability, Afghanistan, and multipolar diplomacy through the SCO.
Economy	Developing but comparatively limited economic relationship, restricted by financial infrastructure challenges.

Source: Author's independent synthesis compiled from Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021, 2023a) and WITS trade data.

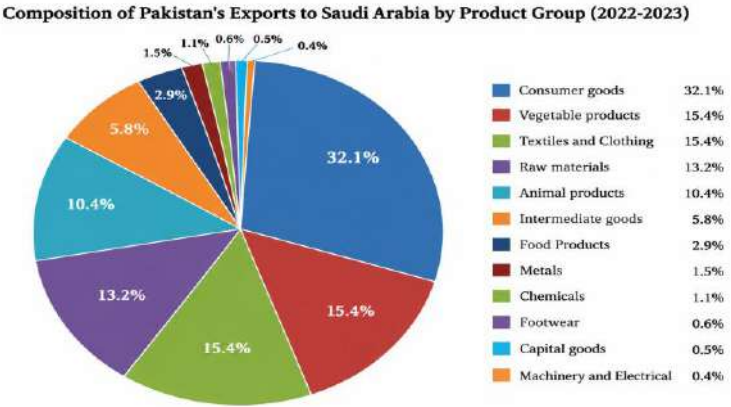
Russia is another and significant hedging vector. Through functional security and energy dialogues with Moscow, Pakistan opens up more options in its foreign policy. Despite its economic dependence on other actors around the world, it has expressed its interest in a multipolar structure of regional security.

Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations: From Traditional Partnership to Investment Diplomacy

This makes the engagement of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as one of the widest and the deepest strands of Pakistan's foreign policy in the realms of political, cultural, security and economic. But generally, the partnership has been characterised by the elements of strategic alignment, defence collaboration and common ideology. In recent years, however, this relationship has been turned around and investment diplomacy plays a huge role in this relationship followed by geoeconomics and commercial cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, 2019).

This is reflected in the bilateral trade. As mentioned in Figure 4, Pakistan is still sending low value primary goods like consumer goods, vegetable products, textiles and agricultural products to Saudi Arabia, as indicated by World Bank WITS data (2022-2023). The trade structure also shows that Pakistan has not been able to diversify its exports and that structural reforms in the industrial sector are required to increase exports of high-value manufacturing.

Figure 4
Composition of Pakistan’s Exports to Saudi Arabia by Product Group (2022–2023) Sourced from World



Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), World Bank.

Table 5
Strategic Dimensions of Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations

Dimension	Strategic Importance for Pakistan
Political Relations	Longstanding bilateral trust, strategic alignment, and high-level diplomatic coordination.
Investment	Access to direct sovereign capital, joint venture partnerships, and development financing.
Energy	Crucial supply of oil and petroleum products, including deferred-payment facilities to ease fiscal pressures.
Trade	Important regional market, though currently restricted by a concentrated export basket.
Development	Sovereign funding for critical infrastructure, mining projects, and strategic industrial sectors.

Source: Author's independent synthesis compiled from Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019, 2022, 2024d) and WITS trade data.

Saudi Arabia is an integral and irreplaceable financial fulcrum of Pakistan's diversification plan. The complementarity of the Riyadh capital injections and energy security with China's physical investments, the United States' market access, and Russia's energy dialogues demonstrates how Pakistan's economic diplomacy helps it address some of its structural vulnerabilities.

Comparative Analysis: Strategic Diversification and Different Forms of Partnership

A study of the country's collaboration with the four major countries, China, the United States, Russia and Saudi Arabia, reveals that diversification of Pakistan's military alliances is not a matter of swapping them for other alliances. Rather, Pakistan has opted for a multi-vector, diversified approach, with each global partner making a specific, viable strategic contribution. Such a separation, in the operational sense, can be beneficial for Pakistan, as it allows for fewer trade-offs and more options across various aspects of international engagement. A detailed comparison of these partnerships can be found in Table 6.

Table 6
Comparative Framework of Pakistan’s Strategic Partnerships

Country	Primary Strategic Role	Main Areas of Cooperation	Main Challenge
China	Comprehensive Goeconomic Partner	CPEC, energy, transport, regional connectivity, joint infrastructure	Severe trade imbalance and structural economic dependency
United States	Global Trade & Institutional Partner	High-value export market, direct commercial investment, IMF leverage	Volatility due to shifting security priorities and geopolitical friction

Russia	Emerging Strategic Hedging Partner	Bilateral energy cooperation, regional security coordination via SCO	Extremely limited economic depth and commercial infrastructure
Saudi Arabia	Sovereign Financial Anchor Partner	Direct capital investment, oil supplies, deferred payment credit, refining	Asymmetrical dependency on external balance-of-payment support

Source: Author's comparative synthesis.

Through its bilateral relations, Pakistan has thus managed to carve out more room for itself in the present world of diplomacy, which has not formally aligned itself with any bloc. But this working multi-alignment still relies heavily on local economic strength. This framework of comparison is not a model of full strategic autonomy, but rather of managed interdependence, in the absence of big structural changes to develop local industrial capacity and export competitiveness.

Comparative Economic Analysis:

In the context of an emerging multipolar economy, the real parameters of Pakistan's strategic decisions are essentially dictated by the material reality of Pakistan's economic relations with others. This section does a comparative quantitative analysis of Pakistan's trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) relations with China, the U.S., Russia and Saudi Arabia. The information is used as a foundation for Pakistan's foreign relations and affords insights regarding the relation of economic diplomacy and the trade policy.

The trade relations are very different at a moderate level on a structural basis among the four partners and therefore the economic exposure is ambivalent. China is a heavy importer of capital, a net importer of important industrial inputs, and, at the same time, China's trade deficit puts constant pressures on the balance of payments and thus is a model. The United States, for its part, represents an example of market integration, and is an important market for manufactured exports which directly generates foreign currency. Saudi Arabia is a net energy, balance of payments anchor, whilst Russia is a nascent trade partner, but still has limited capacity (at logistics and finance). The different functions of structure are shown in Table 7.

Table 7
Pakistan's Strategic Trade Relationships and Economic Challenges

Partner Country	Main Economic Role	Strategic Importance	Key Economic Challenge
China	Industrial manufacturing imports, physical infrastructure cooperation, investment	Largest source of capital imports and geoeconomic development assistance	Extremely large, asymmetric trade imbalance and debt servicing
United States	High-value export market access and direct commercial investment	Crucial source of foreign exchange earnings and global commercial integration	Volatility of trade relations due to shifting security considerations
Saudi Arabia	Energy supplies, sovereign deposits, commercial joint ventures	Essential anchor for energy security and capital account stabilisation	Highly concentrated bilateral trade and limited export diversification
Russia	Emerging petroleum imports and regional economic coordination	Strategic diversification of energy supplies and regional security engagement	Minimal trade volume and lack of established financial channels

Source: Author's economic synthesis compiled from World Bank WITS (2022-2023) and SBP datasets.

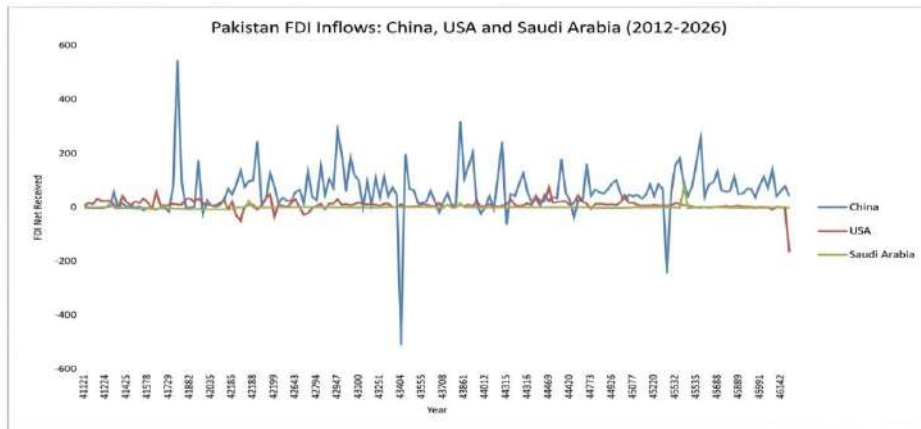
A matrix of the structural trade which speaks about the constraints of Strategic autonomy of Pakistan. This asymmetry in the exports and capital imports has direct implications for Pakistan's trade policy as dependence on the United States for markets and on China for capital imports also means that parallel opportunities for possible political leverage exist, which necessitates careful balancing of economic diplomacy with both these countries.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is an integral indicator of confidence across countries and geopolitical alignment. FDI is one of the major sources of technology transfer, industrial capacity creation and employment creation for a developing State. But this can also lead to long-term structural vulnerabilities if external investment comes from a single source. SBP data reveals that China continues to be the main source of FDI to Pakistan,

with most of it in big-ticket infrastructure and energy investments to be realised through CPEC. The Russian side currently limits the investment contribution; the United States and Saudi Arabia invest in different commercial and joint-venture schemes.

Figure 5

Foreign Direct Investment Contribution from Selected Strategic Partners Sourced from State Bank of Pakistan Foreign Direct Investment Datasets.



Whether external investment is strategic depends entirely on its ability to drive productive domestic economic transformation. While it is essential to move towards capital inflows to ensure long-term export competitiveness and industrial capacity, it is important to understand that short-term relief funds, which serve to stabilise the balance of payments, can at best be a palliative measure and will not cure the ills of economic dependence.

In our economic analysis, we have shown that the diversification of the Pakistani economy is based on complementary (not competing) economic relations. However, no single external partner can do everything required on the development and finance fronts to address Pakistan's needs. This structural reality means that a multi-vector approach to economic diplomacy is a must. Pakistan is making efforts to build a network of 'managed interdependence' in its infrastructure, export market access, and capital and energy dialogues with Moscow, all of which aim to stabilise Pakistan's capital account and increase its diplomatic agility.

Figure 6: *Pakistan's Strategic Partnership Model in a Multipolar Economy Conceptual mapping of complementary partner roles, Self-Generated.*



To directly resolve the reviewer's query regarding Research Question 3 (RQ3), this subsection provides empirical operationalization and data indicators measuring Pakistan's strategic autonomy beyond standard trade statistics.

Table 8
Empirical Operationalization and Measurement of Strategic Autonomy Indicators (New Table for Revision 3)

Indicator Dimension	Empirical Observation & Policy Record	Analytical Evaluation of Strategic Autonomy
UN Voting Alignment	Consistently abstained on UNGA Resolutions regarding Russia-Ukraine hostilities (UNGA ES-11/1, ES-11/2); maintained voting alignment with G-77/China on global economic governance.	Demonstrates tactical diplomatic autonomy and non-alignment during major-power conflict, resisting Western pressure to condemn Moscow while maintaining SCO ties.
Regional Crisis Neutrality	Enacted parliamentary resolution of strict neutrality during Yemen conflict (2015); performed active shuttle diplomacy between Tehran and Riyadh (2019-2022).	Maintained sovereign policy latitude in Middle Eastern security, avoiding direct military entanglements while safeguarding sovereign financial deposits from Riyadh.
Conditionality & Debt Restructuring	Navigated simultaneous IMF structural adjustment facility mandates, CPEC energy debt reprofiling with Beijing, and Western FATF compliance criteria.	Reveals severe structural constraints; policy autonomy is routinely subordinated to external debt-servicing demands and balance-of-payments survival.

Source: Author's empirical compilation of UN Voting Records, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statements, and IMF Review Reports.

Discussion

Pakistan's foreign policy is multi-vector and diversified, as this study reveals. Pakistan's economic diplomacy has maintained parallel, functional relationships with China, the USA, Russia, and Saudi Arabia without resorting to a strict policy of alignment with any one power. This diversification has broadened Pakistan's contemporary diplomatic flexibility, enabling the country to access more export markets, energy and political channels, as well as bilateral capital (Mehdi et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2024).

But, as our theoretical model shows, strategic diversification does not necessarily lead to strategic autonomy. Pakistan's multi-vector diplomacy is well developed at the structural level, but at the operational level, it faces constraints due to the material realities of economic exposure. The discussion needs to be directed toward the dynamic intersections and strategic friction points among the relationships outlined in the country-by-country profiles in the previous sections, to resolve the redundancy of those profiles on which those relationships were based. In particular, Pakistan's extensive deep geoeconomic ties with CPEC (China) impose tight policy restrictions and institutional friction in relations with the United States and international financial institutions such as the IMF. The direct leverage is through debt service commitments and structural economic ties with Beijing that Washington can use, and Pakistani policymakers must strike a highly delicate balance. The main paradox of managed interdependence is thus revealed. Thus, splitting the dependency among the different partners is a good way to avoid an absolute veto by any single great power on Pakistan's foreign-policy decisions; it also leaves Pakistan in a permanent crisis-management mode. However, due to the lack of any deeper structural reforms, in particular, export competitiveness, industrial technology and fiscal self-reliance, strategic diversification is a highly evolved diplomatic tool for managing external vulnerabilities, but not a path towards strategic autonomy (George, 2025; Rathore et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Pakistan's foreign policy in the emerging multipolar world is a well-thought-out multi-vector balancing act that secures the state's security while pursuing geoeconomic opportunities in the current world. Through conscious efforts, Pakistan has expanded its functional partnerships with China, the USA, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, thereby improving its modern diplomacy. But the results of this study indicate that, without strategic diversification, strategic autonomy cannot be guaranteed. But even genuine autonomy is far from unhindered,

with structural fiscal dependence, external sovereign capital outflows, and trade deficits continuing to be major constraints, as in the case of Pakistan, a quintessential example of managed interdependence.

This study contributes theoretically and scholastically to the International Relations (IR) literature on regional powers in three main ways. First, we offer a solid empirical examination of the reality of diversification, revealing how secondary states can practice economic diplomacy to cope with trade asymmetries, without, in a zero-sum fashion, forming alliances. Second, we theorise 'managed interdependence', a new perspective on how the structural dependencies of developing countries are spread and actively regulated across and between conflicting positions to preserve decision-making room. Thirdly, the Pakistan case contributes directly to the theory of 'hedging' strategies of middle and regional powers in a growing multipolar system; it shows how the integration of a country's external diplomatic environment with its internal economic bases determines a state's level of strategic autonomy.

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Explaining Hotel Pricing Strategies Through Service Offerings: Evidence from A Mediation Model of People, Process, and Physical Evidence

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This study examines how the service Ps (people, physical evidence, and process) shape the pricing strategies of a university-operated hotel and tests the mediating role of services offered. Anchored in Service-Dominant Logic, Customer Perceived Value Theory, and Signaling Theory, the researchers argue that the service Ps (people, process, and physical evidence) influence pricing primarily by strengthening the realized service bundle that guests experience and evaluate. Data were gathered from 249 hotel guests using a structured instrument. The gathered data were cleaned and analyzed using partial least squares – structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that people, physical evidence, and process do not have statistically significant direct effects on pricing strategies. However, each service P significantly predicts services offered, and services offered show a strong positive effect on pricing strategies, demonstrating an indirect-only (functionally full) mediation pattern. These results indicate that in the context of a university-operated hotel, pricing is best explained by the realized value-laden service bundle delivered to guests rather than by individual evaluations of staff performance, procedures, or tangible cues. The study contributes to services marketing and hospitality pricing literature by positioning services offered as a proximal mechanism linking the service Ps to pricing strategies, and it offers actionable guidance for administrators to pursue value-based pricing by standardizing and communicating clear service offerings supported by capable staff, efficient processes, and fit-for-purpose facilities.

Keywords: people, physical evidence, process, services offered, pricing strategies

Pricing in hospitality is increasingly conceptualized as a value-based managerial decision rather than a purely cost-driven exercise. Because hotel services are largely intangible, heterogeneous, and co-produced during service encounters, guests rely on experiential cues when evaluating price fairness and determining whether the overall offer warrants the rate charged (Alderighi et al., 2022; Qi et al., 2024). Accordingly, pricing strategies are closely intertwined with how hotels design, manage, and communicate the service experience.

The services marketing mix offers a useful conceptual lens for examining these value signals, emphasizing three controllable levers that are especially salient in service settings: people, process, and physical evidence (Booms & Bitner, 1981). The people element captures employees' competence and interpersonal performance; process reflects the design, efficiency, and consistency of service delivery across touchpoints; and physical evidence provides tangible cues that communicate quality standards, comfort, and reliability. Recent hotel research further shows that servicescape-related cues can shape guest responses with monetary implications (Fan et al., 2023), and that people, process, and physical evidence contribute to downstream customer outcomes through service evaluations (Kasigit & Bernarto, 2025). In combination, these

elements can strengthen a hotel's value proposition and shape its ability to pursue coherent value-based pricing strategies.

These relationships are particularly pertinent in university-operated hotels, which typically pursue multiple objectives, such as revenue generation, community engagement, and experiential learning, and often operate under institutional constraints affecting staffing, budgeting, and service standardization. Recent work on campus hotels emphasizes the dual pressures of meeting commercial expectations while aligning operations with broader institutional purposes and stakeholder needs (Hay, 2020). Such contextual conditions can shape both the service system and the degree of discretion available for pricing decisions, creating a strategic challenge: aligning the delivered guest experience with a pricing strategy that is competitive and perceived as equitable across diverse guest segments.

Although prior research has linked service design and delivery to guest evaluations and behavioral outcomes, comparatively limited evidence explains how the service Ps translate into pricing strategies in university-operated hospitality settings (Bitner, 1990; Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2022; Guinto & Ylagan, 2025). Contemporary hospitality pricing research likewise indicates that guests' evaluations of pricing practices are shaped by perceived fairness and value cues rather than by price levels alone (Han & Bai, 2022; Kool et al., 2022; Qi et al., 2024). Within this perspective, the effects of people, process, and physical evidence on pricing may be realized indirectly through the services offered: the concrete bundle of inclusions, features, and ancillary services that guests receive and evaluate.

To strengthen the theoretical logic of the links between the variables, this study draws on Service-Dominant Logic (S-D logic), which views service provision as the main basis of exchange and emphasizes value as co-created and ultimately identified by the beneficiaries in use and context (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Based on this perspective, the service Ps (people, process, and physical evidence) are operant and operand resources that enable value co-creation during the stay of the guests in a hotel. Yet these upstream resources become economically meaningful only when they are translated into a recognizable and reliable service offering that guests can experience, assess, and compare.

Complementing S-D logic, customer perceived value theory conceptualizes value as the customers' overall assessment of what they receive relative to what they give, such as monetary and non-monetary sacrifices (Thielemann et al., 2018). In hotel settings, guests rely on tangible cues, employee interactions, and process performance to infer the benefits embedded in the offer, and these inferences inform whether the price of accommodation is perceived as justified. Accordingly, services offered are conceptualized as the realized bundle of inclusions and service features, which should function as the most proximal driver of the evaluations of guests in terms of pricing strategy.

Signaling theory further suggests that consumers rely on observable cues to infer service quality when major attributes are difficult to assess directly (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). In service encounters, those signals include the behavior of employees and physical surroundings, which significantly influence the evaluations of the consumers (Bitner, 1990). Based on this perspective, services offered represent the integrated manifestation of these signals, making them a proximal determinant of pricing evaluations.

Against this backdrop, this study tests a model in which the service Ps (people, physical evidence, and process) influence pricing strategies primarily through services offered in the context of a university-operated hotel. Building on S-D logic and perceived value reasoning theory, the researchers posit that guests translate evaluations of staff performance, operational procedures, and tangible cues into an assessment of the realized service bundle, which then anchors judgments about pricing strategy and rate justification. By specifying and empirically assessing this mediation pathway, this study contributes to hospitality pricing discussions that emphasize value realization and perceived fairness or value cues, while offering evidence to guide hotel managers and staff in translating service-system improvements into price-justifying offerings. With this, the following hypotheses were formulated.

- H1a.** The people element of the services marketing mix has a significant effect on pricing strategies of a university-operated hotel.
- H1b.** The people element of the services marketing mix has a significant effect on the offered services of a university-operated hotel.
- H2a.** The physical evidence of the services marketing mix has a significant effect on the pricing strategies of a university-operated hotel.
- H2b.** The physical evidence element of the services marketing mix has a significant effect on the services offered of a university-operated hotel.
- H3a.** The process element of the services marketing mix has a significant effect on the pricing strategies of a university-operated hotel.
- H3b.** The process element of the services marketing mix has a significant effect on the services offered of a university-operated hotel.
- H4.** The services offered have a significant effect on the pricing strategies of a university-operated hotel.
- H5a.** The services offered have a mediating effect on the link between the people element of the services marketing mix and pricing strategies of a university-operated hotel.
- H5b.** The services offered have a mediating effect on the link between the physical evidence element of the services marketing mix and pricing strategies of a hotel.
- H5c.** The services offered have a mediating effect on the link between the process element of the services marketing mix and pricing strategies offered by a university-operated hotel.

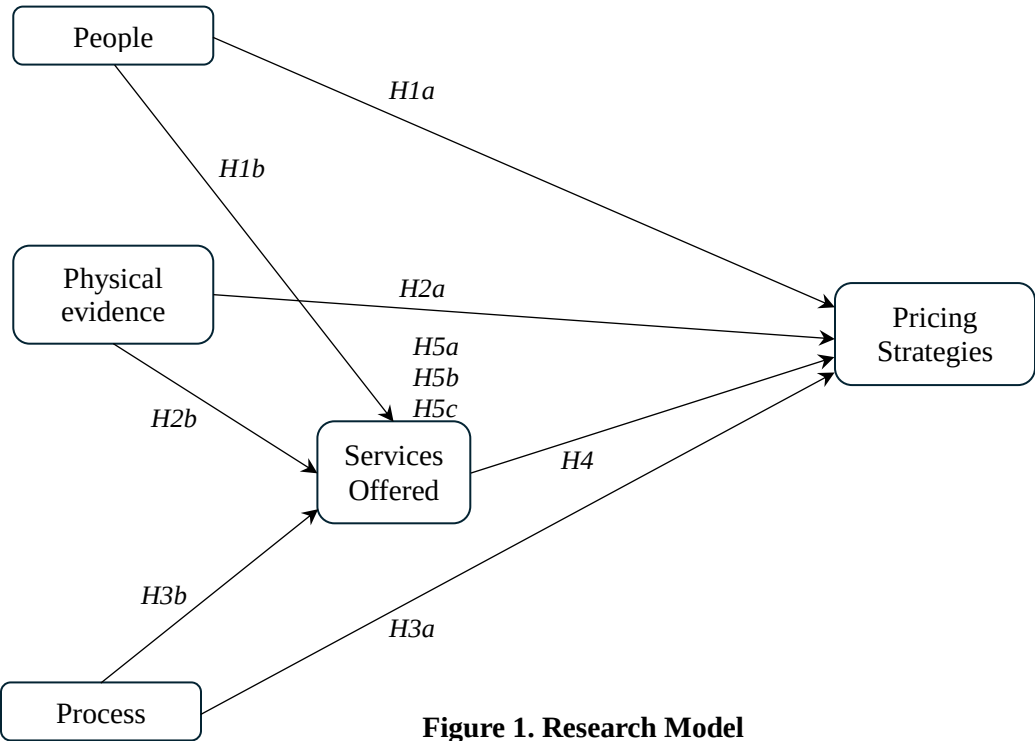


Figure 1. Research Model

Method

This study employed a quantitative research design with an explanatory and prediction-oriented analytic approach. The objective of this study was to assess the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships among the service Ps (people, physical evidence, and process), services offered, and pricing strategies as perceived by hotel guests. Because the proposed model is multivariate and includes mediation paths, partial least squares – structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed as the analytical technique. The PLS-SEM is appropriate for this study as it simultaneously estimates measurement models and structural relationships and is widely used in hospitality and marketing research when the goal is theory testing with an emphasis on prediction of key outcomes (Hair et al., 2019).

Both direct and indirect effects between the variables were assessed. The direct effects include assessment of the relationship between the 1.) People and pricing strategies (H1a), 2.) People and services offered (H1b), 3.) Physical evidence and pricing strategies (H2a), 4.) Physical evidence and services offered (H2b), 5.) Process and pricing strategies (H3a), 6.) Process and services offered (H3b), and 7.) Services offered and pricing strategies (H4). The mediating role of the services offered on the relationships between 1.) People and pricing strategies (H5a), physical evidence and pricing strategies (H5b), and process and pricing strategies (H5c) was assessed for indirect effects.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study were guests of the Northwest Samar State University (NwSSU) Hotel. Data collection followed a systematic sampling procedure coordinated with hotel management. During the data collection period, every fourth eligible guest, after check-out or at a designated survey point, was invited to participate, starting from a randomly chosen first respondent each day. The guests who declined were replaced by the next eligible guest to maintain the interval. This procedure was used to reduce selection bias while remaining feasible in an operational university hotel setting. A total of 249 questionnaires were retrieved.

Sample adequacy was assessed using PLS-SEM considerations rather than survey-population formulas alone. In the proposed structural model, the most complex endogenous construct (services offered and pricing strategies) has at most three antecedent constructs. Prior PLS-SEM guidance recommends evaluating sample size based on the expected minimum effect size and desired statistical power, with alternatives to the overly simplistic “10-times rule” such as the inverse square root and gamma-exponential approaches (Kock & Hadaya, 2016) and broader PLS-SEM reporting guidance (Hair et al., 2019). With 249 observations, the study meets the recommended minimum sample requirements for models of comparable complexity and supports stable bootstrapping-based inference for the direct and mediating effects.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Profile	f	%
Age		
18 to 24 Years Old (Young Adulthood Age)	141	56.63
25 to 44 Years Old (Middle Adulthood Age)	57	22.89
45 to 64 Years Old (Older Adulthood to Average Retirement Age)	35	14.06
Prefer not to say	16	6.43
Sex		
Male	90	36.14
Female	157	63.05
Prefer not to say	2	0.80
Civil Status		
Single	181	72.69
Married	2	0.80
Separated	55	22.09
Widowed	7	2.81
Prefer not to say	4	1.61
Highest Educational Attainment		

Master’s Level	2	0.80
College Graduate	22	8.84
College Level	172	69.08
High School Graduate	14	5.62
High School Level	18	7.23
Elementary Graduate	13	5.22
Elementary Level	7	2.81
Prefer not to say	1	0.40

Research Instrument

To elicit the respondents, a structured, self-administered, adapted questionnaire from the study of David (2023) was employed. The instrument had three sections: (1) respondent profile (age, sex, civil status, and highest educational attainment); (2) guests’ stay-related information and service experience context; and (3) measurement items for the latent constructs. The items for the service Ps (people, process, and physical evidence) were aligned with established service quality and servicescape conceptualizations (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Bitner, 1992), while items for services offered and pricing strategies captured the perceptions of the hotel guests of the completeness and attractiveness of the service bundle and the justification of the pricing strategy. All construct items used a 5-point Likert-type agreement format (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Additionally, the instrument was originally administered using service quality wording, such as very poor to excellent, item scores were coded so that higher values consistently represented more favorable evaluations before analysis. Sample items include “hotel staff provides good services to the guests” for People, “Modern facilities are being used by the hotel” for Physical Evidence, “The hotel uses electronic processes (use of barcodes, e-receipts, other forms of graphics logos, and information about their services)” for Process, “The hotel provides variety of services according to the needs of the guests” for Services Offered, and “The hotel provides better pricing compared to competitors in the industry” for Pricing Strategies. These items were adapted from referenced scales and contextualized to the hotel operated by the Northwest Samar State University.

Data Analysis

To assess the parameters included the research model and hypothesized relationships simultaneously, partial least squares – structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), a variance-based SEM approach (Guiao & Lacap, 2022), was employed. The analysis followed an established PLS-SEM procedures (Hair et al., 2019): 1.) assessment of the reflective measurement models, such as indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability via composite reliability and Cronbach’s alpha, convergent validity via average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity via heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT), and 2.) assessment of structural model, such as collinearity via inner variance inflation factor (VIF), path coefficients and their significance via bootstrapping, effects sizes f^2 , explanatory power via R^2 , and predictive relevance via blindfolding-based Q^2 . Approximate model fit index using standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was employed to support the overall assessment of model adequacy.

Testing the significance relied on non-parametric bootstrapping to obtain the necessary results for direct and indirect effects. Mediation was assessed by examining the specific indirect effects (People, Services Offered, Pricing Strategies; Physical Evidence, Services Offered, Pricing Strategies; Process, Services Offered, Pricing Strategies) using bootstrapped sampling distribution, consistent with contemporary mediation guidance for PLS-SEM (Nitzl et al., 2016). The type of mediation was interpreted by comparing the significance and signs of the direct and indirect effects (Zhao et al., 2010). To address the potential common-method bias, the study followed the recommended diagnostics checks, such as full collinearity assessment (Kock & Lynn, 2012; Kock, 2015).

Results

Measurement Model Evaluation

The internal consistency of the reflective latent variables was evaluated using composite reliability (CR). The reflective reliability values of the reflective construct should not be below 0.70 (Dillon & Goldstein, 1984; Peterson & Kim, 2013; Kamran et al., 2025). The results of the analyses presented in Table 2 indicate that the latent variables, such as people, physical evidence, process, services offered, and pricing strategies, all have composite reliability values greater than 0.70 for their internal consistency.

The measurement model also includes the average variance extracted (AVE) analysis of the latent constructs and their corresponding factor loadings. The AVE coefficient and factor loading were used to analyze the convergent validity of the latent constructs. For AVE, the value must not be less than 0.50 (Amora, 2021; Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and every indicator must not be less than 0.50 for the latent constructs to exhibit significant convergent validity (Hair et al., 2009; Kock, 2014; Kock & Lynn, 2012). It can be observed in Table 2 that the latent constructs are within the required level for the AVE and factor loading. With the results of the analyses, the reliability and convergent validity are established.

Table 2

Reliability and Convergent Validity

Latent Construct	Factor	Factor Loading	AVE	Composite Reliability
People	Peo1	0.800	0.703	0.932
	Peo2	0.883		
	Peo3	0.836		
	Peo4	0.767		
	Peo5	0.879		
	Peo6	0.868		
	Peo7	0.830		
Physical Evidence	PE1	0.787	0.660	0.944
	PE2	0.805		
	PE3	0.826		
	PE4	0.823		
	PE5	0.714		
	PE6	0.815		
	PE7	0.802		
	PE8	0.864		
	PE9	0.831		
	PE10	0.851		
Process	Proc1	0.713	0.671	0.908
	Proc2	0.790		
	Proc3	0.816		
	Proc4	0.874		
	Proc5	0.855		
	Proc6	0.855		
Services Offered	SO1	0.767	0.631	0.928
	SO2	0.820		
	SO3	0.836		
	SO4	0.821		
	SO5	0.754		
	SO6	0.827		
	SO7	0.778		
	SO8	0.739		
	SO9	0.797		
Pricing Strategies	PS1	0.760	0.646	0.946
	PS2	0.827		
	PS3	0.741		

PS4	0.793
PS5	0.805
PS6	0.786
PS7	0.834
PS8	0.812
PS9	0.849
PS10	0.823
PS11	0.760

The measurement model assessment also includes discriminant validity evaluation of the latent constructs. Roemer et al., (2021) introduced an improved measure of discriminant validity using heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations 2 (HTMT2). According to Henseler et al., (2015), the recommended value for HTMT must be at most 0.85 for distinctly different latent constructs and 0.90 for similar latent constructs. The results in Table 3 present the HTMT ratios for assessing among the latent constructs. The HTMT values indicate strong discriminant validity across all construct pairs. Specifically, people (Peo) exhibit HTMT ratios of 0.770 with physical evidence (PE), 0.731 with process (Proc), 0.727 with services offered (SO), and 0.671 with pricing strategies (PS). Physical evidence (PE) shows ratios of 0.701 with process (Proc), 0.797 with services offered (SO), and 0.736 with pricing strategies (PS). Process (Proc) displays ratios of 0.726 with services offered (SO) and 0.667 with pricing strategies (PS). Services offered (SO) and pricing strategies (PS) have the highest ratio at 0.892. All of the HTMT ratios fall below the conservative threshold of 0.85 and 0.90 benchmark for similar constructs, confirming that the constructs are empirically distinct.

Table 3
Discriminant Validity Using HTMT Ratios

	Peo	PE	Proc	SO	PS
Peo					
PE	0.770				
Proc	0.731	0.701			
SO	0.727	0.797	0.726		
PS	0.671	0.736	0.667	0.892	

Peo – People; PE – Physical Evidence; Proc – Process; SO – Service Offered; PS – Pricing Strategies

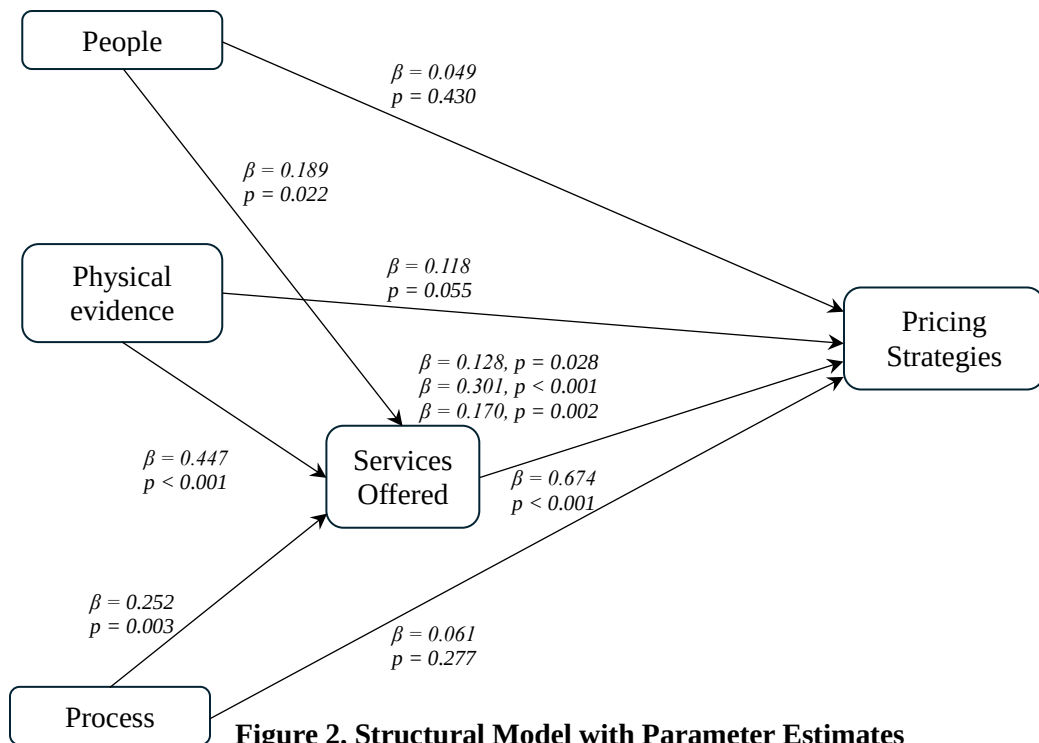
Structural Model Assessment

The next phase of the PLS-SEM analysis was the assessment of the structural model. Figure 2 and Table 4 show the results of the hypotheses testing measured using PLS path modeling. The results indicate that people had a positive, non-significant influence on the pricing strategies ($\beta = 0.049, p = 0.430$) and a positive, significant influence on the services offered ($\beta = 0.189, p = 0.022$). Therefore, H1b is supported, but H1a is not.

It was also found that physical evidence had a positive, non-significant influence on pricing strategies ($\beta = 0.118, p = 0.055$) and a positive, significant influence on services offered ($\beta = 0.447, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H2b is supported, but H2a is not.

Process was also revealed to have a positive, non-significant influence on pricing strategies ($\beta = 0.061, p = 0.277$) and a positive, significant influence on services offered ($\beta = 0.252, p = 0.003$). Therefore, H3b is supported, but H3a is not.

Moreover, the findings revealed that the services offered had a positive, significant influence on pricing strategies ($\beta = 0.674, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H4 is supported.



The effect sizes of the hypothesized relationships were also measured using the threshold set by (Cohen, 1988) – 0.02 (small), 0.15 (medium), and 0.35 (large). According to the findings, Peo → PS ($f^2 = 0.003$), PE → PS ($f^2 = 0.017$), and Proc → PS ($f^2 = 0.006$) had no substantial effect. On the other hand, Proc → SO was found to have a small effect ($f^2 = 0.085$), while PE → SO was revealed to have a medium effect ($f^2 = 0.232$). Only the SO → PS was found to have a large effect ($f^2 = 0.587$).

Table 4
Direct Effects, Indirect Effects, and Model Fit

Hypothesis	β	SE	R ²	Q ²	f ²	VIF	Decision
Direct effects							
Outcome: PS			0.714	0.528			
H1a. Peo → PS	0.049	0.062			0.003	2.522	Unsupported
H2a. PE → PS	0.118	0.062			0.017	2.865	Unsupported
H3a. Proc → PS	0.061	0.056			0.006	2.185	Unsupported
Outcome: SO			0.630	0.612			
H1b. Peo → SO	0.189**	0.082			0.040	2.425	Supported
H2b. PE → SO	0.447***	0.098			0.232	2.325	Supported
H3b. Proc → SO	0.252***	0.085			0.085	2.013	Supported
H4. SO → PS	0.674***	0.061			0.587	2.706	Supported
Mediating effects							
H5a. Peo → SO → PS	0.128**	0.058	-	-	0.075	-	Supported
H5b. PE → SO → PS	0.301***	0.075	-	-	0.416	-	Supported
H5c. Proc → SO → PS	0.170***	0.056	-	-	0.133	-	Supported
Model Fit							
SRMR	0.055						

***($p < 0.01$). **($p < 0.05$). Peo – People; PE – Physical Evidence; Proc – Process; SO – Service Offered; PS – Pricing Strategies

The mediating role of services offered between people, physical evidence, process, and pricing strategies was measured. The results show that the services offered by the university hotel had a mediating

role on the relationships between people and pricing strategies ($\beta = 0.128, p = 0.028$) and process and pricing strategies ($\beta = 0.170, p = 0.002$), having small effect sizes on both ($f^2 = 0.075, f^2 = 0.133$). On the other hand, the services offered was also found to have a mediating role on the relationships between physical evidence and pricing strategies ($\beta = 0.301, p < 0.001$), with a large effect size ($f^2 = 0.416$).

The results also showed R^2 values of 0.714 for pricing strategies and 0.630 for services offered, with Q^2 values of 0.528 and 0.612, respectively. This shows that the model shows a strong explanatory and predictive capabilities. The collinearity was assessed as indicated by the VIF values ranging from 2.013 to 2.865. Lastly, the model fit was assessed using SRMR with a value of 0.055, indicating a good model fit and suggesting that the model adequately represents the observed data.

Common method bias was assessed using the full-collinearity variance inflation factor (VIF) approach recommended by Kock (2015). The full collinearity VIF values for all latent variables were below the 3.3 threshold, indicating that the validity of the results was unlikely to be threatened by common method bias. Consequently, the findings indicate that the observed relationships among the constructs are not primarily attributable to measurement artifacts arising from the employment of a single data source.

Discussions

This study creates three sets of contributions, such as 1.) theoretical, 2.) methodological, and 3.) practical. *Theoretical*: by grounding the extended marketing mix relationships in Service-Dominant Logic and customer perceived value, the results support a value-realization mechanism in which upstream service-system resources influence pricing evaluations mainly through a realized service bundle (services offered). *Methodological*: this study demonstrates the use of PLS-SEM to estimate and interpret indirect-only mediation in a university-operated hotel setting, highlighting the importance of reporting complete structural model diagnostics, such as collinearity, explanatory power, and predictive relevance. *Practical*: The results translate into a prioritized set of actions for university hotel managers focused on designing, standardizing, and communicating a price-justifying bundle.

This study clarifies how the service Ps (people, physical evidence, and process) relate to pricing strategies in a university-operated hotel by testing the mediating role of services offered. The structural model indicates that the service Ps do not exert statistically significant direct effects on pricing strategies, but they significantly predict services offered, which in turn shows a strong association with pricing strategies (H4). In substantive terms, the results suggest that pricing strategies in the context of a university-operated hotel are driven less by standalone evaluations of staff, facilities, or procedures and more by how these inputs are translated into a coherent, guest-recognizable service bundle.

Across the three service Ps, the same empirical pattern emerges: each dimension significantly contributes to services offered, and services offered transmit these effects to pricing strategies (H5a–H5c). This “indirect-only” (functionally full) mediation pattern suggests that improvements in employee performance, tangible service cues, and operational procedures support pricing only insofar as they improve what guests actually receive, such as, but not limited to, inclusions, ancillary services, and the reliability and completeness of the guests’ stay experiences. Notably, physical evidence shows the largest contribution to services offered among the service Ps, underscoring the enabling role of facilities and tangible cues in expanding or elevating the NwSSU Hotel’s service bundle.

A particularly important theoretical insight emerging from the findings is that the service Ps do not directly influence pricing assessments. Instead, the influence of the service Ps becomes meaningful only when translated into a solid bundle of services that guests can experience and assess. This result challenges the implicit assumption in many services marketing literature that improvements in people, process, or physical evidence automatically justify pricing. The findings indicate that the conversion of these resources into-guest visible service offerings constitutes the critical mechanism through which pricing legitimacy is established.

Strong explanatory and predictive capabilities were demonstrated by the structural model. The values indicate substantial explanatory power, with 71.4% of the variance in pricing strategies ($R^2=0.714$) and 63.0% in services offered ($R^2=0.630$) accounted for by the structural model. The Q^2 values of 0.528 for pricing strategies and 0.612 for services offered confirmed the structural model's predictive relevance. In terms of collinearity diagnostics, the VIF values ranging from 2.013 to 2.865 are within the acceptable limits, suggesting that there are no multicollinearity concerns. Furthermore, the model fit assessment demonstrates an SRMR value of 0.055, which is below the recommended threshold, confirming a good overall fit of the model (Hair et al., 2019).

Theoretically, the findings reinforce a value-realization view of services marketing in which customers respond most strongly to the realized service output rather than upstream operational inputs. In this study, the services offered function as the proximal value carrier that links the extended marketing mix to pricing strategy, providing empirical support for examining pricing as an outcome of service design and delivery rather than as a direct consequence of individual marketing mix elements. This mechanism is particularly salient in university-operated hotels, where institutional expectations and training-oriented staffing may reduce the extent to which prices can be adjusted purely in response to perceived service inputs (Hay, 2020; Elbanna, 2016; Vinod, 2022).

The results indicate that more defensible pricing strategies are achieved by making the hotel's value proposition explicit through well-defined services offered, such as standardized inclusions and coherent packages, supported by capable staff, efficient processes, and fit-for-purpose facilities. Accordingly, efforts to enhance people, process, and physical evidence should be assessed by whether they measurably strengthen the service bundle delivered to guests. This emphasis on service-bundle design provides a practical bridge from the Results section to the Practical Implications presented next.

Conclusion

This study examined how the service Ps (people, physical evidence, and process) shape pricing strategies in the NwSSU Hotel and tested whether these effects are transmitted through the services offered to guests. The results show that the service Ps do not directly explain pricing strategies; rather, they influence pricing primarily by strengthening the services offered, which emerged as the most substantive predictor of pricing strategies. This pattern indicates that guests' acceptance of pricing is anchored in the value embedded in the realized service bundle, not in isolated perceptions of staff performance, procedures, or the physical environment.

Theoretically, the findings extend services marketing research by empirically positioning services offered as a key mechanism linking service mix elements to pricing strategy in an academic hospitality setting. Managerially, the results suggest that NwSSU Hotel management can support more defensible and value-based pricing by designing, standardizing, and communicating clear service offerings that operationalize investments in people, process, and physical evidence. Because institutional contexts may constrain pricing flexibility, strengthening the service bundle provides a practical pathway for improving price justification and competitiveness.

However, these should be interpreted in light of this study's single-setting design and sample characteristics. Future research may validate the model across other university-operated and commercial hotels, examine additional value-related outcomes, such as perceived value and satisfaction, and test boundary conditions such as guest segment differences and competitive positioning to further explain when and how service design translates into pricing strategies.

Practical Implications

The findings indicate that, in NwSSU Hotel, pricing strategies are not strengthened by isolated improvements in people, process, or physical evidence per se; rather, these upstream service-system inputs matter to the extent that they are converted into a coherent and guest-recognizable bundle of services offered.

For managers of university-operated hotels, this shifts the managerial locus of control from “improving components” to “designing and reliably delivering an offer” that can credibly justify pricing. In practice, pricing decisions should therefore be treated as value-based judgments anchored in what guests tangibly receive and experience, with investments in staff, procedures, and facilities evaluated against their contribution to strengthening the bundle.

First, management should explicitly define, document, and operationalize the hotel’s core service bundle. This entails specifying, in unambiguous terms, what is included in the room pricing and ensuring that the same promise is delivered consistently across different shifts and booking channels. Because guests form price judgments relative to what they believe the offer contains, clear bundle definitions reduce interpretive ambiguity and provide a stable reference point for value communication and rate justification.

Second, processes should be standardized around the points of the guest journey that protect bundle reliability, including reservations, check-in and check-out, billing accuracy, and complaint handling. The present results imply that process improvements will contribute to pricing outcomes only when they reduce variability that undermines perceived value. Accordingly, managers should identify frequent failure points, such as delays, information gaps, or service breakdowns, set minimum service standards, and monitor adherence so that the delivered service bundle is dependable and aligned with what is communicated to guests.

Third, staff development should be framed explicitly as “bundle delivery” capability. Training should emphasize responsiveness, consistency, and service recovery behaviors that safeguard the promised inclusions and service guarantees, ensuring that the experienced offer matches the communicated offer. In a university-operated context where staffing may involve trainees or rotating personnel, codifying role expectations and providing simple service scripts and escalation pathways can help sustain service consistency and, by extension, strengthen the perceived legitimacy of the hotel’s pricing strategy.

Fourth, given that physical evidence exhibited the strongest contribution to services offered, facility and servicescape investments should be prioritized when they visibly improve or expand what guests receive. Rather than pursuing diffuse upgrades, limited capital should be allocated to tangible elements that directly elevate the utility and credibility of the bundle. Such improvements can make the value proposition more concrete for guests and may be especially important for reinforcing quality cues in a university-hotel setting.

Finally, the service bundle should be translated into clear packages and communication materials that align with key guest segments, such as, but not limited to, academic visitors, event participants, and community guests. By clearly communicating inclusions and differentiating offers, the hotel can strengthen price justification, reduce perceptions of unfairness, and support a more coherent value-based pricing strategy. This is particularly salient when institutional policies constrain pricing flexibility, as transparent and consistent communication can improve acceptance of rates by making the basis of value explicit.

Taken together, the results suggest that investments in people, physical evidence, and process should be assessed and prioritized based on their ability to strengthen the guest-visible service bundle and its consistency in delivery. This emphasis provides a practical pathway for improving price justification and competitiveness in university-operated hotels, particularly where institutional constraints limit rapid or frequent price adjustments.

Hotel managers may further strengthen their effectiveness by creating differentiated service bundles for specific guest segments, such as academic guests, conference participants, institutional partners, and tourists, thereby improving and enhancing perceptions of value while maintaining pricing flexibility.

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China's Belt and Road Initiative: Bold but Responsible Influence

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China is an important communication and connectivity programme of the 21st century. It has sparked controversy over China's strategic motives, the economic viability of its projects, and its impact on developing countries. However, it seeks to influence state behaviour through its infrastructure, finance, and long-term economic interdependence, without applying military coercion or regime engineering. The paper aims to make this argument in two steps. First, it constructs a theoretical prism that combines classical realism with another notion, realism, which emphasises an increasing awareness within major powers that often neglects the long-term interests of weaker nations. This notion of realism is inspired by complex interdependence. Second, it utilises a qualitative, descriptive approach to analyse the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the flagship project of the BRI, which is mutually beneficial to both China and Pakistan. This discussion has concluded that BRI has thus far been a somewhat responsible form of great-power influence that China aims to exert as a global player, without any hint of its military ambitions.

Keywords: China, BRI, CPEC, Global South, Unequal Military Powers (UMPs)

The 21st Century has been riddled with wars and conflicts across all regions. Afghanistan was bombed relentlessly to eliminate Al Qaida, the alleged perpetrators of 9/11, and Iraq was attacked on false pretenses. Likewise, Libya, Syria, and Yemen faced an unprecedented wave of civil wars, perhaps as the battlegrounds for more powerful stakeholders. The people of Palestine, particularly the residents of Gaza, faced existential threats due to Israeli aggression. Ukraine, which was the red line of Russia, has already lost its sizeable territory to the might of the Russian military over the last four years of an all-out war. Unfortunately, these countries will never be the same again because they were faced with UMPs. On the one hand, history's most potent military force was led by the US, and on the other, it was a small and weak state with little to no military power.

Amid the global chaos, China emerged as the sole significant power prioritising economic diplomacy and connectivity over military use and coercion. Following President Xi Jinping's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023), China actively promoted economic prosperity. China's BRI aims to connect the country within the region and beyond. In Pakistan's case too, CPEC under BRI is connecting far-flung areas including Gilgit-Baltistan (Ismail, Tykhonenko, & Fatima, 2026).

Interestingly, the momentous initiative has a significant financial impact. Still, its objectives are more aligned with China's foreign policy, which aims to influence the behaviour of other states without posing a serious threat to their territorial integrity and sovereignty. Therefore, one can assume that it was a 'Bold but Responsible Influence.'

Furthermore, while the US was engaged in wars and conflicts, other powers were consolidating their roles in the evolving international structure. Russia, for instance, consolidated its power to reassert itself, and therefore, did not hesitate in its plan to invade Ukraine, fully aware that the US-led NATO would come with full force to support the country. On the other hand, China was quietly rising without engaging in any conflict or war except for a few skirmishes with India in its northeast, which were of no consequence to it in any domain.

This may be the significant difference between the U.S. and the Chinese foreign policy imperatives. Successive US leaderships have relied more on their military muscles to achieve similar foreign policy objectives: changing the behaviour of other states. In the process, the US has lost trillions of dollars and hundreds of lives. President Trump's slogan of MAGA is indicative of the fact that the US lost its greatness to these unnecessary wars, and now it wants to regain it (Conway, 2016).

In China's case, it follows the precepts of Sun Tzu, who, over 2,500 years ago, professed that one should strive to win a war without fighting (Giles, 2000). Without demonstrating its hard power, China has earned the leadership of the Global South, which comprises over 147 developing countries (Jiang, 2025). After surpassing Japan, China is likely to surpass the US also to become the world's largest economy. The timing of this possible makeover will be interesting, as Trump will be completing his second term and the US will be in an election year.

“President Xi Jinping's speech at the Boao Forum for Asia Conference 2015 held in China discussed achieving a common destiny and a new future for Asia” (Anam & Mustafa, 2017), reflecting what Keohane and Nye had envisaged (1977). Xi's precepts are reflective of this author's assessment about China's responsible behaviour as a global player, and the realisation that this author refers in his revised realism.

Comparing two vastly distinct strategies adopted by two great powers with widely diverse approaches is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is essential given their relevance to the evolving world order. While the US is trying to maintain its hold on global affairs, China is presenting itself as an alternate power to the alienated developing world. The two rivals have adopted different strategies and follow significantly diverse philosophies.

The US continues to follow a Machiavellian philosophy of prioritising the state's interests without sharing them with others, whereas China is following Sun Tzu's dictum of avoiding wars and yet win against the opponent. Perhaps this is one reason why the US wants to maintain its position as the sole superpower. At the same time, China has decided to reach out to the rest of the world with numerous incentives, including investments and loans for development projects tailored to host countries' needs. President Trump is still coercing states to invest in the US and buy its products (Clark, 2025). In contrast, under the BRI, President Xi is undertaking projects worth billions of dollars in less developed countries across various regions. The result is obvious. The developing South, a more than 130-country-strong organisation, considers China its new leader. This is how China is growing its influence responsibly.

Theoretical Precepts

Before deploying an international theory in this research, it is essential to explain the key aspect of the topic, which the author rephrases as ‘Bold but Responsible Influence.’ The core definition under the realist paradigm denotes power as the ability to influence the behaviour of others (Morgenthau, 1948). While the colonial powers pursued realism in both letter and spirit, they continued to exert their influence over their former colonies.

There is little debate in academia that the BRI has not been immediately adopted by international players. The initiative was viewed as too ambitious and perhaps unfeasible, at least in Africa, which remained under the influence of its colonial masters. However, the most significant contribution of President Xi Jinping is not the investment in the infrastructure of developing countries under the BRI, but rather the relative relief these states have experienced from their colonial masters. For this purpose, this study redefined BRI as Bold but Responsible Influence.

China, like any other great power, aspires to influence others; however, it differs from other powers in that it invests in public-sector projects rather than supporting regimes willing to serve the interests of their colonial masters. China's bold initiative through investments in developing countries carries a responsibility to ensure that public sector infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, ports, bridges, climate protection, and energy projects, are implemented effectively. China's exercise of responsible influence is vastly different from that of earlier powers because it has invested in projects that are already yielding results for people in the least developed countries. Therefore, it is not surprising that most developing countries have begun to look up to

China as the leader of the Global South. Hence, its membership has increased to over 130 developing countries worldwide. This directly relates to the theory of Complex Interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977), which challenges the realist paradigm and calls for more liberal cooperative engagement. This is what China appears to be doing through the BRI projects across the globe. This author's assertions on realism (with z), which is also closely aligned with the work of Keohane and Nye, 1977 in *Power and Interdependence*, are reflected in President Xi's approach to, and application of, responsible cooperation and productive engagement. By challenging the core of realism and replacing it with z as realism denotes a sense of realization among global stakeholders about the relatively minor and poor states.

This author's term realism reflects hybrid characteristics of a realist and an idealist or a liberalist. However, international relations are complex and interest based. States must tread carefully that their people do not suffer due to evolving international order (Shamsi, 2021). This framework 'realism' proved efficacious in analysing President Xi's approach to the Global South as a realizer and the utility of BRI projects in the developing countries.

International relations theories continue to evolve and perhaps lead to change the international systems at regular intervals. "It is argued that neoliberals propounded that international institutions should promote global change, cooperation, peace, and prosperity through programs for reforms" (Kegley & Eugene, 2004). Whereas "Security is essential, and institutions help to make security possible.... These interactions will occur not just on security issues but on a whole suite of international issues including human rights (a classical liberal concern), the environment, immigration, and economics" (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

Therefore, "an alternate approach 'realism' is needed to ensure a dignified survival of the humanity that is faced with continued wars and conflicts across all regions. First, it was in Europe between Russia and Ukraine, and now it is between Iran and the US. The genocide of Palestinian people continues since Gaza was specifically targeted in October 2023.

To conclude the theoretical debate for this paper, this author is cognizant of the fact that present international system is anarchic and selfish (Jackson & Sorensen, 2007).

The research design employs a mixed methodology, descriptive and explanatory, employing a qualitative approach, which is "often used in social sciences to explore patterns of individual behaviour and consumption in diverse environments" (Arnould & Craig, 2005). Deploying deductive reasoning, the paper primarily examines the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the flagship project of the BRI, drawing illustrative examples from the regions where most of the projects are near completion and benefiting the people of the host countries.

Xi Jinping's BRI: Contours, Challenges and Opportunities

The BRI, also known as the New Silk Road, is a unique initiative that connects regions through diverse infrastructure projects. President Xi Jinping conceived and launched it in 2013, soon after assuming the presidency of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Initiated with the immediate objective of connecting East Asia with Europe through road and rail, Xi continued to expand it over time. The BRI projects entered Africa, Oceania, and Latin America in less than a decade (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023).

The BRI has improved China's stature worldwide, particularly among developing countries. To date, some 147 countries are undertaking projects under BRI, which accounts for nearly two-thirds of the world's population and 40 per cent of global GDP. This massive participation under one umbrella by so many countries in different regions has certainly enhanced China's political influence and given it a more pronounced purpose in the realm of reality.

President Xi's BRI is built around an ancient Chinese metaphor, 'A rising tide lifts all boats.' For instance, during pandemics, "The BRI countries benefited immensely from China's timely and liberal medical assistance. The people in the Euro-Asiatic world now dream of establishing a 'Silk Route Healthcare Corridor' just like a green corridor, digital corridor, education corridor or cultural corridor to complement infrastructure-loaded BRI" (Javed, 2020).

Moreover, “the BRI is inclusive of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road..... The 21st Century being labelled as the Asian century is exemplary of the shifting balance of political, economic and cultural power from the West to East” (Anam & Mustafa, 2017).

Significant Footprints of BRI

China's BRI embodies a grand vision to create an extensive network of trade routes, economic corridors, and infrastructure projects connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. The initiative seeks to enhance global trade, stimulate economic growth in participating countries, and strengthen China's economic and political ties worldwide. Through investments in roads, railways, ports, and energy projects, China aims to facilitate smoother trade flows, encourage economic development, and promote cultural exchange, solidifying its position as a key player in global affairs.

China's quiet effort through the BRI has attracted at least 52 African countries and has signed numerous agreements of public significance, including roads, railways, ports, climate, and energy projects. China's BRI covers an immensely wide range of economic corridors, which have started to realise in regional connectivity and better communication among the regional societies that President Xi mentioned in the Boao Forum speech in 2015. Some of the major corridors include:

1. China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor
2. New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor
3. China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor
4. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)
5. Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor
6. China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor (UN ESCAP, 2021).

According to (UN ESCAP, 2021), “The Belt and Road Initiative for Seamless Connectivity and Sustainable Development in the Asia-Pacific Region”, the BRI has started to show positive results, and its impact can be felt across various regions. The report suggests that “the results of multiple studies on BRI suggest that the impacts of the Initiative's infrastructure development generally have positive effects on the economy, income, poverty reduction, employment, equity and inclusion. that annual global welfare gains would be approximately \$1.6 trillion in 2030, accounting for approximately 1.3 per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP)” (UN ESCAP, 2021).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): A gamechanger for Pakistan

The most significant and perhaps strategically important project of BRI is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), also labelled as the Flagship project of the initiative. Launched at the early stages of the BRI in 2013, CPEC demonstrates China's eagerness to connect its less developed western region with the warm waters of the Arabian Sea. CPEC, conceived for regional connectivity, has much greater geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions. CPEC has significantly strengthened the long-standing politico-economic and military partnership between China and Pakistan. CPEC aims to reduce China's trade dependency on the Malacca Straits, also known as the ‘Malacca Dilemma,’ and provides China with an opportunity to trade from its western region to the Middle East and beyond, utilising the newly developed Gwadar Port on Pakistan's vast Arabian Sea coastline. China has developed not only the port but also the Gwadar Airport and a road network across the length and breadth of Pakistan, with its Kashgar border (Aqeela, Abbas, & Khan (2022). China's efforts to establish multiple trade corridors that benefit its vast territory and population are part of its “Go Global” strategy, which involves economic corridors and proactive engagement with regional states and beyond (Stietz, 2018). This author supervised a study at the NDU on ‘Pak-China Strategic Cooperation’ in 2011-12, which was presented to Prime Minister Gilani and his Cabinet in January 2012. CPEC signed in 2013 carried several recommendations from the referred study.

Why a game changer for Pakistan?

“(CPEC aims) to improve the lives of people of Pakistan and China by building an economic corridor promoting bilateral connectivity, construction, explore potential bilateral investment, economic and trade, logistics and people to people contact for regional connectivity” (CPEC Vision & Mission, 2015). The official statement of CPEC Vision and Mission primarily justifies the subheading that CPEC is proving to be a

gamechanger for Pakistan because it covers a wide range of people-oriented projects across the length and breadth of Pakistan. The international observers, too, are of the view that “the China-Pakistan Economic corridor (CPEC) is one of the most significant, and strategically important components of the BRI” (The Economist quoted by Chattha & Hyder, 2019).

The initial success of BRI, particularly the CPEC, has undoubtedly raised concerns among the US-led Western Blocs, including some Southeast Asian nations and India (Pence, 2018). The most significant aspect of CPEC lies in the interdependence between China and Pakistan, as China derives greater benefits from the project than Pakistan does. While Pakistan is building its infrastructure with Chinese money, it comes at a price, and the country is doing so with borrowed funds.

The US considers CPEC part of China's broader geopolitical strategy for expanding its influence in the region and beyond. Therefore, the US has expanded its strategic partnership with India through multiple bilateral agreements in various domains. Consequently, it is unsurprising that India has started raising its concerns against the CPEC on international forums. Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar criticised China and Pakistan at the United Nations General Assembly, calling them the authors of “the most concerted effort to undermine the territorial integrity of neighbouring countries” (Razdan, 2024). Jaishankar further stated that “unviable projects increase debt levels. Any linkage against sovereignty and territorial integrity becomes strategically important, mainly if it does not involve mutual collaboration” (Razdan, 2024). India's uneasiness is not without a reason. This is because the CPEC projects pass through territories in the disputed Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir region.

The most worrisome aspect of CPEC for the Western World is its financing of nearly USD 62 billion, which Pakistan could ill afford for the rehabilitation of its much-needed infrastructure at the time it was launched. However, at least four avenues of funds generation and allocation have been explained. These include investment, concessional loans, interest-free loans, and grants. “The money under investment projects is borrowed by Chinese firms that undertake the project on interest rates between 4 percent to 5 percent. The Concessional Loans are given to the Government of Pakistan at an interest rate of 2 percent...” (Chattha & Hyder, 2019).

While the major discussion in this paper remained on CPEC, it is necessary that some of the landmark projects and their progress under the BRI in different regions are also mentioned to highlight the expanded scope of China's initiative, though briefly.

China's BRI does not differentiate among the countries from other regional blocs. For instance, in Israel, the China-Israel Changzhou Innovation Park, inaugurated in January 2015, “has attracted nearly 300 joint ventures and facilitated nearly 60 technological cooperation projects. with 70 Israeli companies applying to participate, 20 of which are now registered in the park (Yang, 2025). Interestingly, the Chinese ambassador to Tel Aviv reaffirmed that China's BRI projects have not been affected by political instability in the Middle East (Yang, 2025). Likewise, the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project (PBRLP) is one of Bangladesh's most significant projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (Yang, 2024). Bangladesh's most extensive railway project, locally known as the “Dream Road,” began in 2018 and spans approximately 170 km. Travel time between the capital, Dhaka, and Jashore will be reduced from 10 hours to just 3 hours, benefiting some 80 million people.

In Europe as well, the BRI's footprint figures prominently. The Lajkovac-Valjevo motorway in Serbia is another project under BRI. This 18.3-kilometre motorway links the central-western Serbian cities of Valjevo and Lajkovac. It is expected to ease traffic congestion and further enhance Serbia's transport network” (Dan, 2025). The project's influential effect is demonstrated by Air Serbia's decision to operate direct flights to Shanghai.

BRI projects are not restricted to infrastructure developments only. To mitigate the effects of climate change, China extended its support to many countries in the Middle East to help develop a new energy ecosystem that includes “solar panels gleam under the relentless sun; wind turbines carve arcs against the sky; and electric cars hum along newly paved roads” (Yang, 2024).

The strength of China's BRI lies in its diversity and placements. Perhaps no region was overlooked when the BRI was launched in 2013, and the priority remained on popular projects so that locals would benefit the most. For instance, "the Jakarta-Bandung, 142.3-km high-speed railway, represents a transformative leap in Indonesia's transportation infrastructure With a maximum speed of 350 km per hour, it has cut travel time between Jakarta and Bandung from over three hours to 40 minutes" (Yang, 2017). Likewise, Pakistan has been rated as a high-risk state due to its climate for such massive investments (Hamida, Sherazi, & Imran, 2026).

The Belt and Road Initiative: An Assessment

The Belt and Road Initiative's presence across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe indicates an ambitious, impactful project. It also represents China acting as a great power, customarily trying to influence its external environment and increase its power. What is unique about BRI is not the aim of seeking influence, but the means China has chosen to pursue it. China relies on infrastructure, finance, and long-term economic interdependence as its primary instruments, rather than military bases, regime change, or coercive conditionality. This change points to the emergence of a new type of power structure, one that connects China's rise with the economic success of states that have long struggled to access capital, connectivity, and plausible development partners. In this respect, China brings along other smaller and poorer states, either intentionally or out of necessity.

A more careful examination of BRI's working dynamics reveals this dynamism. BRI projects address several gaps that have limited development over the decades. Highways that reduce the time spent on the road by several hours to several minutes, railway lines that bring remote areas into the country's markets, and power stations that regulate the flow of electricity are not abstract geopolitical signs. They are transformations that everyday citizens experience. The examples presented in this article, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), rail networks in Central Asia, ports and energy corridors in Africa, and green energy projects in the Middle East and Europe, indicate that the main face of BRI is civilian and publicly visible. These are not clandestine military bases or elitist-oriented arrangements. They are literal public goods in the form of roads, bridges, ports, hospitals, solar grids and industrial parks.

This operational profile is consistent with the concept of realism described by this author, inspired by Keohane and Nye's precepts on complex interdependence, based on the thesis that great powers are becoming more conscious that failures to pay attention to weaker states create instability that, in the long run, undermines their interests. This awareness is evident in China's investments. They demonstrate their realisation that legitimacy in the Global South cannot be built on rhetoric alone but must be supported by material contributions that improve lives. Although these projects are undoubtedly beneficial to Chinese interests, they achieve this by establishing common interests and developmental trajectories rather than using force or conditionality to enforce political demands. This is why many states see BRI as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Nevertheless, BRI does not bear the absolute responsibility and is not above criticism. The most burning issue is debt sustainability. Borrowing has often outpaced fiscal capacity in many partner countries, driven by optimistic growth projections or political considerations at home. Such pressures have raised concerns about long-term repayment and the risk of dependency. Transparency and procurement are also among the issues studied and discussed in academic and policy circles. Many contracts remain opaque, and competitive bidding is not always conducted. There are also environmental issues that have been raised but not systematically addressed, such as the effects of construction and the long-term sustainability of mega-projects. On the same note, the degree of local consultation varies across states, with some communities reporting little contribution to projects that impact their lands or livelihoods.

There is also a strategic layer which makes the responsibility narrative difficult. Ports, energy grids, fiber-optic systems, transport corridors, and other forms of leverage can be established to generate non-economic forms of leverage. The distinction between development finance and strategic positioning is blurred, with infrastructure potentially having dual-use applications or host states becoming dependent on Chinese loans, contractors, and technology. These aspects do not negate the role of BRI in development, but they show the multi-dimensionality of the Chinese influence. It also promotes China's national interests and can reconstitute regional balances of power without resorting to military pressure.

The BRI of China operates differently. It aims to foster communication, connectivity, and economic interdependence across regions, regardless of their resource base, governance systems, or political orientation. Although China is similarly seeking influence alongside the United States, Russia, and other great powers, the design and implementation of BRI are based on long-term development relationships rather than coercion. Influence is achieved through a relationship created by infrastructure, supply chains, and economic interests. Such relationships provide incentives to cooperate rather than the fear of punishment.

From the perspectives of realism, realizm, and complex interdependence, this combination of results is neither new nor contradictory. No world power is motivated by altruism. The moves by China within the BRI framework are evidently aimed at advancing its national objectives of gaining access to trade routes, expanding into broader markets, and enhancing its geopolitical standing. However, the manner in which influence is sought is as important as the endeavour itself. Throughout history, the exercise of power has often been achieved through military power, political intervention, or ideological imposition by major powers. Compared to it, the Chinese model is more infrastructure-and-finance-based, and more interdependent. It can give rise to dependencies, but it can also produce concrete public goods. It will not cause the immediate disturbance that comes with military coercion or externally imposed regime change.

Perhaps that is one reason that this author is inclined to believe that BRI can be described as a bold yet responsible influence. It is ambitious due to its magnitude, imagination, and spread over continents. It bears responsibility to the degree that it seeks to advance Chinese interests without resorting to the instruments that characterised previous periods of great-power expansion. As they bring China further into the economies and politics of Global South states, BRI projects do deliver tangible benefits to them. This is the duality in the core of BRI. Neither is it an act of benevolence to the world nor an obscure imperial project. It is a strategic program that employs development as its primary vehicle.

With a world marked by a changing balance of power and rising demands for connectivity, BRI is an ambitious initiative that recognises shared development as a stabilising factor. To most states in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world, this method is more attractive and less destabilising than the coercive pattern of the past. There are also weaknesses in the initiative, and its long-term implications will depend on how China addresses issues of debt, transparency, and sovereignty. Nonetheless, the empirical history thus far tends to confirm the thesis that BRI has been a relatively responsible form of influence in a competitive international system.

Conclusion

This paper proposes that the Belt and Road Initiative is a bold yet responsible influence. It is ambitious in terms of geographic coverage, financial size and ambitions. It is accountable because it does not rely on military intimidation, coups, or direct political manipulation, but on infrastructure, finance, and the long-term interdependence of the economy. Viewed through the prisms of classical realism, author's realizm, and complex interdependence by Keohane and Nye, the BRI reflects a great power that aims to promote its own interests, understanding that the stagnation of weaker states causes instability that would, in the end, be detrimental to its interests. This is evident by an empirical overview of BRI projects in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Publicly visible goods have been developed through investment in transport and energy, logistics, industrial zones, and green infrastructure. CPEC, Central Asian railways, European and African motorways, and renewable energy projects demonstrate how BRI has enhanced connectivity, reduced travel time, and increased power supply for ordinary citizens. These are not symbols alone. They are resources that alter day-to-day life and further entrench China in the economic structure of the Global South. Such a trend is consistent with the notions of complex interdependence and realizm that great powers have become compelled to prove their responsibility by tangible developmental results, not just rhetoric.

Meanwhile, the article has raised serious concerns that qualify this responsible image. There are still significant issues of debt sustainability in several partner countries, opaque partnering, a lack of local consultation and environmental risks. The new forms of leverage created by strategic investments in ports, critical infrastructure, and digital systems can also blur the distinction between development and geopolitical positioning. BRI thus represents a step forward for China's national interests and can be used to tilt the regional power balance without necessarily resorting to force. The responsibility, in this case, is not absolute, but relative

and disputable. The BRI projects are public-oriented and are billed as win-win cooperation, standard connectivity, and long-term interdependence with states of quite different magnitudes, regimes, and orientations. Overall, the discussion in this paper indicates that BRI has thus far been a comparatively responsible form of influence compared to more coercive historical trends in great-power behaviour. It has intensified the geopolitics of China and propelled the country to leadership in the Global South, but in a more visible form of infrastructure and development relationships, as opposed to military intervention. BRI will be described as a bold yet responsible influence, depending on how China and its partners address the risks of debt, transparency, environmental policies, and sovereignty issues in the coming years. Provided that the mentioned obstacles are overcome, BRI will continue to serve as a valuable example of how an emerging power can pursue influence through connectivity and shared development rather than war and coercion.

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The Influence of Strategic Leadership on Institutional Reputation: A Perspective of Social Exchange Theory in HEIs of Pakistan

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The study is conducted in the light of Social Exchange Theory (SET) that deals with the impact of strategic leadership on reputation of higher education institutions (HEIs). It explores organizational trust as a mediator between leadership practices and institutional reputation along with moderation by perceived organizational support (POS). This is a quantitative and cross sectional study; survey questionnaire was used for data collection from 220 faculty members of public and private sector universities of Pakistan. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to test the projected associations including mediation and moderation effects. The results demonstrate that institutional reputation and organizational trust are significantly impacted by strategic leadership. The relationship between strategic leadership and institutional reputation is partially mediated by organizational trust. The findings reveal that attaining favorable reputational outcomes at HEIs require upholding trustworthy connections and fostering pleasant institutional climates. The study emphasizes to rejuvenate leadership development program, participative governance and faculty support systems to build trust within the institutions.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, institutional reputation, organizational trust, perceived organizational support, Social Exchange Theory, HEIs.

The context in which higher education institutions (HEIs) are working has become much more dynamic, with the rise of globalization, technological changes and shifted expectations of stakeholders towards heightened competitions around the globe. The traditional roles of university teaching & research are no longer enough to assess the performance of universities. They are now required to show the impact on society, create innovations and guarantee quality assurance, including positive reputation among stakeholders (Matos et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024). Hence, institutional reputation (IR) has become a strategic asset, affecting the universities' capacity to attract students & faculty, obtain research funding, forge international connections and maintain competitive edge in the global higher educational environment (Plewa et al., 2016; Kaushal et al., 2023).

Institutional reputation (IR) is a product of continued interaction & experience; the cumulative perception of stakeholders' credibility, quality, legitimacy and performance; which has been built over time (Fombrun, 1996). The university's visibility is significantly impacted by a positive reputation, trust of the stakeholders, sustainability and success of the university in the longer-term. The reputability of institutions does attract good faculty, students, external funding and improve their international reputation (Matos et al., 2024). Mostly previous studies have focused on factors like service quality, university as a brand, organizational culture, student's satisfaction and corporate social responsibility in determining institutional reputation (Plewa et al., 2016; Kaushal et al., 2023). Many researchers have delved upon reputational management; however, only few studies have taken up the subject of leadership-related factors, such as strategic leadership (SL); despite the fact that leadership is one of the most influential mechanisms in determining the direction of the organization, the relationship with the stakeholders and the long-term performance of the institutions (Samimi et al., 2022). The gap is more pronounced in higher education, where universities are run by complicated governance arrangements of multiple stakeholders with conflicting and competing interests.

Strategic leadership institutes a relational and strategic capability through which institutional leaders shape organizational bearing while nurturing reciprocal relationships with internal and external stakeholders. It is crucial for organizations in current scenario due to its vision, resource coordination, innovation and ability to respond to uncertainties (Ireland & Hitt, 1999; Samimi et al., 2022). Strategic leaders foresee future challenges, institute long-term objectives and establish organizational conditions that promote adaptation (SN Ch, et al., 2025). Strategic leadership in HEIs is very demanding for academic excellence, knowledge development, collaboration and communication among stakeholders, both inside and outside the institution (Bryman, 2007). The role of strategic leadership has been further accentuated in recent developments of HEC Pakistan by announcing ORIC validation report (HEC ORIC, 2025). Leaders of universities have been forced to use strategic approaches to become resilient and sustainable (Bush, 2020; Soysal et al., 2024) in the face of rapid digital advancement, growing global integration of universities and increasing demands for accountability.

The scarcity of research is evident in developing countries like Pakistan where HEIs face multiple structural and institutional hitches of deprived financial status, research infrastructures, governance, resource limitations and growing expectations of global rivalry (Islam et al., 2024; Gohar et al., 2023). Universities of emerging economies are facing challenges of quality standards, visibility and socio-economic contribution toward the realm. Pakistan is a case in point that demands investigation towards these rising issues.

Despite many initiatives, there are still problems of quality assurance, research productivity, international ranking, governance model and the trust of stakeholders in the universities of Pakistan (Hoodbhoy 2009; Shah et al., 2023). All said challenges highlight the importance of a strategic leadership in building reputation and sustainable development in higher education sector (SNC & SMA Shah, et al. 2025).

Research in leadership of HEIs has been carried out, but it has predominantly focused on leadership styles, organizational performance and institutional outcomes, with comparatively limited attention to how strategic leadership shapes institutional reputation through internal organizational mechanisms. Moreover, the available literature on leadership has focused on transformational, transactional, authentic, ethical and servant leadership styles along with organizational outcomes like innovation, performance, employee commitment, competitive advantage; but the association between strategic leadership & institutional reputation has been studied relatively less (Samimi et al., 2022). The previous studies on reputation in higher education have largely concentrated on stakeholder theory, resource based theory and signaling theory (Plewa et al., 2016; Kaushal et al., 2023). Though there is potential for social exchange theory (SET) to offer important insights into relational and reciprocal impacts between leaders and organizational members on institutional outcomes instead of alternative perspectives. SET by Blau in 1964 narrates that social relationships are regulated by rules of reciprocity, trust and obligations. People respond positively to the positive treatment they receive and return it in-kind, which is a hallmark for the organizations (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

From the perspective of SET in HEIs, strategic leaders can foster exchange relationships with faculty members and stakeholders by providing support, articulating a compelling vision, promoting participation in decision making and building trust. In response, the stakeholders have increased commitment, cooperation and actions that enhance the image and reputation of the university. Thus, perception of institutional reputation is a result of internal social exchange processes as well as an image constructed by outsiders, through effective strategic leadership. Despite its theoretical context, the use of SET to analyze the relationship between strategic leadership and institutional reputation in higher education sector remains relatively unexplored.

Therefore, this research aims to fill the gaps by exploring the relationship between variables through a social exchange lens in the context of Pakistani HEIs. This study contributes in the existing literature and enhance body of knowledge on strategic leadership (SL) and institutional reputation (IR). Moreover, the study also provides a theoretical contribution through explanatory framework based on the SET between leadership processes and reputation involving organizational actors. Furthermore, the study has specifically focuses on universities of Pakistan to address the contextual limitations of prior research, which has predominantly been conducted within western and developed economies.

Significance of the study

The purpose of the present study is to examine direct and indirect impact of strategic leadership on building an institutional reputation within the Pakistani universities. Although reputation has become a decisive factor in the academic world, especially with the increasing competitiveness among the universities (Kaushal et al., 2023; Matos et al., 2024). This study is based on Social Exchange Theory and extends this theory to the higher education context, describing how the behaviours of a leader can contribute to stakeholder perceptions, trust and commitment (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The study intends to fill the gap in the body of knowledge, where university governance, quality assurance and international university rankings and expectations are being challenged (Shah et al., 2023). Moreover, it provides important lessons to enhance institutional legitimacy and competitive positioning through strategic leadership practices. The role of faculty members as internal stakeholders provides new pathway for understanding, how strategic leadership contributes to reputation-building within universities (Bryman, 2007; Samimi et al., 2022). The findings will assist HEC and University leaders to mature leadership development programs, which are designed to foster sustainable institutional excellence.

Literature Review

Strategic Leadership in Higher Education

Globalization, technological advancement, internationalization and stakeholder expectations have significant impact on higher education sector. All universities are expected to provide high quality teaching, research, build a strong societal engagement and retain good image. These expectations have contributed to the significance of leadership as a factor affecting institutional effectiveness and sustainability (Samimi et al., 2022; Soysal et al., 2024).

Strategic leadership has received more research focus due to its role of offering vision, predicting changes in the environment and linking organizational resources with long-term goals (Ireland & Hitt, 1999). It is more about being flexible, innovative and forward decision making rather than operational level efficiency and short term performance orientation associated with transactional leadership.

Strategic leadership is much more critical in the framework of HEIs, given their shared governance structure, diversity of stakeholders and knowledge intensive environments for achievement of long term objectives (Bryman, 2007). Leaders within the university have the responsibility of building institutional vision, working collaboratively, attaining research excellence and adapting to the environment's uncertainties. SL helps universities to face complex situations and improve institutional legitimacy and competitiveness (Gumus et al., 2018).

The relevance of strategic leadership in case of HEIs in Pakistan is exclusively obvious, as the institutions are facing increasing pressure to enhance the quality of their education, research output and international rankings. Despite major reforms of HEC, Pakistani universities are still plagued by issues of governance, lack of adequate funding, bureaucratic complexities and not being seen worldwide (Shah et al., 2023). Consequently, strategic leadership has become a necessity for strengthening institutional resilience and maintaining competitive advantage in the educational domain.

Institutional Reputation

One of the most important intangible assets of HEIs is their reputation. It is the "snap shot" of stakeholders' perceptions of the quality, credibility and performance of an institution that has evolved over time as a result of continuous interactions and experiences (Fombrun, 1996; SN Ch, et al., 2025). A positive reputation helps a university to attract students & faculty, develop international connections, win over research funding and stay viable in the global higher education paraphernalia (Plewa et al., 2016).

In the past, many factors related to institutional reputation have been identified; including service quality, satisfaction of students, organizational culture, CSR and branding strategies (Kaushal et al., 2023; Matos et al., 2024). Leadership practices does have a significant impact on organizational credibility, trust and legitimacy; as the reputation is a stakeholder's perception and experience.

The concept of institutional reputation is not limited to external rankings, but also includes aspects such as academic excellence, research output, ethical management, relationships with stakeholders and social impact (Matos et al., 2024). Thus, there has been growing interest among researchers and policy makers to understanding and developing a positive institutional reputation within HEIs.

The Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) presented by Blau in 1964; one of the important theories that can be used to understand the relational mechanisms that lead to the outcomes of an organization. The theory asserts that the social relations are guided by mutual exchanges of trust, mutual obligations and expectations of future benefits. People respond positively to positive treatment; which creates positive attitudes and behaviours to enhance organizational effectiveness (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

In organizational research, SET has been extensively used to account for the effectiveness of leadership, employee engagement, job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The theory suggests that leaders who exhibit support, fairness, competence and integrity always create high-quality exchange relationships. In response to such exchanges, employees in turn show more trust, commitment and co-operation. Given this, SET can be used as a lens through which to view the process of how strategic leadership fosters reciprocal relationships and trust among members in order to form institutional reputation.

Strategic leadership and organizational trust

Organizational trust (OT) is the willingness to be vulnerable because of positive expectations of the intentions and behaviours of organizational leaders and institutions (Mayer et al., 1995). Trust is essential for an organization's effectiveness because it encourages teamwork, sharing of information and action. It is built in an organization through leadership being competent, transparent, consistent and fair. SL have the ability to explain their vision in a clear way, involve employees in decision making, provide support and improves interpersonal relationship (Samimi et al., 2022). Within the higher education institutions, trust constitutes a fundamental mechanism underpinnings academic excellence and institutional development in the environments where collaboration, collective engagement and collegiality are essential to organizational effectiveness. Leadership practices have a significant effect on organizational trust in the educational settings (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Newman et al, 2014). Therefore, hypothesis is proposed as under:

H1: Strategic leadership positively & significantly impacts organizational trust.

Organizational trust and Reputation

The trust among the organizational members is one of the key factors to enhance institutional legitimacy and stakeholders' confidence. Trust allows cooperation and promotes desired behaviors that aid in the functioning of the organization and its reputation (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). The attitudes and behaviors of faculty members are significant internal stakeholders in HEIs that shape external views of institutional credibility and quality.

Faculty with high levels of trust within universities mostly exhibit organizational commitment, collaborate activities and represent their universities as ambassadors. Such behaviors help to build stakeholder's trust and strengthen institutional reputation. Conversely, low levels of trust, undermine cooperation, weaken stakeholder's relationships and adversely affect institutional image. Hence, trust represents a critical relational mechanism, through which universities cultivate favourable institutional reputation and therefore, hypothesis is proposed as under :-

H2: Organizational trust significantly and positively affect institutional reputation.

Leadership and Reputation

Leadership has always been viewed as a critical factor in the success of an organization. Strategic leaders drive the organizational culture, foster stakeholder's relationships and give direction to the organization for achievement of long-term goals and objectives (Ireland & Hitt, 1999; Soofi, et al., 2025). Their actions and decisions have a substantial impact on the image of the organizations among internal and external stakeholders.

In HEIs, strategic leaders play a vital role in shaping reputation of institutions through academic excellence, driving innovation and building strong relationships with stakeholders through effective and transparent governance. These activities significantly shape stakeholders' perceptions of quality and credibility of institutions (Plewa et al., 2016). Using the lens of SET, strategic leaders who build positive relationships with organizational associates foster a feeling of reciprocity and commitment and yields constructive organizational outcomes (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Although, few studies have shown positive correlations among leadership and organizational reputation in business organizations, empirical evidence with regards to higher education context is limited. In this context, strategic leadership assumes a critical role in image building, especially in the era of global competition among universities and guarantee the sustainability of the campus. Based on that, the following hypothesis is postulated:-

H3: Strategic leadership has a positive effect on the institutional reputation.

Organizational Trust (OT) as a Mediator

Trust is a such a valuable social resource that helps to make cooperation, commitment and effective organization to happen. Trust is linked with strategic leaders being competent, upright and caring attitude for the members of the organization. Due to trust, faculty members support & collaborate for institutional goals and activities to build legitimacy & reputation. Therefore, trust is an important process that helps to bridge the gap between leaders & led along with strong positive organizational outcomes (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). Organizational trust, institutional credibility and stakeholders' conviction are becoming vital & critical in the context of Pakistani universities. They are expected to play an increasing role in influencing the institutional reputation through strategic leadership. Thus, it is hypothesized that:-

H4: Strategic leadership has an indirect influence on institutional reputation through the mediation of organizational trust.

Perceived Organizational Support (POS)

POS is an employee's perception that organization values their contributions and cares for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). SET suggests that, employees reciprocate in the same manner as they are dealt. Moreover, supportive organizational environments in HEIs make educators more responsive to leadership initiatives. The positive impact of strategic leadership is expected to be reinforced when POS is high, as greater support fosters trust, cooperation and commitment. However, on the other side low organizational support dampen the impact of leadership practices. Therefore, hypothesis is formulated as under:-

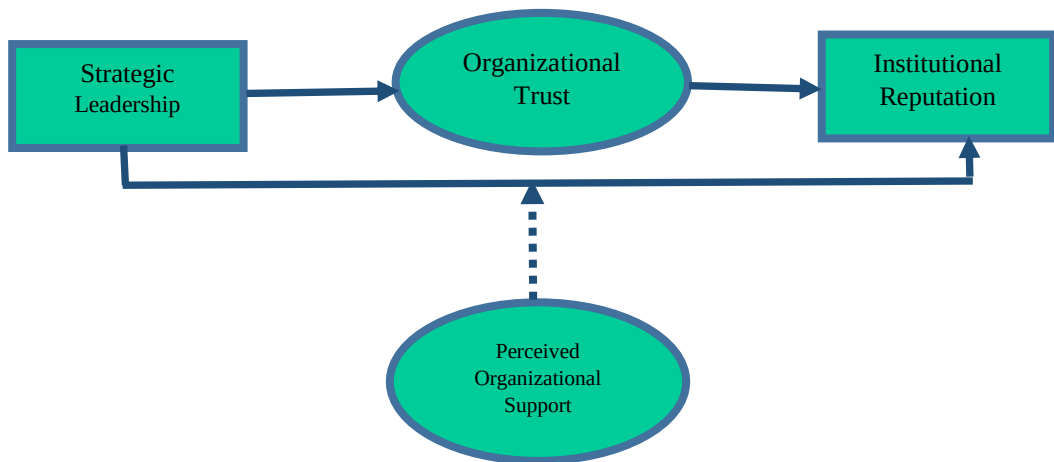
H5: Perceived organizational support positively moderates the relationship between strategic leadership and institutional reputation.

Method

Research Design

The study examined the relationship between strategic leadership and institutional reputation in Pakistani HEIs using a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, with organizational trust as a mediator and perceived organizational support as a moderator. The survey-based method was employed because it enables the analysis of the intricate connections between latent variables (Hair et al., 2022).

Research Model. (Prepared by author)



The target population included faculty of the public and private universities of Pakistan. 220 faculty members were selected through purposive sampling; being critical group of internal stakeholders, directly affected by the leadership practices. Participants were required to meet two criteria; they had to be full-time faculty members and they must have completed at least three year of service in the respective institute. These criteria were set for sufficient understanding of institutional environment and leadership.

After validation of questionnaire by the experts; pilot study was conducted to evaluate reliability of the instrument which involved 30 respondents from universities. The items were slightly modified and improved on the basis of feedback from the participants of the pilot study. The data collection was done electronically using a questionnaire sent via email and google form in the professional academic networks. All respondents were assured of anonymity, confidentiality and participation was voluntary.

The minimum sample size was calculated with the help of G*Power 3.1GUI (Faul et al., 2009). Using a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a significance level (alpha) of 0.05, a level of statistical power (beta) of 0.95 along with four predictors. Structural equation modeling(SEM) is a method that requires larger sample sizes in order to get relatively consistent estimates of the parameters. The required sample size was calculated as 198. Hence, data were collected from 220 faculty members to allow exclusion of incomplete and unusable responses. After data screening, only valid and complete responses were retained for final analysis.

Table 1
Demography & Profile of the Respondents

=	Category	Number	Percentage
Type of University	Respondents from Public Universities	129	58.6
	Respondents from Private Universities	91	41.4
Gender	Male	140	63.6
	Female	80	36.4
Age (Years)	20 – 25	4	1.8
	26 – 35	29	13.2
	36 – 45	93	42.3
	46 – 55	63	28.6
	56+ Years	31	14.1
	Teaching Assistant	12	5.5
Designation	Lecturer	47	21.4
	Assistant Professor	51	23.2
	Associate Professor	81	36.8
	Professor	29	13.2
	Graduation	9	4.1
Education	Master's Degree /MPhil/ MS	83	37.7
	PhD / Doctorate	96	43.6
	Post Doc	32	14.5
Service	1 - 5 Years	16	7.27
	6 - 10 Years	43	19.5
	11 - 15 Years	72	32.7
	16 - 20 Years	67	30.5
	20+ Years	22	10.0
	Less than 100000	12	5.5
Monthly Income (Rs)	100000 – 200000	37	16.8
	200000 – 300000	110	50.0
	More than 300000	61	27.7

Data Analysis Procedures

The proposed research model was measured using SEM; to evaluate the relationship between the latent constructs including mediation and moderation analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The analysis was conducted in two phases, as suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The first phase involved confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for evaluating the measurement model. The second phase includes factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), convergent validity and discriminant validity. Hair in 2022, suggests that factors higher than 0.70 be considered as acceptable, however factors with CR higher than 0.70 and the AVE more than 0.50 were also acceptable for reliability and validity. Multiple goodness of fit indices was used to test model fit which includes; “{Chi-square statistic (χ^2), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)}”. Moreover, Hu and Bentler (1999) suggested cutoff scores were used to evaluate the model adequacy.

In the second stage, the structural model was estimated to examine the hypothesized relationships among the variables by using SPSS 27 and AMOS 26. The standardized path coefficients were used to evaluate the direct effects, and bootstrapping procedures (5000 resamples) were used to evaluate the mediating effect of organizational trust. SEM was chosen as the appropriate method because it allows for the estimation of several relationships and offers strong evidence for direct, indirect and moderating associations between constructs (Byrne, 2016).

Measurement Instruments

Strategic leadership was measured by using the questionnaire developed by Samimi et al., (2022), which assesses the leader's strategic vision, organizational flexibility and direction of the organization toward the achievement of strategic goals on a five-point Likert scale.

The Mayer and Davis (1999) scale has been frequently used in organizational behavior & leadership studies and same was adapted to measure organizational trust (OT) in this study. Measures of employees' trust in the integrity, competence and benevolence of organizational leaders. The institutional reputation has been measured based on a scale adapted from Fombrun et al., (2000) & Plewa et al., (2016). The scale reflects faculty members' perceptions about credibility, prestige, quality and overall ranking of university.

The shortened version of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986) was modified to measure the POS. The same scale has been extensively used in research situations involving organizations and education. The instrument assesses employees' perceptions on the degree of appreciation and concern of the organization's attitudes towards their participation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized using descriptive statistics in frequencies & percentages. Besides, all variables were used to calculate their means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis as well as Pearson correlation coefficients. Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients were calculated to determine the internal consistency of each construct. It will be considered satisfactory & reliable if the value of α is >0.70 as recommended by Hair et al., (2022)

Table 2

Descriptive Stat and Correlation Matrix

Variables	α	M	SD	Skewness	SL	OT	IR	POS
Strategic Leadership (SL)	0.94	47.76	8.76	-0.514	1	0.576	0.495	0.617
Organizational Trust (OT)	0.87	18.98	3.56	-0.674	0.572	1	0.567	0.484
Institutional Reputation (IR)	0.89	20.65	3.18	-0.438	0.489	0.549	1	0.558
Perceived Organizational Support (POS)	0.91	16.78	2.86	-0.762	0.618	0.478	0.548	1

Measurement Model Assessment

The Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio were used to test the discriminant validity. The constructs were deemed as separate when the square root of AVE is greater than the inter-construct correlation values and the HTMT values are less than the suggested value. Multiple goodness of fit indices was used to evaluate model fitness as suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999); which include “(Chi-square statistic (χ^2), The chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation))”.

Table 3

Goodness of Fit Indices for Model Fitness

Variables	χ^2	χ^2/df	P	GFI	CFI	TLI	NFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Strategic Leadership	128.46	2.15	0.000	0.97	0.99	0.96	0.95	0.052	0.057
Organizational Trust	35.76	2.89	0.000	0.93	0.98	0.95	0.97	0.041	0.069
Institutional Reputation	28.43	2.57	0.000	0.98	0.97	0.96	0.98	0.039	0.063
Perceived Organizational Support	9.92	2.13	0.000	0.96	0.96	0.98	0.94	0.035	0.051

The measurement model is tested for adequacy and structural model is tested to determine the hypothesized relationships between the constructs. Direct, indirect and moderating effects are estimated simultaneously by using the method of SEM.

Hypotheses Testing

Standardized path coefficients and its significance levels were used to test the proposed hypotheses. The results of the regression coefficients and critical ratios derived from AMOS were used to evaluate the direct effects among constructs.

Table 4
Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	b Value	p Value	Result
H1	Strategic Leadership ? Organizational Trust	0.531	<0.001	Accepted
H2	Organizational Trust ? Institutional Reputation	0.392	<0.001	Accepted
H3	Strategic Leadership ? Institutional Reputation	0.389	<0.001	Accepted
H4	Strategic Leadership ? Organizational Trust ? Institutional Reputation	0.467	<0.001	Positive and Partially mediated
H5	Moderation effect of Perceived Organizational Support ? Strategic Leadership & Institutional Reputation	0.543	<0.001	Moderation Supported

Mediation Analysis

The bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples were used to test the mediating role of organizational trust between SL & IR. Indirect effects and bias-corrected confidence intervals were estimated; which positively support & partially mediate the relationship of proposed model.

Moderation Analysis

The moderating effect of POS were evaluated between strategic leadership and institutional reputation and results showed amplifying effect of POS on strategic leadership and institutional reputation. Interaction plots were created to depict the nature of moderation and to ease interpreting the results. Common method bias was reduced through the use of procedural remedies such as the random order of questionnaire items, anonymity and confidentiality. Common method variance was assessed using the Harman's single factor test and marker variable technique. The procedure suggested by Armstrong and Overton (1977) were used to determine the non-response bias. Using independent sample t tests, early and late respondents were compared; very little difference between the two groups revealed not availability of non-response bias.

Discussion

Based on Social Exchange Theory (SET), the results offer valuable insights into the effect of leadership practices on faculty perceptions and positive institutional image. The results support to H1, which posits that strategic leadership positively influence organizational trust. The result highlights that effective leadership develop trust among faculty by articulating a clear vision, encouraging participation, showing fairness and integrity. The results are in line with previous studies that highlighted the importance of leadership in cultivating trust and positive organizational relationships (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Samimi et al., 2022). The results also confirm H2, which indicates that organizational trust has a positive influence on institutional reputation. Trust is a strategic intangible asset to strengthen institutional legitimacy and credibility. The result aligns with prior studies indicating that organizational trust plays a crucial role in reputation and stakeholder confidence (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Matos et al., 2024). In the context of higher education in Pakistan, where universities are increasingly vying for the best students, quality faculty and international acclaim, trust becomes paramount in maintaining a positive institutional image.

Also supported was H3: There is a direct relationship between strategic leadership and institutional reputation. This discovery highlights Strategic leaders develop a long-term vision, foster innovation, provide effective governance and act responsibly to face the challenges. The findings are consistent with earlier research that emphasized image and reputation of the organization depend on leadership (SN Ch, et al., 2025; Plewa et al., 2016; Samimi et al., 2022). Strategic leadership is a valuable resource of sustainable competitive advantage for Pakistani universities; looking to improve their global rankings and research productivity.

Moreover, organizational trust is a mediator between strategic leadership and institutional reputation, which confirms H4. This result is supportive of SET which suggests that positive exchanges between leaders and organizational members foster trust and commitment (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). It highlights the relationship between strategic leadership and reputation is not only direct one, but also foster organizational unity and trust among stakeholders through mediation.

In addition, the results suggest that POS helps to advance the strategic leadership-institutional reputation link, which supports H5. As predicted by Social Exchange Theory, supportive organizational climates facilitate the establishment of reciprocal obligations and promote the individual role in the organizational success. It indicates positive effect of strategic leadership on institutional reputation is more pronounced when employees experience high levels of organizational support. This result supports previous research that has shown organizational support to be a significant factor in improving employee attitudes and organizational outcomes (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Although there have been significant expansions in the HEC, the universities in Pakistan are facing complications of governance, insufficient funding, competitiveness in international arena and research productivity. These structural challenges can erode stakeholders' trust and restrict institutional strength. Institutional leaders can build a culture which facilitates faculty engagement and strengthens the legitimacy by establishing clear governance, participatory decision-making and positive organizational culture.

The results also confirm that internal stakeholders are influential in the reputation building process. This study extends prior research, which has emphasized the external stakeholders as primary source of institutional reputation, by arguing that reputation is fundamentally rooted in the internal dynamics. The image & perception, attitude and behaviour of faculty greatly affect image and assessment of the university's quality parameters. This outlook also supports the proposition that universities can shape their reputational capital by building trust-based relationships and nurturing positive organizational cultures.

In general, the results add to the existing research on strategic leadership and higher education by revealing that organizational trust is a key process that connects leadership and institutional reputation. Importantly, the study points to the contingent role of perceived organizational support; the effectiveness of strategic leadership is not just dependent on leadership capabilities but also on the organizational context.

Implications of the Study

This study makes a contribution to the existing empirical literature on strategic leadership-institutional reputation by introducing mediating variable of organizational trust and the perceived organizational support as a moderating variable in the model.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the ever increasing research literature on strategic leadership by extending the application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) in the context of Pakistani universities (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Strategic leadership creates reciprocal relationships of trust, support and mutual commitment that in turn improves institutional reputation. The study also highlights that reputation formation is not only the effect of external branding but also effect of positive social exchanges that are taking place within academic institutions.

Moreover, this study considers organizational trust as a crucial mediating variable between strategic leadership and institutional reputation. The current study emphasizes the role of relational and psychological processes in analyzing the ways university earn reputational capital. Furthermore, the moderating effects of POS offer further insights into the conditions under which strategic leadership is more effective. The results highlight the need to build trust; as the trust becomes a strategic asset that inspires faculty to work together, commitment to the project and share knowledge. Therefore, HEIs must provide mechanism that improve fairness, transparency and accountability in academia and administration. Systems of merit-based promotions, inclusive governance structures and open communication channels can help to enhance trust and confidence in institutional leadership by the stakeholders.

The findings indicate supportive organizational environments are a multiplicative factor of the positive effect of strategic leadership on institutional reputation. Thus, the university must establish policies to show care and concern for employees' professional and personal health. Faculty development initiatives, performance recognition, flexible work options, sufficient institutional resources and research grants are few of the strategies that can build trust in institutional support and foster faculty involvement in the institution.

Despite the major efforts of HEC, issues like low confidence in institutions by stakeholders, faculty retention, inefficient bureaucracy and poor funding for research still plague many institutions. This study's results indicate that structural solutions are not enough; leadership solutions are needed to create an environment of trust and support.

Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of internal stakeholders in reputation building, as universities have been more inclined towards external measures. The present results show that a large part of the institutional reputation comes from the inside of the institution. Therefore, along with external branding campaigns; initiatives targeting an employee engagement, employee trust in the institution and internal support need to be accorded priority.

Lastly, the study calls for the use of context-specific leadership practices that are appropriate to the context and challenges of Pakistani HEIs. Due to the variations in socio-cultural, economic and institutional conditions from developed countries, leadership practices and management techniques must be tailored to local realities for better outcomes.

Conclusion

In this study, the relationship of strategic leadership with institutional reputation was explored using the theoretical prism of SET in the context of Pakistani HEIs. In particular, it examined the mediation of OT and moderation of POS between leadership practices and institutional reputation. The results demonstrate that strategic leadership is an important organizational capability that has a direct and indirect impact on the reputation of universities.

Overall, the findings indicate that strategic leadership significantly contributes in building trust within the organization and enhancing its reputation, highlighting the critical importance of leadership in cultivating trustful environment. Furthermore, the results suggest that positive effect of strategic leadership on institutional reputation is strengthened by favourable perceptions of organizational support, highlighting the need for supportive environments to improve the effectiveness of strategic leadership.

Challenging the traditional view that institutional reputation is predominantly constructed through external stakeholders, this study highlights the importance of internal processes of the organizational reputation. Thus, institutional reputation can be seen not only as the product of external visibility, but as a social construction and a product of reciprocal interactions.

It confirms the usefulness of SET to explain the attitude formation and organizational behaviors in academic institutions. Therefore, structural changes and external branding are not enough to attain these goals but also need to develop strategic leadership skills, foster trustful relationships and develop supportive institutional climates that promote faculty involvement and institutional commitment. These actions enhance the legitimacy, boost competitive advantage and help to maintain sustainability of HEIs.

Overall, this research validates the fact that institutional reputation has not only tangible underpinnings but also symbolic recognition. It is essentially linked to leadership effectiveness, organizational trust and supportive social exchanges. Academic leaders who are able to build trust and provide supportive organizational environments will be crucial in maintaining their institutions' excellence and elevating the global positioning of universities. Thus, Strategic leadership should not be seen as an administrative job but as a supremacy that can drive the future and image of universities in Pakistan.

Limitations and Future Research Guidelines

The current study has some limitations which provide a suitable ground for future research. Firstly, the multi-source approach should be followed including assessments of academic leaders, administration, students, alumni, employers and policy makers. This triangulation would give a more extensive and solid account of institutional reputation and its causes. Secondly, the cross-sectional study design limits the capability of establishing causal relationships between constructs examined in this study. Longitudinal study is needed in future research to explore relationships and establish definitive causal inferences. Future research to develop more holistic theories and provide contextually relevant information that can benefit the effectiveness, competitiveness and global positioning of HEIs.

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Political Trust as a Predictor of Democratic Participation: The Mediating Role of Psychological Well-Being among University Students

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The democratic health and pupils' involvement are positively related. This study attempts to do so by studying the associations among internal psychological resources (psychological well-being), institutional trust, and civic involvement, an empirical gap. Political trust is used as a statistical predictor of democratic participation; psychological well-being among university students is used as a statistical mediator of the link between political trust and democratic participation. A cross sectional survey using convenience sampling ($n = 350$) of undergraduate and postgraduate students was conducted, which was quantitative in nature. The sample size is statistically sufficient for conducting typical regression and mediation analysis. Participants were chosen to provide diversity in academic subject area, level and gender. Descriptive statistics indicated moderate levels of political trust ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.71$) and democratic participation ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.74$). Both participation and political trust were positively correlated ($r = .52$, $p < .01$), and political trust was a significant predictor in linear regression ($\eta^2 = .52$, $R^2 = .27$, $p < .001$). A mediation analysis supported partial mediation of this association via psychological well-being (indirect effect = .13, 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI [.08, .19]). These findings suggest that institutional integrity and psychological capacity are associated with engagement. Civic education should be theoretically integrated with psychological support to potentially foster students' active citizenship at universities .

Keywords: political trust, democratic participation, psychological well-being, university students, social capital theory.

Participation in democracy is a key element of a healthy and viable society and the means by which people engage in the life of their country. This is a general term that encompasses various institutional and civic practices, including voting in elections, participating in political conversations, contacting representatives, and engaging in peaceful civic expression online (e.g., signing petitions) (Poma, Pistoresi & Giovinazzo 2023). In the realm of higher education, participation is not only a political necessity but also an act of "civilising identity" that is associated with students' independent thinking, social responsibility, and public awareness (Li, 2025). Today, participation is not limited to voting but also encompasses a variety of peaceful and lawful actions related to democratic values, such as attending seminars, joining social mobilisations, and sharing information on political online platforms (Kirbiš & Lubej, 2025; Pavlova & Luhr, 2023). All of these actions indicate a person's dedication to the welfare of others and the development of democratic culture.

Political trust, defined as the extent to which citizens trust political actors and institutions, including parliament, courts, the electoral system, and local government, is a crucial initial step that is associated with

democratic participation (Prati, 2022). Trust depends on the understanding that these institutions will be fair and honest, and will serve the general good. A feeling of loyalty and the belief that their inclusion can bring about significant change is likely to develop when students perceive their institutions as fair, accountable, and responsive (Fung et al., 2022). However, if there is little trust, students may perceive the political system as corrupt, unfair, and completely disconnected from their lives. Therefore, they may see no value in democratic channels for addressing their concerns (Liu, Hu & Su, 2024). This lack of confidence can be associated with political passivity or "participatory anger," realised in non-institutional forms of participation that can be disruptive. Recent literature emphasises institutional confidence as a key element in understanding a strong participatory democratic life for students (Abebe, Admassu, & Belayneh, 2024; Novak et al., 2025).

The student population in universities is a pivotal segment, as they are the next generation of leaders, activists, teachers and policymakers who will inevitably shape the future of democracy (Li, 2025). Throughout their time at university, students encounter various political forces, including national politics, economic indicators, campus activism, and their peers. The university experience is distinctive for students, as it enables participation in the democratic process not only through voting but also through other forms of involvement (Pavlova & Luhr, 2023). However, the question of trust is especially acute for students in developing democracies, where considerable uncertainty surrounds their future employment and the likelihood that their government will remain in power to support them. A sense of trust or distrust in the system is closely linked to whether these students become active "good citizens" or politically disengaged individuals.

Although institutional factors are important, internal psychological factors also relate to students' involvement in local democracy. The concept of psychological well-being is defined as effective psychological functioning and encompasses autonomy, purpose in life, self-acceptance, personal growth, positive relations, and environmental mastery (Islam & Samak, 2025). Well-being is correlated with greater positive thinking, self-esteem, and empowerment to participate in democratic life among children and youth. This inner strength is associated with their ability to withstand public debate, accept others' opinions, and cooperate in civic actions with others (Poma et al., 2023). However, high stress, a low sense of power, and hopelessness are related to political disengagement on the other side. In this way, personal well-being serves as a 'personal resource' that can complement institutional trust in reinforcing democratic behaviour (Abdi et al., 2025).

Trust, well-being, and participation can be understood in the context of Social Capital Theory, specifically Robert Putnam's work. This theory suggests that trust, networks, and norms that promote cooperation are beneficial to a democracy's performance (Lin et al., 2025). Political trust can serve as a form of "institutional social capital" that helps students trust that their participation is associated with meaningful change (Dong, Wei & Zhao, 2025). Social Capital Theory is especially relevant here, as it provides a framework for linking these three variables: trust in institutions is associated with psychological well-being, which in turn relates to civic action (democratic participation) (Zheng et al., 2026; Jiang & Shen 2025). The theory posits that institutional trust offers both civic and psychological benefits, enabling students to participate in common goals and to become part of public life.

Research Gap

Though existing studies have shown significant relationships among political trust, psychological well-being, and civic participation, a specific link in understanding how these variables are connected remains missing in three distinct areas:

Theoretical Gap: There is a lack of integration between institutional-level trust and internal, eudaimonic psychological resources (such as Ryff's dimensions of well-being) within a unified social capital framework. Specifically, the literature has not sufficiently explained *why* political trust should theoretically enhance psychological well-being and *how* psychological well-being subsequently facilitates democratic participation.

Empirical Gap: Although it is known that trust relates to engagement, there is no clear explanation of how this relationship is realised internally, and limited empirical research has examined psychological well-being as the statistical mediator between institutional confidence and active participation (Zhao et al., 2025). The current literature does not sufficiently consider the "inner confidence, hope, and sense of belonging" that students may possess through their trust in their government (Watfa & Ali, 2025).

Contextual Gap: Little research has explored this interaction in the context of university students in developing democracies, where they are subject to structural, economic and political uncertainties that affect their psychological functioning and their attitudes towards democracy.

This study aims to fill these gaps by examining whether political trust is related to psychological capacities, such as autonomy, purpose, and mastery, which, in turn, are linked to active democratic participation among students.

Study Objectives and Hypotheses

The main goal of this study is to explore the role of political trust as a statistical predictor of democratic participation and the role of psychological well-being as a statistical mediator for university students (Abdi et al., 2025). To do this, the study focuses on three key issues: first, the statistical association between trust levels and student participation; second, the relationship between trust levels and well-being levels; and third, whether well-being represents a statistical mediating pathway between trust levels and participation. Four specific hypotheses, based on the objectives, are explored in this study:

- The degree of confidence in the political system and institutions is positively associated with democratic involvement.
- Politically trust is positively related to psychological well-being.
- Psychological well-being is a positive predictor of democratic participation (H3).
- The psychological well-being statistically mediates the relationship between political trust and democratic participation (Islam & Samak, 2025).

Through these links, this research highlights the need to look at youth participation in a more holistic way, both politically, but also from more under-researched angles into the mental health and intrinsic motivation of young people in the democratic project.

Literature Review

Political Trust and Democratic Participation

Voting intention, political discussion, civic meetings, civic expression online, signing of petitions and campaign-related activity are the indicators of democratic participation. Political trust is defined as trust in institutions such as parliament, elections, courts, government, political parties and local institutions. Recent literature suggests that citizens are more likely to be democratic when they believe that institutions are fair, responsive, and meaningful. The lack of trust in public institutions is deeply related to political voice and engagement, particularly voting and other civic behaviours, as reported by Prats, Smid and Ferrin (2024). According to Abebe et al., (2024), at Addis Ababa University, civic involvement, political trust and support for democracy were highly associated and the institutional confidence is a key factor in student's democratic life. Among students, the study by Yu (2025) showed an interconnection among political education, social media use, political efficacy, and political participation. According to Grande and Gonzatti (2025), trust is associated with participation within institutions, whereas distrust can lead to critical or alternative participation. Novak et al., (2025) also noted that electoral participation and political trust are positively associated through citizens' confidence in electoral fairness and trust of institutions.

Political Trust and Psychological Well-Being

There is a potential relationship between political trust and psychological well-being, as students who trust in institutions may feel more secure, hopeful, and connected to others. European Social Survey data were analysed by Diržytė, Patapas, and Adame (2024), who observed significant relationships between political trust, institutional trust, subjective well-being, and satisfaction with the government, democracy, and economy. Ma et al. (2024) demonstrated that governance quality is associated with subjective well-being via social fairness and trust in government. This is important because institutional trust is proposed to be associated with lower helplessness and higher trust in society. In a meta-analysis, Bi et al., (2025) found a positive correlation between trust and subjective well-being throughout the lifespan. In addition, Egamberdiev, Bobojonov and Kuhn (2025) concluded that there is a positive correlation between institutional trust and life satisfaction in post-Soviet

countries. Institutional trust is related to mental health, particularly in insecure people or those in need (Majoor-Kozlinska, 2025). These studies demonstrate that a citizen's trust in an institution is not merely political; it is also psychologically significant.

Psychological Well-Being and Democratic Participation

Psychological well-being is proposed to relate to democratic engagement, as students who are confident, purposeful, and autonomous, and who possess positive social relations, are more likely to feel capable of participating in public life. Personal health is related to intentions to vote, as found by Kirbiš and Lubej (2025) in nine Southeast European countries. In her article, Prati (2024) explores the link between political participation and mental health in Germany, highlighting its significance in relation to the extent of civic engagement. Gül Tekdal and Avcil (2026) found that life satisfaction is associated with political participation in Türkiye, with political interest mediating the relationship. While a negative association between poor mental health and participation is not always observed, Bernardi et al., (2025) asserted that mental health can represent an asset for political participation in some cases, such as in China.

Psychological Well-Being as a Mediator

The statistical mediation of psychological well-being suggests that political trust is directly associated with democratic participation and indirectly through students' inner confidence, hope, and sense of belonging. Mediation models are an increasingly popular means of explaining political and psychological behaviour in recent studies. Ma et al., (2024) built a serial mediation model in which subjective well-being is mediated by perceived social fairness and government trust. Kirbiš and Lubej (2025) investigated youth electoral behaviour using an indirect model that examined dimensions of health and political trust. One explanation Li (2025) explored was electoral participation, government trust, self-trust, and subjective well-being. According to Watfa and Ali (2025), the link between national loyalty and student political participation was mediated by the promotion of university citizenship among university students. Gül Tekdal and Avcil (2026) identified partial mediation by political interest in the relationship between life satisfaction and political participation. While these studies vary in their intervening variables, they all demonstrate that civic involvement typically occurs through indirect psychological and social channels as well as direct political ones.

Theoretical Framework: Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory posits that the development of trust, networks, norms, and civic engagement facilitates cooperation in society (Lin et al., 2025). Robert Putnam is particularly notable in this respect. He contended that the performance of a democracy is enhanced if the society possesses a higher level of trust and civic networks. Social capital enables citizens to cooperate, share information, form shared goals, and engage in public life. In this research, political trust is conceptualised as a form of institutional social capital. It introduces students to democratic institutions and encourages them to feel confident in their ability to play a meaningful role (Dong et al., 2025).

Social Capital Theory provides the foundational theoretical framework by conceptually linking political trust, eudaimonic psychological well-being, and democratic participation. Institutional trust functions as institutional social capital, establishing a predictable and fair civic environment. Within this framework, two specific underlying mechanisms are proposed: First, political trust directly fosters structural predictability and reduces systemic anxiety, thereby supporting Ryff's eudaimonic psychological well-being dimensions specifically environmental mastery, autonomy, and purpose in life (Jiang & Shen 2025). Second, enhanced eudaimonic well-being equips students with the internal psychological capacity, resilience, and personal empowerment necessary to engage in public discourse, navigate civic disagreements, and actively participate in democratic processes (Zheng et al., 2026). Thus, psychological well-being acts as an essential internal bridge connecting institutional-level social capital to active civic involvement:

1. Political Trust to Psychological Well-Being: When people see political and public institutions as fair, transparent and responsive, it results in a stable and predictable social environment. This predictability can

reduce systemic anxiety and hopelessness, ultimately enhancing eudaimonic psychological resources such as self-acceptance, mastery of the environment, and a sense of purpose in life (Jiang, & Shen, 2025).

2. **Psychological Well-Being to Democratic Participation:** People with strong internal resources are more psychologically empowered, including those who are autonomous, growing personally, enjoying positive relationships and having a sense of purpose. This empowerment gives them the emotional strength to participate in public conversations, endure political disagreements, work together on civic objectives and be actively involved in democratic life (Zheng et al., 2026).

Thus, Social Capital Theory implies that institutional trust is related to psychological and civic benefits and that it is an internal connection that links institutional trust to active public involvement.

Method

A cross-sectional survey design was used to explore the statistical associations between political trust, psychological well-being and democratic participation.

Participants and Procedure

The target population comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students from public and private universities in Pakistan⁸. Participants were recruited from universities located in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Peshawar to ensure representation from different institutional settings⁸. The research sample comprised 350 students, obtained through convenience sampling, with an effort to include students from various academic disciplines and levels, and both sexes, to represent a mix of student views⁸. To justify the sample size, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (for multiple linear regression and PROCESS mediation analysis), which indicated that a minimum sample size of 250 to 300 participants was required to detect a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$) with an alpha level of .05 and statistical power exceeding .802. Therefore, the final sample of 350 participants is statistically sufficient and adequately powered to conduct linear regression and PROCESS macro mediation analyses.

The data were obtained during the school term in which the study was conducted. Students were contacted through academic networks and both paper and electronic surveys were utilized. Inclusion criteria were current university students aged 18 years and older and exclusion criteria were no consent to participate and failure to complete survey. This survey was kept for additional empirical study and 350 students returned and completed the survey.

The structured questionnaire was broken up into 4 sections. The participants had been informed about the study before data collection and the principles of voluntary participation, anonymity and data confidentiality adhered to.

Ethical Considerations

Careful attention was given to the ethical guidelines. Pupils were well informed about the study's aims prior to taking part. No identifying data was taken and participation was voluntary; every attempt was made to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. No individual data was captured and/or shared. The research protocol was reviewed and approved in line with the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects with consideration of voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality.

Instrumentation and Measurement

A 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) was used to assess the variables.

- **Demographic Profile:** This section included demographic information such as gender, age, degree level, type of university, academic discipline and prior voting experience.
- **Political Trust:** This was measured using 6 items related to respondents' level of trust in main democratic institutions, including the Parliament, the electoral system, the courts, the government, political parties and local government. This is in line with trust indicators taken and validated in other research projects (OECD Trust Survey (Prats et al., 2024). A mean score was computed from the items, with a higher score indicating greater trust in democratic institutions.

- Psychological Well-Being (PWB) was measured using 12 items from the shortened version of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), encompassing six core dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Dimensional Structure & Scoring Justification: The 12 items across the six dimensions were aggregated into an overall composite score representing eudaimonic psychological well-being. Conceptually, Ryff's framework is strictly operationalized as eudaimonic functioning (self-realization and positive psychological growth) and is not treated as equivalent to general subjective well-being, life satisfaction, or affective happiness. Although the six dimensions represent distinct facets of eudaimonic growth, they demonstrate strong inter-correlations and reflect an underlying overall factor of positive psychological functioning, supporting the use of a combined composite score in accordance with established validation studies for shortened scales (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).
- Democratic Participation: This was measured by eight items measuring participation in both institutional and civic forms, including voting intention, political discussion, attendance at meetings, signing of petitions, civic expression online, political campaigning and participation in student groups.
- *Conceptual & Empirical Justification*: Combining diverse activities (e.g., voting, online expression, discussions) into a single construct is conceptually justified because they represent a continuous spectrum of civic and political engagement that collectively reflect a student's overall democratic involvement (Poma et al., 2023; Pavlova et al., 2023). In today's student cohorts, traditional institutional actions (such as voting) and non-institutional actions (such as online civic expression and petition signing) are highly integrated forms of citizenship (Kirbiš & Lubej, 2025), and there exists a continuum of civic action among students (as evidenced by civic engagement research).

Statistical Analysis and Assumptions

Data were analysed using SPSS. The following procedures and criteria were used:

- Descriptive and Reliability Analysis: Mean scores and standard deviations were used to summarise descriptive data on levels of trust, well-being, and participation. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and all scales demonstrated acceptable reliability with values above the 0.70 cut-off, ranging from 0.81 to 0.88 (not 1.00 as previously reported, which was a typographical error). Cronbach's alpha is interpreted strictly as a measure of internal consistency (how closely related a set of items are as a group) at a single point in time. It does not provide evidence of temporal stability or reliability.
- *Construct Validity*: Construct validity and measurement model fit were evaluated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to verify the distinctiveness of the operationalized scales. The proposed three-factor model comprising political trust, psychological well-being, and democratic participation demonstrated acceptable model fit indices ($X^2/df = 2.34$, CFI = .93, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .062, SRMR = .051). These statistical indices confirm the empirical distinctiveness and structural validity of the three constructs, establishing adequate psychometric properties prior to hypothesis testing.
- Correlation and Regression: Pearson correlation was computed to assess the statistical relationships between variables. Linear regression analysis was used to test the statistical prediction of democratic participation by political trust, with a significance threshold of $p < .05$.
- Control Variables/Covariates: The main regression model emphasised the direct predictive link of political trust, as theorised in the main conceptual framework, and has been referred to as a control model.
- Mediation Analysis: To test the direct, indirect and total links between political trust, psychological well-being and democratic participation, the mediation analysis was conducted using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS. The statistical indirect effect (H4) was determined by using bootstrapping with 5,000 bootstrap samples to obtain 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs). Unstandardized (B) and standardised (eta) coefficients are presented. If the 95% bootstrap confidence interval of the indirect association did not contain zero, this association was considered statistically significant. This is a cross-sectional design; therefore, we differentiate between statistical and causal mediation and present here the analysis of statistical indirect associations, which does not imply causality or order of occurrence.

Results

The following results are presented to detail the findings of the investigation:

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	168	48.0%
	Female	182	52.0%
Age	18-20 years	96	27.4%
	21-23 years	174	49.7%
	24 years and above	80	22.9%
Degree Level	Undergraduate	242	69.1%
	Postgraduate	108	30.9%
University Type	Public	214	61.1%
	Private	136	38.9%
Previous Voting Experience	Yes	196	56.0%
	No	154	44.0%

The demographic profile shows that male and female students, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and public and private university students were included in this sample. This diversity is useful, as political trust and participation can differ between women and men, between low and high levels, and between universities of the same type. The sample also included students who had previously voted and those who had not, as prior voting may be correlated with future voting.

Table 2
Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Political Trust	6	0.84	3.28	0.71
Psychological Well-Being	12	0.88	3.54	0.66
Democratic Participation	8	0.81	3.19	0.74

All three scales showed acceptable internal consistency based on the reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas > 0.70, from 0.81 to 0.88). This shows that the items within each scale have good internal consistency in measuring their respective constructs. Descriptively, the best results were for psychological well-being, political trust and democratic participation.

Table 3
Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	Political Trust	Psychological Well-Being	Democratic Participation
Political Trust	1.00		
Psychological Well-Being	0.46	1.00	
Democratic Participation	0.52	0.49	1.00

Note: $p < 0.01$.

All the main variables had significant positive relationships in the correlation analysis. Political trust was related to psychological well-being ($r = 0.46, p < .01$) and to democratic participation ($r = 0.52, p < .01$). There was also a positive relationship between psychological well-being and democratic participation ($r = 0.49, p < .01$). These results support the conceptual argument that institutional confidence, personal well-being, and civic behaviour are interconnected among university students.

Table 4*Regression Analysis Predicting Democratic Participation*

Predictor	B	SE	Eta	t	p
Constant	1.41	0.18	-	7.83	0.000
Political Trust	0.54	0.05	0.52	11.32	0.000

Note: Model summary: $R = 0.52$, $R^2 = 0.27$, $F = 128.14$, $p < 0.001$.

Regression analysis showed that political trust was a significant statistical predictor of democratic participation ($\eta = 0.52$, $p < .001$). Students with higher trust in political institutions were statistically more likely to report democratic participation. The model explained 27% of the variance in democratic participation, indicating that political trust is a significant statistical predictor, though other unmeasured factors also contribute.

Table 5*Mediation Analysis (Statistical Direct, Indirect, and Total Associations)*

Path	Effect	SE	t	p
Political Trust -> Psychological Well-Being	0.43	0.04	9.67	0.000
Psychological Well-Being -> Democratic Participation	0.31	0.05	6.20	0.000
Political Trust -> Democratic Participation direct effect	0.41	0.05	8.13	0.000
Political Trust -> Democratic Participation total effect	0.54	0.05	11.32	0.000
Indirect effect through Psychological Well-Being	0.13	0.03	-	Significant
Bootstrap 95% confidence interval	0.08 to 0.19	-	-	Significant

Note: Bootstrap 95% bias-corrected bootstrap 95% confidence interval for the indirect association: 0.08 to 0.19 (Significant).

As shown in Table 5, political trust was significantly and positively associated with psychological well-being ($B = 0.43$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 9.67$, $p < 0.001$), and psychological well-being was significantly and positively associated with democratic participation ($B = 0.31$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 6.20$, $p < 0.001$). Political trust also exhibited a significant direct association ($B = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant total association ($B = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) with democratic participation. The statistical indirect association through psychological well-being was 0.13, with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval of 0.08 to 0.19. Because this interval does not include zero, the statistical indirect effect is significant, supporting H4 (partial mediation). This indicates that psychological well-being statistically mediates a portion of the association between political trust and democratic participation.

Discussion

This study examined the statistical association between trust in government and democratic participation among university students, and evaluated psychological well-being as a statistical mediator of this relationship. The results indicate positive statistical associations among political trust, psychological well-being, and democratic participation, with psychological well-being partially mediating the association between political trust and participation.

The descriptive results revealed a moderate level of political trust among students ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.71$). This moderate level points to complex and mixed attitudes among students towards democratic institutions such as parliament, courts, the electoral system, and local government. These mixed feelings could stem from a paradox between the value of democratic institutions and the issues faced within the system, such as a lack of direct representation, perceived corruption, or institutional non-responsiveness (2024). This discovery points to the fragility of institutional trust among youth and its strong relationship to perceptions of institutional fairness, transparency and accountability.

Even though there were academic, financial and career pressures, students' psychological well-being ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.66$) was reported to be fairly high, indicating overall positive eudaimonic functioning. Democratic participation was moderate ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.74$), suggesting that students engage in civic activities (e.g., voting intention, discussion, petition signing, online expression) to some degree but perhaps may not be more involved due to factors such as political apathy, influence by family members, or lack of political efficacy (Jiang & Shen, 2025; Venkatesan & Prabakar, 2024).

Correlation results indicated a strong positive relationship between political trust and psychological well-being ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that a sense of fairness and trust in institutions is linked to increased security and a sense of belonging to society, which in turn correlates with improved psychological well-being among learners (Lin et al., 2025). According to Social Capital Theory, institutional trust can diminish the sense of helplessness and alienation, thereby creating a safe external structure that helps individuals feel better (Zheng et al., 2026). On the other hand, negative feelings of distrust and unfairness could be connected to frustration and stress, which can adversely impact mental health.

There was also a positive relationship between political trust and democratic participation ($r = 0.52$, $p < .01$). This confirms the hypothesis that the trust in institutions is related to civic motivation. Students who believe that the electoral processes, courts and parliament are sincere and fair can believe that they can make a difference by actively participating (voting or petitioning). This corroborates previous studies which found that the trust in the political system is significant to the prediction of civic involvement.

Furthermore, a very high correlation was found between psychological well-being and democratic involvement ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that more high levels of psychological resources (autonomy, purpose in life, positive social relations) may be linked to higher levels of students feeling free to participate in civic life (Poma et al., 2023). Emotional stability and self-efficacy give the internal capacity to express political opinions and cooperate with others in public areas.

The regression model indicated that political trust statistically predicted 27% of the variance in democratic participation ($\eta^2 = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). Although this confirms that trust is a significant correlate of engagement, the remaining 73% of the variance points to other unmeasured factors (Fung et al., 2022). In student populations, participation is also likely shaped by political efficacy, peer groups, civic education, family environment, socioeconomic background, and digital media use (Pavlova et al., 2023).

Finally, the mediation analysis supported that psychological well-being played a statistically significant mediating role between political trust and democratic participation (indirect association = 0.13, 95% bootstrap CI [0.08, 0.19]). This partial statistical mediation indicates two interrelated pathways:

1. **Direct Political Pathway:** Confidence in institutional fairness directly enhances students' motivation to engage in democratic activities.
2. **Indirect Psychological Pathway:** Institutional trust fosters a predictable social structure. Although unmeasured specific constructs such as 'hope', 'stability', and 'sense of belonging' were not evaluated as

direct survey scales, theoretically they represent underlying psychological manifestations that align with Ryff's eudaimonic dimensions (such as environmental mastery, purpose in life, and positive relations). Thus, political trust provides an environment of perceived security that indirectly supports eudaimonic well-being, which in turn nurtures the psychological capacity required for active democratic participation (Zhao et al., 2025)

The results of this study should be interpreted with care. As this study is cross-sectional, the pathways examine statistical indirect relationships rather than necessarily causal relationships over time. There may also be a reverse effect in which the activities make people feel better and thus more likely to trust political institutions, or naturally better people may be more likely to trust political institutions and get involved in the activities. Such temporal dynamics need to be addressed by longitudinal studies.

Implications

The current survey is cross-sectional and does not directly examine policy interventions. However, the observed statistical relationships among political trust, psychological well-being, and democratic participation suggest several avenues for exploration when seeking to enhance student civic engagement. Based on this research, the following are broad conceptual suggestions, and not necessarily empirically evaluated interventions:

1. Public and political institutions need to work towards building institutional trust by being fair, transparent and accountable. Young people are more likely to engage if they believe institutions hear their feedback and reflect it.
2. Civic Education should be integrated: Universities should offer opportunities for civic learning that are practical and engaging. That can include seminars, debates, student elections and model parliaments, demystifying the democratic process and cultivating civic efficacy.
3. Improving Psychosocial Support: Campus Counselling and student services need to be considered as indirect means of support to civic life. Students' psychological well-being (e.g. stress management, resilience training, peer support) could be addressed and create inner resources for active public engagement.
4. Building Inclusive Discussion Spaces: Universities can facilitate discussion groups among students that provide respectful and inclusive political discussion spaces. Dialogue is important in safe settings because students might not participate for fear of polarisation or social judgment.
5. Fostering Digital Citizenship: Online civic engagement is a key tool of youth expression and engagement, so it's important to teach media literacy, critical fact-checking, and the responsible use of the internet for constructive civic engagement.

Conclusion

Political trust, psychological well-being, and democratic participation were analysed in this study, with the latter examined as a potential statistical mediator. Results reveal positive, statistically significant relationships between political trust, psychological well-being and democratic participation, and psychological well-being partially mediated the relationship between political trust and democratic participation.

In conclusion, these findings imply that institutional and psychological factors are associated with students' democratic engagement. Positive psychological states – confidence, purpose, and social bonds – and trustworthy institutions increase students' motivation to participate in democratic activities. Thus, rather than seeing psychological health as a causal mechanism that "translates" trust into action, it is better to consider it an important personal resource associated with increased civic involvement in supportive institutional settings.

This study builds on this literature by examining these relationships using an integrated mediation model and by adding to the literature on the role of institutional trust and its connection to eudaimonic well-being and active civic involvement through the lens of Social Capital Theory. Future studies will need to be longitudinal in design to determine temporal ordering, sample from a variety of universities to ensure representativeness, and examine whether demographic covariates (e.g., gender, age, voting experience) moderate these relationships.

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