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Article

Rebuilding the Workplace in the Post-Pandemic Age through Human Capital Development Programs: A Moderated Mediation Model

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Abstract: Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has experienced major technological and procedural changes that will continue in the post-pandemic age. For this reason, firms are expected to learn from such an unprecedented experience and ensure that the managerial and workforce practices in the post-pandemic period are directed toward rebuilding and reinventing the workplace. Within the scope of the research topic: “Diversity, Innovations, and Entrepreneurship in Post-crisis Periods”, this study accentuates the positive impact of human capital development programs in enhancing employee performance. Moreover, the roles of resilience, empowerment, and mimetic isomorphism are analyzed to better enable firms to learn from their past experience and develop practices that fit the agile environment. A questionnaire was administered targeting 370 employees in 12 SMEs in Lebanon. A conditional analysis was used to test the hypotheses through SPSS, PROCESS. The results of this study showed that the deployment of developmental programs is deemed indispensable for enhancing the performance of SME employees and helping them overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic through empowerment and resilience. This study can be useful for academics who might benefit from its theoretical implications and prospective directions for future analyses. Moreover, its results can also be helpful for practitioners, specifically managers of SMEs who are seeking to reinvent their workplace in a responsive way in the post-pandemic age.

Keywords: post-pandemic; human capital development; employee resilience; employee empowerment; employee performance; mimetic isomorphism



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1. Introduction

Besides holding a significant role in enhancing social and economic progress, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) also hold the role of actively setting up work opportunities. The Lebanese economy is highly dependent on SMEs, as they play a vital role in securing job opportunities and enhancing the economic cycle (AL-Shboul 2019). Nevertheless, several factors presented the sector with obstacles that resulted in the withholding of its necessary growth and development, including the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its subsequent consequences for the workplace. Moreover, exterior problems emerged, causing further distress for the Lebanese economy, such as the political struggles in the region and the economic situation that the country is encountering. Therefore, nourishing SMEs and rebuilding them in the post-pandemic era can result in considerable improvements economically, politically, and socially.

The emergence of the pandemic has caused radical changes in the operational procedures of businesses all across the world (Burn et al. 2022). Employees who used to

ordinarily and systematically accomplish their work tasks within the physical frontiers of their organization were required to promptly adhere to unusual, unstructured, non-routine, and remote work processes. Organizations in general were supposed to swiftly handle the major interruptions and far-reaching changes at the levels of both work and social settings by traversing across an unusual era followed by procedural, biological, social, and technical changes that persist in the post-pandemic age. Although there are several advantages associated with teleworking and the numerous work flexibility options pursued by firms to boost organizational productivity (Zheng et al. 2015), the changes in work practices induced by the pandemic have created several problems that firms are expected to tackle and learn from in the post-pandemic age to avoid any similar pitfalls in the future (Cui and Li 2021; Burn et al. 2022; Orfei et al. 2022; Scherman et al. 2023). Moreover, although teleworking and the various pandemic-caused work options gave organizations the possibility to carry on work practices during the acute phases of the pandemic, these new approaches were not accessible to organizations in general (Brussevich et al. 2020; Eaddy 2021; Xiao and Su 2022) and to the majority of the SMEs in Lebanon in particular, which were neither technically nor instructively ready to adopt new technologically driven work approaches (Zakhem et al. 2022).

Accordingly, as firms have experienced major technological and procedural changes that will continue in the post-pandemic age (Fenwick et al. 2021; Kramer and Kramer 2020), they are expected to learn from this unprecedented experience and ensure that the managerial and workforce practices in the post-pandemic period are directed toward rebuilding and reinventing the workplace to ensure responsiveness, agility, and flexibility (Freze et al. 2023; Prayag 2023).

Consequently, fine-tuning organizational operating procedures and institutional arrangements based on the pandemic experience has become a fundamental part of organizational tasks to diminish the interruptions generated by telework, make firms thoroughly equipped to meet future impulsive changes, and ensure the smooth flow of organizational operations (Carillo et al. 2021). That is to say that firms are supposed to equip their employees with the indispensable tools, material, knowledge, skills, and power to aid them in becoming accustomed to the “new normal” and getting ready to quickly cope with any potential variation that might occur at the level of socio-organizational practices in the future, especially in light of the high level of uncertainty present in the economic, health, political, and social environments worldwide. It is critical for organizations to take a proactive approach in this sense because the reformulation of policies and the development of knowledge during the time of crisis can be tough and extremely challenging tasks (Johnson et al. 2022), where training and education can purposefully play a key role (Zancajo et al. 2022).

More specifically, the consequences of the functional procedures and changes adopted by firms during the pandemic are still not completely clear and firms might encounter similar organizational uncertainties in the upcoming periods. Thus, essential questions arise: Are firms that adopted developmental programs prior to and during the pandemic primers in adapting to change? Do employees’ adaptability and the firm’s level of task delegation play a role in shaping the relationship between the administration of developmental programs and the performance of employees? Is the tendency of firms to incorporate developmental programs, delegate tasks, and formulate a resilient culture affected by what their competitors do during critical and unusual times?

This research aims to understand the setting that would best help firms become quickly adaptive to the volatile environment and maintain their performance, taking the pandemic and post-pandemic age as a benchmark. More specifically, the current research features prominent research gaps acknowledged by scholars, first, by examining the relationship between human capital development programs and employee performance (Mikołajczyk 2022) within the context of SMEs in Lebanon, seeking to prove that the implementation of training and development programs by firms prior to and during the pandemic has helped employees extend their potential and minimize the impact of external factors on their productivity. Second, the said relationship will be analyzed through the mediation effects

of employee resilience and employee empowerment (Blaique et al. 2022), assuming that the more adaptability and autonomy employees have had, the better their ability has been in deploying developmental programs and accordingly boosting their performance. In other words, we seek to prove that developing the competencies of the existing workforce is more lucrative than recruiting new employees, particularly during doubtful times. When organizations heavily capitalize on the strengths of their staff, the latter will feel more empowered and will have a high inclination toward accepting change and maximizing their potential. Furthermore, the current model tests the moderating impact of mimetic isomorphism (Klymenko and Halse 2022), assuming that the incorporation of developmental programs, the delegation of tasks, and the formulation of a resilient culture by firms are influenced by their tendency to adopt practices followed by competing and successful firms, especially during unusual times.

This paper aims to contribute to the literature through establishment of a solid theoretical model and to managers through the provision of implications that can be used in the post-pandemic age as a means of conducting business in the face of the unexpected changes that the workplace might encounter from now onward. Hence, this research paper encompasses five subsequent sections: literature review, methodology, analysis, results, and implications and conclusions that will help academics by contributing to the expansion of existing knowledge and practitioners by applying the current findings to the work setting.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Emergence of Hypotheses

2.1. Human Capital Development Programs (HCDPs) and Employee Performance (EP)

Training is considered a systematic approach that is used by firms to capacitate employees and enhance their skill set (Arthur et al. 2003; Salas and Cannon-Bowers 2001), improve their performance (Hill and Lent 2006; Aguinis and Kraiger 2009), and accordingly increase corporate performance. Human capital entails the human apprehension of skills, abilities, knowledge, and qualifications, whereas human capital development involves enhancing these skills and competencies to institute personal, social, and economic growth and welfare (Savrul et al. 2014). For this reason, the HCDP is the heart of successful business operations in all firms regardless of the industry in which they operate (Bendickson and Chandler 2019).

Developmental programs are becoming fundamental strategic decisions in light of automation, industrialization, and the changing work environments (Sima et al. 2020; Costa et al. 2023). In this sense, Vu and Nguyen (2022) accentuated that equipping employees with the awareness and knowledge is a necessity to navigate through the pre-crisis, during-crisis, and post-crisis stages. More specifically, Susanty et al. (2022) reported that it is important for highly vulnerable SMEs to pursue contingency plans to cope with the rapidly changing environment in response to COVID-19 through informative communication. Eventually, improvement attempts made by firms are directed toward one sacred goal, which is enhancing the performance of the firm (Ployhart et al. 2014; Bendickson and Chandler 2019; Javed et al. 2023). However, COVID-19 has significantly affected employee performance in SMEs, and the degree of influence is greatly determined by the SMEs' absorptive capacity that is shaped by employees' learning propensity and their ability to apply what they have learned (Khaliq et al. 2022). Moreover, Kwiotkowska and Gębczyńska (2022) found that job characteristics in the post-pandemic period are crucial for determining the level of satisfaction and job success.

In this regard, the foundation of this research is defended by the human capital theory. This theory proclaims that economic benefits are generated through solid investments in people whose presence in the firm is to be viewed as an asset, not as a liability (Sweetland 1996). That is to say that this theory is intended to justify that the implementation of human capital development programs can basically enhance employee performance by serving as a means for investing in employees through formal and informal education, training, development, coaching, guidance, and so forth. Hence, capitalizing on the skills, knowledge, and abilities of employees can have a positive influence on their performance.

This is mainly due to the fact that employees' levels of productivity can be significantly improved through well-defined, continuous, and systematic developmental programs.

Studies within the field of strategic management consider performance as the most prominent and valuable dimension of organizational success. Progressively, rebuilding organizational operating procedures to cope with the post-pandemic age has become a fundamental goal for maintaining sustainable organizational goals (Wang and Huang 2021; Wenzel et al. 2020). In the context of the current study, HCD programs are assumed to be of significance in terms of predicting the performance level of employees (Dachner et al. 2021; Gambardella et al. 2015), particularly in the case of the SMEs of Lebanon in light of the uncertainty generated by the pandemic. Hence, the following hypothesis emerged:

Hypothesis 1. *HCDPs have a significant impact on employee performance.*

2.2. Mediating Role of Employee Resilience (ER)

Employee resilience and its role in shaping the performances of individuals and firms are becoming highly critical for ensuring organizational sustainability (Ollier-Malaterre 2010; Cooper et al. 2014; Prieto and Talukder 2023). Resilience is defined as the individual's propensity to attune in an effective manner when faced with acute and intense hardships (Malik and Garg 2020; Oparah et al. 2021), while creating a route toward stability (Bonanno 2004). However, the literature still lacks sufficient empirical evidence in terms of the effects of resilience on employee performance during the critical times of the pandemic (Gröschke et al. 2022). On an international scale, organizations are clearly demonstrating a radical change toward adopting a compensation system that is merit-based, which reflects a substantial transition resulting in employees bearing the responsibility for competitiveness and success, instead of the firm itself (Zhao et al. 2012). This necessitates that employees exhibit or pursue a prominent level of resilience in addition to acquiring job-related skills, knowledge, and abilities (Wang et al. 2014). Ensuring a strong fit between employees and their job tasks in addition to having a sense of compliance and engagement are essential for attaining a firm's goals (Cooke et al. 2019), especially at the level of SMEs in the post-pandemic age (Zutshi et al. 2021). Good job performance can result in motivating employees and providing them with a sense of achievement and triumph, which in turn encourages them to exert higher levels of effort in a non-compulsory manner (Bonias et al. 2010).

Developing a culture that fosters resilience helps in confronting the challenges and defeats that organizations face during the course of their operations (Jenkins et al. 2014; Liu et al. 2023). More specifically, resilience is deemed a useful tool to overcome the frustrations faced by SMEs during the pandemic (Agarwal et al. 2023). For instance, Moore et al. (2022) found that the modern workplace and the post-pandemic recovery necessitate the ability of employees to cope with the emerging technological actors more readily and easily.

The notion of resilience and the associated studies concerned with organizational difficulties are entrenched in the field of positive psychology (Luthans 2002; Luthans et al. 2010; Nieuwborg et al. 2023). Fredrickson (2001) asserted that positive thoughts and their derived aspects, such as resilience, may be activated when an individual experiences authentic engagement or liberty when practicing the job. On a similar note, Ang et al. (2022) determined that digital training and flexible training programs help individuals build resilience by exercising higher levels of authenticity. This was also asserted by Galanti et al. (2023) and Ngoc Su et al. (2021), who proclaimed that resilience is enhanced through solid human resource management practices such as clear training plans and goal-oriented training and development programs. Likewise, Zeng et al. (2023) confirmed that capital development in general and psychological capital development in particular essentially help in building an employee composition that is highly resilient and adaptive.

Positive psychological resources are applauded as a main source of prosperity (Higgs and Dulewicz 2014; Cooper et al. 2014) and serve as a mediator in the relation between managerial supervision and employees' productive behavior (Gupta and Singh 2014). Accordingly, positive psychology supports our theoretical foundation that human capital

development policies may possibly foster employee resilience (Mubarik et al. 2022), thus permitting the firm to elevate its performance (Bardoel et al. 2014). Hence, the review conducted on employee resilience led to the emergence of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. *Employee resilience mediates the relationship between HCDPs and employee performance.*

2.3. Mediating Role of Employee Empowerment (EE)

Firms are experiencing a growing need to provide creative and original ideas and to model innovation throughout their business dealings in order to gain a competitive advantage (Ferreira et al. 2020) and to ensure business success in the modern and unstable environment (Darvishmotevali et al. 2020; Tang et al. 2020). A look at the literature conveys that there are two approaches used to describe empowerment: a structural perspective and a psychological perspective. From a structural standpoint, empowerment is denoted as the diverse procedures of a firm and the respective guidelines in place, which result in managers sharing some of the power they possess with the workers and thus providing the latter with a sense of commitment and independence (Wallace et al. 2011). From a psychological standpoint, empowerment is denoted as a psychological genre that is associated with “increased intrinsic task motivation” derived from a worker’s feeling of autonomy, value, influence, and capacity (Bartunek and Spreitzer 2006; Wallace et al. 2011). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) described empowerment as an amplified sense of genuine determination to accomplish what is required or a personal sense of responsibility toward the job, which can be observed using four testing tools: significance, abilities, self-determination, and worthiness or meaning obtained from the job. As the worker looks at these tools and acknowledges them positively in connection to the job, they will experience an amplified sense of determination and eventually feel empowered. The firm’s productivity can be described as “the extent to which firms accomplish their business goals” (Beltrán 2020). Studies have shown that employees who are becoming empowered structurally or psychologically are more devoted to their jobs and thus found to be highly productive (Bonias et al. 2010; Baird et al. 2020; Ochoa Pacheco et al. 2023). Empowering workers may reflect positively on productivity, especially when empowerment is constructed of procedures oriented toward passing on general or job-relevant knowledge, or when empowerment is based on granting employees a sense of power and freedom in accomplishing their work tasks (Bonias et al. 2010). Within the context of this study, employee empowerment is deemed critical for ensuring that employees acquire and effectively utilize the necessary job-related knowledge and skills at the level of SMEs (Çakar and Ertürk 2010), particularly in the pandemic and post-pandemic age where the ability of employees to cope rapidly with the contextual and environmental changes taking place is considered highly important (Alarifi and Adam 2023). For instance, Hadjielias et al. (2022) argued that knowledge co-production enhances and harmonizes the decision-making process in small businesses and makes employee actions more efficient in the COVID-19 age.

In this regard, the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson 2001) can be of aid as it states that positive emotions are a great contributor to how employees cope with workplace elements they are subjected to and utilize different resources. Furthermore, we assume that employees who receive attention from their firms through various developmental programs such as coaching, training, and orientation are more likely to perform better. This is based on the social exchange theory in terms of reciprocity (Blau 2017), which assumes that when benefits exceed costs, the social interaction will be sustained (Gould-Williams and Davies 2005). More specifically, that is to say that when employees realize that the benefits resulting from such trainings and developmental programs outweigh the costs in terms of time and effort they are expected to exert, they will most likely choose to continue with this social interaction and achieve fruitful results. Therefore, the broaden-and-build theory supports the notion of this research regarding empowering employees and its effect on their performance through an enhanced workplace environment, while the social exchange

theory provides a basis for employees to reciprocate to their firms as they perceive the benefits received from their organization (e.g., empowerment, resilience, developmental programs), which can benefit them both individually and professionally.

Hence, empowered workers tend to be more adapting when faced with abrupt obstacles. They also tend to be better at enhancing their connections with stakeholders and to use their time more efficiently (Baird et al. 2020). Empowerment can also improve the technical information and abilities that workers gain in the form of groups, allowing them to conduct their job more productively (Ramovš et al. 2019). It is then assumed that the existence of employee empowerment can lead to higher levels of trust toward managers and/or leaders, which subsequently enhances performance levels (Baird et al. 2020), especially at the level of micro, small, and medium enterprises where the performance of every single organizational member is highly important in shaping the overall performance of the business (Sulistiyono et al. 2022). Thus, the current research assumes that there is a mediating effect of employee empowerment so that when employees are acquainted with the needed knowledge, coaching, and development, their sense of empowerment and autonomy will increase and thus will improve their job-related performance.

Hypothesis 3. *Employee empowerment mediates the linkage between HCDPs and employee performance.*

2.4. Moderating Role of Mimetic Isomorphism (MI)

As an organizational practice, mimetic isomorphism is defined as the act through which a firm conforms by imitating the practices of another firm, especially when the goals of the former are unclear (Haveman 1993). This complies with the study by DiMaggio and Powell (2012), who outlined three kinds of isomorphism: coercive, normative, and mimetic. In this sense, mimetic isomorphism entails that firms tend to copy other prosperous firms when confronted with doubtfulness and obscurity. That is to say that mimetic isomorphism takes place when firms try to manage that obscurity by following the lead of other prosperous firms and copying their actions. The influence of mimetic isomorphism is recognized as a crucial part when it comes to the firm and the way it performs (e.g., Abrahamson and Rosenkopf 1993; Gao 2010; Canello 2022). Considering that settling certain fluctuations and conflicts includes significant studying and observation expenses, firms can benchmark identical prospering firms. In this respect, mimetic isomorphism can be a constructive fix for organizational problems (Canello 2022).

A study conducted by Amor-Esteban et al. (2018) showed that mimetic forces are to be taken into consideration as influential elements that can lead the firm toward sustainable development and successful performance. This variable has been shown to have positive effects on performance with regard to innovation, processes, technology, diffusion, and can encourage the firm toward further development (e.g., Hausman 2005; Yang and Nowell 2021). In addition, Ettorchi-Tardy et al. (2012) asserted that benchmarking organizational acts and following the initiatives of successful firms are core steps in applying best practices. In this regard, we argue that the practices to be followed by the imitating firms can include successful coaching, training, and developmental programs encompassing health and/or job-related content. In addition, Larkin et al. (2015) reported that the best practices related to organizational resilience can also be learned through benchmarking. Similarly, Sweis et al. (2013) highlighted that benchmarking strongly shapes employee empowerment decisions. Such benchmarking run-throughs become more important during critical times, such as during pandemic periods (Krammer 2022). Likewise, Klymenko and Lillebrygfjeld Klymenko and Halse (2022) stated that the mimetic practices of successful industry actors help organizations implement sustainable strategies in the post COVID-19 period.

Based on the aforementioned evidence, we argue that when SMEs adopt the training pillars of other firms, especially during uncertain times such as COVID-19, this will help them implement ideal developmental practices and aid their employees in enhancing their decision abilities and accepting change more certainly. Hence, mimetic isomorphism can be

regarded as a predictor of positive outcomes as it allows the firm to follow a reputable or solid framework during uncertainty, which can subsequently help employees to perform better, as the benchmarked systems have already shown. Thus, the current research assumes that mimetic isomorphism can act as a moderator (buffer) in terms of aiding the firm in fostering better employee performance.

Hypothesis 4. *Mimetic isomorphism acts as a moderator for the linkage between HCDPs and employee resilience and empowerment.*

3. Research Methods

This research adopted a quantitative measure in which a self-administered questionnaire was implemented for the purpose of proving the hypotheses of the study in hand. As previously mentioned, the model and the consequent assumptions were derived from prominent gaps within the realm of literature, and scales are clearly developed and illustrated in the upcoming sections.

The questionnaire addressed employees working for SMEs in Beirut, Lebanon. The bases of selection and data collection were the SMEs that were subject to procedural and technical problems during COVID-19 and were also making attempts to improve their organizational practices amid the pandemic. The researchers deployed contacts with managers of the targeted SMEs and established a basic understanding of the existence of HCDP measures during the COVID-19 period. Relevant permissions were granted for conducting the questionnaire. In addition, various online meetings were held with the managers and owners to ensure compliance with ethics as well as access to employees in a convenient time to avoid clashes with their imminent tasks.

3.1. Sampling Procedure

The current study took samples from the SMEs located in Beirut through a convenience sampling method. Employees were selected based on their availability according to the time that fit their schedules, and firms were selected based on their size. A total of 550 employees were occupied in these firms, and questionnaires were sent to 450, with an 82% response rate (370), providing a satisfactory threshold. However, the total population of employees in SMEs in Lebanon was estimated at over 20,000. These employees were included from a total of 12 enterprises.

As the research entailed a deductive and quantitative approach, the measurement was designed based on the Likert 5-point scale. The scores were assigned as follows: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. The data collection process began after conducting a pilot test for assuring the validity and understandability of indicators. The final data collection process was conducted over a period of 1 month between September and October 2022. In this sense, the respondents were informed of the purpose of the research as well as data confidentiality. The questionnaire did not consist of personal data (e.g., religion, income, and the like), and was administered anonymously to further encourage truthful answers. Furthermore, owners, managers, and relevant authorities within each SME were contacted and necessary permissions were obtained.

3.2. Measurements

The original survey was translated from English to Arabic and then translated back to English by a second translator to ensure that no discrepancies took place (Perrewé et al. 2002). Selection criteria were established within the format of the convenience sampling method. This increased the willingness of participants as well as the accessibility. In addition, the questionnaire was designed based on the most recent and relevant measurement scales existing in the literature. The survey was composed of six sections, where the first section entailed demographic questions (gender, educational level, and age) and the remaining five sections covered the five main constructs of the study, respectively. In this sense, MI was extracted from the work of Daddi et al. (2016), while EE was measured

through the scales derived from the work of Matthews et al. (2003). Additionally, ER was measured based on the work of Näswall et al. (2015), and EP was merged with the scales proposed by Koopmans et al. (2013). Finally, the HCDP was measured through the scale developed by Lai Lai Wan (2007).

3.3. Data Analysis

The proposed model of this research was analyzed through various statistical means via SPSS version 23, PROCESS macro (Hayes 2012, 2017) for SPSS, and interaction plots. Hierarchical regressions were used to show the moderating effect of the buffer variable, while multiple mediation analysis was used for testing the effect of mediators. Variables are shown based on their codes (e.g., ER = employee resilience). Factor loadings, AVE, CR, reliability, and demographic statistics were also conducted to report profiles of respondents as well as to exhibit the validity and reliability of parameters and indicators involved in the current theoretical model. These methods were recommended by Hayes (2017) with regards to the current model. Regressions were a tool for analyzing the effects and impacts within the human resource management realm that had implications for human resource practices in general (Pera 2019; Fernandez 2019) and post COVID-19 practices in particular to create a new agile work environment that is responsive to change (Dirani et al. 2020; McGuire et al. 2021; Zancajo et al. 2022):

The model (Figure 1) was derived from the mathematical equation modeling that is presented below:

$$M_1 = I_{M1} + a_1X + a_2W + a_3XW + E_{M1}$$

$$M_2 = I_{M2} + dX + a_4W + a_5XW + E_{M2}$$

$$Y = I_Y + CX + bM_1 + eM_2 + E_Y$$

where M_1 is Employee Resilience; X is the HCDP; a_1 is the HCDP to M_1 ; W is mimetic isomorphism; a_2 is W to M_1 ; a_3 is the link between XW and M_1 ; I is the intercept; E is estimated error; M_2 is employee empowerment; Y is employee performance; a_4 is the link between W and M_2 ; a_5 is XW to M_2 ; d is X to M_2 ; e is M_2 to Y ; b is M_1 to Y ; and C is the direct effect of X on Y .

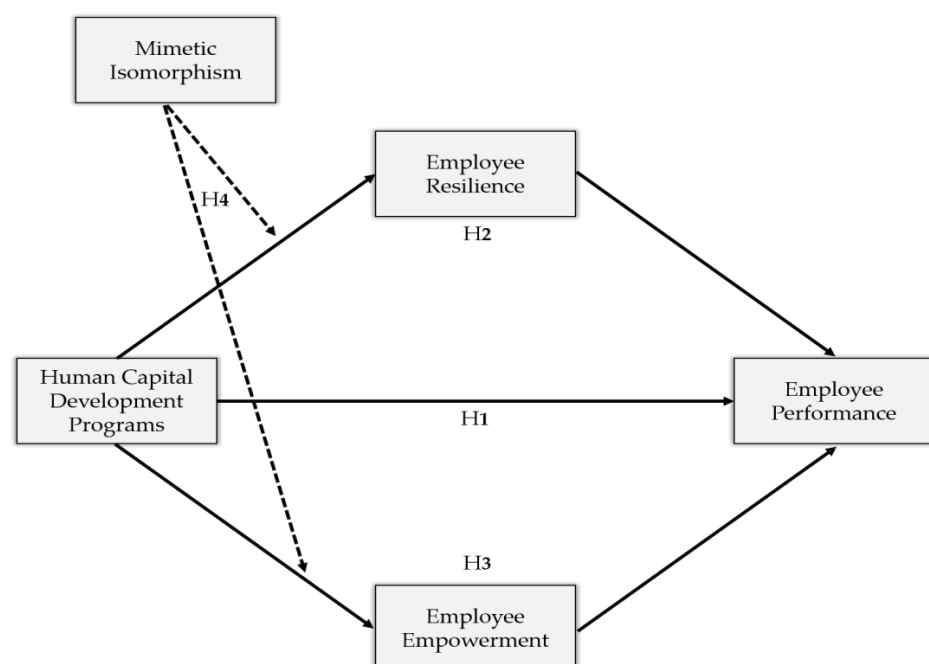


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

4. Analysis

To draw the interaction plot of moderation effect, the mean and standard deviation of the independent variable and moderator were used (see Table 1). Variable data (Table 2) reflected the main characteristics of the sample in terms of gender, educational level, and age, and the correlation coefficient matrix (Table 3) showed a positive correlation between the main variables, which provided an acceptable foundation to proceed with further analyses. Furthermore, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured and measures of different constructs in the questionnaire were separated for the purpose of mitigating the potential effects of the common method variance (CMV) in the analyses of results. In addition, the common method bias was tested where the total variance extracted by each factor did not exceed 50% (all were below 30%), and since data were collected from a single source, the common method bias was tested through Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The first factor accounted for 13.9% of total variance, thus showing that the survey did not suffer from a common method bias.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Mimetic Isomorphism	3.05	0.833	370
Empowerment	2.36	0.623	370
Employee Resilience	2.65	0.654	370
HCPD	3.59	0.765	370

Table 2. Variable data.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Female	181	48.9	48.9	48.9
	Male	189	51.1	51.1	100.0
	Total	370	100.0	100.0	
Educational Level	Bachelor's Degree	195	52.7	52.7	52.7
	Master's Degree	133	35.9	35.9	88.6
	Others	4	1.1	1.1	89.7
	PhD	24	6.5	6.5	96.2
	Secondary Education	14	3.8	3.8	100.0
	Total	370	100.0	100.0	
Age Range	18–25	101	27.3	27.3	27.3
	26–35	127	34.3	34.3	61.6
	36–45	85	23.0	23.0	84.6
	46 and up	57	15.4	15.4	100.0
	Total	370	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Correlation coefficients matrix (N = 370).

Variables	Age	Gender	Education	HCDP	MI	ER	EE
Gender	0.10 *						
Education	0.48 **	0.31 **					
HCDP	−0.02	0.04	0.02				
MI	0.05	0.03	0.02	0.34 *			
ER	0.03	0.06	0.04	0.62 ***	0.50 ***		
EE	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.59 ***	0.29 **	0.18 *	
EP	0.09*	0.03	0.05	0.34 ***	0.39 ***	0.57 ***	0.61 ***

Note 1: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Note 2: HCDP = Human Capital Development Program, MI = Mimetic Isomorphism, ER = Employee Resilience, EE = Employee Empowerment, and EP = Employee Performance.

Table 4 shows a satisfactory statistical significance in terms of validity (all AVE values were above 0.5), reliability (all CR values were above 0.8 and all Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.7), and the loadings of parameters and indicators that were selected for current theoretical model (Hair et al. 2010). Thus, analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses of the current research.

Table 4. Factor loading, composite reliability, alpha and AVE.

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's α	AVE
HCDP	HCDP1	0.761	0.82	0.83	0.594
	HCDP2	0.775			
	HCDP3	0.797			
	HCDP4	0.687			
	HCDP5	0.695			
ER	ER1	0.768	0.81	0.79	0.661
	ER2	0.739			
	ER3	0.656			
	ER4	0.684			
	ER5	0.726			
EE	EE1	0.732	0.81	0.80	0.609
	EE2	0.671			
	EE3	0.792			
	EE4	0.731			
EP	EP1	0.781	0.82	0.81	0.591
	EP2	0.732			
	EP3	0.721			
	EP4	0.648			
	EP5	0.635			

5. Results

Table 5 shows that the mediation effect took place, as the inclusion of mediating variables led to EP and HCDP being insignificant ($p = 0.604$), which reflected a full mediation effect posed by both mediators involved in the model, as the direct effect was no longer significant. Indirect effects of both mediators can be seen in Table 5 as the values of p and R^2 implied the occurrence of a full mediation. More specifically, the p value of the relationship between the independent variable (HCDP) and the dependent variable (EP) was 0.604, which indicated an insignificant relationship. On the contrary, the p values of HCDP-ER (0.031), HCDP-EE (0.032), ER-EP (0.000), and EE-EP (0.000) were all below 0.05, thus indicating a significant relationship, which implied that the linkage between human capital development programs and employee performance was fully mediated by employee empowerment and employee resilience. The aforementioned results support Hypotheses 2 and 3, while rejecting Hypothesis 1. However, it is crucial to highlight the influence of the moderating variable (MI) that strengthened both mediators and their linkage with HCDP.

Table 5. Multiple mediation analysis.

Antecedent	Consequence								
	ER			EE			EP		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
HCDP	0.541	0.234	0.031	0.403	0.134	0.032	0.184	0.193	0.604
ER	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.412	0.113	0.000
EE	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.374	0.082	0.000
Constant	4.149	0.118	0.011	5.307	0.149	0.000	1.259	0.481	0.570
	$R^2 = 0.068$ $F(1, 243) = 3.192$, $p = 0.031$			$R^2 = 0.061$ $F(1, 243) = 4.712$, $p = 0.032$			$R^2 = 0.446$ $F(1, 252) = 20.152$, $p = 0.604$		

Tables 6 and 7 alongside Figures 2 and 3 exhibit the moderation effect, while providing support for the moderation hypothesis with reference to Hayes' Process Macro (Hayes 2015). The moderation effect can be interpreted as the R-square was 0.543 for ER and 0.535 for EE with a confidence interval of 0.001, thus providing support for Hypothesis 4. This is further illustrated in the interaction plots below.

Table 6. PROCESS results for the moderation effect (M_1).

ER						
Variables	B (se)	ΔR^2	R^2	t	CL	
					UL LL	Overall F
Main Effects			0.513			20.82 ***
HCDP	0.507 (0.05) ***			6.08	0.10, 0.49	
MI	0.461 (0.05) ***			5.18	0.07, 0.38	
Interaction		0.030 **	0.543			18.41 ***
HCDP \times MI	0.390 (0.07) ***			5.71	0.12, 0.07	

** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 7. PROCESS results for the moderation effect (M_2).

EE						
Variables	B (se)	ΔR^2	R^2	t	CL	
					UL LL	Overall F
Main Effects			0.508			190.34 ***
HCDP	0.512 (0.05) ***			50.91	0.10, 0.44	
MI	0.402 (0.04) ***			40.87	0.06, 0.46	
Interaction		0.027 **	0.535			170.08 ***
HCDP \times MI	0.287 (0.06) ***			50.16	0.11, 0.32	

** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Notes for Moderation Analysis: Age, gender and education are the control variables for each independent variable, while unstandardized beta (b) and its corresponding standard error (se) represent independent variables.

Furthermore, interaction of the moderating variable (MI) exhibited significance in terms of p -value and t -value as well as exhibition of a satisfactory R-square, which implies that MI moderates the relationship between HCDP and both mediators included in the model, namely, employee resilience and employee empowerment.

Accordingly, the interaction plot using standard deviation and means of variables clearly shows the moderating impact of MI on the relationship between HCDP and the

mediator variables. More specifically, Figures 2 and 3 represent the interaction effect in a plot, where mimetic isomorphism enhanced the positive linkages between human capital development programs and employee empowerment and employee resilience, respectively, even on lower levels (i.e., the lower line in each figure is also ascending but with a smaller slope). That is to say that mimetic isomorphism buffered the relationship between human capital development programs and the two mediators (employee empowerment and employee resilience) by making such a relationship a stronger one. This further supports the fourth hypothesis of the current research. It is also noteworthy to mention that the moderation effect showed more significance for resilience when compared to empowerment, reflecting its vitality and importance, which were relatively higher than empowerment.

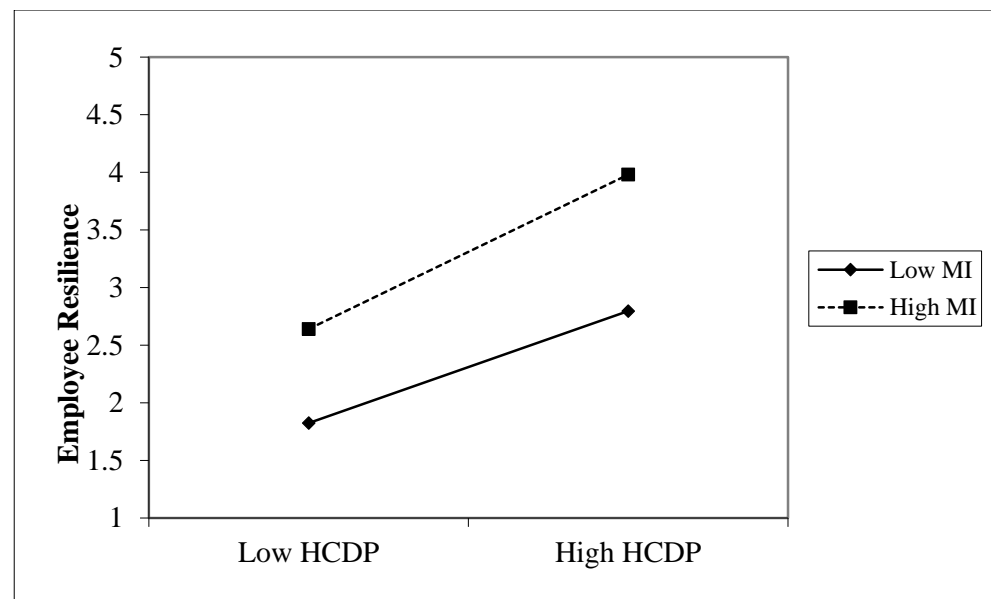


Figure 2. Interaction plot for moderation effect on M_1 .

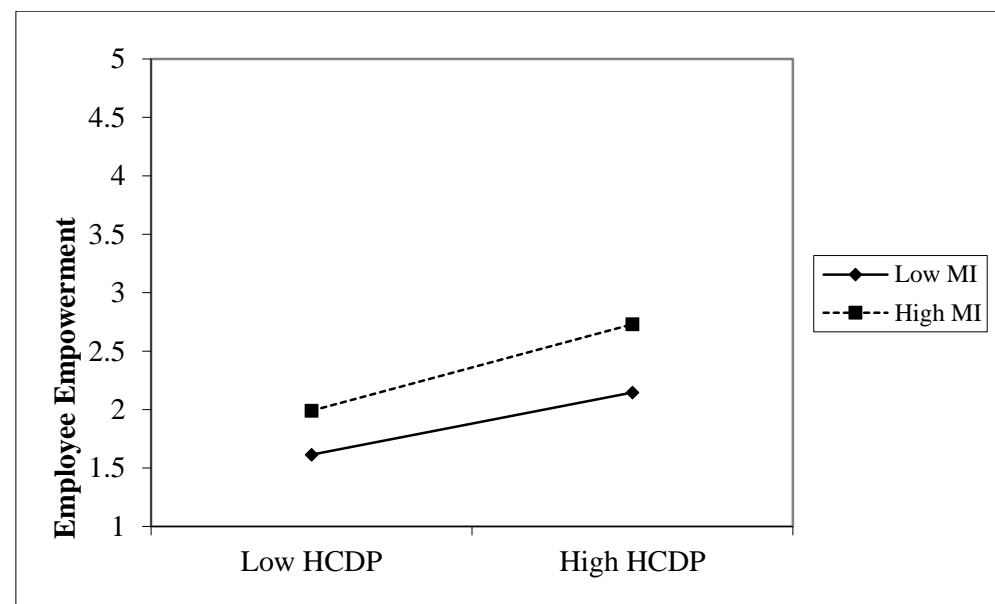


Figure 3. Interaction plot for moderation effect on M_2 .

6. Implications and Conclusions

Based on the findings of the current analyses, it can be seen that the mediating effects of ER and EE cannot be ignored, as our results showed that the inclusion of these factors imposed a full mediation effect (i.e., Table 5 shows no direct relationship between HC DP and EP, where the p value was above 0.05). Furthermore, in terms of moderation, our results showed that MI even in low levels can protect the organization from having low resilience and/or empowerment if the HC DP level is low. This is while higher levels of MI can lead to relatively higher degrees of performance for employees, which is the desire of every firm, especially SMEs, as the existence of MI leads to higher degrees of resilience and empowerment (Figures 2 and 3). We argue that through mimetic isomorphism, employees perceive a higher sense of legitimacy in terms of the organization's management during uncertain times such as COVID-19, which further allows them to experience positive outcomes such as feelings of empowerment and resilience. In turn, this leads to increased levels of performance. Accordingly, Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 of the study are supported, whereas Hypothesis 1 is rejected, indicating that employee empowerment and employee resilience assume a full mediation effect on the relationship between human capital development programs and employee performance. This implies both theoretical and practical settings, which reflects the moderating effect of MI on both the resilience and empowerment of employees. Managers should take this into consideration in their firms so that their staff can perceive legitimacy and the intention to grow toward international standards on a higher level, especially during uncertain times, including the post-pandemic period. Managers can benefit from this finding by taking note of this effect in the future to reconstruct their workforce in a responsive way in the post-pandemic age.

Additionally, resilience was found to be more significant than empowerment, from which it can be deduced that employees with higher levels of resilience tend to perceive a certain degree of empowerment, which can be enhanced through other means within the company. Therefore, the current results showed that while both mediators are to be included for full mediation, resilience is more significant. These results showed that for SMEs, and particularly those functioning in Lebanon in the pandemic and post-pandemic period, it is crucial to take the resilience and empowerment of employees into account if they are to improve their performance level and make their workplace a sustainable and agile one. Mimetic isomorphism can also play a vital role in maintaining high performance, even if HC DPs or other elements are relatively low. Enhancing the impact of MI is significant, and thus, it is to be noted by the managers and business owners of Lebanon. These results are consistent with the findings in the extant literature (e.g., [Amor-Esteban et al. 2018](#); [Cooke et al. 2019](#); [Pera 2019](#)). This finding contributes to the current understanding of how SMEs can enhance their performance in the post COVID-19 era and thus gain competitive advantage in their markets. Managers can focus on these factors in their firms to ensure improvement in the performance of their staff. Particularly for the Lebanese workforce, as current research implies the importance of both empowerment and resilience for employees, managers can retain their skilled workforce and enhance their employee performance by enabling the optimum performance of staff through proactive human capital development programs including education, person-focused pay plans, technical training, problem-solving pillars, health and job-related awareness sessions, etc.

Benchmarking strategies adopted by successful firms in the post-pandemic age can also lead to increased legitimacy, which further yields positive perceptions and initiatives for employees. These findings add to the literature in terms of HC DP research and performance attributes within small and medium enterprises while expanding the limits of the literature by examining Lebanese cases. Additionally, the empirical evidence and modern analytical tools used in this research were designed to aid the extant literature of the subject. Employees who are empowered in their tasks and operate in a culture that fosters resilience are more likely to perform better and easily cope with the rapid changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of Lebanese SMEs, it is important that managers provide an atmosphere of learning and development, where staff members

feel motivated, encouraged, and empowered. This is to be combined with a culture that appreciates resilience, so employees will be able to handle challenging situations resulting from the pandemic more smoothly. It is also to be noted that if managers and owners of SMEs in Lebanon benchmark other strategies (e.g., training programs, healthcare programs, orientation sessions, coaching, and other practices pursued by successful firms rebuilding their structure in the post-pandemic period) and implement tested and sound mechanisms within their firms, their employees will more likely exhibit higher levels of performance and be ready to confront any uncertain event in the future. Thus, it is imperative for SMEs in Lebanon to enhance their functions with modern models of business conduct that incorporate proactive approaches to training, development, coaching, empowerment, and resilience. Through advanced practices, SMEs can further reshape their structure in the post-pandemic period and contribute to the economy of the country during the crisis. These results agree with recent existing literature, which contends that firms' new HR practices are supposed to be tailored in a way that makes the work environment more flexible and agile to respond to change (Dirani et al. 2020; Chen 2021; McGuire et al. 2021; Zancajo et al. 2022; Kohnová and Salajová 2023).

In short, it can be concluded that SME managers can rebuild their structures in the post COVID-19 age by following systematic human capital development programs, including formal and informal training, quality education, healthcare programs, coaching, development campaigns, awareness sessions, etc. These programs can be derived from other programs implemented by successful firms that took a proactive approach to reinventing their workplaces and making them highly responsive to the uncertain environment resulting from the pandemic. Moreover, SMEs are advised to develop a culture that fosters empowerment and resilience to help employees easily cope with change and absorb developmental programs more quickly. These practices will help firms in general and SMEs in particular to enhance the performance of their employees and create a structure that is equipped with the necessary tools, arrangements, practices, and knowledge needed to respond effortlessly to the dynamic work environment. Finally, governments are encouraged to mandate that SMEs establish developmental programs to empower employees and enhance their resilience in the uncertain post-pandemic age. By legislating and monitoring these initiatives, governments can foster employee empowerment, improve performance, and contribute to the SMEs' overall adaptability to uncertainty.

7. Limitations and Recommendations

The current research is limited in terms of sample scale as the number of available SMEs in Beirut is limited. Thus, a relatively bigger sample can be an adequate way to assess the factors included in the current model. This will increase the generalizability of the current findings. Furthermore, the current model can be tested based on goodness-of-fit and other more complicated statistical means (i.e., PLS-SEM). Similar models can also be examined in the region to see the differences among nations in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), especially because the majority of Arab nations were not familiar with telecommuting practices prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the current study was limited in terms of data collection as it was conducted in a single stage. Future studies may conduct the data collection in two or more stages to increase the reliability and validity of the answers. In addition, factors such as supervisor support, digitization of work practices, and minimization of organizational layers can be tested to further develop the theoretical model of this study as a means of rebuilding the workplace as a dynamic work environment. Future studies may also follow a qualitative approach and conduct interviews to gain more in-depth insight into the challenges that would hamper the implementation of human capital development programs at the level of SMEs. Finally, a longitudinal analysis of performance can be used to understand the effects of implied HCDPs within SMEs in the post-pandemic age.

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