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Social Exclusion and Mental Health Issues of Transgender Community in Lahore City

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Marginalisation, social exclusion, and stigmatisation are major issues restricting the transgender community from living normally. This marginalised group suffers more in a developing country like Pakistan, where a vast majority lives below the poverty line. The present study aimed to identify social exclusion and mental health issues faced by the transgender community in Pakistan. This is a quantitative study in which data from 300 transgender people were collected from four towns of Lahore city. A questionnaire based on a nominal scale was prepared, and data were analysed using the Chi-square test. The study reported the poor economic, social and psychological state of the transgender community in Lahore city. This group is being discriminated against in almost all sectors of life, and their social issues are not addressed properly, leading to a poor physical and mental health state, which needs to be addressed at micro and macro levels. This study emphasised providing equal opportunities to this segment of society by ensuring their constitutional rights. Moreover, the laws and policies on physical and sexual assaults need to be reviewed to make them more inclusive, not only by specifying men and women but also transgender people .

Keywords: transgender, community, social exclusion, mental health, marginalisation, Lahore city

The transgender community in Pakistan is socially excluded and least acceptable as a normal human. This community deals with various types of discrimination in public spheres, resulting in different social and mental health issues. Traditionally, gender has used two binary, males and females; however, a third category is also named transgender, having different names: Khawaja Sara, Hijra, Khusra or Murat (Spagna, 2013).

This community faces discrimination since early childhood. Children start getting disapproval from their parents for not showing the appropriate behaviors according to their biological gender. At the time of gender role adoption, a child might get confused as they have to learn the gender role from their same-sex parent, but that is not according to their inner feelings, and the child starts questioning, who am I? What should I do? How should I behave? This causes conflict in the mind of the child. At the age of puberty when physical changes appear, and it is the peak time when children usually start to feel disgusted with their bodies as

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they look different, and their physical identity is not aligned with what they feel. As a result, they suffer from a gender identity disorder. According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), this category is gender dysphoria (Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016).

This is not a single factor that causes distress, but the whole life of a transgender person is misery. The stigma and lack of social support that transgender persons experience from their immediate family members devastate their psychological well-being, and the urge to strive for their rights may decrease. In this regard, findings of a research study show that 79% of the surveyed population of transgender in Pakistan are uneducated. Dropout of transgender children from schools is common (Nazir &Yasir, 2016). This discrimination they experience in family, in school (if they attend) and at every place where they move or interact with society. As the people started identifying as khusras, a significant population now only looked down upon them on the societal and religious levels. Lovett and de Saxe (2006) suggested that discrimination faced by sexual minorities is often religion based. The sacred scriptures of the Abrahamic religions, i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, strongly discourage cross-dressing, and other such activities are extremely discouraged (Yip, & Page, 2016). The more a person is religious, the extreme the attitude will be formed against such people (Crooks & Baur, 2005). Due to this discrimination, they are also vulnerable and deprived of society with less or no employment opportunities. Hence, they are bound to adopt means of earning which are not considered respectable in our society, i.e. begging, dancing and prostitution (Hahm, Ro & Olson, 2018). The mentioned stereotypes are built over a period of time.

The perception of social identity and membership in society in the south Asian context is based on social exclusion (Kabeer, 2006). Marginalised groups like the transgender community are undermined in these societies due to the socio-cultural norms and beliefs, thus limiting the social contribution of these groups. The social exclusion theory is useful for understanding the exclusion of transgender communities from religious, political and economic affairs of society due to gender. The ingrained patriarchal mindset having the typical social structures from the macro to micro level, further promotes this social exclusion of the marginalised people. (Labonte, 2004).

There are about 1.5 million transgender people in Pakistan (Wirtz, Poteat, Malik, & Glass, 2018). Khawaja siras in Pakistan have encountered exclusion and maltreatment. “Their story is, or one could undoubtedly say ‘was,’’ excruciating until 2009,” composes Rabail Baig in an ongoing Foreign Policy article featuring the ongoing Supreme Court choices permitting khawaja saras to enlist themselves as transgender on national identity cards and to cast a ballot like other Pakistani residents. In any case, the truth of their lives is a lot harsher than the state's abjuration of character and citizenship (Ziegler & Rasul, 2014). It has been found that their final rituals are performed very secretively. Their funerals are in the dark, somewhere around the middle of the night, whereby only a few people are present at the ceremony. It is even said that a few transgender people even enjoy their fellow's death because they think life on this Earth is harsh and people have been abusive towards them, but God is all loving, and He shall be fair in the afterlife (Abdullah et al., 2012).

In 2013, the Supreme Court of Pakistan decided that, as indicated by the Constitution of Pakistan, transgender/eunuchs have equivalent rights as all citizens of Pakistan and perceived the legitimate status of Hijras as a third sex class. Supreme Court of Pakistan ordered to practice of reasonable conduct with Hijras and to make work openings (Ghafoor et al., 2014). Despite such a memorable activity in Pakistani law, no legitimate arrangement is available for Hijras identified with rights and commitments. With such changing times, the situation is not encouraging. There is a need to study attitudes that play an important role in the marginalisation, stigmatisation, and political standing of such a sexual minority (Jami,2005). Transgender people in Pakistan do not have access to the facilities available to the mainstream population. Transgender people have reported facing harassment and discrimination at the hands of police and health welfare officials, in particular (Aurat Foundation,2016).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) as reported in a study, transgender people are mostly engaged in different professions (93.5%) like prostitution (37.5%), singing and dancing (31%). Beggars are 15% of the total sampled population. They face hatred from society. Further, people do not hire them for respectable jobs such as household work, day-care services or any other job for which they can learn the skills easily (Aurat Foundation, 2016).

Transgender people from the community face both mental and physical violence. Several cases have been reported in the news whereby transgender people have been victims of acid attacks and brutal killings. There also have been cases reported in the media whereby a transgender person was raped brutally by several men. Such cases, when reported to the police for investigation, are mostly not recorded. Those that get recorded are not pursued, and the perpetrators are not punished. All this anguish causes the transgender population to seek solace through intoxication and self-harm. Many transgender people in the community consume alcohol and other intoxicants. No professional mental health service can be availed by this segment of society (Aurat Foundation, 2016; Hapsari, Effendi & Yanti, 2019).

Research conducted by Olson, Durwood et al. in 2016 postulated that transgender people experience an elevated level of anxiety at the pre-puberty stage compared to normal children. Another research conducted on transgender adolescents concluded that they experience high distress because of their gender identity. A multivariate logistic regression model predicted that the social rejection that transgender people experience regarding their familial, occupational and societal functionality leads to gender identity distress (Robels, et.al, 2016). In India, 31% transgender people committed suicide, and 50% attempted suicide once (Virupakshal, Muralidharl, & Ramakrishna, 2016). Research on suicidal tendencies conducted in USA concluded that 41 percent of transgender people attempted suicide once in life (Grant, Mottet, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011).

The mental pain experienced by trans-individuals is related to living in a harsh society and sexual orientation-related exploitation (Ellis, Bailey, and McNeil, 2015). In one study, 87% of respondents distinguished separation and bias occasions in their lives legitimately identified with their trans-personality (Couch et al., 2008). A critical number of participants in a single report (63%) portrayed verbal, physical, or sexual exploitation encounters (Nemoto et al., 2005). In another study, trans-men were often bound to take part in illegal medications to adapt to segregation. To deal with the toxic effects of stigma and victimization, trans-people may also use drugs and alcohol (Fredrikson-Goldsen et al., 2013). There are expanding frequencies of depression and related suicidal behaviour (Harrison, Grant, & Herman,2012). The accessible figures uncover that the percentages of dejection are somewhere between 26% and 66% (Nemoto, Bödeker, & Iwamoto, 2011) and nervousness was 33% (Bockting et al., 2013). Besides, liquor and illegal medication use went between 20–36% (Herbst et al., 2008; Nemoto et al., 2005). The rates for suicides are between 37–65% (Liu &Mustanski, 2012; Nuttbrock et al., 2009).

Keeping in mind the different reported socioeconomic difficulties of Pakistani transgender community, this study aimed to identify the extent of social exclusion of the transgender community and its effect on their mental health in Lahore city Pakistan.

Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study:

- To find out the basic demographic information of the transgender community in Lahore.
- To explore the areas of social exclusion faced by the transgender community in society as an outcome of societal pressure.
- To discover the Psycho-social problems faced by the transgender community.
- To see if there is an association between social exclusion and mental health issues of the transgender community.

Method

The quantitative study measures the socio-demographics antecedents, social issues, areas of social exclusion and mental health issues of the transgender community. The study population was a transgender community in Lahore city. In the absence of proper statistics on the transgender community, it was difficult to have exact numbers; however, considering the community's geographical dispersion, multi-stage sampling was used to approach respondents. The Lahore city has nine towns i.e. Ravi, Shalamar, Wagha, Aziz Bhatti, Data GunjBuksh, Gulberg, Samanabad and Iqbal Town. Four towns were selected at the first sampling stage, including Gulberg, Shalamar town, Data Gunj Baksh town and Aziz Bhatti town. The cultural centrality, commercialism and presence of the transgender community in old mohallas and vicinities was the reason behind the selection of these four towns of Lahore. From each town, 75 respondents were approached based on convenience. The sample was calculated through the G power method, and against each predictor, 15 cases were selected. The reason behind convenience sampling is the common visibility of the transgender groups in the areas, so the researchers went to the transgender communities and asked them to participate in this research after taking consent. It was ensured to them that their information would be kept confidential and only used for research purposes. Moreover, the incentive in the form of money was also given to them. The respondents were briefed about the purpose of the research, and the researchers ensured that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained.

Instrument of data collection

The study tool was developed to measure socio-demographic variables, economic status, areas of social exclusion and mental health issues. The interview schedule was prepared after the conceptualization and operationalization of the constructs. The questions regarding age, education, income, social issues faced by the community, areas of social exclusion and marginalization faced by the community and psychological issues were included. The item of the pool was get reviewed by two gender experts, and pre-testing was conducted with 50 respondents, The ambiguous, repeated and sensitive questions were further excluded after pre-testing.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed by using SPSS 22 version. Descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests, i.e. chi-square test of independence, was used to measure the association between social exclusion and mental health issues.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Advanced Studies and Research Board (ASRB) of the Virtual University of Pakistan. To guarantee the protection of confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of subjects' basic rights, a written informed consent was taken from the respondents. Participants were at first told about the motivation behind the investigation and that their cooperation was intentional. Information was gained from the participants with their consent. The participants were guaranteed that the information looked for from them would be kept classified and no data identified with them would be utilised other than that of the scholarly and experimental targets; along these lines, no infringement of secrecy and protection would occur. Clarifications were given on the most proficient method to finish the poll, and any ambiguities were explained.

Results

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Transgender Community

The mean age of the respondents was 31 years covering the age bracket of 18-45 years. About 48% of the respondents were trans-males, and 52% were trans-females. About 60% of respondents were living in a one-room house on a sharing basis, 30% were in a two-room house and 10% of the respondents lived in a house with three rooms. About 32% of respondents were household heads, whereas 68% of the respondents were living under the headship of Guru. The household transgender distribution was, i.e. 8 (10.7%), 7(13.4%), 6(27.4%), 5(37.8%) and 4(10.7%). About 65% of respondents had a toilet facility, whereas 35% did not. About 80% of respondents had water facilities, out of these, 53% had safe drinking water, whereas 47% did not have access to safe drinking water. Data show that 67% of the respondents were illiterate, 25.3% had basic reading and writing capacity, 3.7% had dropped school before reaching primary level, and only 4% completed the primary level of education. In the household where kids were living(36%), about 62% of kids did not attend school and the rest, 38%, attended regular schools. Of those who attended the school, 75% faced verbal discernment and 25% faced physical abuse.

Social Issues of Transgender Community

Data reflect that about 20 % faced severe social issues in their community, and around 40 % experienced fewer severity issues. A majority of respondents (43.3%) had financial issues at a high level, 33.3% were moderate, and 23.3% were low. Respondents (83.3%) reported no legal issues, 40% had a moderate level, and 3.4% had high-level issues. Most respondents had family issues because of non-acceptance in our society (53.3% high). Drug abuse and addiction are very common among transgender people; 26.7 % had higher level usage, 36.7% had moderate and 36.7 % had low drug use. Severe physical abuse was faced by 43.3 %, moderate level abuse was faced by 36.7% and lower level abuse was faced by 20% of the total population. The same is the case with sexual abuse; about 30% of respondents became the victim of sexual malpractices severely, 40% of them were moderately victimized, and 30% of them had mild sexual experiences.

Statistics on Social Exclusion and Discrimination of Transgender Community

After the statistical analysis, results showed that singing and dancing were the two main professions of the transgender community, i.e. 60 %. Street begging was opted for by 27%, while 10% were involved in paid sexual activities. Very few are related to the respectable profession of a beautician or beauty industry. Most of the total respondents (300) were unemployed (81%) and only 19 % were employed and their daily income ranged from 200 to 1000 Pakistani rupees.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Social Exclusion and Discrimination of Transgender Community

Indicators	F	%
Major sources of income		
Singing and dancing	177	60.0
Beautician	9	3.0
Street Begging	80	27
Paid Prostitution	34	10
Currently Employed Somewhere		
No	243	81
Yes	57	19
Type of employment		
No	242	80.7
Beautician	20	6.7
Daily wage	2	.7
Domestic	13	4.3
Hawker	4	1.3
Labour	8	2.7
Vending	11	3.7
Discrimination in finding job		
No	19	30
Yes	44	69
Discrimination in seeking health care services		
Health issue at the moment		
No	198	66
Yes	102	34
Where do you go for treatment		
Government Hospital	10	9.8
Private clinic	37	36.2
Self-medication	55	54
Face any discrimination in treatment		
No	104	34.7
Yes	196	65.3
Indicators of Social Exclusion		
People avoid meeting you		
No	108	36
Yes	192	64
How often have meal with the community people		
Once a week	20	6.7
Twice a week	50	16.7
Thrice a week	30	10
Sometime	170	56.7
Very often	30	10
People void mixing with you		
No	93	31
Yes	207	69
Indicators Religious exclusion		
Allowed to freely practice religion		
No	130	43.3
Yes	170	56.7

Results reflected that they did not get opportunities to get respectable jobs, i.e. 56 %, and they experienced biased and discriminatory attitudes from those around them. About 34 %

were facing health-related issues, and almost more than 50 % of them were on self-medication because of the unavailability of healthcare facilities. About 36.2 % of the remaining population visited private clinics, and the rest looked for healthcare facilities given by government hospitals.

Data reflected that 65.3 % of the respondents reported discriminatory attitudes toward healthcare professionals, and almost half of the reported number experienced distress due to their biased behavior. Respondents (13.3 %) reported that the quality of health care services was sub-standard, which could have caused unhealthiness. About 10 percent of the given number stated that professionals are so nonprofessional that they refuse to treat them after knowing their gender.

A large number of respondents (64 %) experienced social exclusion only because around 56.7 % got the chance to have time for meal sharing in society. Another important issue was the practising religion by the majority of respondents (62.7 %) i.e. Muslim, and the remaining did not know about their religion. In a Muslim country, 56.7 % were allowed to practice their religious beliefs, whereas 43.3% were not. About 59% of respondents were not allowed to participate in religious rituals and celebrations, whereas 41% participated in religious festivities.

Mental Health Issues of Transgender Community

Depressive Symptoms

Data regarding depressive symptoms of respondents under the dimension of Psychological issues shows that a majority, 46.5% reported change in appetite sometimes, 40% often and 13.3% most of the time. About 26.7% and 43.3% reported low mood all the time and very often, and 30% told it at some time. About 50% reported the issue of a continuous headache sometimes, 36.7% often and 40% all the time. About 66.7% had suicidal ideation sometimes, 23.3% often and 10% all the time. A majority, 53.3%, very often face sleep problems, 30% sometimes, and 16.7% always face this issue. A majority, 37.9%, reported a loss of interest in daily activities sometimes and very often and 24.1%. A majority (53.3%) felt sad very often, 26.7% sometimes and 20% all the time. About 46.7% had lower sexual desire sometimes, 40% very often and 13.3% all the time.

Table 2

The extent of depression faced by respondents

Depressive Symptoms	(Sometimes) f (%)	(Very often) f (%)	(All the time) f (%)
Change in Appetite	139(46.5)	120(40)	40(13.3)
Low mood	90 (30)	130(43.3)	80(26.7)
Continuous headache	150(50)	110(36.7)	40(13.3)
Suicidal ideation	200(66.7)	70(23.3)	30(10)
Sleep problems	90(30)	160(53.3)	50(16.7)
Loss of interest in daily activities	110(37.9)	110(37.9)	70(24.1)
Sadness	80(26.7)	160(53.3)	60(20)
Low sexual desires	140(46.7)	120(40)	40(13.3)

Anxiety symptoms

Data regarding anxiety symptoms show that 43.3% of respondents had low anxiety symptoms, 40% had moderate and 16.7% had high anxiety and fear of social situations and appearance in public. About 50% of respondents had low worry about minute issues, 36.7% had a moderate worry, and 13.3% had high worry. About 23.3% had been experiencing a high level of restlessness and fatigue, 36.7% had moderate fatigue and restlessness, and 36.7% experienced it at a lower level.

Table 3

The extent of Anxiety symptoms faced by respondents

Anxiety symptoms	Low (1)	Moderate (5)	High (10)
Fear/anxious about any situation like public appearance	130(43.3)	120(40)	50(16.7)
Excessive worry on minute issues	150(50)	110(36.7)	40(13.3)
Restlessness and fatigue	110(36.7)	120(40)	70(23.3)
Unable to concentrate on things	130(43.3)	120(40)	50(16.7)
Difficulty to sleep	90(30.1)	140(46.8)	69(23.1)

A majority, 43.3%, could not concentrate on things, but at a lower level, 46.8% had this issue at a moderate level, and 16.7% were facing its high intensity. About 23.1% and 16.8% had difficulty in sleep at a high and moderate level, whereas 30.1% experienced it at a lower level.

Feelings of Self-harm. Data show that a majority (60%) of respondents felt self-harm, and 40% did not have such feelings. About 46.8% currently had the feeling of self-harm, whereas 53.2% did not have these feelings. Of those who had self-harm feelings, 30% were low, 40% moderate, and 13.3% used to bruise their bodies and cut through with razors and other tools. About 16.7% and 43.3% had a high and moderate level of practice with burning their body through cigarettes and other means, 20% had a lower tendency, and 20% did not experience such practice. Scratching and pinching were found among 36.7% at a lower level, 33.3% at a moderate level and 13.3% at a higher level. A majority, 43.3%, were used to tearing their skin at a moderate level and 16.7% at a higher level. About 26% and 48.3% of the respondents used to rub objects on their skin at a higher and moderate rate.

Of those who were used to self-harm, 53.3% had done this practice in last six months and 46.7% were currently experiencing it. A majority, 53.3%, used to burn their body with a cigarette and other means in the last six months, and 46.7% had been experiencing current episodes. About 63.3% had current episodes of scratching and pinching their bodies, while 36.7% had experienced this issue in the last six months. Half of the respondents (50%) were used to tearing the skin in the last six months, and 50% were also experiencing current episodes. Most (60%) rubbed objects on their skin in the last six months, and 40% had current episodes.

Table 4

Association between Social Exclusion, Depressive Symptoms and Anxiety Symptoms

	Social Exclusion	
	No	Yes

Depressive Symptoms	f (%)	f (%)	χ2
Low	20(25)	39(17.9)	113.268*
Moderate	10(12.5)	150(72.5)	
High	50 (62.5)	209(9.7)	
Total	80(100)	209(100)	
Anxiety Symptoms			
Low	20(22.2)	40 (19.3)	31.154*
Moderate	70(77.8)	130(62.8)	
High	0 (39)	39(17.9)	
Total	90(100)	209(100)	

Note. *p = .000. df = 4

An independent chi-square analysis was conducted to see the association between social exclusion (yes, no) and depressive symptoms (low, moderate, high) among transgender people. Results show that there was a significant association between social exclusion and the level of depressive symptoms χ2 (4) = 113.268, p< .000. From the analysis of data, it was observed that those who reported social exclusion among them the level of depressive symptoms was also moderate to high (9.7% and 72.5%). Data show that there is a significant association between social exclusion and the level of anxiety symptoms χ2 (4) = 31.154, p< .000. From the analysis of data, it was found that those who reported social exclusion among them the level of depressive symptoms were also more (17.9% and 62.8%).

Association between Psychological issues (depression & anxiety), self-harm intention and suicide ideation

Table 5

Association between Psychological issues and self-harm intention and suicidal ideation

	Psychological Issues			
	Low	Moderate	High	
Self-harm intensions	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	χ2
No	30(30)	40(33.6)	40(57.1)	14.56*
Yes	70(70)	79(66.4)	30(42.9)	
Total	100(100)	119(100)	70(100)	
and suicidal ideation				
No	80(80)	70(58.8)	50(71.4)	11.648*
Yes	20(200)	49(41.2)	20(28.6)	
Total	100(100)	119(100)	70(100)	

Note. *p = .001. df = 2, **p = .003. df = 2

The table shows the association between psychological issues and self-harm intention of the transgender community. Results show a significant association between psychological issues and self-harm χ2 (2) = 14.56, p< .001. Data analysis found that those who reported psychological issues at moderate and high levels (66.4%, 42.9%) among them self-harm intentions were also found. An independent chi-square analysis was conducted to see the association between the level of psychological issues (low, moderate, high) and suicidal ideation (no, yes) among the transgender. Results show a significant association between psychological issues and suicidal ideation $\chi2$ (2) = 11.648, p< .003. From the data analysis, it was observed that among those who reported psychological symptoms, suicidal ideation was also found (moderate to high (41.2% and 28.6 %).

Discussion

Transgender people with disapproving social and personal identities have long been marginalized in Pakistan. The existing statistics and reports provide insufficient information about this community's affairs. To study the real-life situation of the Transgender community, this study aimed at exploring this group's demographics, psycho-social and economic issues.

Areas of Social Exclusion Faced by Transgender Community

The very first objective of this research was to get basic demographic information regarding this group of people in Lahore city. The study revealed that this community's age group varies from 20-45 years, with a mean age of 30. Most were living in a one-room, rented house and in slum areas. The household composition showed that due to poverty and limited resources, the number of residents in single and double-room houses exceeds five to eight. It is not just limited to the exceeding number of one family; the situation is so critical that families are supposed to share even those two-room houses with other families or transgender groups. The situation is quite evident regarding their subsistence and was similarly reported by Lombardi and associates in 2002. As this population resides in low-income areas, the basic facilities are also limited. Non-availability of toilet facilities, water, and safe drinking water were the prominent issues this group faced in their respective living areas. One of the plausible reasons is poverty which restricts them from moving into some good living facility, whereas the other is their gender, which limits their access to these facilities.

There is an alarming situation regarding the educational status of the respondents as found during analysis that a big majority is illiterate, and only a few have attended school. Even those who attended the school, their educational level remained limited to learning basic reading and writing skills and below primary level. The same pattern was observed not only for respondents but also for other household members. The humiliating attitude from society does not allow this gender group to be normal members of society and restricts the chances of their upward social mobility due to persistent poverty and discrimination. Similar findings are shared by Tabassum and Jamil (2014) and McFadden (2020), who reported that the transgender community faced social prejudice, especially in educational attainment, that restricted their upward social mobility and change in socioeconomic state.

Education and income are two important indicators of socioeconomic status. As data revealed, the low educational profile of the respondents directly affects their income and type of employment opportunities. Society does not only restrict educational opportunities due to discriminatory attitudes; it has also circumscribed their employment prospects for them. Earning 100-300 Pakistani rupees per day with a ratio of 6-8 family members' daily expenditures makes it hard to meet their ends. In some cases, even they cannot manage three meal times in a day. Study results show that the majority were not employed as they are not provided equal employment opportunities that a common person has. Those employed were involved in domestic, general, and vending and selling. Even the aptitude of transgender people showed the intention to serve lower level jobs, and not a single respondent intended to serve in executive or high profile jobs. All these are blue-collar workers who can hardly change their socioeconomic status. It also shows that it has been ingrained in their mindset that they are third gender and will not get equal and good opportunities as normal humans. The discriminatory attitudes at the workplace are common, along with emotional, physical and sexual abuse that this group faces.

These facts are ascertained by Nazir and Yasir (2016), who reported the absence of proper facilitation for the employment of the transgender community.

Poor socioeconomic status does not affect the economic aspect of life; it also devastates health and health-related issues. When poverty prevails, and quality food is unavailable, the outcome is poor health and the non-availability of resources to bear quality health services. About one-third of the respondents had different health issues, and most relied on self-medication and consultation from medical stores. Few also went to private clinics where general practitioners checked and gave medical advice. Free medical health facility is also availed by few at government hospitals; however, the majority were maltreated at public and private clinics i.e. provided a service of worse quality or on worse terms than they would normally offer and also caused harm sometimes, refused to provide the health services or stop providing the medical facility. This ill-treatment, most of the time, causes distress and offends them. Previous research found only small evidence regarding this (Grossman, D'Augelli, Howell & Hubbard, 2005; Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman &Keisling, 2011).

The constitution of Pakistan guarantees that individuals freely practice their religions and religious freedom to the people of different sects. Being a marginalized segment of Pakistani society, the transgender group also face issue in practising their religion. The majority of the respondent were Muslims; however, many were not allowed to enter mosques and perform their religious rituals there. Communities avoided them and did not allow them to participate in religious celebrations (Islam, 2020). Only on a few occasions, they went to offer prayers. Even it was reported that people did not consider them Muslims, so they restricted their religious participation. This discrimination and social exclusion harm their self-confidence and make them depressed and sad (AAWAZ, 2016).

Psycho-Social Problems Faced by Transgender Community

Social exclusion is not just limited to religious rituals; generally, people avoid meeting and mixing with transgender people, make fun of them and do not like to have food with them. They are not involved in social and welfare activities due to having different gender. A specific social distance is minted by the general public, which disturbs their self-esteem and alienates them (Munir, 2019). People usually do not socialize with them, do not accept them as normal human beings and even abuse them while they try to involve the general public, which causes stress among them. As a result, few are also involved in deviant behavior and criminal acts (Sharma, 2000).

The transgender community tolerates many social issues; however, their intensity varies per circumstance. Poor health facilities, high concerns regarding their earning, family and parenting issues, use of drugs and high levels of physical and sexual abuse are some of the common issues faced by this minority group. Family disassociation due to gender is the trauma they feel with high intensity; they feel lonely, neglected and socially rejected by their parents, immediate family and society. In most cases, transgender kids are dropped off at Gurus and transgender households by their parents. Such adoptions are not always legal and disturbing as well for young kids. And all these issues and behaviours lead to psychological and mental disorders.

Social exclusion, discrimination and maltreatment lead to many psychological issues. Respondents of this study reported depressive symptoms like change in appetite, low mood, continuous headache, sleep problems, loss of interest in daily activities, suicidal ideation, and low sexual desires were the commonly reported depression signs (SDPI, 2014; Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2015). Anxiety symptoms were also found among the respondents. Fear about public appearance, excessive worry about minute issues, restlessness and fatigue, inability to concentrate, and difficulty sleeping were the most reported symptoms (Akhtar & Bilour 2020). These indicate that social exclusion and other factors had badly affected the respondents' mental health, even leading to self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Most respondents felt self-harm, including bruising, burning the body with the cigarette, scratching or pinching, tearing the skin and rubbing objects on the skin. The frequency of these acts is found from the last six months to the current episodes experienced by transgender (Newcomb et al., 2020). One-third of the respondents also tried to commit suicide. The common mean used to commit suicide were sleeping pills, hanging with string, shooting with a gun and use of pesticides. The situation also indicates the availability of pesticides and other sources to commit suicide (Virupaksha, Muralidhar, & Ramakrishna, 2016; Grant, Mottet, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011; Zaman & Munib, 2020). This social exclusion and discrimination further lead to psychological issues, poor mental health, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Pantell et al., 2013; Stewart et al., 2017; Breslow et al., 2015; McCann & Brown, 2017).

Conclusion

This research concluded that the transgender community is discriminated against and socially excluded from the mainstream. Their poor educational status, low income and limited employment opportunities have made them economically and socially vulnerable. Residing in poverty-ridden areas with limited facilities and poor hygiene has also exposed them to various health issues. But these issues are not dealt with empathy; they are treated as a minority. The restriction on their religious performativity being transgender people is another important finding of the study that indicates the change in people's attitudes and behaviours towards this segment of society. The study provides evidence that this group is being discriminated against in almost all sectors of life, and their social issues are not addressed properly, leading to poor physical and mental health. Changes in appetite, low mood, continuous headache, sleep problems, loss of interest in daily activities, suicidal ideation and low sexual desires, restlessness and fatigue, inability to concentrate on things and difficulty sleeping were major psychological problems. Overall results highlight that social exclusion leads to psychological issues, the tendency to self-harm, drug use, and suicidal ideation that need to be addressed at micro and macro levels.

Recommendations

The following suggestions for developing policies are provided in light of the study's findings.

- The fundamental rights outlined in Pakistan's Constitution guarantees the equality to all the citizens, regardless of gender, hence it is imperative that these rights may be upheld in letter and spirit. The results of this study strongly advocate proper implementation of the existing policies for the transgender community and emphasized the importance of taking more targeted steps to assure their inclusion in all aspects of society.
- This study also strongly proposes the adoption of new policies and laws to guarantee that the transgender population is equally represented and receives equal chances, and freedom to exercise their fundamental rights.
- It is necessary to evaluate the laws and regulations on physical and sexual assault to make them more inclusive, not just for men and women but also for transgender

persons.This study has highlighted that transgender people are not usually considered normal members of society based on centuries-old labeling of Khawaja Sira. There is a need to develop certain parameters, criteria and policies to recognize the transgender official identity and acceptance in private and public service sectors.

Conflicts of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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The Factors of Individuals and Course on Students' Motivation within Hybrid Learning Process

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The use of online learning has become ubiquitous in the learning process. This study investigated the impact of different factors on students' motivation within synchronized and asynchronized learning. A quantitative research design was applied, and data was gathered using a survey method from the university students. A total of 254 dataset were analyzed and the results found that 51.9% of the students were reported to have moderate to high level of motivation, and 48.1% had low level of motivation to learning. Additionally, individual and course factors (attitudes, course difficulty and learning styles) play a beneficial effect in students' motivation within synchronized and asynchronized learning. This study concluded that individuals, course and other factors can undoubtedly influence students learning process. However, this study findings contributed to literature in educational contexts and are useful to the universities in Jordan to consider the use of hybrid learning practices to enhance the level of student's motivation.

Keywords: Individual; course; synchronized; asynchronized;learning.

The world witnessed the impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on life in general, as well as the world of education and learning processes (Prasetyo, Tamrin, & Estriyanto, 2022; Khalil, et al., 2021; Garcia-Garcia et al., 2020; Soliman et al., 2022; Rasheed et al., 2021). For instance, the COVID-19 has led to serious health, social and learning problems for many individuals, and seriously affected college students, as well as affected instructors and educational organization (Arslan, Yildirim, & Zangeneh, 2021; Teodorescu, Ajivas, & Amalfi, 2021; Mailizar et al., 2020; Toquero, 2020). Recently, all educational organizations including universities shifted to online and face to face activities in implementing synchronized and asynchronized learning process. It is critical that researchers study motivation prior and during the pandemic, since many students struggled in their learning (Teodorescu, Ajivas, & Amalfi, 2021; Fared, Jdaitawi, & Sheta, 2018; Jdaitawi et al., 2020). While technology and e-learning activities involve academics (teachers, tutors or lecturers) and learners (Jdaitawi, et al, 2022; Jdaitawi et al., 2022; Jdaitawi et al., 2022; Jdaitawi & Kan'an, 2022), much effort is required by the academics in the higher education setting in terms of the students' characteristics, experiences, engagement, teacher-students interaction, learning content and assessment of the knowledge gained during the online learning

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and learning processes (Maphalasa & Adigun, 2021; Jdaitawi et al., 2013; Al-Nabrawi, Jdaitawi, & Talafha, 2015; Jammeh & Ladage, 2022).

Prior literature from advanced countries links online learning experiences with instructional methods, greater support and interaction between students and instructors, accessibility of materials, course content and assessment criteria (Khalil et al, 2021; Aronoff, 2010). For instance, literature (Khalil et al, 2021; Aronoff, 2010) indicated that the online instructional methods are not sufficient enough as an efficient tool for learning. Additionally, (Michal et al., 2021) supported that course content and assessment criteria are from the factors affecting the success of e-learning. Literature (Rhema & Miliszewska, 2014) reported that several factors such as students attitudes, learning styles and course difficulty, design and its contents are important in students online learning and students success (Khan et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020; Diseth, 2013; Cimermanova, 2018; Debattista, 2018; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Khamparia & Pandey, 2017).

In literature very few studies are conducted on synchronized and asynchronized online learning and motivation are relative and scarce (Teodorescu, Ajivas, & Amalfi, 2021), and only a few have been conducted in eastern countries (Trout, 2020; Cahyani et al., 2020). Additionally, previous studies on attitudes towards using technology for learning remained few and inconclusive (Khan et al., 2021; Zhang et al, 2020). In the last few decades, there are some conflicting results on learning styles associated with online learning environments (Howie, 2011). The above results need attention from researchers and provide evidence to reconsider the study variables in online learning environment. Therefore, this study is aimed at examining factors associated with motivation during COVID-19. This study contributed to the literature in the motivation literature by comparing motivation and factors associated with motivation in the university online context, and aims to investigate the factors associated with students' motivation within synchronized and asynchronized online learning which has not yet been discovered.

Higher Education in Jordan in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The impact of COVID-19 had an overwhelming effect on global higher education, and Jordan was no exception and move to the online learning system. Online education benefited communication between people in the education settings regardless of the place and time of instructions and interactions (Akhdinirwanto, Ashari, Mafrukhin, & Fatmaryanti, 2022). Traditionally online learning comprised of synchronous learning environment where students are recipients of live lecturers with real-time communication and instant feedback between each other and their instructors; ,whereas asynchronous learning environments are not properly implemented, necessitating separate sourcing due to the distinct learning system and forums. Although, online teaching became a new routine, it posed serious challenges. However, some studies have examined the synchronized and asynchronized learning approaches in education context in Jordan and have found that these approaches have a number of benefits and challenges in terms of teaching methods, feedback, support social interaction and satisfaction in using technology and difficulty in communication with peers and instructors (Alsoud & Harsis, 2022; Al-Musili, Bataineh, & Al-Jamal, 2022).

Research Questions

The research questions formulated were:

1- What is the level of the students' motivation within both synchronized and asynchronized online learning environment during COVID-19 pandemic?

2- Are there any significant differences in the factors (students' attitudes, course difficulty and learning styles) between low and moderate-high levels of motivation?

Method

The study is a cross sectional study using a quantitative method with the survey as the main collection instrument to determine the respondents' characteristics, and expectations (Creswell, 2012; Jdaitawi, 2020; Jdaitawi, 2019).

Setting and Sample of the Study

The setting were universities founded in one of the large cities in Jordan, offering several education undergraduate and graduate programs. This setting has been chosen due to their familiarity with current technology and are involved in the activities of its usage. Moreover, the selection of the setting was also based on the geographical location of their university that caters to numerous students studying online courses. The population in this study consisted of 254 university respondents ranging from 18-22 years of age. The response rate was 80 percent, thus being suitable for further analysis (Bell, 2005). The respondents were randomly chosen, using stratified sampling, owing to the availability to the researchers that attended online learning sessions. The participants were from two university colleges: Social Science and Business. These were chosen because as the researchers expect that the students from those college would have similar technology skills. The data were collected in the academic year of 2022. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the participants, 100 (39.4%) were males, and 154 (60.6%) females, about 29.53% of the participants aged less than 20 years old, and 70.47% more than 20 years old.

Table 1

Students Characteristics

Variable		No.	Percentage
Gender	Male	100	39.4%
	Female	154	60.6%
Age			
	Less than 18 years	75	29.53%
	More than 20 Years	179	70.47%

Measurements

There were four variable scales adopted from relevant literature, namely students' attitudes (Ireson, 2016), course difficulty (Vadakalur et al., 2020), and learning styles VARK online questionnaire, learning motivation (Keller, 2009). Following a review of the initial study items, the scales were reviewed and feedback on further suggestions was provided to establish face validity. Several items were investigated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 denoting strongly disagree, to 5 denoting strongly agree. Several items were also negatively constructed, so these were replaced to be positive statements.

The first section of the instrument requested the respondents to provide demographic information including age and gender. This is followed by the scaled-response items to determine the opinions of the respondents on the factors that influence over their inclination towards learning success. Cronbach's Alpha, KMO, and Bartlett tests were applied to check the reliability and validity of the questionnaire as shown in table 2. The internal reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha which was found to be 0.77 for students' attitudes, 0.85 for course difficulty, 0.79 for learning styles, and finally, 0.75 for learning motivation. Data from the questionnaire was encoded and entered into SPSS after which descriptive statistics was used for data analysis and provide the values of mean, standard deviation, Pearson correlation and regression analysis.

Table 2
Results of Mean and standard deviation on the motivation level

Variable	Total Items	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO	Bartlett's Test
Attitudes	11	0.77	.743	.000
Learning_ Style	15	0.79	.835	.000
Motivation	10	0.75	.733	.000
Course Difficulty	4	0.85	.803	.000

Data Analysis

The descriptive data analysis was performed between the study variables (learning motivation, student attitudes, course difficulty, and learning styles). To determine the participants motivation level, the mean and standard deviation were calculated as shown in table 3. Results showed that 51.9% were reported to have moderate to high level of motivation and 48.1% had low level of motivation to learning. Independent sample t-test and MANOVA were used to answer the research questions.

Table 3
Results of Mean and standard deviation on the motivation level

Variable	Level	Percentage
Motivation	Moderate-High	51.9%
	Low	48.1%

Results

The present research study conducted Levene's test, independent t-test and MANOVA on the independent samples in order to identify whether the groups are statistically significant as stated in question 2. Firstly, Levene's test was conducted between the two groups (moderate-high and low), and the results indicated that the assumption of variance equality was met, and no significant differences were noticed between the two groups on the study variables. Independent sample t-test was conducted to test the difference between the two groups (high vs low motivation) taking into consideration students' attitudes, course difficulty and learning styles. The result supported significant differences, for the high level of motivation group, and are given in in table 4 where t-test results for student attitude $t=6.714$, $p=.000<0.05$; course difficulty $t=4.302$, $p=.000<0.05$; Learning style $t=6.227$, $p=.000<0.05$.

Table 4
Results of independent sample t-test

Variable	t-value	P.
Student Attitude	6.714	.000
Course difficulty	4.302	.000
Learning Style	6.227	.000

The results in table 5 reported higher scores for the high motivation level group in the students' attitudes, course difficulty and learning styles when compared to the low motivation level group.

Table 5
Summary of the Mean and Standard Deviation Results

Variable	High Motivation	Low Motivation
Student Attitude	M=2.72 SD=.582	M=2.20 SD=.633
Course difficulty	M=2.51 SD=.961	M=1.92 SD=.499
LearningStyle	M=2.31 SD=.491	M=2.03 SD=.793

The results from the investigation that compared students' attitudes, course difficulty and learning styles influence on the motivation level groups are shown in table 6. A significant difference is shown between the two gender groups (MS=16.740, F=45.382, p=.000; MS=9.515, F=18.231, p=.000) and (MS=14.280, F=38.826, p=.000) respectively.

Table 6
Results of MANOVA for between-subjects effect of the research variables

Source	Dependent Variable Post-test	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Square	F	P
Group	Students' attitudes	16.740	1	16.740	45.382	.000
	Course difficulty	14.280	1	14.280	38.826	.000
	Learning styles	9.515	1	9.515	18.231	.000

P=.05

Discussion

This study has investigated the influence of students' attitudes, course difficulty and learning styles on students’ motivation within the hybrid learning process. The result showed significant differences in students' attitudes towards motivation based on students motivation levels. Students with positive views of online learning are more motivated in learning. Therefore, the result is in accordance with the studies results of (Lei & So, 2021; Xie, Debacker, & Ferguson, 2006) studies. Recent studies have shown that positive online attitudes positively influence students’ preferences for online learning (I-Jan et al., 2013). It indicates that students with positive attitudes are highly believed to enjoy online learning more. This finding is supported by our finding in which students with positive online learning attitudes are likely to have enjoyable online learning experiences that increase their motivation.

Another interesting finding is that the result demonstrated that course difficulty affects online learning motivation. It should be noted that the majority of subjects from the colleges that participated in this study are not practical based, and that may lead to the result of significant association between course difficulty and the learning motivation of students. Therefore, this study result is in accordance with previous studies results (Andres, 2017; Bulic & Blazevic, 2020), which indicated that course difficulty influence students' performance and their motivation. Another result reported that learning styles are associated with students learning motivation.

The findings indicate that the availability of online material provides instant knowledge and interaction between students and instructors. This result is in accordance with the previous studies that showed a positive influence of learning styles on students' motivation. van Alten et al., (2020), students with high self-directed learning are predicted to achieve better learning outcomes and experiences as well. Students with good learning strategies are also likely to have a more pleasant and satisfying online learning experiences. The result of this study, in accordance with previous study conducted by Randi and Corno (2021) revealed that students’ online learning experiences are influenced by students’ leaning strategies. The results may also relate to the fact that different student have different abilities and prefer different learning styles. This illustrates that students with high level of motivation are aware of their appropriate learning styles in online classes when compared to students with low levels of motivation.

Implications and Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this research are a new contribution in displaying essential differences between successes of students in the online learning process. Although, some studies examnined students learning outcomes (Arthur-Nyarko & Kariuki, 2019; Tholibon et al., 2022), but gaps still not filled about online learning motivation among students (Teodorescu, Ajivas, & Amalfi, 2021). This study revealed that students' attitudes, course difficulty and students learning styles proved to be the main significant factors influencing student motivation. The findings of this study suggested several practical implications that can be made to the education sector and other sectors which are implementing an online learning platform for their students. First, it offers a more accurate perspective on how individual, course and instructional factors influence students' motivation towards learning. This study has proven that both in class and online methods play a positive role in enhancing the learning activities and initiatives of students in learning and enhance their motivation towards learning. Hence, through proper teaching practices, a high level of motivation van be achieved in the field of education in general and university education in particular. The results of this study also have practical implication by giving useful insights on the learning-teaching techniques used at the university level. This study has several contributions based on its literature search by examination of the success online predictors on students' success motivation which has largely remained insufficient in literature.

Limitations and recommendations

First, this study is limited to some factors included in this study, therefore, other factors not included, needs to be investigated by researchers. To reach a more accurate conclusion, future studies must take into consideration other factors not included in this study. Another limitation is related to the study settings which was conducted in one city of Jordan; therefore, future studies should consider other universities to validate the findings.

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Quest for Peace in Afghanistan: Analysis of China's Regional Policy after US Withdrawal

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Peace and stability are critical for Afghanistan's and regional countries' security and socioeconomic interests. It is also necessary for landmark project of China, the Belt and Road Initiative, in the region**.** Therefore, China is consistently making concrete efforts for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of United States without restoration of peace and stability has created a situation where there is likelihood of civil war in the country. An unstable Afghanistan would prove fatal for the interests and security of China as well as other neighbouring countries. On one hand, it has created security threats to Chinese interests and investment in Afghanistan and on the other hand militant organizations like Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) regrouped their militants that posed direct threat to security and stability of China. The current study attempts to analyse the Chinese quest and pursuit for peace and stability in Afghanistan and whether China possible role along with the regional countries to establish a regional bloc of countries, like Pakistan, Russia Iran and Turkey could be workable for restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan or not after the US and NATO forces withdrawal ?

***Keywords*:** China, Regional Bloc, Afghanistan, Taliban,Peace and stability.

The decade's long war and brutalities have crippled the state and society of Afghanistan,which, has been altered the country a cockpit of regional and extra regional states and non-state proxies for the last 4 decades. It is a fact that like other regional countries,insecurity and terrorism are serious threats to China's national security and interests in the region, so it can be argued that China is affected by the Afghan imbroglio and as such,she is searching for peace in the country. In 2001 China supported the US invasion of Afghanistan in the hope of restoration ofpeace and stability. After the collapse of the Taliban regime (1996-2001) andformation of Karzai government in Afghanistan, China reopened its embassy in Kabul in 2002, which was closed in 1993. China's Afghan policy and role can be judged from various aspects. First, it helped in developmental projects, provided notable economic aid, technical assistance andmade sizable contribution to Kabul's foreign direct investment. Second, China

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provided training to Afghan officials.Third,it facilitated the peace process. It shows that in post-2001 era China-Afghanistan relations entered into a new phase.Overall,China has been playing a positive and constructive role since US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Most importantly, Kabul has no unpleasant memory about Beijing because the latter has not ever interfered in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. It has made Chinese role in the post-withdrawal era acceptable to most of the groups including Taliban and helped establish its soft image in the country in particular and in regional affairs in general.

Bringing about peace and stability in Afghanistan is, no doubt, an uphill task. There are proxies and socio-economic causes of the decade's long insurgencies and insecurity in the country. At the moment war economy has surrounded the state and the people of this devastated land. Not only China but other notable regional countries including Russia, Pakistan and Iran having stakes, are also considering the post- US withdrawal scenario as a thorny problem for themselves. At present China and Russia have more influence in the region as compared to the US. For instance, Islamabad has formulated its Afghan policy after the Taliban takeover in consultation with China and Russia. It shows thatthe neighbouring countries are fully aware of the fact that activation of a regional mechanism for restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan is the need of the hour.

In the past two decades, several studies have been conducted over the peace process in Afghanistan; rarely any academic paper has addressed the Chinese potential of peace within a broad paradigm of regional stakeholders in Afghanistan. To ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan, therefore, require a regional approach relevant and acceptable to all concerned stakeholders to bring an end to the Afghan quagmire. This study ensures regional contextual knowledge but also strives to acquire knowledge relevant to the broader scholarly community in the understanding of regional dynamics in the peace process in Afghanistan. This study has systematically focused on the Chinese regional approach to peace building in Afghanistan and its key policy tool, i.e., 'economic development'. This study has explored China's efforts in the peace process, intra-Afghan dialogue, economic aid and support and its cooperation and working together with Pakistan, Russia and Iran to restore peace and stability in this war-torn country. Last but not least, the paper also places options for a newly establish Taliban government, politicians and decision-makers to carefully craft national/foreign security policy.

Theoretical Framework

In the contemporary world politics, the study of regions has received a significant attention. The increased interconnectedness in security and economic aspects bring the regional states closer to each other. The Regional Security Complex Theory advanced by Buzan and Ole Waever (2003) endeavours to convince the mainstream of International Relations to pay attention to the regional level of analysis. Regional Security Complex Theory is a relatively new theoretical approach in the IR, first introduced by Barry Buzan in 1983 in 'People, states, and fear', and later presented as a major theory in Buzan and Ole Waever's 2003 work: Regions and Powers the structure of international security (Buzan, 1983; Buzan et al., 2003). As defined by Buzan and Waever a Regional Security Complex is "a set of units whose major process of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from each other" (Buzan et al., 2003: 44). The regional states are closely knitted in a way that matters related to domestic peace and security of one state have a vital and paramount impact on the other (Sunawar, 2018). Security of one actor is directly related to security of another actor. The regional security complex theory explains the security is predominantly a regional issue, as threat do not travel long distances, instead the immediate neighbours are more vulnerable to (in)security issues of geographically adjoining states (Buzan et al., 2003; Sarwar and Siraj, 2021). As the authors explain that geographical proximity produces a pattern of regionally based clusters, where security and economic interdependence is markedly deeper between the states inside the complexes than those outside of complexes (Buzan et al., 2003; Godehardt, 2014: 41).

The alarming situation resulted by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan alarmed the whole region. The economic implications of the Afghan security and growing influence of non-state actors and its geographic importance/implications for China's connectivity drive and trade necessitate studying the Afghan issue through the lens of regional security complex theory. Since the security vulnerability of Afghanistan profoundly affects the region in general, the adjacent states have also been subject to spill over affect thus creating a regional security complex. Afghanistan's security construct is more pertinent with China due to its national security environment receives greater heat. Moreover, the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), linking to Europe via Central Asia significantly depends on land routes, and therefore, the Afghan instability poses colossal threat not merely to the economic interests of China but also to Central and South Asian countries as well. Thus, the region having overlapped economic and security concerns, presents a regional security complex. An unstable Afghanistan could threaten stability in the Chinese Xinjiang region and its geo-economic project, the BRI, in Pakistan and Central Asia. At the same time, a stable and peaceful Afghanistan may present opportunities for China and other regional states to contribute to the country's post-conflict economic reconstruction and development.

Method

This research study is conducted on the qualitative and descriptive techniques of social sciences to assess the Chinese potential of peace within a broad paradigm of regional stakeholders in Afghanistan. Data, facts and figures to support the analysis have been collected from secondary sources, including books, research articles and official reports. The Content Analysis Technique has been adopted to analyse the existing literature on Chinese policy towards Afghanistan. While using qualitative content analysis method, the significances and insights can be obtained from a text more holistically and evidently. This approach to the study relies on in-depth assessment, inquiry, and detailed study of the Chinese foreign policy towards Afghanistan and Beijing's cooperation with other regional stakeholders, including Pakistan, Russia and Iran. Qualitative content analysis allows learners to understand social phenomenon including its meaning in a subjective but scientific manner. A researcher uses analytical inquiry to develop fresh notions in light of the dynamic evidence. There are several ways to do an analytical investigation of a research problem, and a study conducted using this approach is considerably more trustworthy, consistent, and thorough. In order to analyse Chinese potential of peace in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal and to access its regional acceptability, descriptive and analytical approaches of social sciences are found comparatively more suitable. Resultantly, qualitative assessment of data is preferred over the standardized precision of measurement.

China's Interests in Afghanistan since 2001: A Historical Sketch

Historically speaking, China showed very little interests in Afghanistan (Segal, 1981), but now it has many stakes in the country. First, the rise of militant groups like ETIM and ISKP alarmed Beijing because it also created security threat to China (Weitz, 2010). Second, China has economic interests in Afghanistan because it has about one trillion dollars' natural resources including 1.6 billion barrel crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet gas and 240 million tons Copper (Ross, Trombly and Barr, 2014). Third, though China opposed the US long term presence in Afghanistan, but at the same time it was also not in favour of her quick withdrawal without restoration of peace fearing it would lead to civil war in Afghanistan (Weitz, 2010). Fourth, China is concerned about the drug production in Afghanistan.

Since 2001, China is taking active part in economic recovery and development of the country by providing assistance and aid in various fields. Kabul looks toward China for help and support in economic development as well as in the security and peace (Khan, 2015). Though still China kept low profile in Afghanistan (Mie`re, Li, and Inkster, 2011), her contributions especially in economic development of the country are noteworthy. More importantly, Hamid Karzai paid five visits to Beijing during his tenure which depicts the importance of China for Afghanistan and increasing recognition of bilateral relations in both countries. In 2002, the two countries signed "Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations", in 2006, signed the "treaty of bilateral friendship and cooperation" and treaty of "Trade and Economy Cooperation". In 2010, during Hamid Karzai's visit to China, many agreements were signed which gave free access to some goods from Afghanistan to China, and proposed larger cooperation in irrigation, mining, agriculture, infrastructure development, power generation and natural resources exploration (Paliwal, 2011).

Since 2012, the two countries upgraded their relations to a cooperative partnership (Yongbiao, 2018). They have also assisted each other in combating terrorism, organized crimes and drug trafficking. They have also established good economic relations, with concentration on exploration of natural reservoirs, electricity generation, construction of roads, rehabilitation of agricultural division and involved in communications developments (Huasheng, 2012). Chinese telecommunication companies, Huawei and ZTE updated 200,000 Afghanistan's analog telephone lines to digital.

China also trained Afghan officials in different fields and did security cooperation to counter the three forces of evil-terrorism, extremism and separatism. She also gave human resource training to more than 800 different officials of Afghanistan and also technical training to local people in different fields (Norling, 2008). In 2012, Chinese President Hu Jintao and his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai reached an agreement to upgrade bilateral relations to the level of a strategic partnership. President Hu Jintaourged the two sides to enhance security cooperation and jointly combat the "three forces" of terrorism, separatism and extremism as well as trans-boundary crimes, including drug trafficking (Xinhua, 2012). It has strengthened their bilateral relations which positively contributing to bring peace and development in the country. Afghan government has always acknowledged China for its support and assistance in the reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. In 2017, People's Republic of China had also incorporated Afghanistan in Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

China is one of the leading investors in Afghanistan. The country has a good number of unexplored reserves of copper, coal, iron, gas, cobalt, mercury, gold, lithium and thorium. After the opening of these sites for international investors, China also showed its interests in Foreign Direct Investment. She has invested in different types of projects important for the development of this war-torn country. Twelve Chinese enterprises have currently invested in Afghanistan. China invested 425 million dollars in the country, and the cumulative contract value of its signed projects is 1.221 billion dollars (Yongbiao, 2018).

China's Policy Towards Taliban Regime

Primarily the security and economic interests of China have defined her policy towards Afghanistan in the post- US withdrawal era. Beijing has a chance to play a significant role in Afghanistan because of the country's extreme isolation in the international community since the

Taliban took over Kabul. Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, China has established active diplomatic contacts with the new regime. Like other neighbours of Afghanistan, Beijing is cautiously interacting with the Taliban government without formally recognizing it. She has announced several investment initiatives, continued trade and allowed Taliban to reopped Afghanistan's embassy in Beijing. China has joined the global community’s efforts in pushing the Taliban to enact reforms, including the creation of an inclusive government, and insurance of women's rights, especially regarding employment and education (Rehman, 2022). Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, some nations have maintained their embassies open, including China. Insecurity, bases of ISKP and ETIM, power politics of big powers and political instability are the main concerns of China in Afghanistan. China wants to address these concerns through constructive engagement with Taliban. Since China has maintained pleasant ties with all prominent stakeholders of Afghanistan, therefore, her position in Afghan affairs is distinct following the United States and NATO withdrawal. She is working on bilateral as well as multilateral levels to address the above-mentioned concerns. At multilateral level, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is the potential platform where China can work with other Afghanistan’s neighbours (Khan and Sultana, 2019). In the post-withdrawal period, China has adopted a rational approach to establishing ties with the new regime and is ready to work with it which is in the best position to address its legitimate concerns and safeguard national and regional interests. Kabul will attract Chinese foreign direct investment, export resources, and improve transportation services if Chinese worries about security are appropriately addressed. The expanded transportation connections and natural resources Afghanistan provides are advantageous to Beijing. Therefore, both parties are eager to benefit from the opportunities they have for each other.

Post-withdrawal China’s Interests in Afghanistan

After 20 years long war, US and NATO withdrew their forces in haste leaving Kabul in a state of chaos and uncertainty, without finding any durable solution to the Afghan issue. By signing Doha agreement with Taliban, the coalition only wanted a face saving for their defeat and safe passage for their consequent withdrawal. Washington spent billions of dollars of which major portion was incurred for military purposes to inflict death and destruction on the Afghan people. Reconstruction and rehabilitation attracted little attention of the human rights champions. Besides spending billions of dollars, Washington had to bear the loss of 2300 US soldiers whereas 20,660 more were injured (BBC, 2021) without achieving any tangible goals. The US led coalition had given a little attention to institutions building. Therefore, before the formal completion of withdrawal the US established system was collapsed and Taliban takeover Kabul in mid-August 2021. The main reason was that the US and her allies did not give enough attention to institutions building and formation of strong government army. It seems as if the US and her allies had invaded Afghanistan to avenge the 9/11 attack on its world trade centre and stayed here to look for some geostrategic interests in the region included the containment of China. Hence, this adventure was in no way sincerely and firmly aimed at bringing peace and stability in the country. The present US-led international system is polarised and biased that cannot adapt to rising China (Kaufman, 2010).

China being a rising economic power and leading international trade bearer would never like to ignore any potential security threat in her neighbourhood constraining its economic initiatives. Currently, the quantum of China’s trade is 4 trillion dollars, its GDP is 17 trillion dollars, and it has foreign reserves worth 4 trillion dollars (Ahmar, 2021). In the post-withdrawal Afghanistan China has geopolitical, economic and security interests.

Geopolitical Interests

It is obvious that China cannot afford political instability, insecurity and power politics in its neighbourhood. At the same time China is in a better position to play an effective role in restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan because Beijing and Kabul share no history of rivalry. The US and her allies withdrawal from Afghanistan has compelled Chinese policy makers to formulate a more proactive and comprehensive policy towards Afghanistan. Beijing welcomed and hosted a Taliban delegation in July 2021 followed by China’s official statement that she respects Afghan’s rights to decide their future. This indicates Beijing’s stance which implies that the Taliban’s victory reflects the people’s will. China started strengthening her diplomatic ties with Taliban even before they took control of Kabul.

Some observers are of the view that China tend to perceive the vacuum not only to avail the opportunities but to manage the threats as well. Beijing's main goal of obtaining economic gains is by utilizing Afghanistan's role as a regional connection in the Belt and Road Initiative or the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Furthermore, China has been looking for a way to extract Afghanistan's immense mineral resources since 2007, which necessitates security and transportation infrastructure. Because none of this is conceivable without a stable Afghanistan, China is currently examining the political environment in the country and what it may benefit from peace (Sakhi, 2022).

Economic Interests and Engagement

Before withdrawal Afghanistan’s fragile economy was highly dependent on US aid and Western donors’. China becomes a crucial supporter of Taliban-led Afghanistan provided the latter does not support extremism and militancy. While China seeks to revive business schemes in Afghanistan, Taliban support Chinese investment as it will provide the much-needed revenues at this critical juncture. After the US withdrawal millions of dollars foreign aid that was supporting the former administration has been stopped, billions dollars of state assets are blocked, and financial sanctions have brought Afghanistan's economy near to collapse. So, Taliban government is actively pursuing Chinese economic support, trade relations and investment in this scenario. A Counsel on Foreign Relations expert, Ian Johnson has very rightly remarked that Taliban will welcome any sort of investment, especially if it is not accompanied by lectures on human rights. According to him, China’s goal is likely to be at least as much political as economic (Johnson, 2021).

After the collapse of Ashraf Ghani government, Taliban spokesman Sohail Shaheen in his press conferences repeatedly called upon China for investment. As one of the leading trade partners of Afghanistan since 2006, China has given duty free access to export 278 items (Bashardost, 2019). It has increased the bilateral trade significantly. In 2021, bilateral trade volume increased and recorded 523.45 million dollars. China export to Afghanistan was 474 million dollars and her imports from Afghanistan were 49.53 million dollars (China Briefing, 2023). Beijing is devoted to improving the two nations' cooperation in several areas, including economy and trade. To overcome the obstacles, she has established an air corridor to increase the import of agricultural goods like pine nuts. In 2022, she has also given duty-free access to 98% of Afghan goods import to China (China Embassy in Afghanistan, 2022, November 3). This is an obvious attempt to strengthen bilateral commercial relations in this critical time as the Taliban regime strives to rebuild the nation's sanctions-hit economy. Moreover, China’s exports to Afghanistan are cheap (Reeves, 2010), therefore, comparatively more affordable for the poor people of the country. Beijing has continuously encouraged collaboration on significant projects with Kabul, assisting it to generate money, boost job opportunities at the local level, and strengthen its potential for economic growth. In the current situation, the socio-economic development of Afghanistan is critically important for peace and stability in the country and the region. Therefore, economic development, creation of jobs and business opportunities are very crucial to end terrorism and militancy in the country. It will protect the youth from becoming member of terrorist organizations.

One of the main interests of China in Afghanistan is the exploration of mineral resources. The MesAynak copper mine and the oil extraction agreements in Faryab and Sar-e-Pol provinces are the main economic interests of China in the country. The country has a huge amount of unexplored natural resources including copper, Iron, Silver, Lithium, Chromite, Gemstones, and oil etc. To stabilise the economy of Afghanistan, some of the very significant investments of China are; the 30 years of Aynak copper mines project worth 3.5 billion dollars whose copper deposits are estimated to be worth of 3 trillion dollars (Khan, 2015) expected to generate 4,000 direct jobs, 7,600 indirect and 62,500 induced jobs (Iqbal, 2016) and after the full operationalization expected to generate revenue equal to 45% of Afghanistan’s total budget (Bukhari, 2012), and the 25 years project of exploration of gas and oil in Amu Darya River Basin oil fields. It is pertinent to mention here that this was the first contract in the history of Afghanistan to permit any foreign country to discover gas and oil in the country. China National Petroleum Corporation signed this agreement of oil exploration in 2011. A survey estimated that these oil fields containing reservoirs of about 87 million barrels oil. According to the agreement, China will invest 400 million dollars in this project and will pay the Afghan government 20% tax on revenue, 15% royalty, and 70% of revenue on income. It is estimated that annually 304.35 million dollars will provide this project to Afghanistan, a total of 7 billion dollars in the 25 years contract period and expected to generate 7,000 jobs (Tahiri, 2017).

More recently, a contract to drill for oil from the Amu Darya basin and establish an oil field in Sar-e Pul province was signed by the Taliban regime with China on January 5, 2022. Approximately 150 million dollars will be invested yearly by China and in the coming three years, the investment amount will increase to 540 million dollars (China Briefing, 2023). Since the Taliban took control in 2021, this agreement is the first substantial energy exploitation agreement with a foreign corporation. The Taliban regime and a state-owned company of China are now in talks over mining operations in the MesAynak copper mine. It would be in accordance with a 3.5 billion dollars, 30-years deal inked in 2008 under the former government of Afghanistan (China Briefing, 2023). All these plans and initiatives would play a significant role in the economic development of the war-torn Afghanistan. The enormous amount of natural resources in Afghanistan continues to be appealing to Chinese investors despite security challenges. China is therefore a preferable partner to engage with as the Taliban eagerly seeks external aid and investment to support the country's fragile economy. Now after the capturing of Kabul by Taliban, investment in the country remains a question mark, but if a stable government is founded then local and foreign investments will resume.

China contributed 250 million Yuan in 2021 to Afghanistan in the form of food, medication, winter clothing, and other aid to help the Afghan people endure the severe winter season (China Embassy in Afghanistan, 2022, November 3). She also has offered 8 million dollars in humanitarian relief to the Afghan families impacted by the recent earthquake. China is also interested and ready to invest in infrastructure development and regional connectivity projects. During the conference on Afghanistan held in Tashkent on July 26, 2022, Yue Xiaoyong, China's special representative for Afghanistan stated that China will finance the construction of a transnational railway passing through Afghanistan. It is supposed to link Uzbekistan to Pakistani seaports (Rehman, 2022). China views Afghanistan as a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia.

Beijing is concerned about the risks of unnecessary entanglement in Afghanistan, which is seen as a ‘strategic trap’ and ‘graveyard of empires’. Afghanistan’s involvement in China’s Belt and Road Initiative including connections to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is particularly important. However, stability has to precede new economic commitments. China would certainly take on a significant investment role provided there is a conducive security and political environment in the country. In other words, Beijing will watch the Afghan situation more cautiously before getting fully involved. China will gradually and carefully fill the vacuum and accommodate Taliban’s needs and requirements while ensuring that its own concerns are addressed.

Security Interests

China has four security concerns in post-withdrawal Afghanistan; first, Kabul must have a functional government; second, ensure the security of its border; third, the Taliban should eliminate Uyghur militant groups based in Afghanistan; fourth, protect its current investment (Murtazashvili, 2022). There is many anti-China militant organization based in Afghanistan which have posed direct threats to its national security and unification. Primarily China has security threats from ETIM and ISKP. The expansion of the ISKP also known as ISK in Afghanistan particularly after the withdrawal of the United States of America and the Taliban take over has shadowed the security prospects of other regional states, one such being China- a state at the doorstep of Afghanistan (Kapur, 2022). Analysing the predicaments for China, the ground facts provide a vivid picture of the possible threats to China as a state and its interests in the near abroad. Significant progress in this context is the merger of the ETIM with ISKP. ETIM is a terrorist organization identified by the United Nation and is based in Northeast China’s Xinjiang province (Mehra & Wentworth, 2021). This Muslim group’s merger with ISKP shall not only provide it sanctuary in Afghanistan to cause security implications for China but may add China to ISKP’s target list considering the events unfolding in China regarding the Uighur Muslims. Important to mention here that during their first regime from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban permitted Uyghur organizations to operate on Afghan soil and still it has considerable safe heavens in Afghanistan

An important fact that backs this argument is the attack on Kunduz; the attack was carried out by an ethnic Uighur in 2021 and ISKP claimed its responsibility (Soliev, 2021). In September 2022, ISKP’s most scathing comment on China came, criticizing the Belt and Road Initiative in the following words: “red atheists whose hands are soaked with the blood of innocent Uyghur Muslims” (Weber, 2022). This provocative message indicates its plans against China and that ISKP’s followers must take up arms against China. ISKP is sceptical of Beijing and Kabul relations and refers to China as “Imperialist” in Voice of Khorasan Magazine of September 2022 (Ma, 2022). Another implication for China is the ISKP’s threats to its interests outside China, including Chinese investments. For instance, China’s investment in Afghanistan’s Amu Darya Oil Project, MesAynak and many others are all subject to Afghanistan’s security situation which is being constantly challenged by ISKP (Weber, 2022).

China is more concerned about the potential for strikes planned by terrorist organizations like the ETIM than it is about playing a role in a post-withdrawal scenario. This group is continuously attacking Chinese citizens and interests both inside and outside the country. China is undoubtedly aware that the Taliban won't be persuaded to kick out Uyghur militants from Afghanistan. Several international Jahidi groups are functioning in different parts of the country; the Taliban refuses to extradite them but instead takes covert actions to curtail or stop their extraterritorial activity. According to some evidence, the Afghan Taliban have relocated Uyghur terrorists from Badakhshan province, a province that shares a border with China, in order to allay China's security concerns (Rehman, 2022). ETIM is also attempting to strike a balance between its animosity towards China and Taliban hosts.

China is worried about how the instability and insecurity in the county following the United States and her allies exit may damage China's economic interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asian Republics. Therefore, China accused the US of its rapid withdrawal without restoration of stability in the country and reacted angrily to the humanitarian and economic catastrophe in Afghanistan made worse the security situation. China and Afghanistan had a good collaboration until the fall of the Ghani-led regime, and Afghan security agencies were monitoring and pursuing Uyghur insurgent organizations at Beijing's request. However, since the Taliban took control, China has started to communicate with them because she does not want terrorism to spread into China from Afghanistan or harm its economic and political interests in the area. In return for addressing Beijing's security concerns, notably in preventing any Uyghur terrorist organizations from attacking Chinese nationals its interests, especially BRI projects, Beijing has promised the Taliban to give economic assistance.

China Role vis-à-vis Pakistan, Iran and Russia

Following the US withdrawal, the security vulnerability of Afghanistan deeply affects the whole of region. Needless to say, that all regional countries like China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran want peace and stability.It has been proved by the recent increase insecurity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan and attacks on Chinese in different parts of the country. Taliban's tangible victory and sweeping takeover of Kabul has emboldenedTahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan sharing same ideology with the former. Pakistan suffered alarming repercussions due to massive influx of Afghan refugees and sudden rise in the scale of terrorist attacks against security forces, civilian population and military installations. It had to divert its armed forces and national resources towards its western border risking its national economy as well as its security position on the eastern border with India-an arch enemy of Pakistan. The Afghan war has seriously affected Pakistan (Khalil and Parveen, 2015). It has also created mistrust between the two countries (Qazi, Qazi and Ahmad, 2016).

According to Economic Survey of Pakistan 2001-2018, the country sustained an estimated loss of 126.79 billion dollars during 2001-2015. Pakistan also lost around 80,000 of its soldiers as well officers and innocent civilians, not to speak of the thousands of women, widows and children who suffered lifelong disabilities. Therefore, an instable or continuation of terror and disturbance in Afghanistan is in no way in the interest of anyone, especially it has direct impact on regional countries. Therefore, the regional countries should extend full support to the Taliban Government and people of the war-ravaged country in the interest of peace and stability in the region.

Pakistan has vast experience in dealing with Afghanistan affairs. Once China decides to initiate mega projects in Afghanistan, it can benefit from Islamabad's knowledge and experience gained over a long period of its engagement as a front-line state during the Soviet invasion and the US attack and occupation of Afghanistan. Beijing and Islamabad's joint strategy based on the principles of peaceful coexistence, economic cooperation and extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and central Asia will produce tangible and promising outcomes. Such arrangements are crucial for creating positive impacts on Afghan economy through boosting economic activities and employment opportunities. Following the hasty withdrawal of the US forces, Beijing and Islamabad can play a key role by ensuring Kabul's participation and partnership in CPEC with workable connectivity. Though these initiatives may face many challenges, but this is very potential scheme that can help Afghanistan’s return to the mainstream of the global community as sovereign state. Both China and Pakistan are interested to include Afghanistan in CPEC, and Ashraf Ghani government has also showed formal interest to join it. Afghanistan is a landlocked country and is mostly reliant on Islamic Republic of Pakistan for her foreign trade. If she joins this Corridor, it will link its economy to China, Pakistan and the rest of the world. It can possibly offer a massive boost to economy of the war-torn Afghanistan.

For decades, Pakistan has been an essential partner of China, for a variety of factors. One, China's wolf warrior diplomacy has enraged many countries, ranging from its Indo-Pacific neighbours to Europe. This emphasises the significance of Pakistan as a genuine partner. In addition, New Delhi closeness with Washington and its allies, including Canberra and Tokyo, India has established a network of security and strategic partnerships, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as the Quad) with the United States, Australia, and Japan, as well as a variety of trilateral strategic partnerships such as India-US-Japan and Japan-India-Australia. All of these new agreements are clearly aimed at countering China which certainly makes China more reliant on Pakistan to resist India (Rajagopalan, 2021).Though US tried to engage India as a regional alloy to manipulate regional affairs, but this ‘marriage of convenience’ did not work as it was primarily an ill-designed alliance against Pakistan and China. After fighting war against Taliban for long 20 years, US was obliged to accept humiliation and sign peace agreement with Taliban. She could not achieve its core objectives of restoration of peace (Parveen, Shah and Khalil, 2020). It is also a bitter reality that US in the disguise of war on terror formulated an alliance against regional countries especially against its old rival Russia and rising China. The US seems to be in pursuit of a more aggressive and confrontational attitude toward China, particularly bitterness had reached its peak in Trump administration. The Biden administration’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, released in March, asserts that China “is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system” (Jisi, 2021).

Looking at this situation in a theoretical perspective, the emergence of new great powers at global level with trepidation because it expects rising states’ ambitions to grow in tandem with their capabilities, as well as the anxiety that this expectation provokes in their neighbours and potential adversaries (Kirshner, 2012). Following withdrawal, it seems that the US will use the soil of Afghanistan against China as well as against Russia, Pakistan, and Iran. To avoid such developments, peace and stability in Afghanistan are necessary. If there is no peace it will be easy to manipulate Afghanistan against the regional foes. While altering the regional dimensions and alliances, a good chance occurs in the form of Moscow and Islamabad also. In this phenomenon, India is US main regional ally working closely with her to fulfil its objectives of primarily countering China and Pakistan. India’s foothold in Afghanistan was a grave concern for both Pakistan and China. Therefore, Pak-China cooperation and coordinated working are necessary for protection of their interests and defusing impacts of India-US alliance. Beijing and Islamabad’s strategic partnership in Afghanistan proved workable. The primary rationale behind the success of Beijing and Islamabad partnership in Afghanistan is that it functions under the umbrella of their decades-old friendly strategic relationship.

Likewise, both Russia and Pakistan are concerned about the repercussions of the US and NATO withdrawal without restoration of peace left the country on brink of civil war and untold hardships due to internal and external displacement. Seeing the growing US and India relationship, Islamabad started expanding its relationship with Moscow after experiencing itself being alienated by the US and the close collaboration between the US and India against Pakistan. Islamabad and Moscow due to regional and global pattern of alliance realised to develop a multidimensional relationship in close association besides improving their defence collaboration. It is manifested by the deal of MI-35 helicopters, DRUZHBA joint military exercises, and partaking of the navy of Russia in the Aman-2021 maritime exercise, in Pakistan.

At a recent meeting in Moscow, a Taliban leader reiterated the desire for a peaceful settlement of all local and national issues (Lodhi, 2021). The regional countries, while using their influence and capability should play their role to persuade Taliban and other ethnic and political groups to seek a negotiated solution to the prolonged Afghan issue. Moreover, the regional countries and other powers ought to desist from arming the non-state fighting groups in Afghanistan. Formation of an inclusive government representing all ethnic communities and sects is prerequisite for a peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue and undoing the possibility of a civil war in the country.

China is also enjoying good workable relation with Tehran that can play crucial role in bringing peace and development to Afghanistan. Taliban government did not enjoy good relationship with Tehran in 1990's. However, China, and Iran supported the Taliban in many ways against the US-led coalition in Afghanistan. Iran can still play her part because it has a long border and sizable trade with Afghanistan. It is estimated that $5 million hard currency flows to Iran from Afghanistan each day as Afghan buyers are the fifth largest consumers of Iranian exports (Batmanghelidi, 2021). Taliban also cannot ignore peaceful relations with their first door neighbour due to mutual trade interests between the two countries. Therefore, Iran can play an important role in the formation of an inclusive government and subsequent developments in Afghanistan. However, at the moment Iranian policy makers see the situation differently. When the US and its allies finally left Kabul, Iran's Foreign Ministry stressed that Tehran would not rush to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

In case the Taliban agree to the distribution of power and formation of an inclusive government engaging all ethnic groups, especially Hazara Shias in government, Iran would like to have normal relations with Taliban regime. But if the Taliban seeks a monopoly of power, given that the group's ideology is different from that of Iran and closer to Saudi Arabia, then it seems that the relations between Iran and the Taliban or the government formed by the Taliban will not be much amicable. It is Tehran's considered opinion that the Taliban's statement about formation of inclusive government is just an attempt to influence the international opinion in their favour; and that Taliban would never agree to compromise their religious and ideological posture. Iranian leadership firmly believe that in the long run, the ideological aspect of the Taliban will prevail over their political one. Therefore, one cannot expect that the Taliban will not be the same Taliban of 20 years ago. Hence, they cannot be termed as "Friends of Iran" (Choksy and Choksy, 2021). It is no secret that Iranian media and some experts term the formation of Taliban's interim government as "a government of terrorists and criminals"(Choksy and Choksy, 2021). Iran's semi-official Mehr News Agency has reported that given the Taliban's current approach to governance, experts in Tehran have warned that Iran's relations with Taliban government will not be amicable(Choksy and Choksy, 2021).

However, China alone may not properly handle the Afghan situation without well integrated coordination, association and cooperation with its regional partners. Same are the stakes of Russia, Pakistan and Iran and therefore they also cannot bear instability in their neighbourhood because it will directly affect their security and geostrategic interests. China requires taking the initiative in consultation and close association with Russia, Pakistan and Iran as these countries have equally important stakes in Afghanistan. Having said that Afghanistan still needs massive investments to develop its infrastructure and economy. At present, an expert team on the economy is the utmost requirement to deal with international financial institutions. Moreover, regional and extra-regional players have their own geo-strategic and political interests in the country. These are the potential areas where China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran need to work together and use their resources and influences to resolve the Afghan issues. Though the issues are very complicated, joint efforts of these regional powers can help better in this regard. China and Pakistan are already close allies of regional and international arenas, but the US withdrawal provided an opportunity for realignment of Pakistan with Russia and Iran. A well-considered and well-planned policy with effective implementation by these regional powers will lead to political stability in the country. Otherwise, the absence of such policy and spirit will lead to the intensification of domestic strife and power struggle in Afghanistan.

Quest for peace and stability in the post US withdrawal

The recognition of Taliban regime by other countries is dependent upon their internal performance, mood of governance, respect of human and minorities rights, rule of law, overthrowing fundamentalism, and adoption of moderate policies and democratic norms. If such a situation like their previous regime (1996-2001) emerges, then Afghanistan will pose serious security, economic and political threats to China, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. In this regard, these four regional countries must try hard to persuade Taliban and other groups over which they have influence to establish an inclusive government composed of all groups and communities. They should use their collective good offices to do national reconciliation in Afghanistan, besides convincing Taliban to broad-based national government, respect human rights, avoid fundamentalism, extremism, respect women's rights, permit individual freedom and promote democratic norms. This is key for the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan and putting the country on the path of progress and development.

In Afghanistan, the economy has been badly damaged due to decade’s long war. It is said, “who has a gun has bread”. The US and NATO withdrew their forces without restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan. They signed Doha agreement in 2020only to get safe way for themselves, left protracted Afghan imbroglio unresolved. It brought the county to the brink of civil war among the different sects, ethnic groups and other stakeholders. The US president Joe Biden said in his remarks about the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan that “We did not go to Afghanistan for nation-building. And it’s the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country”. This frivolity and irresponsibility not expected from the US because Afghanistan at present is more destabilized than before 9/11. This place a question mark on US foreign policy approach because, if the US considers that nation building was not its responsibility, then how peace could be restored in a war-torn country? Nation building is key for restoration of peace and stability but unfortunately, very less attention has been given to it in the 20 years stay of US and NATO in Afghanistan.

During the fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan, China presented a five-point proposal. First, Afghanistan should be governed by the Afghan people. Second, political reconciliation must be moved forward. Third, economic reconstruction should be expedited. Fourth, a development path should be explored. Fifth, external support should be fortified (Yongbiao, 2018). Additionally, China is pursuing friendly policy toward all the Afghan people instead of any specific group. It has been affirmed by Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his meeting with Taliban political head Mullah Ghani Baradar in Tianjin during the latter’s visit to China on July 28, 2021 (CGTN News, 2021).

All things considered, the lack of indigenous cohesion and central authority acceptable to all sects of Afghanistan are part and parcel of the leading problems (Ali, 2021) in ending the war, restoration of peace and stability and establishment of an inclusive national government in the country. The question is whether international community in general and regional countries in particular can exert pressure and facilitate Taliban to establish a broad-based national government or not. A regime acceptable to majority of groups will help to bring peace in the country (Perveen et al., 2016). For Taliban, it is important to realize this fact that an inclusive and representative government will not only help them in gaining internal stability but will also pave the way for their recognition at the international level. More so, the post US withdrawal ISKP's attacks is alarming for the peace and stability of Afghanistan and the whole region.

Another important issue, which needs immediate attention, is the brain drain from the country. It was seen at Kabul airport that hundreds of educated and professional young people left Afghanistan after the collapse of Ashraf Ghani government in mid-August. Afghan educated youth who can offer and utilize their abilities and capabilities and play an active and effective role in rebuilding their ruined motherland. Moreover, removal of all types of proxies, eradication of socio-economic causes of terrorism, reconciliation, promotion of education and health facilities, human rights, institutions building including strong national military and good governance are prerequisite for sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan. Close cooperation and coordination of regional countries can better help in the above mentioned sectors.

Conclusion

China and other regional powers like Russia, Pakistan, and Iran cannot afford insecurity and instability in Afghanistan as it is fatal. The signing of peace agreement with Taliban by the US without restoring peace and stability has shown the decline of the US's influence and power in the region. The Taliban regime, local people, and many regional countries are looking towards China for a larger role in reconciliation, reconstruction and rebuilding of Afghanistan and regional integration. The current Chinese role in Afghanistan reflects her as a responsible rising power facilitating international peace and stability.

China has taken steps at both individual level and multilateral level as working with regional and international stakeholder to ensure an inclusive political settlement in the country. The regional countries need to integrate their efforts and cooperation in Afghanistan. Under the prevailing hazardous situation, a preferred option is that all these four countries form a formal alliance as a common platform for coordination and integration of their efforts to resolve the Afghan issue. It is high time that China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran work together for durable solution of the Afghan issue and help formation of an inclusive government in Kabul that is acceptable to all concerned. Pakistan and China have already fully synchronized their Afghan policies whereas Russia and Iran currently seem to be at the 'wait and see' axis to decide their formal policies and future course of action. Currently, they have no conflict of interests, they just need to further synchronize their policies. They should make well concerted collective efforts because individual efforts in such critical situation have limited scope and chances to give any fruitful result.

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Marketing Activities among Social Media Users in Cambodia: Mixed Method Research

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Cambodian people generally use social media sites before using Google to find information. It is commonly assumed that social media is a place for first impressions and where businesses must present their products and services**.** This study used an explanatory sequential mixed method with a follow-up explanation design to evaluate the construct validity of social media marketing activities (SMMAs) with empirical data and developed assessment criteria for SMMAs. The quantitative samples were chosen using the stratified sampling technique, whereas the qualitative participants were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. The quantitative data were gathered from 500 Cambodian social media users via Google Forms, whereas the qualitative data were collected from seven experts via an online interview. Descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA), and content analysis were used to examine and test the research hypotheses. Subsequently, the key results were endorsed using a mixed method. The results uphold the research hypotheses at the statistical level $p < .01$. CFA with the goodness of fit indices confirmed the construct validity. The findings revealed SMMAs assessment criteria in five components and 27 indicators, including perceived risk, trendiness, interaction, customization, and entertainment, respectively. The quantitative and qualitative research findings of the assessment criterion of SMMAs in Cambodia, which were approved by the follow-up explanation design, complement each other.

***Keywords*:** entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, perceived risk

Over the last few decades, the use of social media has steadily increased (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Social media platforms are used to engage in interchangeable activities with people from the same and different home countries all over the world. Users can use the social media platform to create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Tufts, 2019). YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Line are some of the most well-known platforms. The global proportion of people using social media is increasing. According to 2019 social media statistics, globally, there were 3.2 billion social media users, and this figure was growing. This large number corresponds to 54% of the world's then population (Emarsys, 2019), and Facebook was the most popular social media platform, with 5.31 billion users as of the end of the second quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2021). These data have resulted in a plethora of business opportunities through these platforms.

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The desire to purchase various products for sale on social media has piqued the interest of business owners and researchers (Husain et al., 2016). Many trades have begun to use social media sites as platforms for serving and interacting with their customers. To pique the consumer's interest and attention (Makmee, 2022), an increasing number of businesses worldwide, including those in Cambodia, are focusing on digital marketing channels such as search engine optimization, Google Ads, and social media advertising (Giantfocus, 2019). Cambodia had more than 8 million social media users in 2019. (Geeksincambodia, 2019). Facebook is the most popular platform, followed by YouTube, Instagram, Tik Tok, LinkedIn, and Twitter. These platforms can provide marketers with more opportunities for online and social media marketing.

Facebook is the most well-known social media platform in Cambodia. As a result, it is the primary arena for growing online shopping and media space (International Trade Administration, 2019). In Cambodia, a new generation of vendors has begun to use Facebook as an online store to sell their wares. The Cambodian government is preparing a robust-yet-business-friendly policy and legal environment in response to its Rectangular Strategy 2019-2023. This strategy described the progression to digital innovation, e-commerce, and industry 4.0 under the theme "New Sources of Growth" (Etradeforall, 2019).

The study of SMMAs has been introduced in various social media-related fields (Sano, 2015). Seo and Park (2018) indicated that SMMAs have five critical dimensions: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and perceived risk. The SMMAs are considered the main platform for promoting brand awareness, product images, and a subordinate hand to promote electronic word of mouth and spur purchases in online commerce (Nuseir, 2019). Therefore, this study focused on developing SMMAs assessment criteria to achieve purchasing goals among Cambodian social media users. It aims to develop evaluation criteria for SMMAs to achieve purchasing goals among Cambodian social media users.

Based on the conceptual framework, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

H1. The social media marketing model is consistent with empirical data.

H2. The criterion of SMMAs affects consumer's purchase intention in Cambodia.

Literature Review

Social Media Marketing Activities

Advertisement continues to evolve due to the technological, network, and social media revolutions, which have created ample opportunities for digital marketing. According to Kelly et al. (2010), social media serve as bridges between marketing outlets and their consumers and foster communications between customers (Hafez, 2021). Manthiou et al., (2016) investigated the following three SMMAs dimensions positively affecting brand equity: entertainment, customization, and e-WOM. Similarly, Liu et al. (2021) identified four key components in SMMAs that affected consumer engagement: entertainment (EN), interaction (INT), trendiness (TREND), customization (CUST), and perceived risk (PER).

Entertainment plays the main role in this purpose through social media. According to De Aguilera-Moyano et al., (2015), brand entertainment created the highest potential instrument, which is an effective message for producing entertainment content.

Interaction is an SMMAs that embraces talking, chatting, and sharing information. It has a strong relationship with the online and social media platforms (Karg et al., 2014). Hall (2018) found that most social media interactions were talk-focused, with one-on-one exchanges with close relational partners, broadcasts, or passively consumed information shared with acquaintances.

In 2019, the latest trends and brand discussions were found on social media (Sehar et al., 2019). According to Kim and Ko (2012), the trendiness of interesting luxury and fashion brands can be found on various applications, such as Twitter, blogs, and other social networking sites.

A customized product is a new design created for a specific group of customers or individuals (Barutcu, 2007). Kotler (1989) stated that both customized and mass-produced goods must grow together, with marketing mediated by the product's construction and principle.

Several researchers have studied perceived risk in marketing from various perspectives. In view of decision-making theory, Park et al., (2004) indicated perceived risk performance as a potential factor in consumer behavioral outcomes, possibilities, and personal values (Park et al., 2004; Taubenheim et al., 2008; Chan and Guillet, 2011; Chi, 2011; Chang et al., 2015; Pham and Gammoh, 2015; Choi et al., 2016; Tuten and Solomon, 2017; Felix et al., 2017). Social media marketing is a process by which companies communicate, create, and deliver online marketing offerings via social media platforms to maintain stakeholder relationships that enhance stakeholders' value by facilitating interaction, offering personalized purchase recommendations, information sharing, and word of mouth creation among stakeholders about existing and trending products and services. (Yadav and Rahman, 2017), and the use of social media platforms to connect with your audience to build a business brand, increase sales, and drive website traffic. (Lua, 2020).

Type of Social Media Platforms

Social media can be used for various objectives. Some are used for information sharing, conversation with friends, and build community pages while others are enfolded on accomplishing business networks. Yet, the point of interaction from users is what distinguishes each type. Each type is classified based on its own distinct set of features, tools, and applications (Dagnew, 2014).

Social media has a preeminent impact on young adults and teenagers (Appel et al., 2020 ; Rahim et al., 2020). Young adults in the United States used the popular social media platform in high percentage. According to Anderson and Jiang (2018), YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat were US teenagers' most popular social media platforms. Meanwhile, statistics from users in the United States revealed many teen users who were active on social media. Approximately 95% of teenagers had access to a smartphone, and 45% said they were online almost constantly (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Moreover, Manthiou et al., (2016) demonstrated that people worldwide used smartphones, tablets, iPads, and desktop computers for daily transactions and for learning about tourist destinations. Destination marketing organizations worldwide use social media platforms, such as Figure 1.

YouTube Source: (Seeklogo, 2017)	**Facebook** Source: (Newscaststudio, 2019)	**Instagram** Source: (Hrueinteractive, 2019)
LinkedIn Source: (Superbrandsnews, 2019)	**Twitter** Source: (Planeta.com, 2020)	**Line** Source: (Wikipedia, 2022)

Figure 1. Logos of different social media platforms.

Cambodia's SMMAs are growing slowly compared to neighboring countries. Credit-card usage, delivery system, internet users, and internet infrastructure are all fully operational indicators for e-commerce operations. Furthermore, the majority of transactions are paid in cash upon delivery. It is because security and overcharging are still concerns among the consumers there. Furthermore, e-commerce was concerned about the high cost of electricity and the scarcity of internet-computer-technology professionals. However, many local banks have begun launching credit card payments for online purchases. Because of the availability of high-speed internet, urban areas are seeing an increase in online shoppers and consumers. In Cambodia, Facebook is the famous media platform. Therefore, it is the primary area for expanding online purchasing and media space (International Trade Admitration, 2019). Please see relationship of variables in conceptual framework.

Conceptual framework

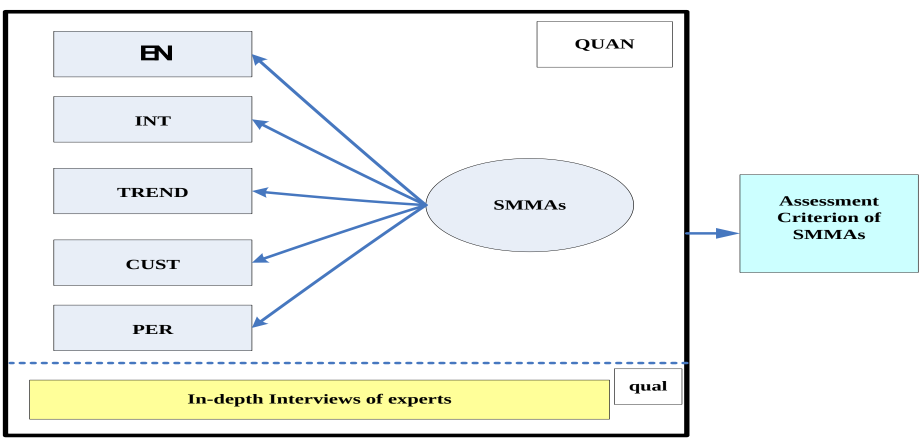

Figure 2. Conceptual framework.

Method

In this study, mixed methods, an explanatory-sequential approach, and a follow-up explanation design were used, with the quantitative method as the primary investigation instrument, supported by the qualitative method. Moreover, the time horizon was cross-sectional. The research flows were classified as population and sample instrument determination, data collection and analysis, conclusion of quantitative and qualitative results, and interpretation of the results based on the quantitative data. The approach of follow-up explanation design was used to investigate the results (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, pp. 196-197). Figure 3 shows more information.

Figure 3. Follow-up explanation design

Quantitative Phase

Quantitative research. The definition of each variable was built based on concepts and theories about SMMAs to establish the questionnaire. The aspects of the questionnaire were classified as follows:

Part I: Personal information about the sample, including gender, age, educational level, occupation, income, social media platform use, device accessing social network, daily social media usage, and online shopping experience.

Part II: The assessment criteria for observed variables in SMMAs are as follows: Prior to data collection, the questionnaire contained 30 items, with six questions per variable. The items were designed based on Seo and Park (2018) and adapted from Manthiou et al., (2016), Liu et al., (2021), and ElAydi. (2018). These questions were presented on a 5-point scale, with 5 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*, 2 = *disagree*, and 1 = *strongly disagree*.

According to the results of both methods and the data collected from social media users in Cambodia, SMMAs are appropriately usable in Cambodia with significant results for statistical data analysis. Additionally, factor loading from factor analysis revealed high loading. After qualifying using both methods, the results were confirmed using appropriate SMMAs criteria in the context of Cambodia. Hence, this set of criteria did not differ significantly from the adapted frameworks. Only 26 of the 30 indicators developed were effective. Moreover, this research will assist the next generation of online entrepreneurs reach their target audiences via social media. Furthermore, in this day and age of social media users, it would be useful guidance for conducting consumer behavior surveys.

All of the questions' items content validity index (I-CVI) equaled 1, and S-CVI/UA equaled .92, indicating that the quality of each item was excellent content validity. The questionnaire was sent to 30 similar participants to run Polit et al., (2007) test to determine the reliability of the research tool. Cronbach Alpha values for the studied variables ranged from .81 to .89, indicating good reliability (George & Mallery, 2016). After qualifying on content validity and reliability, usable SMMAs questions had 27 items.

Qualitative Phase

This phase aimed to confirm the quantitative phase's results and provide a guideline for developing the assessment criteria of SMMAs to achieve purchasing goals among Cambodian social media users. For the process of gathering qualitative data, an online interview was used. Instrument for qualitative research, that is, semi-structured structured interview, was conducted with experts based on a timetable that allows for about 60 minutes of interview duration (Seidman, 2006, p. 20). Online interview is utilized for collecting qualitative data.

Data Collection

Quantitative method (QUAN). The participants were at least 18-year-old social media users who used social media in their daily lives. When the authors used the purposive sampling technique to select experts in qualitative analysis (qual), they used stratified random sampling to select QUAN participants (Creswell, 2014; Makmee, 2021). The sample included 500 social media users in QUAN and seven marketing experts in qual. The experts in the qualitative section were chosen based on their related job positions, experience (more than five years), and direct experience with social media marketing in the regular industry.

Three major economic provinces/cities in Cambodia were chosen to conduct the research and collect data. The study area included Phnom Penh City, Sihanoukville, and Siem Reap Province. The sample size was 200 people from Phnom Penh City, 150 from Siem Reap province, and 150 from Sihanoukville province. Researchers contacted them via Facebook Messenger and invited them to complete the Google Form survey. After one week of sending out the survey, the researchers followed up with the participants.

Seven experts were chosen to oversee the qualitative research process in the qualitative method. When practicing the purposive sampling technique, the expert must meet all the interview requirements. The chosen experts had to work in a field related to SMMAs, such as social media manager, or have extensive experience with digital marketing (Management Association, 2018). A sample size of six to ten participants with diverse experiences may thus provide adequate information power for descriptions (Malterud et al., 2016). In practice, seven experts were chosen to conduct interviews with the researcher.

The interview was divided into two important steps:

1. Self-introduction: the researcher contacted and sent a document to request an interview, and then planned a suitable time for the participants (experts) to participate in an online semi-structured interview with marketing experts about the main variables and criteria of the SMMAs model.

2. This method was supported by Sharma (2018), which allows researchers to create video calls via a secure online website or platform. The researcher sent text questions to participants via mobile phone and computer during the process. The interview is then conducted one-on-one via video call between the researcher and the participant. Among the various platforms for conversation, Facebook Messenger was chosen for the interview. If needed, the researcher called the participant to obtain some more details later. During the interviews, the researcher double-checked the collected data in handwriting and sound record devices. This method was designed to ensure that the interview data were properly stored.

Data Analysis

After obtaining sufficient data from the online collection, the data were checked for accuracy, and quantitative research was used for the measurement model. The data were analyzed using a Mplus program and included descriptive statistics, normality distribution, correlation, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Following data collection, qualitative research and data analysis were carried out. This study employed sequential content analysis with the following steps:

1) Interpret the recorded interview.
2) Read the transcription, review, and understand the data.
3) Conduct content analysis by categorizing data that has the same meaning or belongs to the same group.
4) Interpret the data and benefit from interview.
5) Create a data explanation based on the meaning of the received information.

All the received information must be presented as supporting data that demonstrated the result in the quantitative section.

To obtain the assessment criteria in the model of each variable, the qualitative indicators and criterion were chosen to follow the quantitative finding. The assessment criteria of each indicator were adapted by using its definition. The method was evaluated using two criteria: the score of agreement and the supporting comment. When the comments from the semi-structured interview were used, the agreement scores were derived from the experts' "Yes" responses. Moreover, the follow-up explanation design was used to select the social media marketing assessment criteria. The positive comments on each criterion and indicator were used to describe the assessment criteria of social media marketing to describe the purchase intentions of Cambodian social media users.

Results

Quantitative Section

In the quantitative research, online questionnaires were administered to all the participants (500 samples). The majority of them were female (51.00%), aged between 22 - 29 years old (71.40%), education at the level of bachelor' s degree (82.00%), occupation in private companies (42.20%), incomes less than USD300 (44.40%), most used social media was Facebook (100.00%), devices used for social media was smartphone (44.80%), time spending on social media per day between 2-4 hours (41.60%) and online shopping experience answer "Yes" (91.60%).

Correlations

The correlation coefficients of the indicators of all variables were significant at a statistical level of $p < .01$. The coefficients for entertainment ranged .37–.58; interaction, .36–.55; trendiness, .25 –.62; customization, .47–.71; and perceived risk indicators, .20–.55. The results of confirmatory factor analysis of SMMAs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The results of confirmatory factor analysis of SMMAs

Latent Variables	Observe Variables	Indicators	Results			
			β	*S.E.*	*t*	R^2
SMMAs	Entertainment		.84	.05	16.80**	0.71
		EN1	.48	-	-	0.36
		EN2	.58	.05	11.58**	0.44
		EN3	.57	.04	11.83**	0.42
		EN4	.66	.05	12.10**	0.55
		EN5	.56	.05	10.49**	0.36
		EN6	.73	.06	10.99**	0.50
	Interaction		.93	.07	13.29**	0.86
		INT1	.54	-	-	0.29

Latent Variables	Observe Variables	Indicators	Results β	$S.E.$	t	R^2
		INT2	.51	.04	12.25**	0.30
		INT3	.58	.04	12.25**	0.50
		INT4	.54	.04	12.99**	0.39
		INT5	.57	.04	11.97**	0.45
	Trendiness		.95	.05	18.09**	.91
		TREND1	.66	-	-	0.57
		TREND2	.52	.03	14.52**	0.34
		TREND3	.61	.04	15.11**	0.48
		TREND4	.49	.04	11.08**	0.29
		TREND5	.56	.04	13.42**	0.37
	Customization		.85	.05	16.39**	.73
		CUST1	.65	-	-	0.59
		CUST2	.70	.04	17.58**	0.67
		CUST3	.63	.03	16.34**	0.56
		CUST4	.57	.03	14.57**	0.44
		CUST5	.50	.03	12.92**	0.34
		CUST6	.48	.03	12.76**	0.33
	Perceived Risk		.97	.08	12.13**	.94
		PER1	.32	-	-	0.14
		PER2	.35	.06	5.83**	0.12
		PER3	.48	.07	6.97**	0.21
		PER4	.53	.07	7.40**	0.27
		PER5	.43	.06	6.76**	0.21
$\chi^2 = 220.07$, $df = 193$, $\chi^2/df = 1.14$, $p = .08$, $RMSEA = .01$, $SRMR = .04$, $CFI = .99$, $TLI = .99$						

Table 1 exhibits the results of the CFA of SMMAs by a Mplus program. The CFA was used to evaluate the measurement construct of SMMAs in 5 components and 27 indicators. The results in Table 1 indicated the criteria indices with the goodness of fit. From the results, $\chi^2/df = 1.14$ was less than 2, *RMSEA* and *SRMR* were less than .05, and *CFI* and *TLI* were more than .95, indicating that the measurement construct had perfect goodness of fit (Hooper et al., 2008).

Qualitative Results

Experts' personal information. There were seven experts in this study, six of whom were men and one of whom was a woman. The information showed that two experts had 5–10 years of experience, two had 11–15 years, two had 16–20 years, and one expert had more than 20 years of experience. Six experts had completed master's degrees, and one had completed a doctoral degree in business, management, and economics.

Results from Experts' Interview

The following research findings were obtained from the interview data:

The observed variables of SMMAs were more focused on five quantitative results components. In that order, these variables were perceived risk, trendiness, interaction, customization, and entertainment.

The fact that the perceived risks included five indicators, which received many comments from experts, is a complicated phenomenon that social media users should be aware of. It is related to the perception of social media users, who prefer contents that are shown to have a positive impact on society.

".... Risk factors are a complicated issue that we must be more careful about when using ... It shows the assessment of risk on online shopping" (P.2)

"... People only choose to learn or understand about the risk for a short period of time. But once others' information is abundant then it will cover up all the risk aversion that the person might have ...." (P.7)

In terms of trendiness, five indicators were involved, and the interview data revealed the appropriateness of its indicators to properly uphold the data from quantitative data analysis. *"... Positive impact and useful contents to audiences... and can go along with social media users."* (P.6)

"... Your explanation of the assessment already said it all. Thus, I don't need to elaborate more." (P.7)

"... All above elements make the lifestyle more civilized. It is very important to get consumers' trends ..." (P.1 and P.3)

Expert opinion demonstrated the suitability of these indicators for measuring the interaction that played a central role in the individual customers and their prospective actions in the interaction involving five indicators.

"... It is a good way of interaction, but one should be careful with security reasons of privacy ..." (P.2)

"... Share ideas platform or quick and easy communication platform ..." (P.6)

The customization involved six indicators, the consistent suitability was shown to be why Cambodian social media users refer to content posted by their colleagues and networks. "... *Based on my observation, the majority of Cambodian people are content consumers. They tend to receive every content that is posted and shared by their friends, networks or pages ..."* (P.3)

When publishing customized contents, customization must also be adapted to the culture of the consumers.

"... All the above elements are true, but sometimes culture also influences it ... Good advice for customers and useful contents ..." (P.2)

"... It's such good advice for customers ..." (P.5)

Six indicators were involved in entertainment. The main reason for this identification was the interesting lifestyle and positive impact on the audiences.

The interaction had the same results as all experts were suitable for measuring SMMAs.

"... All elements above are suitable for the current situation but marketing shouldn't forget ethics ..." (P.2)

According to these contents about SMMAs suitability, the result confirmed the support for the CFA of SMMAs

Discussion and Conclusion

The research findings reveal a statistical significance when compared to previous studies. The SMMAs model of social media users performed exceptionally well in terms of goodness of fit with the empirical data (Hooper et al., 2008; Srisawat et al., 2021).

The following is the conclusion for the development of the assessment criteria of the social media marketing model of Cambodian social media users. The main factors in the SMMAs model are 1) interaction, 2) entertainment, 3) trendiness, 4) customization, and 5) perceived risk. There are six indicators of entertainment: interesting, enjoyable, funny, happy, entertaining, and useful contents. Meanwhile, interaction has five indicators: discussion channel, allowing consumers to express themselves, easy access to content, sharing information with others, and maintaining interactions with followers and fans. Furthermore, trendiness comprises five indicators: supporting consumer lifestyle trending, reflecting consumer lifestyle trending, completing consumer lifestyle trending, current content, and having the most recent information. Customization is comprised of six indicators: providing content based on personalized recommendations, providing content based on personalized services, providing content based on customized service, offering content based on a customized information search, assisting consumers in quickly finding relevant information, and guiding consumers in quickly finding relevant information. Lastly, perceived risk includes five indicators: online shopping presents unexpected dangers, facing unexpected danger while doing online shopping, being aware of the risk associated with any brand, protecting privacy and personal information, and feeling secure when providing billing information.

The development assessment criteria of each variable of the social media marketing model have gone through several stages to arrive at the appropriate criteria for measuring each variable. The study's objectives were to test the construct validity of the SMMAs with empirical data and to develop SMMAs assessment criteria using an explanatory sequential mixed method with follow-up explanation design. This study included 500 samples drawn from Cambodian social media users. Second-order CFA was employed to confirm the quantitative data. Moreover, the follow-up explanation design was used to obtain the assessment criteria of SMMAs. The data were analyzed by a computer program. The qualitative data were gathered through an in-depth online interview with marketing experts in Cambodia, followed by data analysis using content analysis.

According to the follow-up explanation mixed-method design, the assessment criteria of SMMAs included entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and perceived risk. These findings were compared to previous studies and found to fit the stated criteria significantly. A total of 27 indicators were significantly confirmed and decried in the SMMAs. The results demonstrated that each variable, namely, entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and perceived risk, has six, five, five, six, and four indicators, respectively. The results of the SMMAs revealed significant results for social media users in Cambodia ($p < .01$). Seo and Park (2018) discovered similar results when studying airline company customers. Most participants in their study had seen and purchased through social media platforms, prompting many businesses to create brand profiles on social media communication channels and to develop activities that engage consumers with content sharing, such as online product information, discounts, advertisements, and promotions. (Muensriphum et al., (2021).

Perceived risk is defined as the "uncertain thing" that happens in a social media transaction. Consumers who shop online can learn about these issues by receiving information from other consumers on social media. Giving knowledge about a brand means making others much more aware of the risks associated with it.

According to Kim and Ko (2012) and Seo and Park (2018), trendiness is one of the indicators of SMMAs. Using trendy content to reach consumers on social media is a valuable opportunity to stay connected with consumers or page followers. Trendy content is displayed in the form of videos, photos, memes, and news.

According to BusinessBlogs (2023, Consumers who engage with their favorite brands on social media have a strong relationship with that brand. Consumers who interact with their favorite brand are more likely to have a positive opinion of the brand, stick with it, and spread brand-related information to others. These are the interaction strengths that marketers should use in their actual implementation.

Social media customization can reach target consumers more efficiently than traditional media (Liu et al., 2021). Based on their personalities, social media platforms can estimate target consumers. Useful products, in particular, benefit from various social media marketing tactics, as do fun products such as games and live streams. Consumers are encouraged to share viral messages via social media platforms, such as public sharing on timelines or direct private messages.

Social media entertainment can take many forms, including photos, videos, games, memes, and so on. Everyone craves excitement in their lives, so using entertainment to reach consumers is a good way to increase market size and marketing strategies. According to Barutcu (2007), consumers who engage with their favorite brands on social media have strong relationships with those brands. Similarly, consumers who engage with their favorite brands are more likely to have a positive opinion of the brand, stick with it, and spread information about the brand to others.

In summary, because the data were collected from Cambodian social media users, these SMMAs are appropriate for use in Cambodia. Furthermore, the factor loading from factor analysis shows a high loading (Makmee, 2021).

Based on the results of both methods and the data collected from Cambodian social media users, the SMMAs have been shown to be appropriate for use in Cambodia, with statistically significant results from data analysis. Furthermore, factor loading from factor analysis revealed high loading. After qualifying using both methods, the results were confirmed using appropriate SMMAs criteria in the context of Cambodia. As a result, this set of criteria does not differ significantly from the adopted frameworks. It is just that only 26 of the 30 indicators developed were effective. Furthermore, this research will assist the next generation of online entrepreneurs reach their target audiences via social media. Furthermore, currently of social media users, it would be useful guidance for conducting consumer behavior surveys.

By factor loading, the assessment criteria of SMMAs to achieve purchasing goals among Cambodian social media users included five components: perceived risk, trendiness, interaction, customization, and entertainment, and 27 indicators.

Future Recommendation

Future studies should examine on a specific industry or product to obtain closer results to genuine consumer attitudes. It should be a study of popularly ostentatious sectors on social media and trending with people’s lifestyles. The next study should concentrate on how SMMAs influence consumer behavior to achieve effective results in online business.

Rights protection of research participants

The researchers explained the steps and research processes to those who took part in this study and asked for their voluntary participation. They could withdraw at any time after agreeing to participate. All data provided by participants would be kept confidential, and the overall conclusion would only be revealed if it was deemed beneficial for academic purposes. This research adhered to the research ethics practices in humans. The Board of Ethics for Human Research of Burapha University examined and approved this study to protect the respondent's rights (research project code G-HU 104/2563).

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this research.

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Factors Affecting the Financial Performance of Islamic Banks in Pakistan

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This research aims to evaluate the internal factors influencing the performance of Islamic banks in Pakistan. There are currently five Islamic banks in operation, and data from all five have been used to analyze their performance from 2008 to 2021. The data was collected from the State Bank of Pakistan. To examine financial performance, this study used return on assets (ROA) and returns on equity (ROE) as proxies, and considered both internal attributes (such as liquidity, bank size, asset quality, capital adequacy ratio, operational efficiency, and assets management) and external factors (such as macroeconomic indicators like GDP growth and inflation rate). Ordinary least squares (OLS) estimation is employed to examine the relationship among variables. The estimation findings suggest that all of the internal factors have a strong association with banks' performance. Bank size and asset quality were found to have a positive and significant association with ROA, while asset quality and assets management were associated positively with ROE. Additionally, during the Covid-19 pandemic period, banks' size and liquidity were found to adversely affect ROA of Islamic banks, while operational efficiency had a positive impac t.

Keywords: *Financial performance, Islamic banks, liquidity, Pakistan, Covid-19.*
JEL Classification: D01, E50, G21, L25

The series of crises have shed doubt on the conventional mode of financing and posed some serious questions on the effectiveness of the financial system particularly conventional banking. As a result, there is consensus among stakeholders that the US-led financial crisis of 2007-08 has resulted in an increase in inequality. In addition to finding the solution to the issues in conventional banking, policymakers, practitioners, and academics are supporting the alternative system. Hence, they advocate the effective role of *Shariah*-compliant Islamic banking as an effective alternative. *Shariah*-compliant finance refers to the financial system or products conforming the Islamic jurisprudence. According to Suzuki and Uddin (2016) in addition to profit-loss sharing and interest-free banking, Islamic banks cannot participate in risky, speculative, or gambling activities. Moreover, they can only invest in assets or businesses that are permissible

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(*halal*) as per Islamic jurisprudence. Similarly, as per Beck *et al*., (2013) Islamic banks are not permitted to charge interest (*riba*), take part in speculative or illicit financing activities and are permitted to carry a price on goods and services. Islamic finance emerged as a considerable alternative to conventional finance in the last few decades. According to World Bank (2015), in the past decades' Islamic finance business has flourished rapidly and is expanding at 10-12% annually. Currently, *Shariah*-compliant assets are expected at approximately US $ 2 trillion, covering non-bank financial institutions, banks, insurance (Takaful), capital, and money markets. It further states that the progress of *Shariah*-compliant or Islamic banking is growing not just in Muslim-majority nations but also in non-Muslim nations like Luxembourg, Hong Kong, South Africa, and the UK.

Generally, banks play the role of financial intermediaries to channel the funds from households to the industrial sector, finance investment opportunities, and contribute to economic growth (See. Khan *et al.*, 2021). Besides other factors, the effective role of banks as suppliers of capital primarily depends on their financial soundness which is dependent on the financial performance of the banks. This performance is the outcome of the efficient allocation of funds to the different sectors within the economy. According to Almazari (2011), the effect of a firm's policies, plans, and operations can be measured with its financial performance, which can be reflected in ROE, ROA, and other value-adding measures.

The soundness of the financial system particularly, banks is the pre-requisite for economic growth, development, and equal distribution of wealth among households. As reported by the World Bank (2017) since the aftermath of the 2007-08 financial crisis income inequality has increased in the world. Despite the good policies and intentions, the desired results of equity have not been achieved. To promote equality in socio-economic development, Islamic Development Bank and World Bank revised their mission to provide the leading role to Islamic finance to achieve the objectives of economic development and income equality.

The financial prosperity or performance of the bank helps to analyze the safety of the banking industry and finally the robustness of the financial sector. The stability of the financial or banking structure depends on financial performance and that connection has been discussed extensively in the literature. Apart from financial performance, Mehtab *et al.*, (2015) explore the personality traits related to the knowledge and practice of the customer related to Islamic products in Pakistan. Basit *et al.*, (2021) examine the influence of religion on the purchasing of services or goods provided by Islamic banks, Hadi (2019) evaluated the role of government on the growth of *Musharakah* products in Pakistan.

Several empirical investigations have examined the performance or profitability of conventional commercial banks, like Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2020), Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019), Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019) studied the Indian commercial banks' profitability, Antoun *et al.*, (2018) evaluated the performance of Central and Eastern Europe banks, Khan (2022) evaluated the operative effectiveness of Saudi banks. Additionally, Khan (2022) explored the influence of financing structure on the bank's profitability in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council). With the increase of Islamic banking particularly aftermath of the 2007-08 financial crisis numerous studies have evaluated the performance of Islamic banks in several countries like Ledhem and Mekidiche (2020) study on five Islamic countries, Berger *et al.*, (2019) study on twenty-four countries, Rusydiana and Sanrego (2018) on Islamic banks in Indonesia, Shahab *et al.*, (2016) by using the financial data from 2006-2014 conducted a comparison of conventional and Islamic banks performance, Majeed and Zainab (2021) comparative study uses the data from 2008-2019. However, the studies conducted on Pakistan mostly uses the data from 2006-2014 except for one study that uses that data until 2019 (see. Majeed and Zainab, 2021). No doubt these studies have explicitly investigated the Islamic banks' financial efficiency/performance in the context of Pakistan and other global economies. But all of the studies use the post-2007-08 financial crisis data. But, limited studies have examined how well Islamic banks have performed in Pakistan during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, as per Standard & Poor's (2022) Islamic finance outlook predicts the progress of Islamic finance at the rate of 10%-12%, especially in the post-Covid-19 period. Therefore, the study's goal is to investigate the answers to the subsequent questions.

1. What are the key aspects that affect Pakistani Islamic banks' performance.?
2. How do the Islamic banks in Pakistan perform throughout the Covid-19 pandemic?

The study is unique compared to the existing studies in such a way that it uses the data from 2008 to 2021 of five fully established Islamic banks functioning in Pakistan. It also includes the Covid-19 period in analysis to explore how the Islamic banks' performance has been affected during the pandemic. It is expected that the study's outcome will assist policymakers and practitioners to improve the supply side of Islamic banks by formulating growth-friendly strategies. Particularly, after the failure of the initial launch of Riba free or Profit Loss Sharing (PLS) banking in the country in 1980. However, it has been successful since its re-launching in 2001. While on the demand side, it will assist the investors and depositors to make effective decisions related to their investments and deposits or withdrawal of funds with Islamic banks in Pakistan.

To analyze the banks' performance, both macroeconomics and bank-specific parameters are used in the analysis. The following two responding variables as proxies of performance effectiveness i.e. ROA and ROE are used. Liquidity, bank size, asset management, assets quality, capital adequacy ratio, operational efficiency, growth, and inflation rates are applied as the independent variables. The rest of the manuscript is structured as follows. The Islamic banking overview in Pakistan and literature review is provided in the next section. It is then followed by an explanation of the data, variables, and the study's methodology. The subsequent part provides a discussion of empirical results, followed by the conclusion.

Overview of Islamic finance/banking in the country

As reported by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), interest-free or elimination of *riba* (interest) from the Pakistani economy was started in the 1970s, in this regard significant and practical step was taken in 1980. However, this system fell apart due to its failure to address the issues like *Shariah* compliance, capacity building, etc. Afterward, the government took the initiative to reinstate Islamic banking in 2001. The Islamic banking sector shows moderate growth since 2002 and accounts for 7.8% of assets and 8.3% of deposits of the total banking industry by the end of 2011 (Financial stability review SBP, 2011, p.34). Moreover, a banking sector performance review by SBP stated that the assets of Islamic banks increase to 17% of overall banking assets (SBP, banking sector performance review, 2021).

The banking sector of Pakistan is comprised of 32 scheduled banks which include, 5 public sectors, 20 private sectors (including 5 Islamic banks), 4 specialized banks, and 4 foreign banks (SBP). This shows that Islamic banks comprise 15% of the total banking sector in Pakistan. As per SBP (2021), the total operating branches of conventional banks in Pakistan were 11,360 and Islamic banks have 3,884 branches. It shows that Islamic banks' branches are 25% of the total banks' branches. These facts show that the Islamic banking industry has growth potential, and is a lucrative business opportunity for conventional banks in Pakistan as well.

Literature Review

The empirical studies such as Khan (2022), Majeed and Zainab (2021), Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2020), Ledhem and Mekidiche (2020), Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019), Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019), Antoun *et al.*, (2018), Rusydiana and Sanrego (2018), and Delis and Papanikolaou (2009) examine the performance or factors disturbing the financial performance of the conventional banks. Majeed and Zainab (2021) reported that Islamic and conventional banks' performance is affected by profitability, liquidity, capital adequacy, and risk management. Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2020) and Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019) stated liquidity, asset quality, asset management, and bank size as the internal determinants that improve the ROA of commercial banks. Likewise, Antoun *et al.*, (2018) also found the impact of earnings quality, liquidity, capital adequacy, and bank size on the performance of commercial banks. Delis and Papanikolaou (2009) described the bank's size, industry concentration, and investment environment as the factors that determine the bank’s efficiency.

Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019) explored that operational efficiency, asset management, bank size, and leverage significantly affect the ROA. While bank size, liquidity, asset and management quality have a strong positive effect on ROE. Another study by Almazari (2011) concluded that the size of the banks adversely influences the performance of Jordanian commercial banks, while asset management positively influences the performance. Following a similar methodology, Shah and Jan (2014) use operational efficiency, bank size, and asset management to examine the performance of Pakistan's conventional banks. They reported that ROA and interest income has a positive association with asset management. However, performance and bank size are negatively associated. In the case of banks, loans or credit is considered as one of the income-producing assets of the banks. Hence, the continuous management and monitoring of these assets are required for constant revenue generation, which ultimately contributes to banks' performance.

In contrast, in the existing literature, the major research comparatively examines the conventional banks’ performance with Islamic banks. These studies use the profitability ratios or financial ratios to associate the financial efficiency of these banks (see, Majeed and Zainab, 2021; Islam *et al*., 2014; Ika and Abdullah, 2011; Widagdo and Ika, 2009; Samad, 2004; and Ahmed and Khababa, 1999). Majeed and Zainab (2021) stated that Pakistani Islamic banks are more liquid, highly capitalized, and less risky relative to their conventional counterparts. Islam *et al.*, (2014) using profitability ratios reported that Islamic banks are highly profitable relative to conventional banks in Bangladesh. Samad (2004) explores no specific dissimilarity between the Bahraini conventional and Islamic banks' profitability and liquidity risk. Also, Ika and Abdullah (2011) research on the comparison of Indonesian conventional and Islamic banks explore no significant variance between their performances. The only difference they explore is that Islamic banks are highly liquid compared to their conventional counterparts.

The following studies, Majeed and Zainab (2021), Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2020), Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019), Tai (2014), and Hassan Al-Tamimi (2010) use regression techniques to examine the Islamic banks’ performance in various countries. Most of them use ROA and ROE as dependent variables as performance measures in their empirical analysis. While the study by Hassan Al-Tamimi (2010) reported that cost and branch network (no. of branches) are the significant elements to affect the financial efficiency/performance of Islamic banks in UAE during the period 1996-2008. Tai (2014) examine the performance/efficiency of Islamic and conventional banks in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries between 2003 and 2011. This study found bank size, financial development, and operating cost as important variables affecting the ROA.

The empirical literature found a mixed result of bank size with the performance measures of the banks. In theory, it is anticipated that bigger banks are those with more assets which can help them to have access to more customers to meet their needs by receiving their deposits and providing them loans. Hence, it is expected that larger banks are extra efficient and profitable. Singh and Sharma (2016) established a negative association between ROA and bank size while Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019) stated a positive association. Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019) stated a positive association between bank size and ROA and ROE. Alzoubi (2018) and Alharbi (2017) studies on Islamic banks' also reported that profitability and bank size are positively related. In contrast, Djalilov and Piesse (2016) found no influence of the size of the bank on its profitability. In another study, Yao *et al.*, (2018) found an inverted U-shape association between size and profitability where the bank's size in term of assets contribute to profitability up to a certain extent after that it has an adverse effect on it. Salike and Ao (2017) study on Switzerland found small and large banks were highly profitable than the medium size banks.

Liquidity is an important factor in banking operations, the withdrawal of a large amount of money by depositors could trigger a liquidity issue for banks at any time. On the demand side availability of excessive cash also increases the bank's operational activity which could contribute to its performance. Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019) reported a positive association between liquidity and bank performance While a comparative study on Pakistani conventional and Islamic banks by Majeed and Zainab (2021) found that conventional banks have higher liquidity compared to Islamic banks. Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019) and Yao *et al.*, (2018) also reported a positive relationship between liquidity and profitability. Khan (2022) stated that for Saudi banks liquidity is a primary factor that contributed to operational effectiveness and performance.

Assets quality and management have an important impact on banks' performance. For banks, investments and loans comprises a major portion of their assets. Hence, the quality of the loans and investments directly contributes to the earnings of banks. Poor management of the loans results in poor quality of the loans that will reduce the banks' earnings from these assets on one side, and other side inflating the non-performing loans. Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2020) and Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019) found a significant and positive connection between asset quality on ROA and ROE. Similarly, Salike and Ao (2017) reported that banks' poor asset quality could result in negative profitability.

To keep the banks' soundness to maintain financial stability, regulators rely on the capital adequacy ratio (CAR). It helps them to analyze the true picture of banks' position to meet any unexpected financial situation. Majeed and Zainab (2021), Ali (2020), Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019), and Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019) use the equity-to-assets ratio as a proxy of CAR. The rationale is to examine what proportion of assets are funded by equity or other sources of funds. A higher equity-to-asset ratio suggests that banks' assets are less likely to depend on external funds. Majeed and Zainab (2021) in a comparative study stated that Islamic banks have better risk management and have higher CAR compared to conventional banks. The findings by Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019), Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019), and Salike and Ao (2017) reported the part of CAR in banks' performance.

The level of operational efficiency suggests, how efficiently an organization performed. In banks, operational efficiency is related to the effectiveness of cost and reducing the no production cost. Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019), Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019), and Salike and Ao (2017) explored that the operating efficiency of the bank results in improved performance. Dietrich and Wanzenried (2011) stated that banks with higher operational efficiency shows reported higher profits than banks with lower operational efficiency. Yao *et al.*, (2018) study on Pakistani banks found a negative and strong association between profitability and operational efficiency.

Hence, by adopting the various factors from the existing literature that influence the banks’ performance. This study investigates the factors of Islamic banks’ financial performance. Additionally, based on the review of literature following literature gap is found. Firstly, very limited studies cover the Covid-19 pandemic period, along with using macroeconomic indicators such as economic growth and inflation to scrutinize the Islamic banks’ financial performance, by using recent years' data. Therefore, the study covers the literature gap by adding to the body of knowledge by presenting empirical proof of the performance of all the Pakistani Islamic banks including the period of Covid-19, by introducing the rate of inflation and GDP growth as macroeconomic indicators.

Method

Data

To investigate the internal attributes that contribute to the financial performance, data of all Islamic banks working from 2008 to 2021 in Pakistan is used. The final sample comprises of unbalanced panel data of five banks for fourteen years. The data published by SBP is used. To check for the role of macroeconomic indicators growth and inflation rate data have been obtained from the World Bank.

Variables

The variables used in the study are adopted from the present literature used to observe the performance of conventional or Islamic banks. For example, Majeed and Zainab (2021), Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019), Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019), Shah and Jan (2014), and Almazari (2011) used similar variables. These studies mostly used the ROA and ROE as the dependent variable as proxies of banks' performance. The variables adopted for this study with their description are presented in Table I. The assets quality proxy is computed as a proportion of non-performing loans to the total gross loans as suggested by IMF.

Table 1

Variables summary

Variables	**Descriptions**
Dependent variables	
*ROA (*Return on Assets)	Ratio of net income to total assets
ROE (Return on Equity)	Ratio of net income to total equity
Explanatory variables	
LIQ (Liquidity)	Ratio of cash and cash equivalents to total assets
SZ (Size)	Natural log of total assets
AM (Asset Management)	Ratio of operating income to total assets
AQ (Asset Quality)	Ratio of non-performing loans to total gross loans
OE (Operational Efficiency)	Ratio of administrative expenses to profit before taxes
CA (Capital Adequacy)	Ratio of total equity to total assets
IR (Inflation rate)	Annual inflation rate
GDG (GDP growth rate)	Annual growth rate of GDP

Source: Authors based on Majeed and Zainab (2021), Almaqtari et al. (2019), Al-Homaidi et al. (2019), Shah and Jan (2014)

Research Model

Firstly, Breusch and Pagan Lagrange- multiplier (BPLM) test is performed for the choice of estimation model. The results of the BPLM test reject the existence of panel structure. Therefore, Ordinary Least Square (*OLS*), estimation was applied to estimate the results. Each dependent variable was regressed against explanatory variables by using the mentioned estimation technique.

$$PERF_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 LIQ_{it} + \beta_2 SZ_{it} + \beta_3 AQ_{it} + \beta_4 AM_{it} + \beta_5 OE_{it} + \beta_6 CA_{it} + \beta_7 IR + \beta_8 GDG + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where $Perf_{it}$ represents performance measures i.e. *ROA* and *ROE* *i*th bank at time *t*, β_0 is the intercept, ε_{it} is the random error of *i*th firm at time *t*, β_{0i} denotes intercept for the *i*th firm.

Results and discussion

Findings

The summary statistics are given in Table II. The mean of the ROA and ROE during the observed period was 0.4% and 16.2% respectively. The mean value of ROA and ROE of Islamic banks is less than the mean value of conventional banks operating in Pakistan as reported by Majeed and Zainab (2021). The availability of cash or cash equivalents which represents the liquidity was on average 34% of the total assets.

Table 2

Descriptive summary

Variable	*Obs*	*Mean*	*Std. Dev.*	*Min*	*Max*
ROA	63	0.0049	0.0659	-0.2850	0.1690
ROE	63	0.1625	0.2963	-0.6420	0.9800
LIQ	63	0.3425	0.3258	0.0583	0.9820
SZ	63	18.7256	1.0587	16.6211	21.3667
AM	63	0.0326	0.0088	0.0089	0.0521
AQ	63	0.2639	0.2752	0.0000	0.9210
OE	63	14.1968	88.6418	-63.0502	688.8585
CAR	63	0.0957	0.0670	0.0418	0.3725
INF	63	8.8853	4.5320	2.5293	20.2861
GDG	63	3.5883	2.0511	-1.3295	6.1517

Source: Authors' estimation.

The outcomes of the Pearson correlation are given in table 3. The value of the correlation of all variables is less the 0.5 or 50% which suggests that multicollinearity is not the issue among variables. The results of VIF (variance inflation factor) of independent variables are also presented in table 3, as per the rule of thumb all the values of VIF are less than 10, and the maximum value of VIF is for size variable i.e. 3.56. The VIF values further indicate there is no issue of multicollinearity amongst variables.

Table 3
Pairwise correlation matrix

	ROA	*ROE*	*LIQ*	*SZ*	*AM*	*AQ*	*OE*	*CAR*	*INF*	*GDG*
ROA	1									
ROE	0.33***	1								
LIQ	0.20	0.24*	1							
SZ	0.44***	0.23*	-0.10	1						
AM	0.27**	0.33***	0.14	0.04	1					
AQ	0.23*	0.37***	0.30**	-0.26**	0.39***	1				
OE	0.00	-0.05	-0.06	0.00	0.05	0.00	1			
CAR	-0.32**	-0.36***	-0.07	-0.72***	-0.09	-0.06	-0.03	1		
INF	-0.20	-0.10	0.01	-0.38***	0.45***	0.25**	0.08	0.19	1	
GDG	0.10	0.07	0.04	0.13	-0.37***	-0.10	-0.10	-0.05	-0.06***	1
VIF*			1.14	3.16	1.69	1.59	1.02	2.48	2.09	1.57

Source: Authors' estimation
VIF*: Variance Inflation Factor of independent variables

Table 4
The effect of explanatory variables on ROA & ROE

	ROA	ROE
LIQ	0.029	0.089
	(0.023)	(0.106)
SZ	0.039***	0.011
	(0.012)	(0.054)
AM	1.468	10.757**
	(1.014)	(4.743)
AQ	0.079**	0.298**
	(0.032)	(0.148)
OE	0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
CAR	0.193	-1.065
	(0.162)	(0.757)
INF	-0.002	-0.014
	(0.002)	(0.010)
GDG	0.001	0.010
	(0.004)	(0.020)
CONS	-0.801***	-0.312
	(0.233)	(1.088)
Number of Observations	63	63
Prob. F (Stat)	0.0002	0.0012
R Square	0.411	0.363
Adj. R Square	0.323	0.268

*Source: Authors' estimation. *** p<0.01; ** p<0.05; * p<0.1.*

The O*LS* outcomes on the impact of explanatory variables on the performance measures i.e. *ROA* and *ROE* for the complete sample are given in table IV. The regression results suggest that the explanatory variables have an effect on the performance of Islamic banks functioning in Pakistan. However, bank size and asset quality show a significant positive association with the ROA. While assets management and quality have a positive significant relationship with ROE. Apart from these explanatory variables, other shows a positive relationship with ROA and ROE but is insignificant. The macroeconomic indicator inflation only shows a negative relationship with ROA and ROE but the association is insignificant as well.

Table 5

The effect of explanatory variables on ROA & ROE during the Covid-19

	ROA	ROE
LIQ	-0.007	0.483
	(0.018)	(0.338)
SZ	0.009	0.136
	(0.006)	(0.111)
AM	-0.128	0.194
	(0.434)	(8.095)
AQ	0.026	-0.256
	(0.047)	(0.876)
OE	0.000	-0.001
	(0.000)	(0.006)
CAR	0.261	0.320
	(0.225)	(4.196)
GDG	-0.000	-0.003
	(0.000)	(0.009)
CONS	-0.190	-2.609
	(0.118)	(2.208)
Obs.	10	10
F Sta.	73.974	121.18
R Sq.	0.996	1.00
Adj. R Sq.	0.983	0.99

*Source: Authors' estimation. *** $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$; * $p<0.1$.*

The analysis is performed to examine the performance of banks during Covid-19 i.e. during the years 2020 and 2021. The results are presented in table V. Even though no variable has a statistically significant effect on ROA and ROE. Liquidity and asset management negatively influence the ROA. While asset quality and operational efficiency negatively affected the ROE during the Covid-19 pandemic. But, all the relationships are insignificant. This might be due to the limited number of observations, but the results do infer that the pandemic may have adversely affected the liquidity, asset management, asset quality, and operational efficiency of Pakistani Islamic banks.

Discussion

In Pakistan the Islamic bank’s size contributes to the ROA, suggesting that larger banks have higher ROA or Islamic banks can achieve higher ROA through economies of scale. It further points out that the larger Islamic banks in Pakistan can finance more profitable investment opportunities to increase their revenue and ROA at last. Empirically, Singh and Sharma (2016) reported negative association between ROA and size the bank.While, the outcomes are consistent with the result of Khan (2022) and Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019) that also reported a positive association between the size of bank and ROA. Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019) and Alzoubi (2018) and Alharbi (2017) also reported a positive association. While Djalilov and Piesse (2016) found no effect of bank size on profitability, Salike and Ao (2017) found that the profitability of small and large banks was more compared to the medium size banks. Asset quality is another factor that has a positive and significant effect on ROA. The quality of the assets in banks refers to the quality of the loans given by banks. The quality of the loans indicates the credit risk evaluation of borrowers by the bank. This suggests that Islamic banks through efficient management of loans and by reducing non-performing loans can improve profitability. The positive relationship is congruent with the results of Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2020), Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019), and Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019). The study by Ali *et al*., (2021) stated that Pakistani Islamic banks have superior asset management and quality compared to the country's conventional banks. Likewise, it also endorses the findings of Majeed and Zainab (2021) and Salik and Ao (2017), which states that banks with poor asset quality show lower profitability. The positive and significant relationship between asset quality and bank size with performance suggests that large banks can have better loan portfolios with low non-performing loans. This endorses the Berger *et al.*, (2009) conclusion that better asset quality is related to the bank's size and ultimately to its performance.

For the other performance variable, ROE, all the explanatory variables have a positive effect on performance except inflation. But the relationship of ROE is positive and significant with the proxies of assets management and assets quality. It means that for Islamic banks in Pakistan to improve their ROE need to enhance assets management and assets quality. As assets quality and management are interrelated to each other, therefore, poor asset management could result in poor quality assets, resulting in poor performance. These results are consistent with the findings of Almaqtari *et al.*, (2019) and Al-Homaidi *et al.*, (2019) who also reported a positive impact of asset management and quality on the ROE of banks in India. The positive influence of asset quality and management on probability supports the assumption of Salike and Ao (2017), which stated that the good quality of the assets is the outcome of better asset management that positively affects profitability or could be the opposite for poor asset quality.

The impact of descriptive variables on performance proxies is different during the pandemic showing the negative association of liquidity and bank size on ROA, suggesting that the uncertainty due to the pandemic has an adversarial consequence on Islamic banks' performance. The larger banks may have suffered more due to higher operating costs like branches and employees related expenses. While for liquidity especially cash, there were fewer deposits compared to more withdrawals by the customer due to the overall economic uncertainty. Moreover, for Islamic banks, the availability of short-term investment opportunities is limited because of the availability of *Shariah*-compliant products. Operational efficiency and asset quality showed a negative relationship with ROE, indicating that banks were not efficient with controlling their cost during the pandemic.

Conclusion

In Pakistan, Islamic banking was relaunched in 2001 following its initial launch in 1980, which had been unsuccessful. Hence, the objective of this investigation is to evaluate the determinants of the financial performance of the Islamic banks operating in Pakistan after the relaunch of these banks. To accomplish the research objectives, the study uses five Pakistani Islamic banks' data for the period of 2008 to 2021. The ROA and ROE are used as dependent variables to estimate the performance of the banks. The banks' internal attributes like capital adequacy, liquidity, asset management, bank size, asset quality, operational efficiency, macroeconomic factors rate of inflation, and GDP growth are used as explanatory variables.

The result indicates that various factors of the banks do affect their financial performance. However, bank size and asset quality show a significant and positive relationship with ROA. It specifies that the larger Islamic banks have higher ROA compared to the smaller banks. Additionally, banks with better management of their assets could reduce non-performing loans can also enhance their performance. These results further suggest that Islamic banks need to invest in good quality assets that could result in better performance, failure to do so can adversely affect their performance. This could result in more financial risk for Islamic banks, as these banks cannot use conventional risk management tools. For ROE, asset management and quality have a significantly positive association. It may suggest that Islamic banks' obligations as per *Shariah* compliance to invest in asset-backed investments could improve their profitability.

The findings also show that the internal factors that affect profitability are different than the factors of conventional banks. This variation could be due to the fundamental difference between Islamic and conventional banks. Islamic banks require an additional cushion to accept the unanticipated loss and the transaction costs connected with *Shariah*-compliance to sustain the franchise value (Suzuki and Uddin, 2014, pp.174). They further suggest that Islamic banks must earn additional income to manage the cost related to the *Shariah*-compliance. Moreover, it is observed that the economic uncertainty arising due to the Covid-19 pandemic also adversely affected the Islamic banks operating in Pakistan.

In a nutshell, it has been found that since its relaunch in Pakistan in 2001 Islamic banking has significantly contributed to the financial sector of the country, with support and consideration from the SBP. The market has the potential to grow and Islamic banks can increase their market share by using fintech or digital finance by accessing new customers and reducing their operational costs as well. In the future, a cross-country and industry comparative study by examining additional external and internal factors is suggested to observe the performance and growth of Islamic banks around the globe.

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COVID-19 & Problematics of Global Health Security

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COVID-19 illustrates our fragile and precarious global health security. Global health governance has failed miserably to ensure health security. This study examines the problematics of health security. The findings reveal that the problem lies in the conception of health security. A narrow understanding of the term "security" has been used to define and implement health security at the national and global levels, based on the Westphalian legacy of protecting countries against external public health threats through many emergency measures. Nationalistic and sovereign norms constantly stand in the way of collaboration among states. The problem is primarily interpretation, acceptability, and implementation of the concept. This study recommends that health security be redefined from a human security paradigm. As a second step, revamp the global health governance regime through de-politicizization of WHO, constructing a pandemic treaty and making 'health security a priority .

***Keywords*:** COVID-19, human security, health security, WHO, Global Health Governance.

The global approach for responding to pandemics has been a dismal failure. Covid-19 has been so effective that it has shut down entire nations. While countries and even subnational governments fought aggressively over scarce medical commodities, export bans from the government interrupted vital supply networks. So how did we get into this predicament? When it comes to pandemics, how ready were we as a global community? The cholera outbreaks that ravaged Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of a formal system of international health regulation. However, global governance systems for dealing with epidemics did not develop until the 2002–2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO) serves as the nerve center for enforcing the International Health Regulation (IHR 2005), the basic legal framework for controlling public health.

The rapid global spread of SARS resulted in 774 deaths and an estimated $40 billion cost to the world economy, but existing governance mechanisms were found inadequate. Regulation on a global scale used to be relatively limited, but that has changed recently (Hameiri, 2020). They prioritized the management of ports, airports, and other international entry points and mandated that governments keep tabs on a small subset of infectious diseases (Nur, 2021). Consequently, the world community was unprepared for pandemics like COVID-19. So, what

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precisely did COVID-19 reveal? The Covid-19 pandemic has reiterated the concept of human security, which incorporates the approach of health security. The state-centric concept of national security, which prioritizes territorial integrity through military defence, seems to be an unavoidable characteristic of politics, but it failed to ensure human welfare (Malik, 2021).

There is no consensus on the meaning of the word "health security," despite its widespread use and acceptance in academic and policy discourses. The term's multidisciplinary connotations and uses are primary factors. Health and safety are concepts that cut across many disciplines and serve many purposes. The range of relevance extends from the personal to the national to the international. For instance, health security encompasses the broad domain of public health that protects the fundamentals of people's life at the micro level. National and international "health security" typically refers to protecting populations from contagious diseases and bioterrorism, which pose a threat to both countries' security and stability (Aldis, 2008). Furthermore, 'security' is associated with a methodology since it connotes urgency, authority, and the legal implementation of emergency measures (Kempen, 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights global health governance's 'systematic gaps', which failed to provide health security. This paper has tried to answer why global health governance failed to provide health security in COVID-19? In order to answer this question, this paper is divided into five sections; the first section depicts an image(s) of policy failures and gaps while containing COVID-19. In the next section, By examining the meaning of health security on both the national and international scales, we hope to better understand the causes of policy failures. In the shadow of the state-centric approach, which may be based on nationalism or sovereignty, the concept of health security and other systematic-structural inadequacies may be overlooked. We focus on the human security paradigm, which the United Nations adopted in 1994 to rethink the health security system and fill in the holes we've identified. Lastly, we discuss the problematics of health security while constructing a global health governance regime.

COVID-19 Discourse

An epidemic of 'coronavirus' as a devastating disease appeared to have started in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Wu, 2020). Fearing the virus could spread further, Chinese officials first shut down Wuhan and other major towns in the province (BBC, 2020). Initially, neither the other states nor the World Health Organization supported lockdown policies (WHO, 2020; Kalkın, 2021). China's proposed quarantine of 11 million people "is unique in public health history, hence is certainly not a proposal the WHO has made," Dr. Gauden Galea, the WHO's representative in Beijing, emphasized (Reuters, 2020). It was a time of denial, misinformation, and disinformation regarding the infectious disease. Most crucially, world governments lacked knowledge of how to implement policies to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Yousaf, 2022).

There was a political victimization; US accused China of creating the Corona virus in a lab, putting the world's safety in jeopardy. Meanwhile, US state officials and media outlets slandered China's 'locked-city strategy,' referring to it as a 'political virus’ (Reuters , 2020). Meanwhile, the fatal virus began spreading to other states as well. Eventually, in March 2020, the WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak a "global pandemic." (Cucinotta, 2020). The lockdown strategy against the spread of the coronavirus became the international standard, and states persuaded it accordingly - despite the fact that they initially criticised China's lockdown strategy. However, other nations, such as South Korea, have encountered infectious epidemics in the past (particularly SARS). Therefore, they used a highly centralised 'test-trace-isolate' methodology. Germany and South Korea have initiated testing and contact tracing methods. Immediate hospitalisation preserved low mortality rates, and German hospitals remained operational despite an increase in infection cases. Due to an exclusive policy, health officials utilised a complex network of laboratories and conducted over 500,000 COVID-19 tests per week (Caduff, 2020).

The first country to announce a nationwide lockdown was Italy. Italy's ambiguous model was both terrifying and inspiring. In response to the terrible images of Italy's overcrowded hospitals, many countries have taken similar precautions to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus (Pisano, 2020). States all across the world used a "militarised form" to enact country-wide lockdown policies, deploying huge armies to enforce the restrictions (Sieff, 2020). Experts initially equated Covid-19 to the 1918 influenza pandemic, claiming it was "a virus with equivalent fatality as H1N1 influenza in 1918" (Mineo, 2020). The 1918 epidemic killed more than 50 million people globally (Hagemann, 2020). The frightening part was the scientists' haste in comparing two 'pandemics' and enacting different 'policy' without considering the multiple impacts on citizens.

There have been prior pandemics that have wreaked havoc on the world, with estimates ranging from 2 to 4 million deaths due to the influenza pandemic of 1968 and 1 to 2 million deaths due to the 1957 epidemic. COVID-19 has caused the deaths of 6.26 million individuals worldwide as of writing of this article. Every year, however, the globe witnesses deadly pandemics: 1.3 million people die from tuberculosis, 770,000 people die from HIV infections, and 435,000 people die from malaria (Caduff, 2020). Then, why was the global health system unprepared to deal with pandemics of this magnitude? In fact, we have witnessed such infectious diseases in the recent past in the shape of SARS and COV-1. So which ‘policy’ is best to contain the infectious diseases? Scientists are still arguing in this regard.

The mathematical modelling of infectious diseases cannot be replaced with epidemiological surveillance, even if done routinely. The infectious disease actuality varies at the ground level. Testing, tracking, and isolating are the most practical techniques to manage an infectious disease outbreak. The infectious disease intervention(s) demands a dynamic, geographically focused, and risk-based strategy that can execute in stages. Another significant issue to consider is that every infectious disease intervention must assess the social, economic and political repercussions of the policy as well as the indirect impacts on health. Issues challenging to diagnose are depression, anxiety, or other mental issues that we have found in COVID-19 lockdowns (Ashcroft, 2021).

The number of people who are impacted by a disease is measured in absolute terms by mathematical models. Yet, absolute figures can never be used to guide policymaking because they only serve to instill fear and panic. Temporarily, lockdown policies safeguard individuals. After the lockdowns have been lifted, there will undoubtedly be an increase in the number of infections. There is no escape from the pandemic, but there is an escape from its response. In early period of COVID-19 in hospitals, N95 masks ran out within one week. How can this be possible? Especially after spending billions of dollars over the past 15 years in the health sector. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) inventories were insufficient, and production capacity was outsourced. Due to this inefficiency, community health workers, nursing home residents, and hospital employees were all put at danger. All of these further weakened the global health system. This deficiency raises the question of policy failure: what happened to the billions invested on healthcare readiness? What was the final outcome? It is apparent that the global health care system contains systemic-structural flaws.

Identifying Issues of Health Security at State Level

The traditional idea of state is interpreted and operationalized by the military-centric approach to national security, which focuses around the traditional concept of state. The current health-care system emphasises the importance of protecting sovereignty, economic interests, and state peace from public-health concerns in a systematic manner (King, 2001-2002). Epidemics, pandemics, infectious diseases, and bioterrorism, on the other hand, are (possible) security hazards. As a result, these security threats can wreak havoc on a variety of levels. First and foremost, popular distrust on state institutions may jeopardise the social fabric between citizens and the government. Political instability has worsened economic inequities, particularly in vulnerable regions of the world, as a result of the lack of trust in institutions. Lack of trust starts a vicious cycle that affects governance as well as the operation of institutions, and the ability to address the problem.

The limited state capacity, as per international history, magnified external threats in the form of war (s). In 2001, there was an outbreak of anthrax in the United States. Simultaneously, other infectious diseases such as AIDS, Ebola, and SARS have spread across borders, prompting governments such as the UK, the US, Germany, and France to include identification on their national security objectives and take appropriate preventative measures. The US Global Pathogen Surveillance Act, approved in 2002, followed the Clinton administration's 2001 designation of AIDS/HIV as a priority for national security, and infectious diseases are now recognised as a security threat. In their national security programmes, the majority of states, including the powerful G20 bloc, fail to consider epidemics, pandemics, and infectious illnesses as potential security threats.

Furthermore, Japan's Self-Defence Forces have carried out a "disaster relief" operation to provide logistical and material support in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak. Similarly, in Indonesia and South Africa, the military provided logistical and material support. In addition, military forces in India were deployed as part of 'Operation Namaste,' which supplied logistical, material, and technical support to suppress the virus in response to COVID-19 pandemics. The increased involvement of the 'military' in providing logistical assistance, which resembles a typical war-like effort, could have been an effective method for containing the COVID-19 virus in these states. From a global perspective, however, the strategy is likely to be counterproductive because it could hinder the collaborative effort needed for global public health. It is also crucial to note that infectious diseases do not recognise or differentiate between wealthy and poor countries. So, how can states feel confident about their ability to provide health security to their nationals from ID threats? As long as you don't secure the neighbouring state(s).

Identifying issues of Health Security at the Global Level

Political realism drives the state-centric idea of security on a global scale, and it continues to maintain power. Norm of sovereignty and nationalism dominates in global affairs among states. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the world's leaders established the Global Health Security Initiative (GHSI), a loose coalition of states and international organisations. The US, the UK, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Mexico, and the European Union, as well as the WHO as an observer, are among the GHSI emissaries. The fundamental purpose of this campaign was to highlight the threat of bioterrorism and how states could strengthen the global health system while combating it. Furthermore, the John Hopkins Centre for Health Security launched the Global Health Security Index to track the health systems of 195 countries.

The initiative's major purpose was to look at health security, and how well states can identify, prevent, and respond to infectious disease outbreaks. The US ranked first, as the most capable nation, while the UK ranked second. Nevertheless, since we now know, the US' performance in regulating Covid-19 through 2020 and 2021 has been among the worst of among developed states (West, 2021). However, the effort was criticized for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, there is the issue of 'politicisation.' It raises several questions, in addition to its political motivations: who will be in charge of the security plan? Who is going to be safe? And against what are we attempting to defend ourselves? (Nunes, 2014).

Furthermore, pandemics are essentially public health issues, and effectively combating them requires a multi-sectoral, holistic approach. Basic sanitation and fundamental hygiene systems are lacking in developing and underdeveloped countries; in reality, 9.2 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty, and there is no plan in place to address social exclusion (World Bank , 2022). Furthermore, the approach ignores those states that are subjected to harsh sanctions (in terms of political, economic, etc.), even though the world is rife with military conflicts (Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Libya, Afghanistan) and without resolving such conflicts, how can global health security be accomplished at systematic level?

An Approach to Strengthen Health Security

A human security perspective seeks to ensure that all people are safe from long-term dangers like starvation, sickness, and oppression, as well as from the more immediate dangers posed by disasters and other emergencies. Notwithstanding their differences, human security theory is tied to both human rights and human development (Busumtwi-Sam, 2008). The concentration of 'human security' is on seven security aspects that people need to live in a dignified way to make their lives productive. One of these dimensions is - health security (Alkire, 2003). The customarily practiced idea of health security, in contrast to the human security-driven definition of health security, is solely concerned with infectious diseases. Infectious and non-infectious diseases, as well as communicable and non-communicable syndromes, are all included in this broad category of health risks.

The focus is on multi-sectoral and holistic solutions, such as building the health sector's capacity, ensure universal health coverage, as well as eliminate poverty or induce social marginalisation. Under the guidance of former Pakistani Finance Minister Mahbub-ul-Haq and with strong backing from economist Amartya Sen, the concept of human security was developed at the United Nations Development Programme as part of a holistic paradigm of human development. Global Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Program in 1994 was the first key international document to express human security in conceptual terms with ideas and action (HDR, 1994). Moreover, the focus on the necessity of governing the international arms trade by preventing weapons from being transferred to potential trouble hotspots and urges under-developed states to redirect large amounts of military resources into human development. Additionally, a focus on the need to develop a global governance framework to manage the global human security threats - derived from social contract.

According to critics, human security was used only as a foreign policy instrument by Japan, Canada, and Norway, not even as a strategy to overcome the internal concerns of specific groups by the locals (Bosold, 2005). Since some critics attribute the ambiguities and limited assimilations of the human security concept to the depth and breadth of the concept's theoretical extensiveness, on the contrary, the adherents of the human security notion interpret the conceptual breadth as a source of virtue because it provides the vibrancy and objectivity that the concept requires (Johns, 2014). The interconnection extends from the individual to the national level and then at the global level. All of this indicates that pursuing a fragmented approach to security will not be sustainable. Like, health insecurity can lead to economic instability and political instability, which can contribute to food insecurity. In addition, the human security concept implies the spatial and geographical interdependence of threats. Those inherently indivisible threats indicate that they cannot manage transnational threats like infectious diseases in isolation (Smith, 1998). Another feature of the human security concept is the emphasis on collective action; overcoming global problems can only be accomplished through inter-state collaboration. The concept acknowledges the existence of independent states but doubts their ability to ensure human security on a global scale.

Human security as a concept also empowers non-state actors and transnational civil society organizations to address human security challenges on a global scale. The idea of human security places premium on taking a holistic stance. It refers to the core determinants underlying that health security cannot be accomplished and sustained without addressing specific population groups' social and economic marginalization. The significance of public health initiatives in East Asia has recently been highlighted in academic studies. The strengthening of public health emergency preparation systems is based on rising per capita health spending and better healthcare administration. One of the reasons for East Asian nations' relative effectiveness in combating the coronavirus pandemic is that policy (Sainsbury, 2016). Moreover, 'universalism' underpins the concept of human security. Contrary to traditional development paradigms, which place human vulnerability issues in developing states, however, human security as a concept; recognises a variety of human weaknesses in developed countries, particularly in terms of health security. The COVID-19 pandemic has further disclosed several shortcomings of developed states.

Health Security from Implementation to Sustainability

The question of international collaboration is closely tied to the state's sovereignty. Even though infectious diseases cross national borders and demand global cooperation and systemic joint action, however, states use national sovereignty as an excuse to disregard international norms. The worldwide ecosystem is broad and complex, with more than 175 programs, funds, organizations, and contributors. The United Nations has established a Global Health Cluster coordinated by the WHO, with over 900 partners at the state level and 60 partners engaged at the global level. The partners include organizations (both inside and outside the UN), national governments, and civil society logistics (Health Cluster , 2022). In health emergencies, coordination is essential to guarantee that all actors understand their obligations and collaborate without wasting efforts or imposing bureaucratic barriers. However, there has been a lack of synchronization in international operations, extending from the reaction to earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal – to the Ebola pandemic and now towards COVID-19.

The WHO conducted its own investigation into the spread of COVID-19 ahead of the 2020 World Health Assembly at the urging of international health experts. The 'COVID-19: Make it the Last Pandemic Report' was compiled by the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparation and Response. A team of 13 global health experts, nominally recruited by the WHO but independent of it, compiled the study, released on May 12. As per the findings, 'the COVID-19 pandemic may have been prevented.' The report declared WHO's policies and government responses a 'toxic cocktail'. On January 30, 2020, the WHO labelled the epidemic a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern,' or PHEIC. Additionally, the report suggests that the government would have regarded COVID-19's threat more immediately if the WHO had declared the outbreak a 'pandemic' sooner. However, the term is not specified in the WHO's protocols for dealing with health emergencies.

Experts in global health have long expressed concern that the WHO's capacity to initiate action is severely limited. Furthermore, it does not have the legal authority to mandate a fair, needs-based redistribution of medical supplies, equipment's, immunizations, and medications during a pandemic, placing people in developing countries at greater risk (United Nations , 2021). Former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, seated on the panel, noted that having an empowered WHO was "essential." She further proclaimed, 'If travel restrictions had been imposed more quickly, more widely, again that would have been a serious inhibition on the rapid transmission of the disease, and that remains the same today'. The agency's global health agenda is driven by significant donors who fund it with earmarked monies that account for approximately three-quarters of its total budget. The US, the EU, and the Gates Foundation are influential contributors who influenced the WHO. Margaret Chan, the Director-General of the WHO, asserted that the WHO was not an implementing organization, as it functions across domestic state institutions (Global Policy Forum , 2013).

Furthermore, the health sector is the most corrupt of all government sectors. Corruption diverts not only essential resources intended to promote local and national health but also erodes social cohesiveness and breeds scepticism. Corruption thrives in situations with monopoly power, unfettered authority, lack of accountability, and weak enforcement. As the Haitian crisis revealed, even a significant scale-up of international aid cannot succeed without a coordinated and coherent approach aligned to accomplish the public welfare (Vian, 2008). So, what can be done to ensure global health security? An international framework for global health governance is needed to ensure that the world has a sustainable and resilient health system. It is time for the WHO to be modernised by its most powerful leaders. A World Health Assembly declaration advocating "health for all" was pushed through by "third world" and communist member states in September 1978. The health gap between developed and developing countries was brought to light by the Alma Ata Declaration, which acknowledged health as a human right and socioeconomic concern. Although many affluent countries signed the Declaration, they were wary of redistributive plans. As a result, the United States and other Western European nations reduced their contributions to the World Health Organization. The World Bank's structural adjustment policy redirected the vast majority of international aid money to poorer countries, where it is desperately needed. Governments' contributions to the WHO shifted from mandatory spending to voluntary, project-based aid so that it could achieve its priorities. By the 2000s, donors controlled 80% of WHO's budget. The annual funding for WHO is $5.6 billion. The 2019-20 health budget for Australia's federal government was $120 billion (Hameiri, 2020).

The second phase involves the international community securing long-term financial support. Without appropriate financing, it is much harder to detect and respond to biological threats, help countries construct their national capacities to respond to crises, fund research and development of novel therapies, and implement quick responses. The establishment of a financial intermediary fund necessitates both public and private money. Equity in health care provision needs to be prioritized. COVID-19 is one factor that has exacerbated existing inequalities around the world. The top priority should be developing a global health care system that will ensure the well-being of all people. Preventing the global spread of SARS-CoV-2, which does not care about national borders, is of paramount importance for every nation.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 outbreak has spotlighted inadequacies in our current state-centric approach to health security. The prevailing 'global health governance regime' cannot respond adequately during the COVID-19 pandemic. The necessity of the hour is to switch the lenses. Such a crisis necessitates a reframing of health security in a holistic way. The concept 'holistic' is too broad to explain and implement owing to the strings attached in the form of 'structure' and 'methodology.' In this research, we looked into specific aspects of the human security paradigm that are relevant to health security and have larger implications. Health security as a concept is best suited to giving global health security the "methodology and structure" it needs from a human security standpoint. As states adopted the health security approach within the context of the UN's 1994 human security theory, but failed miserably to implement it as policy, this technique seeks to apply the health security approach at the state, and global levels. However, the problematics of global health security are undeniable. Because that narratives and policies on a global scale are typically the product of power dynamics, the "politicization of WHO" is a significant challenge. The assertion of state sovereignty justifies disregarding international rules and posing further hurdles to collaboration, halting the path of sustainable global health governance. However, whether powerful nations' vested interests will prevent genuine reforms remains. We should hold our political leaders answerable if this historic period passes with just lukewarm improvements. The position of urgency is a 'global health security governance regime' – demanding a harmonious policy to combat future health issues by surrendering the state's sovereignty in the context of health.

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The Impact of Inquiry-Based ChemistryExperimentation on Eleventh-Grade Students' Science Inquiry Process Skills

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As the advocacy for active learning in science classrooms grows, so is the need to cultivate learners' competencies in scientific inquiry. In this parallel convergence mixed-methods study, we examined the science process skills of 221 eleventh-grade students in four out of 30 senior secondary schools, which were selected using a two-stage sampling technique. A six–week chemistry experimentation teaching using the 4-H Inquiry- in -Action model followed a pre-test. During experiments, qualitative classroom observations were made to describe students' science inquiry process skills. While the quantitative data were collected using the Science Inquiry Process Skills Inventory, the qualitative data were collected using the Event Sampling Observation Schedule. Grand findings show a meaningful level of acquisition of all of the science inquiry process skills under investigation. The skill to use evidence to answer scientific questions was relatively easy, and although students were more inclined to drawing and interpretation of graphs, they experienced initial challenges in designing their own experiments, making accurate measurements, and recording the masses and volumes of experimental samples. These results have underscored the need to employ guided inquiry learning strategies in the Liberian science classroom and hence serve to inform science curriculum reform programs in Liberia.

***Keywords**:* 4-H Inquiry - in - Action, measurement, recording, science education, science inquiry process skills

Science inquiry process skills are skills that are used by scientists to construct knowledge for solving scientific problems. Settlage and Southerland (2007) describe these skills as comprising inevitable procedures that constitute physical and mental approaches to solving scientific problems. Science inquiry process skills include problem identification, asking questions, experimenting, measuring, observing, classifying, data gathering, transforming, interpreting, and communication the data (Ġnce et al., 2010). Having been described as the focus of doing science, many scholars have underscored the greater importance of science process skills over the science content for more impactful learning (Çalık & Coll, 2012), and there is a

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widely held belief among teaching practitioners that the development of science inquiry process skills is a core objective of science education (Colvill & Pattie, 2002).

The last two decades have witnessed a growing interest in learners' science inquiry process skills on the grounds that it represents the attributes of scientists (Aktamis & Ergin, 2008; Feyzioglu et. al., 2012; Özgelen, 2012). Many studies, which tested the effects of inquiry-based approach to teaching on high school chemistry students have found greater achievement measures for the students' science process skills in Indonesia (Af'idayani et al, 2018), and Turkey (Balım, 2009; Koksal & Berberoglu, 2014; Şahintepe et al., 2020). With two versions of the inquiry-based model of teaching, in which the experimental group used models, the results showed no substantial overall difference between the independent groups, but phenomenal gains in the science process skills were observed within each group between pre-test and post-test mean scores. While the control group showed meaningful improvement in identifying variables and stating hypotheses, the experimental group experienced gains in identifying variables and stating hypothesis, operational definitions, as well as graphing (Ogan-Bekiroğlu & Arslan, 2014).

Buntern et al (2014) observed a significant positive difference in students' science concept achievement and the science process skills between an experimental group, which was taught using inquiry, and the control group, which was taught using demonstration. Also, Kuhn and Pease (2008) have reported meaningful gains made in the identification of scientific questions, interpretation of data and over time, supporting claims through inquiry-based teaching strategies. Also, the size of the effect of teaching on science inquiry process skills has been reported by Koksal and Berberoglu (2014) to be higher for inquiry-based instruction, than the demonstration method. Students' experiences in science experiments that have been documented include the inclination towards designing their own experiments (Galloway & Bretz, 2016; Koretsky et al., 2011; Yildirim, 2016), the dislike for graphing experimental numerical observation (Berber, 2013), malfunctioning and equipment (Deacon & Hajek, 2011).

These aforementioned scientific shreds of evidence demonstrate the power and potential of self-regulated learning engagements (Khan et al., 2020), and the inquiry-based teaching strategies for enhancing science inquiry process skills, which Aydogdu, (2015) considers most important for the retention and transfer of acquired scientific knowledge. According to Khalid et al., (2016), information overload threatens this retention and subsequent transfer of learning. Little wonder, a cross-section of the scientific community refers to science inquiry process skills as the most important element of scientific reasoning (Aydogdu, 2015), thus its inclusion in curricula at every level of science education is critical, as countries across the economic divide strive to strengthen their science education programs. Achieving this broad goal however requires a professionally trained and motivated science teacher population, material resources, and the administrative commitment to the overall goal of improving science education.

The abstract nature of chemistry and other sciences requires teaching strategies that sustain learners' attention and understanding. According to Said et al., (2016), experimentation like other hands-on activities has the potential to motivate learning. Although the Ministry of Education in Liberia in the right move, adopted a competency-based curriculum in 2018, that emphasizes practical activities in science classes, the inadequacy of science laboratory facilities, or the lack thereof has thwarted the Ministry of Education's initiative to enhance the quality of science education. However, even those schools, which marginally meet these needs are challenged with large class sizes. Therefore, experimentations are done almost exclusively by demonstrations, where the teacher directs the activities and manipulates the physical and cognitive processes of knowledge construction. Learning science in this fashion ultimately leaves the Liberian students with rote memorization of the concepts and procedures in scientific investigations, which may not adequately develop scientific attributes.

It is not very surprising, therefore, that in recent years, the Liberian candidates' performances in the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) have been described by the West African Examinations Council's (WAEC) Chief Examiners' report as below average (WAEC, 2016) or very poor (WAEC, 2017). This persistent suboptimal performance in chemistry may not be unconnected with the prevailing teaching strategies. On the basis of the aforementioned, we sought to examine the science inquiry process skills of grade eleven students of Bong County in Liberia, in the hope that the outcome will serve as a baseline, upon which further studies will be conducted. The overarching justification for the selection of the eleventh grade class in this study was the teachers' overwhelming expressed consent for cooperation.

Research aim and question

This study aimed to examine the effects of the 4-H Inquiry – in - Action on grade eleven students' science inquiry process skills. To achieve this aim, the following research questions further guided the study.

1. How do students' science inquiry process skills compare before and after the implementation of the inquiry-based experimentation teaching?
2. What are students' experiences in the 4-H inquiry-in-action chemistry experimentations that were meant to enhance their science inquiry process skills?
3.

Method

In this mixed-methods study, the Convergence Parallel Mixed-methods design was used. This design involved the collection and analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data at about the same time. Thereafter, mixing and integration of the findings of the two kinds of data enriched the grand findings and led to better interpretation of said findings (Creswell, 2014). This design allowed for the comparison of the quantitative and qualitative findings, and to find possible explanations for contradictions and divergence between the two types of findings. The quantitative component of the study used the One Group Pre-test / post-test Design illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

The one- group pre-test /post-test design

O	X	O
Pre-test	treatment	Post-test

Source: Adapted from Frankael et al., (2012).

In order to ascertain participants' initial perceived science inquiry process skills, a pre-test was administered to the students. Thereafter, instructional intervention, which lasted six weeks followed. Post-tests were administered after the closure of instructions in the following week. Classroom experiments were qualitatively observed in the course of the instructional intervention. At the end of every observation, the field notes were immediately collated and harmonized. This way, information missed by one observer was captured by the other, thus contributing to the overall trustworthiness of the process of data collection.

Study participants

Four schools were purposively selected from a total of 30 on the basis of the availability of laboratory facilities and conducive space for experiments. 221 (135 male and 86 female) students whose mean age was 17 years comprised the sample of study participants. This sample was drawn from a population of 754 students. These figures represent the experimental group of a previous study (Langenhoven & Stevenson-Milln, 2022) for which the current study is a follow-up.

Instruments and procedures

The Science Inquiry Process Skills Inventory (SIPSI) in Appendix B, adopted from Arnold et al., (2013) was used to gauge students' level of acquisition of science inquiry process skills. The SIPSI was crafted in line with the 4-H Inquiry - in - action model of science instruction (Appendix A) by the same authors. The SIPSI comprises 11 items each of which measures an important process skill. The Event Sampling Observation Schedule (ESOS) was researcher designed for recording the verbal and non-verbal observations at every stage of the 4-H Inquiry- in-action process. The outcomes of the ESOS were integrated into the field notes for a thorough description of students' science inquiry process skills in the experiments.

The SIPSI was pilot tested with 41 students from one of Bong County's senior high schools after validation. The Cronbach Alpha reliability was computed in SPSS Version 26.0 and found to be 0.80., indicating internally consistent items (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Every classroom observation and hence recording of events was done by two members of the research team, and the independent records were collated immediately for reliability.

The 4-H inquiry – in - action lesson

Solutions was selected from the Eleventh - grade Liberian National Curriculum on the basis that it is listed among the topics identified as either the least attempted or the least scored in the WASSCE (WAEC, 2016, 2017). The typical class started with the teacher motivating the students by asking a few questions aimed at identifying misconceptions. Thereafter, and in groups of four or five, students were provided with the topic for investigation, as well as the apparatus and reagents needed for the experiment, and asked to carry out a cycle of scientific inquiry by (i) asking a scientific question that will be answered using evidence,(ii) designing an experiment in diagrams,(iii) conducting the experiment according to the design, but the design must be approved by the teacher,(iv) correctly recording observations, (v) presenting the results in tables, (vi) where necessary, plotting the results on graph sheets (vii) explaining the findings to the cooperative and larger (entire class) groups,(viii) and answer the research question that was asked at the beginning of the inquiry using scientific evidence. The experimental activities are found in Appendix C. The teachers' role was to circulate among the cooperative groups to offer appropriate and timely guidance.

As much as possible, teachers refrained from providing explicit responses to questions but rather asked a leading questions in place of an answer. Teachers exercised wait time to allow students to process the information before verbalizing it. These strategies cultivated critical thinking, which is one of the core competencies that inquiry instruction is meant to achieve.

Figure 2. Students working in cooperative groups

Figure 3. Students exploring the density as a distinguishing property of liquids

Figure 4: Students exploring the difference between true solution and suspension using filtration

Figure 5. Students using a triple beam balance to determine the mass of a solid (sodium chloride)

Data analysis

The SIPSI data were placed on an Excel spreadsheet for computation of the composite totals and mean scores. The mean change in the acquisition of the process skills was calculated using the formula.

$$\%\,mean\ difference\ = \frac{posttest\ score - pretest\ score}{pretestscore} \times 100$$

Thereafter, the composite totals were fed into SPSS Version 26.0 for analysis of the shape of the data. Based on the skewed distribution of the scores, which implied that the normal distribution condition was violated even by indication of a Shapiro-wilks value of .017, and box plot shown in Table 2 and figure 6 respectively, a non-parametric statistic, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used to compare the means of pre-test and post-test science inquiry process skills scores at α = .05 level of significance.

Table 2

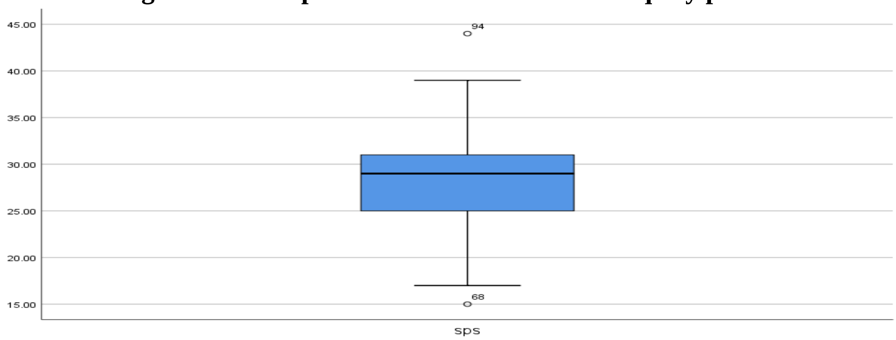
Results of test for normality of science inquiry process skills scores

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
sps	.111	169	.000	.980	169	.017

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Figure 6. A box plot of scores of the science inquiry process skills



Theoretical thematic analysis patterned after Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted by the researcher and three research assistants; all of whom are knowledgeable in qualitative data analysis. The theoretical (deductive) thematic analysis was preferred because of the need to align participants' focused responses with the specific research questions. Therefore, coding was more specifically aligned with the research questions.

Results

The section that follows displays the result of the analysis of the quantitative data, followed by the qualitative data.

Table 2
Results of mean scores per item of students' science inquiry process skills

Science inquiry process skill	Pre-test mean score	Post-test mean score	Mean difference	% mean difference
Using scientific knowledge to form a question	2.51	2.70	0.19	7.56
Asking a question that can be answered by collecting scientific data	2.32	2.57	0.25	10.78
Designing a scientific procedure that leads to answering a question	2.31	2.60	0.29	12.55
Communicating a scientific procedure to others	2.21	2.51	0.30	13.57
Recording scientific data correctly	2.47	2.57	0.10	4.05
Drawing a graph of scientific data for presentation to others	2.12	2.59	0.47	22.17
Displaying data and observations for better communication	2.24	2.47	0.23	10.27
Analyzing the results of a scientific investigation	2.41	2.57	0.16	6.64
Using appropriate science terms to share and explain results	2.39	2.58	0.19	7.95
Using models to make explanations of results better	2.13	2.45	0.32	15.02
Using the results in the investigation to answer the question that I initially asked	2.65	2.77	0.12	4.53

An examination of Table 2 shows that three skills related to data presentation and communication; the skill to communicate a scientific procedure to others, the skill to use scientific terms to share results and the skill to use models to explain results, show mean differences of 13.57%, 7.95% ,and 15.02% respectively. Therefore, with respect to data presentation and communication, the greatest and least perceived gains were made in the skill to communicate a scientific procedure to others, and the skill to use scientific terms to share results respectively. Data recording is the least improved skill with a mean difference of 6.64%. The skill to design experimental procedure shows one of the highest mean difference, 12.55%, second only to the skill to draw graphs (22.17%). The students showed the acquisition of the skill to use evidence to answer a scientific question by a mean difference of 4.53%. This represents the second least developed skill.

Table 3
Results of Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for SIPSI pre-test and post-test scores

		Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test			Test Statistic
		N	Sum of Ranks	Mean Ranks	*p*
	Negative Ranks	65	4599.50	70.76	0.001
Post-test-	**Positive Ranks**	96	8441.50	87.93	

pre-test	**Ties**	8
	Total	169

*p < 0.05, difference is significant

The result in Table 3 shows a higher positive mean rank than negative mean rank, implying that the post-test mean score is, on average higher (87.93) than the pre-test mean score (70.76). The associated p-value for this test is < 0.05, indicating that the difference in the mean ranks is found to be statistically significant. Following are the results of qualitative observation of science inquiry process skills.

Table 4

Themes in the classroom observation on science inquiry process skills

S/N	Related Inquiry science process skills	Themes generated
1	questioning as a science inquiry process skill	Students slowly developed the skill to construct inquiry questions
2	Data display, presentation and communication	Students were excited about drawing solubility graphs and experimental designs
3	Designing scientific procedure for exploitation	Designing experiment is the most difficult skill in scientific inquiry
4	Data recording and analysis of scientific inquiry	Measurement and recording masses challenged students
5	Using evidence to answer a scientific question	Answering the inquiry question was relatively easy

Following is an elaboration on the five themes in Table 4

Theme 1: Students slowly developed the skill to construct inquiry questions

Students could either ask dichotomous questions or generic questions at the beginning of the intervention. Students' questions predominantly started with "what". Fine-tuning and appropriately narrowing the questions down to a specific inquiry item initially posed a challenge but this was overcome once the students realized after several failed attempts that starting a question with "*is*" will overly narrow the scope of response to a *yes"* or *no*. Students gradually learned from the class experience that a good scientific inquiry question that seeks sufficient exploration starts with "*how"* and *"what"*. Therefore, towards the middle of the intervention, students demonstrated fairly good knowledge of scientific questioning skills. The two items that pertained to the level of questioning skills; one being the skill to use scientific knowledge to form a scientific question, and the other, the skill to ask a scientific question that can be answered by collecting data, could not be distinguished, since forming a question is a cognitive process, and cannot be directly observed, but can only be determined from the resulting question that is asked, after the cognitive processes of forming the question.

Theme 2: Students are excited about drawing solubility graphs

Students demonstrated excitement about drawing of solubility graphs in classroom observations, much more than they did in drawing diagrams on poster sheets for display. This preference was demonstrated in the observed clamoring to draw the axes, locate the point, and join the points on the graph. Therefore, literally, every segment of the graphing activity aroused students' interests. However, the most demonstrated ability was in the use of scientific terms, followed by the communication of scientific procedures to others. The most difficult skill observed was the use of models to explain results. However, the most highly demonstrated ability was the use of scientific terms, followed by the communication of scientific procedures to others.

The most difficult skill, revealed in classroom observations, was the use of models to explain results.

Theme 3: Designing experiment is the most difficult skill in scientific inquiry

Students encountered lots of difficulties in figuring out the experimental procedures although the materials needed for the experiments were provided. Teachers initially provided a tactful guide, until students gradually realized that the procedure really depended on the materials present. It worked more or less like a jig-saw puzzle. Realizing this, students started to suggest procedures. Although time – consuming, this gave rise to a gradual mastery of the skill with time. With this mastery came a heightened interest and motivation to design their own experiments. Therefore, a meaningful gain in this skill was realized towards the end of the intervention.

Theme 4: Measurement and recording challenge students

Principally, the measurement of masses using the triple beam balance posed a challenge to students. Most students made frequent errors in subtracting the mass of the beaker from the total mass of the beaker and salt, to obtain the mass of the salt. Also, correctly reading volumes on graduated cylinders, and thermometers temperatures was initially difficult. Students recorded data with difficulty, especially given that they were challenged in the use of consistent decimal places in reporting.

Theme 5: Answering the inquiry question is easy

Students demonstrated satifactory skills in using evidence to answer a scientific question. Classroom observation notes indicate students' emphatic use of data as evidence in their responses to scientific questions. Once the experiment was conducted, and the findings were clearly written, students realized even at the start of the interventions that answering the inquiry question required just using the findings as evidence in answering said science inquiry question.

Discussion

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

Quantitative results show that every skill under investigation was enhanced to varying extents. The first three highly acquired skills in decreasing order being; the skill to create a graph for presentation to others, the skill to use models to explain results, and the skill to communicate a scientific procedure to others. The least three acquired skills in decreasing order are; the skill to analyze the results of a scientific investigation, the skill to use the results of investigation to answer the scientific question, and least, the skill to record data accurately.

The qualitative data supports the quantitative findings to a large extent in the sense that students developed the skill to construct inquiry questions slowly. Also, the fact that students' excitement was drawn from the graphing activity and gradually mastered the skills for designing experiments is also an indication of gain. The most enhanced skill being the skill to create a graph for presentation to others was confirmed by the qualitative finding. Those skills that posed serious challenges to students were gradually overcome with time. Therefore, it can be implied that the two types of results support each other and converge on a grand finding that students' science inquiry process skills were significantly enhanced by the inquiry-in action model of teaching chemistry experiments.

The divergence in the outcomes of the two types of data regarding the most and least gained skills suggests the presence of an unknown variable. Most probably, this observation may just have come from the limited representativeness inherent in qualitative samples compared to quantitative ones. However, irrespective of this unexpected observation, both types of data converge at the finding that the 4-H Inquiry- in- action model of teaching improves all 11 science process skills under investigation. This grand finding is conclusive and consistent with those of Af'idayani et al., (2018) in Indonesia and (Balım, 2009), Koksal and Berberoglu (2014) and Şahintepe et al., (2020) in Turkey.

The finding that drawing of solubility graphs tended to attract students' attention more than diagrams on poster sheets and sheets of paper may have been derived from the newness of the activity on one hand, and the interest generated from the systematic nature of graph plotting on the other. Given that this activity represents the highest score in the quantitative data, and the fact that it is supported by the qualitative findings, it may be worthwhile to suggest that graphing is a motivating activity in science teaching, and it should be encouraged in science classes. Ogan-Bekiroğlu and Arslan, (2014) also realized great improvement in students scientific skills that included graphing. However, drawing graphs does not always excite students as revealed in the study of Berber (2013). Students in this study feared graphical representation of data in addition to unit conversion. These contradictory findings probably imply that the type of activity that excite learners is context dependent.

Students' skill to form and ask scientific questions developed with time and practice. Most students initially found it difficult to ask specific questions related to the investigations. A typical question presented in one group on an activity to determine the effect of temperature on the rate of dissolution of a salt was

What will be the reaction between the salt and water at different temperatures?

After several prompts and guidance, the students figured out that the question was derived from the title of the activity. After several trials, and when eventually the teacher led them to writing the inquiry question. One student discovered the trick in writing the inquiry question from the title of the inquiry in the following statement:

> *I know now how to write the question; just replace the "to determine" at the beginning of the title of the activity with "What is" and put a question mark at the end.*
>
> Therefore, if the activity is; *to determine the effect of temperature on the rate of dissolution of a salt, the investigative or scientific question would be; what is the effect of temperature on the rate of dissolution of the salt.*

Although the quantitative finding suggests that student found it harder to form questions than asking questions, observation field notes could not delineate these two skills, because the mental process of forming a question is latent, and could not be observed directly. To find students being more challenged with forming scientific questions than asking a scientific question, after being formed is expected, because as Reiff (2002) puts it, the hardest thing to do is to ask the right question, which depends on how the questions are formed. The students' demonstration of questioning skills seems a key indicator of the overall success of the 4-H inquiry model of instruction. Wide divergence in the two types of findings on data communication skills, may be indicative of a truly multi-level skilled class.

Designing experiments constituted an early challenge, which may have been caused by its strangeness in an education system where instructions are neither patterned after scientific inquiry investigations, nor do WAEC tests reflect guided inquiry items. It is not entirely surprising that the quantitative finding shows considerable improvement in this skill, because classroom observation shows an initial difficulty, which was eased towards the end of the intervention. This activity apparently posed a similar challenge in the studies of Galloway and Bretz (2016), Koretrsky et al (2011) and Yidirim (2016). However, one thing that is common to all, is that irrespective of this challenge, the students acquired and developed the skills to design their own experiments with time.

Classroom observation revealed that the low mean scores on the skill to record scientific data may have come from the difficulties encountered by students in calibrating, weighing and recording masses. This is similar to the observation in Deacon and Hajek's (2011) study, where students complained about defective and malfunctioning equipment. The students in this study encountered difficulties with triple beam balances in determining the masses of solids and yet demonstrated motivation to design their own experiments. Students were frustrated with these measurements, and had to spend several minutes getting a dependable reading that will be acceptable by all group members. Students were not accustomed to ensuring consistency in units of measurements and decimal places for scientific measurements and reporting.

Conclusion and implications

This study aimed to examine the science inquiry process skills of grade eleven students in Bong County. Although there is an initial difficulty with getting students to acquire mastery in skills that they are not too often exposed to, this can be overcome with appropriate guidance in teaching. The study has found that the 4-H Inquiry – in - action model of teaching is effective in enhancing all 11 science inquiry process skills under review to varying extents. Students find the skill to use scientific evidence in data to answer scientific question reactively easy. Students are most excited about drawing and interpreting graphs of solubility. However, they appear to be more challenged by the acquisition of the skills to design experiments, make accurate and precise measurements of masses and volumes of experimental samples.

These results have underscored the need to employ guided inquiry learning strategies in the Liberian science classroom and should serve to inform curriculum reform programs in Liberian science education. This further implies that teachers' professional developments in science inquiry process skills is critical to the students' long term acquisition of these skills. Specifically, teachers' investment of time and energy in developing students' skills to design experiments and make accurate measurements in laboratory activities is needed. Emphasis should be made on students' inquiry process skills in science activities because these truly represent and identify scientists.

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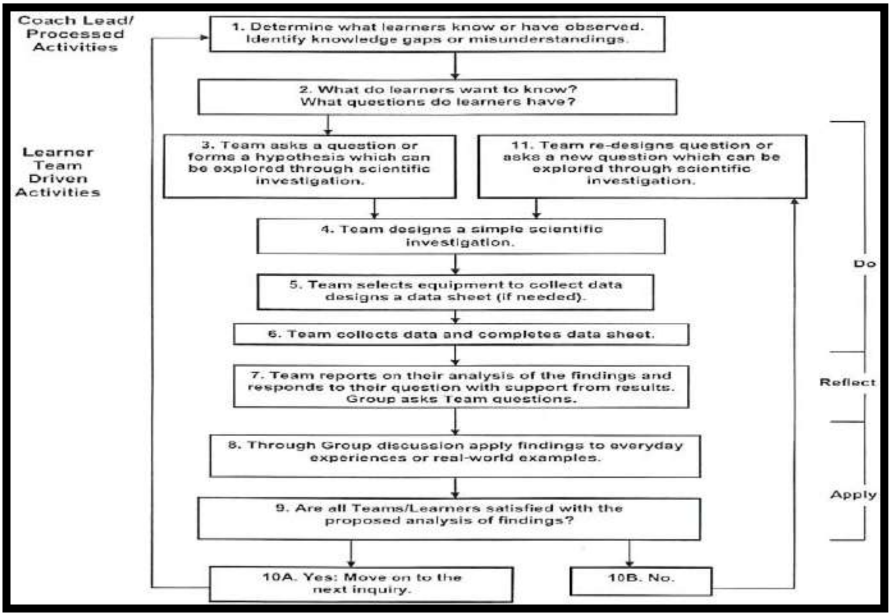
Appendix A: The 4-H Inquiry-in Action Model



Appendix B: Science Inquiry Process Skills Inventory

Section A: Background information of respondent

1. Age: ----------
2. Sex/gender (Place a tick in one of the boxes as applicable to you).

a. Male: ☐

b. Female: ☐

3. Name of school: ____

Section B: science process skills scale

Below is a scale that has statements/sentences called items in the middle. Carefully read each statement and then circle (○) one of the options **(N, ST, U, A)** on the right of the scale that most appropriately applies to you under the response column. In the response column,

N = Never
ST = Sometimes
U = Usually
A = Always

Item	Item	Responses			
1	I can use scientific knowledge to form a question	N	ST	U	A
2	I can ask a question that can be answered by collecting data				
3	I can design a scientific procedure to answer a question				
4	I can communicate a scientific procedure to others				
5	I can record data accurately				
6	I can use data to create a graph for presentation to others				
7	I can create a display to communicate my data and observations				
8	I can analyze the results of a scientific investigation				
9	I can use science terms to share my results				
10	I can use models to explain my results				
11	I can use the results of my investigation to answer the question that I asked				

Instructions for handing in the survey sheet

Thank you for completing this survey sheet. Please carefully go over the responses to be sure that you have selected the right responses. Thereafter, please make sure to hand in the survey sheet to the research assistants. Once more, I thank you for your time and kind cooperation.

Appendix C: Experimental Activities

Activity 1: The effect of particle size of a solid on its solubility in a liquid

Students were provided with the following
4 cubes of sugar
6 test tubes
1 Wash bottles containing water
1 stopwatch

In this activity, students in their groups were given the following instruction.

In your respective group and using the materials provided,

1. Design an experimental procedure to determine the effect of the molecular size of sugar (solute) on its solubility in water (solvent).
2. Carry out the investigation, make keen observations and record your observations on a sheet. Data should include
a. time taken for the sugar samples to dissolve,
b. temperatures of the water
3. Note your observation
4. What is the practical everyday application of this investigation?

Activity 2: The effect of temperature on the solubility of a solid in a liquid

Students were provided with the following
4 Sugar cubes
1 Thermometer
3 beakers holding water at 3 different temperatures
6 Test tubes

In your respective group and using the materials provided,

1. Design an experimental procedure to determine the effect of temperature on the solubility of sugar (solute) in water (solvent).
2. Carry out the investigation, make keen observations and record your observations on a sheet. Data should include
a. the temperature of the water in the beakers just before pouring it.
a. time taken for the sugar samples to dissolve,
c. date and time, and
d. names of group members.
3. Note your observation
4. What is the practical everyday application of this investigation?

Activity 3: The effects of intermolecular forces on miscibility and solubility of one liquid in another

The materials provided were as follows;
6 test tubes
5 beakers, one each containing water, kerosene and vegetable oil, vinegar, green alcohol
3 test tube holders
In your respective group and using the one set of materials at a time,

1. Design an experimental procedure to determine the effect of intermolecular forces on the solubility of two liquids.
2. Carry out the investigation, make keen observations and record your observations on the activity sheet. Data should include responses to the following
a. which two liquids are miscible?
b. why are the two liquids miscible?
c. which liquids are immiscible
3. Note your observation
4. What is the practical everyday application of this investigation?

Activity 4: Plotting and interpreting solubility graphs

The table below shows experimental values of solubility of KNO_3 per 100mL of water measured at different temperatures.

Solubility(g/100mL	35.1	50.0	60.2	90.0	110.0	140.0	140.0	140
Temperature(^{0}C)	25	30	40	50	60	70	80	90

A. Plot the graph of the solubility of KNO_3 [The plotted graph is attached]
B. Indicate on the graph area that shows
(i)unsaturation,
(ii) saturation and
(iii) supersaturation
A. From the graph, indicate the solubility of KNO_3 at 55^{0}C
B. At what temperature will 80g of KNO_3 solution be exactly saturated in 100cm^3
C. What mass of salt will precipitate if it is cooled from 85^{0}C TO 55^{0}C?
D. If 20g of KNO_3 has been added to 100cm^3 of water at 30^{0}C, how much solute must be added in order to make it saturated?

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The Role of Brand Love, Trust, and Commitment in Fostering Consumer Satisfaction and Loyalty

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Some logistic companies faced a lot of competition. The firms need to applying specific approach to exist and competitive advantage through specific brand. Yet, few research has examined consumer satisfaction with brand awareness-based consumer loyalty. So, it is essential to undertake this study in order to comprehend how customer satisfaction and loyalty are evolving over time. This study investigates the relationship between brand loyalty, brand love, and consumers' satisfaction with Indonesian logistic and courier services. A sample of 710 customers from a survey study and structural equation modeling are used to assess the research assumptions (SEM). The empirical data show that consumer pleasure has a positive and significant influence on consumer brand loyalty and trust. Customer pleasure has a detrimental effect on brand loyalty. Also, consumers' emotional connections have a positive and significant influence on their loyalty. Consumers' emotional connections act as mediators in the relationship between customer loyalty and contentment. Further research is needed to validate the findings across the region and industry because this study only looked at courier and logistics consumers in Indonesia. The marketing and psychological insights from the current study were helpful to the management of courier and logistics organizations. The leaders must improve the promotion of their brand and products in order to grow their relationships with customers. This study illuminated the psychology of consumer decision-making by developing and evaluating a model of emotional attachment and consumer psychology .

Keywords: Consumers' satisfaction, Consumers, emotional bonding, Consumers loyalty

JEL CODE: C63, C83, D12, D41, E21

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The pandemic of COVID-19 has influenced many effects on everything including in business (Blaique et al., 2022). Many companies failed and struggle to survive. Delivery service is one of the products which is currently important to the society in this country. Especially during the pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic. The government recommends all citizens to undertake more activities from home in order to reduce the prevalence of the COVID-19. Most offices have started implementing work from home policies since last year (Gupta et al., 2022; Heinonen & Strandvik, 2021). In these conditions, delivery services are highly needed by the community. How can society fulfill all their needs even though they don't go out of home. It causes many new delivery services start to emerge. Starting from delivery goods, so many purchasing food to deliver from one place to another even til now. This condition is a big challenge for shipping services that existed for a long-time including company which provided shipping service. Consumers' retention depends on brand love, devotion, and trust in addition to happiness and loyalty (Karim et al., 2022; Suhan et al., 2022).

According to some research, a person's decision to continue with a brand can be influenced by a variety of things. Ali et al., (2020), Ali and Majid (2020), Makudza (2021), Miraj et al., (2021), and Närvänen et al., (2020) claim that cultural, experiential, motivational, and psychological factors affect consumers' decisions to utilize a product. In addition to these factors, brands that were developed in response to emotional and personal experiences have an impact on consumers' decisions to switch to alternative goods and services (Das et al., 2019; Fusva et al., 2021; Junaidi, 2022). But management philosophies and top-notch customer service also have a big influence on what consumers decide (Movarrei et al., 2021; Rocco & Selinšek, 2021). During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, some companies which provided courier and logistic services faced to economic downturn. Furthermore, the information and technology development brought the traffic competition and market share among service provider. However, the quality-of-service play significant role to consumer satisfaction in Indonesia (Junaidi et al., 2022), Malaysia (Othman et al., 2021), UK (Movarrei et al., 2021). In private sector, the COVID-19 pandemic also pursues the company to reframing service innovation (Blaique et al., 2022; Heinonen & Strandvik, 2021).

One of the actions to satisfy consumers are by providing services to consumers as well as possible. A service is defined as any action or sequence of acts that one party can perform for another party that are essentially intangible and do not result in ownership. If the services meet the required criteria and are good, consumer satisfaction will be high (Kotler & Armstrong, 2014; Saha & Mukherjee,2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Consumer satisfaction measures how satisfied a person is with their experience after comparing it to their expectations (Ajmair et al., 2020; Othman et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022). After consumers feel satisfied with the products or services that they got, consumers will compare the services provided. Then they will recommend to other people to buy at the same place. In order to survive in this competitive world, the companies must be providing variety of services that offered. Not just package delivery, but also offers financial services businesses, such as Cargo, fund distribution and bank channeling. Especially during this current situation, which makes service quality is the main thing that must be prioritized to customers satisfaction.

One aspect of reliability that contributes to the quality of the service that will impact the degree of consumer satisfaction is offering good direct service from the first time the consumer makes a transaction (Suhartanto et al., 2019). However, prior studies more concern to banking and private company. Furthermore, there are also based on Western context. Moreover, lack of study which validate brand bonding as one of unity on the business and marketing contexts. Hence, study in private and public companies in developing country such as Indonesia is worthy. It has the ability to develop into a creative business in order to fulfil its vital role as a means of good delivery and to live up to community expectations (Karim et al., 2022).

By examining the connection between consumer happiness and emotional bonding, such as brand loyalty, consumer commitment, and band trust, this study bridges the information gap mentioned earlier. It also supports the notion that emotional bonds between clients can act as a bridge between client loyalty and client satisfaction. Närvänen et al., (2020) and Othman et al., (2021) also recommended to examine brand as facilitator to bridge relationship between company and consumer. Hence, there is a need study based on developing countries such as Indonesia.
RQ1. Can the emotional bond between consumers have a positive and significant impact on consumer satisfaction?
RQ2. Does an emotional connection affect a customer's loyalty?
RQ3. Can emotional ties between patrons influence how loyal patrons behave and how satisfied they are?

Both theoretical and practical advancements were accomplished in this effort including the relationship between consumer pleasure, consumer emotional attachment, and consumer loyalty is examined; previous studies such as Suhartanto et al., (2019), and Zhang et al., (2020) have reviewed this relationship.

Literature Review

Service quality

Service quality defined as the whole evaluation which carried out in providing services to consumers (Mursid & Wu, 2022). Furthermore, consumers evaluate the superiority and features of product or service which provided by the firm. The impressions, unique experiences, and views of the users ultimately determine how well a service is rated. Consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction essentially refers to the discrepancy between expectations and actual performance. If the perceived service is as expected, then the quality is perceived as good and satisfying. When consumers feel high value from their experience, consumers will tend to express positive behavior and intention to use the same of product and service. The perceived value of the product in terms of tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, certainty, and businesses' empathy all have a significant impact on consumer purchasing decisions (Fida et al., 2020). The resource, information, personal interaction, and innovation quality are additional five service quality characteristics (Gupta et al., 2022). It is shown that service quality can be assessed by comparing consumers' perceptions of the goods and services they actually receive or accept (perceived service value) with the services they genuinely anticipate or desire (expected service). It suggests a strong relationship between consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty.

For every marketing company, including consumer happiness and loyalty for both manufacturing and services, Saha and Mukherjee (2022) claim that service quality care or service quality greatly helps to the construction of differentiation, positioning, and competitive strategies. Generally, service is a pleasant feeling provided to a customer lengthways with accessibilities and rewarding all their needs. This service is an effort to provide pleasure to consumers and meet their needs. The dimensions of facility superiority SERVQUAL is a scopes of amenity quality which the service that offered has several aspects that can be used to determine the level of quality. From the whole theory refers to service quality (SERVQUAL) concept, based on five dimensions of quality, which are tangibles (direct evidence), reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Hanaysha, 2016; Jain et al., 2022). Consequently, SERVQUAL is a main issue to enhance the consumers' satisfaction and loyalty. Today, the global business competition has extremely dynamic, hence organizations need to develop innovation and embrace consumers' satisfaction through customers' attraction and and satisfaction (Marcos & Coelho, 2021; Nasir et al., 2021). It plays important role to enhance consumers' loyalty. The service quality also leads to improved consumers' satisfaction and value attributions toward emotional response and initial service evaluation.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the emotion of contentment or dissatisfaction that someone has after comparing the results of the product or service under consideration to the results that were anticipated (Grönross & Voima, 2013; Kotler & Armstrong, 2014). Consumers who are happy with the goods and services they receive are more likely to repurchase goods and employ the same services when they need similar goods in the future because they feel they received value. two types of co-creation. It occurred because of positive interaction between companies and consumers. It suggests that in order for consumers to make repeat purchases, which make up the majority of the business's revenue, they must be satisfied. On the other hand, clients may switch to competing products if their satisfaction levels are low. In addition, how a person feels after comparing the performance or results to his or her expectations affects how happy they feel. Hence, satisfaction can be determined by contrasting the services or results that customer received with their expectations. The products or outcomes must at least live up to or even beyond the expectations of the customers. Furthermore, in this context, companies and consumers' have same opportunity and position.

Some factors which potentially influence consumers' satisfaction upon the business sector including products and services relations between companies and consumers, as well as brand and consumers' trust. Consumers' satisfaction is related to the quality service of the firms provided. It also correlation to company performance (Anantharaman et al., 2022; Basit et al., 2021; Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021). Consumers' satisfaction is pursuing the companies provide services continuously. The consumer loyalty, commitment, company image, trust, and being proud of using the products and services. Customer loyalty can be measured based on these as indicators (Hanaysha, 2016; Kalia et al.,2021; Su et al., 2022). The companies must obtain consumers loyalty to ensure their existence and competitive advantage within a global market (Anantharaman et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2022). Several previous studies have stated that there is a relationship between consumer satisfaction and services provided by the firm. Furthermore, consumers' satisfaction is one of the factors that influences consumers' loyalty (Fusva et al., 2021; Jain et al., 2022). Quality and consumers' satisfaction thus remain a significant source of competitive advantage for businesses existency. Consumers' loyalty also comprises of attitude and behavior components about the interest object.

Emotional bonding

Consumers' emotional and psychological reactions to a brand are referred to as emotional bonding (Das et al., 2019; Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021). It demonstrates how closely a brand and the psychology of its audience are related. Moreover, emotions were shown in consumer assessments of their own experiences. Also, there is a connection between customer behaviour and brand awareness, showing that consumers' brand experiences act as emotional stimuli (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021). The emotion factor also has a correlation with consumers' brand connection, passion, and affection. The awareness and loyalty of consumers are the results of the emotional brand of consumers. Additionally, consumers' pleasure is determined by their emotional characteristics, such as emotional attachment and brand loyalty. The feeling of emotional connection is undoubtedly linked to brand love, consumer loyalty, and brand trust. The term "emotional quality" also refers to psychological elements that consumers use to convey their loyalty to and trust in a brand. Also, there is a direct link between how an organisation is seen by its audience and how successfully it interacts with them. Because of this, how customers feel about a company's products affects how they act. As a result, the logistics and courier services offered to clients might take into account their feelings (Kalia et al., 2021). Emotional bonding includes all forms of brand commitment, brand love, and brand loyalty (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021).

H1 Consumer happiness has a strong and positive impact on customer brand loyalty.
H2 Consumer happiness has a positive and significant impact on a brand's ability to retain consumers.
H3 Consumer happiness has a big and positive impact on consumer brand trust.

Consumers' Loyalty

In marketing literature, the loyalty and contentment of consumers are critical and strategic topics. It became apparent how consumers behaved towards various product categories, retailers, services, and brands (Mostafa & Kasamami, 2021). Furthermore, this process influnced by consumers' satisfaction and how far their relationship to brand. It depends on the positive value of products and services which consumers obtain from business process. Loyal consumers usually make the same purchases again. These consumers are willing to recommend the brand's products to other consumers. In addition to making purchases across all product and service categories (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021; Mursid & Wu, 2022). Yet, a person who continues to use a product could not be loyal because they lack other moving options, for example, because of the cost of moving, the suitability of the services, the product quality, or even because they worry about losing out on deals or discounts (Karim et al., 2022). Emotional ties seem to have an impact on consumers' resistance to switching brands. Consumers are more likely to stay with a brand or business if they have positive feelings about it, trust it because it satisfies their needs and wants, and feel proud to use it. These favourable feelings may manifest as loving (or even falling in love with) the service or business.

H4 Consumer brand love has a large and positive impact on brand trust among consumers.
H5 Consumer trust has a large and beneficial impact on brand loyalty.
H6 Consumers' brand loyalty is positively and significantly impacted by their love of the brands they use.
H7 Consumer brand trust has a huge and positive impact on customer loyalty.
H8 Brand loyalty has a big and positive impact on customer loyalty.

Method

Research Design

The biases of all the measurement items were investigated in this study using pretest and pilot testing. It was used to identify different participant replies to the questions (Hair Jr et al., 2019). An online survey was distributed to Indonesian courier and logistics users to help weed out research participants who weren't qualified. Data collected during February 1, 2022 to March 30, 2022 and obtained 755 samples, these respondents were invited by social media platform and asked about their personal experience before fill the questionnaires. This study rejected 15 samples due to the unsuitability (and non-consistency) of the samples: for example, the consumers experiences were more than 1 year. This study collected 710 valid data and the respondent rate was 94.03%. Thus, nonresponse bias should not be a concern. The items scale of consumers' satisfaction refers to Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh (2021), brand trust was adopted from Anantharaman et al., (2022), brand commitment refers to Kalia et al., (2021), and the scale for brand love from Basit et al., (2021), while consumers' loyalty was derived from Kalia et al., (2021) and Mursid and Wu (2022).

Results

Pilot study and descriptive statistic

All constructs had Cronbach's alpha values more than 0.8, showing strong reliability for all assessment items, as measured by the pre-test and pilot test values. Thus, it fits the observed data well. Table 2 shows that the value of mean differences is stated in standard deviations. Therefore, the result of this step is one-half of the standard deviation. It implies that Indonesian courier and logistic consumers satisfaction play important role to influence their decision and intention to use the company services. Moreover, the standard deviation for customer loyalty and emotional bonding is low compared to mean values. It therefore closely matches the observed facts. The Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was utilised to ascertain the relationships between the variables (such as consumer happiness, emotional attachments, and consumer loyalty). It is employed to evaluate the parametric statistic and interval data for each of the variables described (Hair Jr et al., 2019).

Table 2
Correlation matrix for measurement scales

Constructs	Mean	SD	CS	BL	BT	BC	CL
CS	5.34	0.78	**0.852**				
BL	5.53	0.64	0.584**	**0.818**			
BT	5.50	0.64	0.692**	0.548**	**0.824**		
BC	5.69	0.68	0.541**	0.417**	0.692**	**0.438****	
CL	5.73	0.68	0.330**	0.525**	0.399**	0.330**	**0.489****

Note: CS: Consumers' satisfaction, BL: Brand Love, BT: Brand Trust, BC: Brand Commitment, CL: Consumers' Loyalty

SD: standard Deviation

Diagonal elements are the square roots of the AVE for each construct

Pearson correlations are shown below the diagonal
Significant at *: $p < 0.05$, **: $p < 0.01$, ***: $p < 0.001$

Measurement model

Maximal likelihood estimation was used in this study's measurement model, which was run using the AMOS 22 programme. Table 3 demonstrates that the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model accurately recreates the covariance matrix of the measured variables (Hair et al., 2019). All measurement items and constructs have outstanding convergent validity and reliability, according to the model fit and Cronbach's alpha for each construct.

Table 3

Measurement and Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results

Constructs	MLE estimates factor loading/ measurement error		Squared multiple correlation (SMC)	Composite reliability (CR)	Average of variance extracted (AVE)	Cronbach's α
Consumers' Satisfaction				0.917	0.615	0.908
CS1	0.718	0.484	0.516			
CS2	0.809	0.346	0.654			
CS3	0.766	0.413	0.587			
CS4	0.804	0.354	0.646			
CS5	0.787	0.381	0.619			
CS6	0.870	0.243	0.757			
CS7	0.723	0.477	0.523			
Brand Love				0.928	0.616	0.909
BL1	0.766	0.413	0.587			
BL2	0.832	0.308	0.692			
BL3	0.800	0.360	0.640			
BL4	0.809	0.346	0.654			
BL5	0.765	0.415	0.585			
BL6	0.774	0.401	0.599			
BL7	0.796	0.366	0.634			
BL8	0.733	0.463	0.537			
Brand Trust				0.902	0.570	0.900
BT1	0.806	0.350	0.650			
BT2	0.801	0.358	0.642			
BT3	0.754	0.431	0.569			
BT4	0.728	0.470	0.530			
BT5	0.717	0.486	0.514			
BT6	0.751	0.436	0.564			
BT7	0.722	0.479	0.521			
Brand Commitment				0.846	0.579	0.854
BC1	0.765	0.415	0.585			
BC2	0.738	0.455	0.545			
BC3	0.789	0.377	0.623			
BC4	0.751	0.436	0.564			
Consumers' Loyalty				0.892	0.581	0.902
CL1	0.753	0.433	0.567			
CL2	0.728	0.470	0.530			
CL3	0.731	0.466	0.534			
CL4	0.806	0.350	0.650			
CL5	0.809	0.346	0.654			
CL6	0.740	0.452	0.548			

Fit statistics (N = 710)
χ^2/df = 3.728, Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = 0.918, Nonnormed fit index (NFI) = 0.934, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.931, Incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.924, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.067

Structural model

The fit of data to the proposed model was adequate (Byrne, 2016; Hair *et al*., 2019): χ^2 = 1,808.721, df =457, χ^2/df = 3.956, GFI = 0.903, NFI = 0.914, CFI = 0.939, IFI = 0.940, and RMSEA= 0.065. This study empirically validates that consumers' satisfaction has a significant and positive effect on consumers' brand love (γ_{11} = 0.635, p<0.001) and and consumers' brand trust (γ_{21} = 0.575, p<0.001), respectively, supporting H1 and H2. This implies that the consumers' satisfaction toward personal experience about company service in couries and logistic has strong correlation to consumers' convenience and intention to use the company brand and and services. It has positive and significant effect to consumers' psychology and confidence that the brand is good and guarantee that the brand is honest to consumers and also consumers have motivation to use this brand in the future. Besides, brand love consumers' satisfaction also has positive and significant effect to consumers' brand trust with regard to their service in line to their expectation because the employees have commitment to help consumers. Furthermore, the consumers also feel safety when use the company service and solve the problem. Interestingly, consumers' saticfaction has less effect on consumers' brand commitment for use this company long time. Hence, H3 was unsupported (γ_{31} = 0.041, p>0.005). It supported by Anantharaman et al., (2022), Das et al., (2019) and Fida et al., (2020) who revealed that consumers' satisfaction plays important role on consumer brand awareness.

This study further confirms that consumers' brand love has a significant and positive effect on consumers brand trust (β_{21} = 0.301, p<0.001) and consumers' loyalty (β_{41} = 0.551, p>0.001). H3 and H4 are supported. It means that the quality of service has a crucial effect on consumers' psychology and adoption of products compliant with the company brand by Kalia et al., (2021), Mbango (2018) and Miraj et al., (2021). It has a good impact on boosting consumer confidence, provides the business with a way to increase customer loyalty, and explains why customers are drawn to the brand. Moreover, consumers' brand trust has positive effect to consumers' brand commitment (β_{31} = 0.755, p<0.001) and negative effect on consumers' loyalty (β_{43} = 0.031, p>0.005). Hence, H6 is supported, meanwhile H7 is unsupported. As well as, H8 is unsopperted where consumers' brand commitment has negative effect on consumers' loyalty (β_{43} = 0.031, p>0.005). Despite having low satisfaction with the company's service, forgiveness, price, and psychology component, consumers still utilise and recommend the business. This is as a result of the business offering value and a remedy. This result opposite with prior studies by Karim et al., (2022) and Suhartanto et al., (2019) who found that brand play important role on consumers' loyalty. Table 4 shows the results of the research hypotheses.

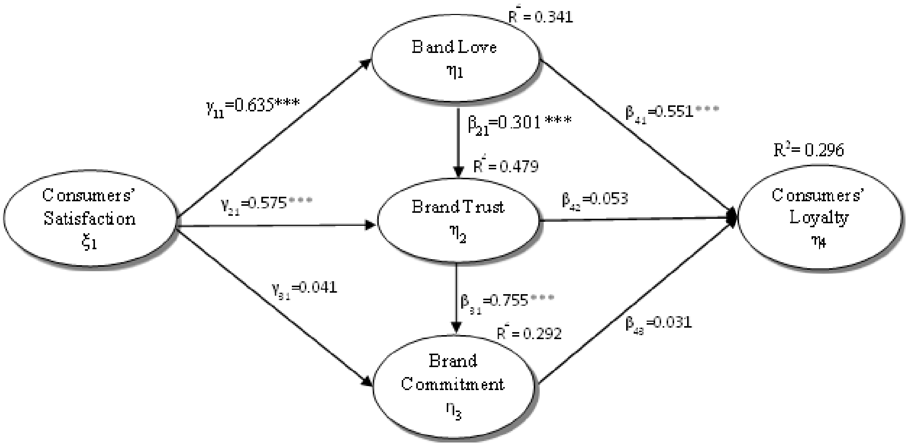
Table 4

Proposed model and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) results

Hypotheses	Symbol	Path			Coefficients	Test results
H1	γ_{11}	Consumers' satisfaction	→	Brand Love	0.635***	Supported
H2	γ_{12}	Consumers' satisfaction	→	Brand Trust	0.575***	Supported
H3	γ_{13}	Consumers' satisfaction	→	Brand Commitment	0.041	Unsupported
H4	β_{21}	Brand Love	→	Brand Trust	0.301***	Supported
H5	β_{41}	Brand Love	→	Consumers' Loyalty	0.551***	Supported
H6	β_{31}	Brand Trust	→	Brand Commitment	0.755***	Supported
H7	β_{42}	Brand Trust	→	Consumers' Loyalty	0.053	Unsupported
H8	β_{43}	Brand Commitment	→	Consumers' Loyalty	0.031	Unsupported

Note: Model fit: χ^2 = 1,808.721, df =457, χ^2/df = 3.956, GFI = 0.903, NFI = 0.914, CFI = 0.939, IFI = 0.940, and RMSEA= 0.065.

Significant at *: *p* < 0.05, **: *p*< 0. 01, ***: *p* < 0.001



Note: Model fit: χ^2 = 1,808.721, df =457, χ^2/df = 3.956, GFI = 0.903, NFI = 0.914, CFI = 0.939, IFI = 0.940, and RMSEA= 0.065.

Figure. 1
Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) result.

Mediating effect

This study adopted the procedure recommended by Hayes (2018) and the PROCESS macro for SPSS to calculate the mediation effects of consumers' emotional bonding (see table 5). Bootstrapping is a nonparametric statistical procedure in which the dataset is repeatedly sampled. It concluded that brand love has crucial role to mediates relationship between consumers' satisfaction and brand trust. However, brand love has less role on bridge relationship between consumers' satisfaction and consumers' loyalty. Furthermore, brand trust has direct effect to mediates relationship between consumers' satisfaction and consumers' loyalty and also consumers' brand commitment. Moreover, customers' brand loyalty significantly and favourably influences the relationship between consumer pleasure and loyalty. This result confir preliminary studies which concluded consumers' brand awareness and attitude play important role in mediating the relationship between consumers' satisfaction and loyalty (Karim et al., 2022; Mursid & Wu, 2022; Othman et al., 2021; Suhan et al., 2022). It meas that consumers' emotional bonding play important role to keep company going concern and competitive advantage.

Table 5
Mediation effects result

IV	M	DV	IV->DV (c)	IV->M (a)	IV+M->DV		Bootstrapping 95% CI	
					IV (c')	M(b)	Percentile method	Bias-corrected
CS	BL	CL	0.284***	0.476***	0.030	0.533***	[0.036, 0.224]	[0.097, 0.344]
Standard Error			0.030	0.025	0.034	0.041		

CS	BL	BT	0.572***	0.476***	0.467***	0.221***	[0.414, 0.528]	[0.520, 0.616]
Standard Error			0.022	0.025	0.027	0.032		
CS	BT	CL	0.284***	0.572***	0.089*	0.341***	[0.009, 0.170]	[0.224, 0.344]
Standard Error			0.030	0.022	0.041	0.050		
CS	BT	BC	0.471***	0.572***	0.103**	0.643***	[0.039, 0.167]	[0.417, 0.526]
Standard Error			0.027	0.022	0.032	0.039		
CS	BC	CL	0.184***	0.471***	0.184***	0.212***	[0.114, 0.224]	[0.254, 0.344]
Standard Error			0.036	0.027	0.036	0.040		

Note: CS: Consumers' satisfaction, BL: Brand Love, BT: Brand Trust, BC: Brand Commitment, CL: Consumers' Loyalty
Significant at *: $p < 0.05$, **: $p < 0.01$, ***: $p < 0.001$

Discussion

Key findings

Ultimately, it is clear that customer happiness affects consumers' emotional ties to brand loyalty, affection, and commitment. Also, it enhances customer loyalty. Consumers' contentment, as shown in Table 4, does not, however, significantly affect their brand loyalty. Furthermore, consumers' brand trust and brand commitment also have negative effect to consumers' loyalty. Consumers' satisfaction influence consumers' brand love toward a positive feeling for a company product and services. The psychology of consumers is characterised by a need for the product (in this example, courier and logistic services), a readiness to offer feedback, and a sense of having a particular relationship with the business with which they are dealing. This part confirms prior studies that concluded consumers' satisfaction has strong correlation to consumers' brand love (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021; Gupta et al., 2022; Hanaysha, 2016; Othman et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). As catalysator product and service quality, consumers' satisfaction also has positive effect to consumers' brand trust. It supports prior studies which concluded consumers' satisfaction play important role on consumers' brand trust (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2021; Jain et al., 2022). It implies consumers' satisfaction makes a sense of belonging to consumers' brand love and brand trust of selected courier and logistic services. However, the recent study opposite with prior studies which concluded that consumers' satisfaction has positive effect on consumers' brand commitment (Das et al., 2019; Junaidi et al., 2022; Kalia et al., 2021). It means that consumers do not make to brand commitment.

This study demonstrates that customer brand trust and loyalty are positively impacted by brand love. Also, it plays a significant role in influencing consumers' decisions to utilise courier and logistic companies and tell others about their individual experiences. This is a critical result because, to our knowledge, not many studies have confirmed the association between the different aspects of emotional bonding. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that brand love has a bigger impact on customers' loyalty than brand trust, which also revealed to keep using the company's services. This result confirms preliminary studies which concluded consumers' brand love has positive and significant effect in brand trust (Grönross & Voima, 2013; Jain et al., 2022) and consumers' loyalty (Anantharaman et al., 2022; Fida et al., 2020; Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021). Consumers' brand trust also has a significant positive effect on customers' brand commitment. Thus, if consumers' satisfaction on company service quality will strength relationship between consumers and company. Jain et al. (2022), and Kalia et al. (2021) state that consumers' trust is the desire to maintain a valuable relationship with the company and services. It has positive effect on consumers' commitment. Hence, the consumers will maintain the relationship if it is deemed more valuable. Meanwhile, consumers, brand trust has negative effect to influence consumers' loyalty. This result contradicts to previous studies, for example, by Suhan et al., (2022). The authors concluded that brand trust has positively correlates to consumers' loyalty. In addition, consumers' awareness will appear if the company can provide more value to the products offered. It will maintain the relationship between consumers and company. Lastly, consumers' commitment has negative effect on consumers' loyalty. It means that consumers more prone to use courier and logistics company in short time than long time. Because, the rapid competition and new competitor always provide innovation product to invite and promote their company and brand. Its drawback to prior studies which revealded that consumers' commitment has positive effect on consumers' loyalty (Othman et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020).

As mediator variables, emotional bonding has positive role to mediates relationship between consumers' satisfaction and loyalty. During the pandemic COVID-19 which lead the society to do all their activities at home cause the delivery service is increasingly needed by the community to fulfil all their needs without leaving home. The various types of new delivery and logistic services cause the existence of the courier companies. Hence, among the service provider must be able to compete in order to attract the consumers satisfaction and still perform during this pandemic. Improving consumers' satisfaction through service quality is important to survive countiously. Based on this research it is showed partially mediation effect, that the emotional bonding play important role to bridge relationship between service quality, toward reliability, responsiveness, and empathy and consumers' satisfaction, which subsequently influence consumers' loyalty. These prove that during the COVID-19 pandemic, people are very concerned about how a delivery service is able to provide the accurate information, validity time of service, responsive to complaints, service in accordance with the procedures, and provide solutions to problems that faced by consumers. Furthermore, brand love, it is known that this variable has indirect effect to mediates relationship between consumers' satisfaction and loyalty. This result confirm that consumers' satisfaction plays important role on consmers' loyalty toward consumers' psychology and company brand (Mursid & Wu, 2022; Närvänen et al., 2020; Othman et al., 2021; Saha & Mukherjee, 2022).

Besides consumers satisfaction, brand love, brand trust and brand commitment, in the marketing field, plays an important role in influencing consumers' loyalty because the consumers have a positive feel and are more comfortable using the companies' brand and product. The consumers also believe that the product's quality and performance are in line with expectations and make the product the first choice that will be used compared to other products from the competitior. It implies the main motive is the service quality and consmers' value rather than how much price they pay. Hence, it also corroborates that consumers' satisfaction and emotional bonding (e.g., brand love, brand trust and brand commitment) have pivotal role in bridging consumers' minds and views about company and consumers' co-creation value.

Conclusions

As a rapid competition, company need to enhance their service quality. It has crucial role to enhance consumers' satisfaction and consumers psychology toward emotional bonding (e.g., brand love, brand trust and brand commitment). The result provides substantial insights to encourage courier and logistic consumers and company managers to combine service quality and consumers' emotional, and also economic and social values of the servide. For instance, the service quality and emotional field of service are justified for consumers' behavior and loyalty. Most importantly, company and brand by consumers' expectation are crucial roles in influencing consumers' decision-making process. This is because during the COVID-19 pandemic people are seldom to visit the office directly, most consumers' use delivery services from home, even deliver and picking up delivery or online access of various types of products that offered by companies, so that the condition of the office building, the space of room and the comfort of the waiting room are not felt by consumer and these conditions are not affect the level of perceived satisfaction. Consequently, regarding the relationship between emotional bonding and consumers' according to our findings, brand and consumers' psychology have the ultimate role in the success of companies and consumers'. Hence, this study shows that brands play an important role in determining consumers' satisfaction and loyalty.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to some literature by proposing and testing a model regarding the formation of consumers satisfaction, consumers' emotional bonding and consumers' loyalty in courier and logistic sector. The recent study contributes to the theory of consumers' behavior and consumers' emotional bonding, such as brand love, brand trust and brand commitment in two ways. Firstly, the findings of this research demonstrate the effects of consumers' satisfaction on mediator variables namely consumers' brand love, brand trust and brand commitment, which subsequently influence consumers' loyalty. Hence, it provides deep information on the relationship among variables examined. Although, prior studies concluded that some consumers prefer brand and value such as (e.g., interest and price) to use courier and logistic service. However, consumers' psychology toward brand products and services are more essential than others. It provides new insight due to emotional bonding brand is a new issue and quite different with brand loyalty and equity. Secondly, this research demonstrates that emotions in line with brand and consumers can be used simultaneously. It provides a theoretical insight for future study. This study also provided valuable information on the current situation and practice of logistic companies.

Practical implications

This study's practical application is that courier and logistics businesses should concentrate on the elements that affect client happiness and emotional attachment in order to retain clients. The study's conclusions indicate that emotional connection aids in moderating the relationship between consumer satisfaction and loyalty. So, companies still need to develop stronger strategies for forging an emotional bond with their clients. Nonetheless, a business must actively promote brand love and loyalty among its clients if it wants them to continue to do business with it. The discovery provides academics and business executives with the knowledge they need to further conversations on important issues regarding brands and consumer behavior. Hence, the company managers need to communicate actively with their consumers, which provides valuable services. In addition, issues of consumers should be addressed in order to increase their knowledge and loyalty. To preserve or perhaps increase cconsumer happiness, the organisation also recommended that service quality be improved in all areas. Particularly now and following the COVID-19 pandemic, when delivery services are crucial for the majority of people not just in Indonesia but all over the world. By fulfilling all community needs so that people do not have to leave their homes in order to meet them, the company's success in enhancing the quality of service would greatly aid the government in containing the spread of the corona virus, which is on the rise.

Limitations and future research directions

There are some limitations to this study. First, the current study was only courier and logistic consumers in Indonesia. Hence, the finding cannot be generalized. Therefore, future studies should use other regions and perspectives. With the greater sample, future work is also possibly more representative. It can also help practitioners and researchers to examine the actions of consumers' attitudes and behavior to elaborate on the impact of consumers' satisfaction on consumers emotional bonding and loyalty. Second, consumers' desire and commitment to a brand might potentially impact their love for, trust in, and devotion to it, which can accurately predict their behaviour and loyalty. Finally, the recent study primarily examines the viewpoint of the logistics and courier industry. Future research could examine other aspects such as hospitality, tourism and retail sector based on the antecedent of consumers' awareness and behavior. It would lead to a more comprehensive result. Finally, in order to develop and assess present frameworks and regulations as well as how to tackle this issue, new empirical research is critically needed in the disciplines of consumer psychology, business dan brand image. Numerous theoretical and empirical studies could also examine how strong environmental factors might mediate or moderate the asserted link.

Appendix

Consumers' satisfaction

1. I have had a positive experience overall with this business.
2. Given what I've learned about this company, I'm satisfied.
3. I have confidence in this business.
4. I would rather purchase this brand if there was another that was just as nice.
5. I favour this business more than others.
6. I would use this business more frequently than I would other businesses.
7. I'm more likely to choose this business over others.

Brand Love

1. I adore this company
2. There is a warranty when using this brand.
3. I feel secure with this brand.
4. This company values its customers.
5. This company is trustworthy with its clients.
6. This company cares about its customers.
7. In my opinion, this company strives to better serve its consumers' demands every single time.
8. This company should upgrade its products to reflect the most recent scientific findings.

Brand trust

1. This brand satisfies my requirements.
2. I have faith in this company's personnel.

3. I'm never disappointed by this business.
4. I feel secure using this firm.
5. This company would address my concerns in an honest and true manner.
6. I could trust this company to find a solution.
7. This company would go above and above to meet my needs.

Brand Commitment

1. I'll continue to use this brand for a long time.
2. I won't be able to quit using this brand tomorrow
3. I see the benefit of utilising this brand.
4. This company has assimilated into my family.

Consmers' Loyalty

1. I am happy to recommend this organisation to others for logistical services.
2. If the business offered better service and prices, I would utilise it.
3. I feel very loyal to the company
4. The company contacts consumers to find out their loyalty and commitment
5. The competitive strategies of the company are strong enough to make its market position
6. I feel sense well-being when use the company service

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Russia – NATO Uneasy Ties: Transformation, Cooperation to NATO Accession

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Russian Federation re-emerged on the global map in December 1991. It was one of the Soviet Republics since the communist party took over in 1922, and after about two decades, it became one of the two superpowers. The Soviet communist ideology was a deterrent to the United States-- the capitalist superpower. The US established a collective security organization for Western European countries called NATO to contain the expansion of communism. The fall of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union ended the cold war; however, the Alliance was not dissolved. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, Russia and NATO have transformed and sought ways to cooperate. However, the accession policy of NATO became a threat to Russia. The article contributes to understanding deep-rooted issues between Russia and NATO. It examines their transformation and cooperation phases. It deals with the post-cold war accession policy of NATO and Russian concerns over it. The paper analysis various forums of their cooperation and inquiries why NATO's membership was not extended to Russia. It further delves into the significance of Ukraine for Russia. Diverse research methodologies are adopted in this research work.

Keywords: Russia, NATO, security, Ukraine, accession

Russia and NATO remained a threat to each other even after the fall of communism. In the 1990s, Russia, the legal successor of the Soviet Union, passed through political and economic turmoil. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had to redefine its role and relevance to sustain itself into the future. It adopted an open-door policy for all European countries contrary to the unwritten agreement over the non-expansion of NATO towards Eastern Europe. The Russian presidents were also inclined to NATO membership which the West ignored.

The former Soviet allies turned towards NATO; however, the inclination of former Soviet republics to NATO membership was disturbing for Russia. It could enable NATO forces to approach Russian borders due to the collective defence policy. A critical situation emerged in Europe when two former Soviet republics, Georgia and Ukraine, tended for NATO membership. Russia launched a five-day war against Georgia in 2008 to prevent Georgia from NATO membership. After six years, Russia annexed Crimea, a part of Ukraine that further deteriorated Russia-NATO relations. Over time, Russia became assertive toward NATO campaigns. At the 70th anniversary of NATO, a renewed agenda was presented that included combating global terrorism, arms control, containing Russia, and curbing the rise of China. It revived the camp-based politics of the cold war. The NATO accession became a security risk to Russia, and the

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resurgence of Russia in global politics threatened NATO. The consistent accession and massive military exercises of NATO increased Russian security concerns, and it demanded security guarantees from the West. When it was not given, and Russia felt that the balance of power was going in favour of NATO, it moved forces in her survival.

Theoretical Framework

The research paper fits in the theory of realism and neo-realism. According to realism survival and security of a state derive international politics (Moorthy & Naidu 2022) and balance of power is a main concept in neo-realism theory. The realist theorists believe that the use of force and war is an irrefutable right of the state. The end of the cold war created great imbalance in international system. It transformed the role of Russia and NATO in global politics. Russia focused on economic uplift and re-establishment of armed forces to recover its position as a great or at least regional power. The weakness of Russia forced her to cooperate with NATO but the accession policy of the latter becoming a threat for the former. When Russia failed to maintain balance adequately against the accession of NATO it used force for her survival.

Method

This is a descriptive, quantitative, and deductive nature of research based on historical, analytical, and critical methods. The historical method is used to find answers to current questions through an intensive study of the past. The deductive method infers the research work to a logical conclusion. Data has been collected from primary sources, i.e., government documents, newspapers, historical interviews, etc. To collect secondary data, various books, journals, and archives have been studied to bring the research in a theoretical framework.

Russia and NATO in the 1990s: Transformation, cooperation, and NATO accession

The attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991was failed but resulted in the imminent collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the disintegration of the USSR on December 25, of that year. The Belovezha Accord ended the existence of the USSR and established democratic, independent republics based on mutual recognition and respect for national sovereignty (Bhattacharyya, 2020). The Soviet collapse resulted in the formation of 15 autonomous states; among them was the Russian Federation, the world's largest country by area.

Russia inherited the seat of the Soviet Union in the UN Security Council and underwent a course of transformation. The democratic forces led the Russian economy in a future direction, and capitalism became the preferred economic transition destination. The Russian economy faced a deep slump for a long time. According to official Russian financial data, Russian GDP fell by about 50% between 1990 and 1995, significantly more than the United States endured during the Great Depression. The Russian armed forces also lost self-esteem (Baev, 2004). In an entirely new geographical condition, Russia had to counter 14 new neighbours; previously, military allies were bound to the Soviet Union through the Warsaw Pact (Pallin, 2008).

For NATO, the 1990s was a challenging decade. The Alliance struggled to justify existence after losing its principal adversary “expansion of communism.” Two years before Soviet disintegration on February 9, 1990, the US Secretary of State James Baker had pledged to Gorbachev that there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction to Eastern Europe (Howorth, 2017). However, the "London Declaration" reflected a changed North Atlantic Alliance environment, signed on July 5-6, 1990. It stated that as the Alliance would enter a new century, it must continue to provide for the collective defence (Rimanelli, 2009). It was ambiguous against whom collective security would be delivered since the Soviet Union was a waning power. A new body of “North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC)” was established on December 20, 1991for dialogue and cooperation with former Warsaw Pact countries (Gerosa, 1992).

Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first president, intended to participate in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and indicated that Russia might join NATO in the future. In the Visegrád Triangle of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, the former Soviet-aligned states were the first who pledged to join NATO on May 6, 1992. Yeltsin visited these states in 1993 to approve their accession to NATO, although he confronted fierce opposition from the Russian parliament and military officers. It was perceived as a direct threat to Russian security (Smith, 2008).

Within the framework of "NACC, another cooperative mechanism "Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme" was launched in January 1994 (The Europa World Yearbook 2003), Russia joined it in the sixth month of the same year to build a long-term constructive relationship with NATO. An uneasy situation emerged for Russia in August and September 1995 when NATO launched first combat operation against Bosnian Serbs (Collins, 2011). Russian policymakers opposed the use of force by NATO. However, Russia participated in the Dayton peace agreement and dispatched soldiers to Bosnia in 1996 to join the implementation force. Russia, a significant non-NATO contributor, proved to be a beneficial partner(Smith, 2008).

Another forum was established for confidence building and information exchange between NATO-Russia named the "Founding Act, signed on May 27, 1997." The Act established a "Permanent Joint Council (PJC)" for NATO-Russia consultations(Forsberg, 2005). The developments articulated Russia's unique relationship with NATO. The PJC enabled NATO members and Russian officials to discuss various security issues regularly.

However, before the inaugural of PJC conference tensions grew between Russia and NATO over the violence in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Russia raised apprehensions about NATO's bypassing UN Security Council (UNSC) in Kosovo and requested the latter's approval. The UNSC was a legal forum to maintain global peace and security. The North Atlantic Council (NAC), the main political decision-making body of NATO (Russia was not its member), authorized limited bombing and a phased air campaign in Kosovo in October 1998. The NATO action was a violation of the UN Charter that binds states to take approval from the UN Security Council on the non-defensive use of force. The Western states were certain that Russia and China would oppose such a resolution in the UNSC. The NAC's endorsement of using force in Kosovo exposed Russia's impotence in NATO (J. Smith, 2008). In Kosovo War, NATO launched Operation Ally Force against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on March 24, 1999. The bombing campaign of NATO against Serbia, a Russian ally, was a proof of aggression. In response Russia cut ties with NATO and withdrew delegate from its headquarters on the same day but avoided entirely severing relations with NATO (J. Smith, 2008).

The Visegrád Triangle of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia became NATO members on March 12, 1999. It completed the first phase of NATO's post-cold war enlargement owing to Russian political instability. The accession of Poland brought NATO closer to the Russian border (Behnke, 2012). NATO celebrated its 50th anniversary in April 1999 with 19 members. It was decided to host another summit in 2002 to consider the request for membership made by nine more countries (Daalder & Goldgeier, 2001). Meanwhile, Russia rejoined NATO in July 1999 and sent peacekeepers to Kosovo to assist NATO, while in Bosnia, Russia was signalled to play a positive role in the Balkans' stabilization (Smith, 2008).

Boris Yeltsin resigned on the last day of 1999, and Vladimir Putin was named acting President of Russia, committed to mending fences with NATO. In an interview with the British

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on March 5, 2000, Putin was asked about NATO as a possible partner, a competitor, or an enemy. He said, "We embrace equitable collaboration and partnership. We believe deeper integration with NATO can be discussed, but only if Russia is treated as an equal partner. We have consistently expressed opposition to NATO's eastward expansion (BBC Breakfast with Frost, 2000)." Though NATO was careful to not send any sign of Russian joining to NATO in the future (Smith, 2008).

Russia under Putin: relations with NATO

On March 26, 2000, the presidential election was held in Russia; Putin became Russian President on May 7. From December 31, 1999, to May 6, 2000, Putin served as acting President. He firmly believed in restoring Russian authority, and national honour in international affairs. Putin views Russia's destiny as a European nation. During a visit to Russia in June 2000, US President Bill Clinton urged western European countries to accept Russia into NATO and the European Union (Tyler, 2000).

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, were a watershed moment in world politics. Terrorism evolved as a global threat. The first foreign leader who communicated directly with President Bush was the Russian President. He stated unequivocally to support every action the American President would decide to take. The Next day of the terrorist attacks, NATO invoked Article 5 for the first time in its fifty-two-year history, pledging support to the U.S (D'Souza, 2015). The strategic cooperation between Moscow and Washington was reaffirmed. Russia cooperated with the US to construct military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan for rapid military moves in Afghanistan (Cooley, 2012).

At the NATO Rome Summit on May 28, 2002, the "NATO–Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC)" was replaced with the "NATO–Russia Council (NRC)." It established an official diplomatic route for resolving security issues and collaborative initiatives between NATO and Russia. In November same year, at the Prague Summit, NATO invited seven new members to begin accession talks, including three former Soviet republics: "Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania" (the USSR's "security belt"), Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (Prague Summit Declaration, 2002). The addition of Estonia to NATO reduced the distance between Putin's hometown St. Petersburg and the NATO boundary to less than a hundred miles. The distance was around 1,200 kilometers in 1989 (Sarotte, 2021).

Following the invasion of Afghanistan, the US invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003 (Ullah, 2020). The US president passed orders for the 200,000 American troops stationed on Iraq's southern border to launch a long-awaited invasion to disarm and overthrow Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (Burns & Sanger, 2003). Putin opposed the war (Pincus, 2004); Russia described the conflict as "unjustifiable and unnecessary" and the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, also criticized the US-led war on Iraq and declared it illegal (MacAskill & Borger, 2004).

The US military focused on Iraq, and the command of the multinational peacekeeping force of Afghanistan was transferred to NATO on August 11, 2003 (Shah & Ayaz, 2015). It was the first mission of NATO beyond European borders, reflecting constant transformation and resolve to meet the security challenges of the twenty-first century (Waldman, 2003).

In the meantime, street protests broke out in two former Soviet republics, Georgia and Ukraine, in 2003 and 2004, prompting new presidential elections. Western observers called these demonstrations "colour revolutions" and were perceived as democratic breakthroughs capable of bringing about political change in these countries. Parliamentary elections were held in both countries, but the results were challenged. It led to massive protests known as the Rose and Orange Revolution. It culminated in the re-election of pro-Soviet Presidents who faced defeat. The new presidents of Georgia and Ukraine followed a pro-Western foreign policy, declaring

European and Euro-Atlantic integration to be their top priority; this shift contributed to tensions between Georgia-Ukraine and Russia. The "rose and orange revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine(Way, 2008), respectively, were regarded by Moscow as additional evidence of the Western intention to marginalize Russia and render it militarily powerless in the face of the US and NATO. Russia could not allow these ex-Soviet republics to join NATO (Wolff, 2015).

The 19th NATO summit was held in Riga, Latvia, on November 28-29, 2006, the first summit on former Soviet territory. The United States indicated in January 2007 that it would negotiate with Poland and the Czech Republic about the possibility of deploying a missile defence system in these countries. On February 17, 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia. Russia expressed firm opposition and backed Serbian protests that the West ignored. Many of the NATO members acknowledged Kosovo's independence(NATO Summit, 2006, 2006).

The NATO 20th summit was held in Bucharest, Romania's capital city, on April 2-4, 2008, when US President Bush campaigned for Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO. It was an antagonistic move. The Russian President warned the West that any attempt to expand NATO to Russian borders would be viewed as a "direct threat" to Moscow (Dawar, 2004). Despite strong US support and extensive debate in NATO, it was decided not to offer the" Membership Action Plans (MAPs)" to Georgia and Ukraine. These developments again brought Russian-NATO ties to the lowest ebb.

Considering the worsening situation, Russia launched a five-day high-intensity war against Georgia four months after the NATO 20th summit. It was the first European conflict of the twenty-first century (Allison, 2013). Russia accused Georgia of "aggression against South Ossetia." South Ossetian forces, backed by Russia, began shelling Georgian settlements (Hanhimaki, 2021) On August 1, 2008. The war put Georgia, and Ukraine's accession hopes on hold for the time being. The Georgian war caused severe disagreements between Russia and NATO over several matters; however, Russia gained a strategic victory in the Georgian conflict (Weitz, 2010a).

Two tiny states, Albania and Croatia, joined NATO on the 60th anniversary of NATO (Fact Sheet On NATO Summit. 4/04/2009, 2009). The accession brought all former Warsaw Pact countries into NATO. The admission met with little opposition from Moscow(Albania, Croatia Become NATO Members, 2009).

The third “NATO-Russia Council (NRC)” conference was held in Lisbon on November 19-20, 2010. In closing remarks, the Secretary General of NATO declared that NATO members and Russia agreed, in writing, that while we face many security issues, we represent no threat to each other (Weitz, 2010b). However, in the following months, NATO became a threat to Russian interests in Libya and Syria when the self-immolation of a Tunisian citizen on December 17, 2010, brought the Arab Spring to the forefront of world politics.

Assertive Moscow towards NATO: 2011-2020

Moscow sided with the West in recognizing the democratic change in Tunisia and Egypt. But in response to the uprising in Libya and Syria, serious divisions arose between NATO and Russia. In a UN Security Council vote Russia remained silent on a resolution authorizing NATO intervention in Libya. Russia condemned the NATO air campaign in Libya and argued that the latter had broken international law by intentionally targeting a state's leader for assassination. That was a flagrant breach of the sovereignty of a state (Flint, 2012). Following the assassination of Muammar Qaddafi, President of Libya, on October 20, 2011, Russia began backing Syrian

President Bashar al-Assad and warned NATO that something similar should not happen in Syria (Bryansk, 2012).

Contrary to popular belief, NATO and Russia collaborated in the years afterwards to equip the Afghan army's helicopter fleet, conduct joint counter-piracy and submarine-rescue exercises, and discuss a common mission to help Syria dispose-off chemical weapons (NATO-Russia Relations: The Background, 2020).

In November 2013, Russia encountered another issue owing to the Ukraine President’s rejection of signing an association agreement with the European Union (History of Crimea’s Reunification with Russia, 2022). Viktor Yanukovych, a pro-Russian president, was deposed, and fears grew in Moscow about the new government that could evict Russia's Black Sea fleet from its base in Sevastopol, Crimea's central city and a major Black Sea port. Putin was motivated to reclaim Sevastopol because he feared it might fall into NATO's hands. Russia organized a referendum that overwhelmingly approved the territories' membership in the Russian Federation. In response to NATO's eastward expansion, Russia annexed Crimea, a part of Ukraine's sovereign territory, in March 2014. By intervening in Ukraine, Russia created a situation where Ukraine could not join either NATO or the EU shortly (Loftus, 2019).

The Russian moves threatened the West, and both accused each other for these developments. The Foreign Ministers of NATO retorted by suspending all practical cooperation with Russia on April 1, 2014 (Freedman, 2014). The hostile operations of Russia against Ukraine continued since then, notably destabilizing eastern Ukraine. In response, NATO increased its deterrence and defence posture. The bloodless integration of Crimea into Russia sent shockwaves in NATO countries, particularly among Russian neighbours. Concerning this, "assimilation" might one day be used against them.

NATO launched another “Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII) at the Wales Summit in September 2014” to deepen connections with partner forces. It extended the partnership with six more countries Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, Sweden, and Ukraine. On the other hand, Russia responded positively to an official request by the Syrian government for military assistance in September 2015. This move shifted the war's tide in favour of pro-Russian Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. By eliminating a substantial part of the armed opposition and reasserting regime control over much of Syria, Russian airpower with Iranian-backed militias on the ground played a decisive role in protecting the Assad regime (Jones, 2020).

At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO leaders heeded that Russia had to abide by international law and obligations. NATO-Russia did not return to routine until then. Before leaving for Europe on his final trip as President in November 2016, Obama conveyed to world leaders that his successor may not abandon the decades-old partnership with NATO (Smith, 2016).

The next American President, Donald Trump, was obsessed with repairing relations with Russia and referred to NATO as an obsolete relic. However, the accession of NATO continued, and in 2017, Montenegro, a former Yugoslavian country, joined NATO in contradiction of Russian desire. Montenegro had historical issues with Russia; the latter threatened reprisal if Montenegro continued its "hostile path" and criticized the country's "anti-Russian move (Luhn, 2017)." The US President also chastised this little country's membership in NATO (Specia Megan, 2018). NATO appeared badly divided in its mission, with officials on both sides of the Atlantic casting doubt on its prospects (Hanhimaki, 2021).

In the meantime, Ukraine became an official NATO aspiring member, which brought her closer to NATO's full-fledged membership and it appeared on NATO’s website on March 10, 2018(Khan, 2018). Ukraine's unicameral parliament, Rada, on February 7, 2019, passed a bill amending the country's constitution to gain full EU and NATO membership (Shea & Jaroszewicz, 2021). Ukraine's presidential elections were held in March of the same year and won by the pro-western candidate Zelensky (Erlanger, 2021). Kyiv had to settle its territorial issue with Moscow over Crimea before joining the Alliance. The Russia-NATO Council (RNC) had its last meeting in Brussels on July 5, 2019 (Wither, 2021).

On the 70th anniversary of NATO, its secretary general acknowledged the Alliance's external and internal constraints but argued that NATO was adaptable and powerful enough to deal with them. At this occasion, he presented a comprehensive agenda that included combating global terrorism, arms control, containing Russia, and for the first time, curbing the rise of China (Powell, 2022).

In the last year of Trump’s presidency, the U.S-led multinational military exercises, including NATO, were conducted from February to mid of March 2020, known as "Exercise Defender-Europe 20 (Ploom et al., 2020).” It reinstated the US resolve to stand by its NATO Allies. Due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the exercise duration, scale, and scope were reduced to two weeks.

Russia objected to Exercise Defender-Europe 20 and asked the West, " Who will they defend themselves from? Russia considered such exercises as provokable, which could only escalate tensions. Russia did not find any comparable opponent of NATO, whose armed forces surpassed Russia by more than half (‘Russia to React to US-NATO Exercise Defender 2020 in Europe’, 2020). With the military buildup, NATO's accession continued, and it accepted North Macedonia, a landlocked Balkan country, as its newest, smallest and weakest member on March 27, 2020. that boasts a strong military. With this accession, NATO became an organization of 30 countries, two from North America and twenty-eight from Europe out of forty-four. Russia stated that adding a weak country like North Macedonia to the Alliance did not strengthen it and showed its value as a member is similarly questionable (Russia Fumes at North Macedonia’s NATO Accession, 2020).

Six more countries Ukraine, Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, and Sweden joined another NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Program on June 12, 2020, a part of NATO's Partnership Interoperability Initiative, which aimed to retain and strengthen cooperation between allies and partners who have contributed significantly to NATO-led operations (‘NATO Grants Ukraine Enhanced Opportunities Partner Status’, 2020). The development brought Ukraine a step away from the full fledge membership of NATO.

Escalated tensions between Russia and NATO

NATO increased the scale and frequency of its military exercises in the “Baltic and Black Sea areas.” The Exercise Defender Europe, first conducted in 2020, became an annual NATO exercise. The second such was conducted from March to June 2021. The development provoked Russia to show its military might, and in September 2021, Russia conducted the most significant military Exercise Zapad (West) 2021 that involved 200,000 troops from Russia, Belarus, and several other countries participating in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Barros, 2021). In late 2021, the Russian additional military forces moved toward Ukraine (Gorenburg, 2022) and Moscow demanded security assurances from the West. In non-compliance the former had to pursue a "military-technical" solution of its own (Gorenburg, 2022). Tensions were growing between Russia and NATO, and they intensified when NATO expelled eight Russian officials from its headquarters in Brussels on October 6, 2021, owing to the suspected activities. NATO reduced Russian staff at the organization from twenty to ten. The mission of Moscow to NATO was suspended on November 1, 2021('NATO Mission in Brussels Unlikely to Resume Work, Says Senior Diplomat', 2021). In response Russia closed NATO's military liaison and information offices in Moscow ('Russia Suspends NATO Mission in Response to the Expulsion of Its Staff', 2021).

NATO and Western countries accused Russia of massing troops near Ukraine, but the Russian government dismissed the fears as unjustified. The chief of Russia's General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, on December 9, 2021, told in a news briefing that " NATO holds about 40 major military exercises near Russian borders every year." To de-escalate tension, the Russian foreign ministry proposed an eight-point treaty on December 17, 2021, demanding that NATO rule out further expansion, including Ukraine joining the Alliance, and a limit on the deployment of troops and weapons to NATO's eastern flank. Bring back NATO forces to where they were stationed in 1997 ('Russia Issues a List of Demands It Says Must Be Met to Lower European Tensions', 2021). Russian security demands were followed by three high-level diplomatic meetings between Russia, America, and NATO-Russia Council (NRC). In these meetings, the participants remained steadfast in their positions in Ukraine. Neither NATO accepted Russian demands to stop further enlargement and withdrawal of troops from member states bordering Russia, nor was Moscow ready to allow Ukraine accession to NATO (Erlanger, 2022). On January 26, 2022, the US and NATO presented individual written responses to Russian security requests. Afterwards, in a telephonic conversation, Putin told Macron, his French counterpart, that the principal Russian concerns regarding security guarantees were not considered in the US response. It is up to him to "decide on further measures" and when to respond to the American letter on his own (Putin Says US Response on Security Guarantees Ignores Russia's Concerns, n.d.).

Ukraine-NATO ties: a security threat for Russia

NATO-Ukraine ties were strengthening with the passage of time, and Russia perceived that in the annual NATO summit in Madrid (Spain) on June 28-30, 2022, Ukraine could be fully absorbed into NATO. Ukraine, an eastern European state, is the second-largest country in Europe after Russia. It shares a 1,200-mile border with Russia. It holds a much higher place for Russia than the other former republics. Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine was the oldest and most renowned Slavic city in the Russian Empire. Kyiv was considered the mother of all Russian cities. It was one of the Russian Empire's most vibrant and rapidly expanding cities at the beginning of the 20th century (Fuller, 2006). Russia became deeply concerned over Ukraine's drift toward the West. Ukraine's internal and foreign policy always affects northeastern neighbours.

The geostrategic significance of Ukraine on the Black Sea also contributes in Russian policy. Russian natural gas had been traditionally travelled via Ukraine on its way to Europe. Ukraine accession to NATO insecure Russia due to Article 5 that binds thirty states of the organization with collective security.

Russia found evidence of Ukraine's planned attack on Donbas, the Donetsk and Lugansk regions in southeastern Ukraine. The developments in these regions were posing a direct threat to Russian security. Russia began a "Special Military Operation" on February 24, 2022, and justified it that the operation was carried out on the request of the heads of the Donbas republics to protect the civilians. ('Russia Has Not Invaded Ukraine and Will Not Invade Any Country Lavrov', 2022). It has been Europe's most extensive military action since World War II.

Conclusion

Russia-NATO ties remained uneasy, unpredictable, and uncertain. There were intense periods of cooperation and frequent periods of crisis, dramatic turns, and even cut-off relations. Being a European state, NATO ignored the Russian desire for membership. In abandoning communism and adopting democracy, the Russian economy passed through a prolonged economic depression. It survived without any substantial western support. Despite extending membership to Russia, NATO established multiple forums to develop close ties with Russia. In all such forums, Russia was not treated as an equal ally. The discriminatory western policy indicated that Russia was still considered a threat to the West owing to its rich past. Russia resisted NATO actions over the breach of international laws. Gradually Russia became critical of the US and NATO's independent and unilateral decisions in world affairs. Russia accused the US of disdain for the basic principles of the UN charter. Two decades after the fall of communism in 2011, Russia emerged as a stakeholder in global politics. In contrast to the 1990s, it refused to accept its position as the West's subordinate partner. Russia became assertive to recover its lost international position. Russia suspended ties with NATO, an organization that members were increasing and reaching Russian borders with the bondage of collective defence. Ukraine, the former Soviet republic, was also ambitious to be a member of NATO. The membership could deeply harm Russian geo-strategic, geo-political, and geo-economic interests in regional and global politics. When battling Russia became an overt part of NATO agenda, followed by unprecedented military exercises, and letting down of Russian security guarantees from the US and NATO, all contributed to provoking Russia for decisive action for her own survival. As per the theory of realism and neo-realism, states have an undisputable right to use force for their security. Russia practically did the same.

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Impacts of Regional and Global Players on theDynamics of Pak-Iran Relations: Post-US Withdrawal from Afghanistan Scenario

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After the US pulled its troops out of Afghanistan, relations between Pakistan and Iran started to return to normal. Both countries have been at odds with each other for a long time because they backed different sides in the Afghan Civil War, and Iran and Saudi Arabia are rivals. However, since the US left, both countries have worked to improve their relationships with each other. Pakistan and Iran have signed several agreements and held joint military drills. Iran and Pakistan have also been having regular diplomatic talks to solve their problems and strengthen their relationships. In particular, the two countries have discussed making a free trade agreement to help their economies work together better. As part of a larger plan to increase its power in the area, Iran has also tried to expand its presence in Afghanistan and invest in infrastructure projects. Overall, the US leaving Afghanistan has improved the relationship between Pakistan and Iran; the two countries are working together and talking to each other more. This has been good for the area's stability because it has made it less likely that the two countries will fight. This thematic analysis-based study aimed to investigate the dynamics of relations between Pakistan and Iran. The internal situation in Afghanistan after the US left, the US's role and foreign policy in the region, and India's relations with Iran are all things that have had a significant impact on the political situation in the region .

Keywords: Iran; Pakistan; Political relations; Asia; Saudi Arabia; US; India; Afghanistan

Both countries share deep cultural and historical ties with one another's people. Modern depictions of Pakistan, especially in Persian literature, show the influence of these ties. After Pakistan became a country in 1947, Iran was the first to recognize it as a state. During the 1950s, both countries improved their relationships with other countries and became more involved in world events. Iran and the United States remained close allies under the rule of the monarchy in the decades following World War II, when the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a cold war. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini led the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which Islamabad recognized and supported. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the government was pressured to back Saddam Hussein's Iraqi government. However, Pakistan publicly supported the Islamic

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Republic of Iran instead. The main functions of the state are the security of citizens, justice, public service, mobilization of resources, and infrastructure development, all of which require strong state institutions, which Afghanistan lacks (Khan & Rahman, 2020). The conflict in Afghanistan, sectarian tensions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, American influence in Pakistan and shifts in its foreign policy, Iranian government sanctions, and Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia are just a few examples of the many challenges to their bilateral relations.

Over the past few decades, the two countries have worked hard to stop being so hostile toward each other and get closer. Both nations are serious about identifying areas of mutual economic advantage and interest, such as a joint gas pipeline and business venture development. Iran is an important trade partner for Pakistan, which requires much energy due to its abundant oil and gas. New estimates put Pakistan's population at 209 million. The country as a whole has a per capita income of $1,560. A 5.83 percent increase in GDP puts the country's total at $313 billion. One-fifth of the country's total output comes from agriculture, and two-fifths of the country's workforce is also directly or indirectly involved in this industry. Even though services comprise 56.3% of GDP, the manufacturing sector still holds a 19.1% share of total production. To the tune of 50%, the country's exports are in the textile and clothing industries. Iran has a significant trade deficit with exports of about $21.2 billion and imports of around $48.51 billion. A balance of payments deficit, energy sector growth, and foreign investment are needed to keep the growing population, especially those under 25, in urban areas. This is one of Pakistan's current problems related to its changing population. Attained the level of economic development necessary to sustain the hiring of mature workers (CIA, 2018).

Political Dimensions

Iran and Pakistan share a border. These countries are close geographically and have much in common, like a similar history, culture, language, religion, and even some racial and linguistic traits. Iranians and Pakistanis have an ethnic identity as the Aryans (Ahmad, Shah, & Khan, 2014). Iranians gained favor in Pakistan thanks to the mystical and religious bonds that Shia and Sufi followers shared. However, business ties and trade routes that date back hundreds of years have reliably linked the two countries for decades. Iran, whose culture is also called "Persian culture," has had a considerable effect on Pakistani food, fashion, poetry, music, art, and architecture.

Also, the Persian language was used as the official language of the Mughal Empire until the British took over India. Also, famous Persian poets and writers like Rumi, Hafiz, Saadi, and Khayyam have written works that can be read in Urdu, Pakistan's official language. Also, the fact that Muslims in India fought politically for the Iranian people at the time shows how close the two Muslim countries are to each other. When foreign armies took over Iran in 1940, the All-India Muslim League passed a resolution for him. When Pakistan got its government in 1947, Iran was the first to recognize it as a sovereign state (Hussain, Khan, & Ayaz, 2021).

Occasionally, things would improve between Pakistan and Iran, and sometimes they would worsen. From 1947 to 1965, they could keep good relations with Iran and other Muslim countries. When Iran and Pakistan joined the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), their relationships became more civilized. Having formed the RCD in 1964, relations between Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran have only strengthened. Iran's honest attempts to heal the 22-month breach in Pak-Afghan relations in the early 1960s indicate the high quality of relations between Pakistan and Iran. The only thing that could have gone wrong was figuring out the border between Pakistan and Iran. However, the problem had been rectified to everyone's satisfaction by

December 1967. In the Arab world's fight against Israel, Pakistan joined Iran in siding with the enemy. Also, Pakistan's good relations with Malaysia can be traced back to 1967, when Iran tried to bring the two countries together (Qureshi, 1968).

Pakistan was weakened by the unrest of the late 1960s when events like the East Pakistan fiasco and the birth of Bangladesh occurred. There was a significant decline in strength after East Pakistan broke away. Politically, the state was weak during this time, and Iran was growing in power, especially when the British pulled out of the Suez Canal. Iran intended to overthrow British control in the Middle East. Thus it used the 1973 oil embargo to strengthen its hand and influence. It was a time of relatively solid commercial connections between Pakistan and Iran. The value of commerce between Pakistan and Iran tripled to Rs. 848 million between 1974–1975 and 1976–1977 (Bilal, 2017).

Since Pakistan became independent, relations between Islamabad and Tehran have steadily improved. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, however, they got worse. As the Islamic religious leadership in Iran grows, it is clear that the US is its main rival. This means that Pakistan's regional foreign policy is about to get more complicated. This heightened tension between the two countries occurred when Iranian revolutionaries held US diplomats, hostage, for 444 days. So, Pakistan took a diplomatic position on the hostages being held by revolutionary students in Tehran (Mohammadally, 1979). Pak-Iran relations suffered after the Iranian Revolution when the United States was viewed as a relic of the past. At the time, the United States and Pakistan were against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. General Zia-ul-Haq, the military dictator in power then, was a staunch supporter of the Saudi government. Unfortunately, Iran is unhappy with Pakistan's foreign policy because of its pro-American and pro-Saudi tilt.

Fears of state meddling in religious concerns, such as General Zia's policies, are shared by Shiite communities in Pakistan and Iran. After the tragic events that led to the death of Sadiq Gangi, an Iranian ambassador, in Lahore (Hussain, 1993) and the deaths of five Iranian Air Force cadets in the country's capital in 1997, sectarian rifts between Sunnis and Shiites surged (Iqbal, 1997). Additionally, Iran's stance on Kashmir shifted in the 1990s. Sometimes Iran would emphasize the need for self-determination and back a bilateral solution (Pasha, 2000).

In the 1990s, when Iran offered India access to the landlocked Central Asian Republics, a tighter relationship between the two countries emerged (CARs). Pakistani and Saudi Arabian cooperation in aiding and encouraging the Taliban in Afghanistan was the second key issue that presented a chance for both states to strengthen the friendship between Iran and India (Pasha, 2000). Pakistan supported the Taliban, while Iran backed the Northern Alliance. Since the Taliban took over in Kabul in 1994, Iran and Pakistan have not worked together to help the Afghan government (Khawaja, 2004). Many Iranian diplomats were killed by the Taliban in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998, nearly provoking an Iranian invasion of Afghanistan (Stone, 2018).

US Factor in Pakistan-Iran Relations

US-Iran relations are crucial to the study of Pakistan-Iran relations. The United States and Iran have been at odds over two contentious issues: oil and nuclear technology. Healthy relations between the United States and Iran were displayed for everyone to see after Pakistan's independence. Tehran's work on its nuclear program dates back to the 1950s. Ironically, the United States gave Tehran its first nuclear facility in 1960. The United States became interested in Iran's nuclear fusion-producing plant after the oil crisis of the 1970s. The Islamic government rescinded the Pahlavi nuclear agreement with the United States.

Before 2002, the United States had no idea that Iran was working on a nuclear program; yet, tensions only increased as it demanded that Iran expand its nuclear program. According to a 2003 assessment by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran's government must provide full cooperation to ensure transparency in the country's nuclear program's activities (Congressional Research Service Report, 2022). The United States considers Iran a significant threat to its hegemony in the Persian Gulf. In addition, the Iranian government was hit with sanctions in 2006 by the United Nations Security Council as a punishment for its inadequate response to the disarmament process (Congressional Research Service Report, 2022). Pakistan's security and economy are inextricably linked to Iran's leadership, which is why the two countries have always stood side by side. Pakistan will likely join a coalition that would target Iran. Islamabad's ties with Tehran have been affected by the United States' discontent with the Iran-Pakistan gas project (Report of the Congressional Research Service, 2022). According to experts, the United States may have offered the Pakistani government in 1984 to destabilize Iran through Baluchistan (Hussain, 1993). There is no denying the significance of the American influence in the current renegotiation of Pak-Iran relations. Contributes to the plot. Pakistan has to work with its resourceful neighbor to stand up to the United States.

Since the sanctions against Iran were lifted a few years ago, there has been a lot of willingness on both sides to work together to benefit both countries. Nevertheless, former US President Donald Trump's comments show that Iran's nuclear behavior is upsetting Washington. When Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal, President Rouhani compared it to a "psychological war." On the other hand, Islamabad has taken Tehran's side and urged the United States not to leave the nuclear accord but rather to continue dialogue and negotiations (News, 2018). US officials are worried that there are still high-level contacts between Pakistani and Iranian officials. The United States has warned Pakistan against developing business relations with Iran (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2020). President Trump of the United States imposed two significant penalties on August 6. Trump pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) at the start of 2020. Given these developments, Pakistan's ongoing cooperation with Iran will likely be seriously affected.

Pakistan's civilian government has tried to keep the public from seeing that it has a bias toward Saudi Arabia in its foreign policy. The country's closer financial and strategic links with Saudi Arabia mean it is more likely to favor the Saudi monarchy than Iran in more significant regional concerns. Since the JCPOA agreement in 2015, economic ties between Pakistan and Iran have been thriving. Pakistan has kept its sovereignty and independence despite Saudi Arabia's demands on Yemen because it wants to keep its territory's integrity in the region. However, Pakistan has been less inclined to impose diplomatic influence on the Saudi monarch.

Literature Review

Ayaz (2013) provides a broad overview of the ties between Pakistan and Iran since 1947. He talked about the diplomatic ties that have kept Pakistan and Iran together over the years and suggested ways that they could continue to grow and thrive. As he saw it, the new ties between the two countries would have to be founded on common interests apart from those shared by Saudi Arabia and the United States. Ahmad (2009) shows how governments interfere in IMF and World Bank talks to improve their political and military standing. He was responsible for getting American aid packages to Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s. He explained how Pakistan's votes against China's membership in the UN were affected by American aid to Pakistan in the 1950s.

Kazimi (2011) focused on the broader relationship between Pakistan and the United States. He talked about how Pakistan and the United States have a special relationship. He contended that the United States and Pakistan needed American support against India. However, the United States also sought Pakistan's help in isolating communist nations like the Soviet Union and China. Ansari (2006) provides an overview of U.S.-Iranian relations. Ansari says the relationship between Iran and the United States started in 1953 when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established a coup to eliminate Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. This meant that after 1953, the United States had a much more significant impact on Iran. He emphasized that Iran's geographical reality and abundant oil, natural gas, minerals, and metals were the primary reasons for the United States to view Iran as a geopolitically significant nation.

Although Kazimi (2011) highlighted three critical events occurring during the Cold War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and 9/11, which prompted American support for Pakistan, In his book "Pakistan Studies," Jaffrelot (2008) zeroed in on the impetus behind the American sanctions against Pakistan. From the 1940s to the 1970s, he detailed how relations between Pakistan and the United States evolved. According to him, the American weaponry shipments to Pakistan and the officer training project started with the May 1954 mutual support and defense agreement between the two countries. In his book "Pakistan: A Modern History," Talbot (2005) outlined the events that led Pakistan to adopt a multilateral foreign policy and attempt to create a nuclear weapon. After India's crushing loss at the hands of China, the United States began shipping significant quantities of weapons to the country. As a direct result, Pakistan adopted a trilateral policy involving the United States, the Soviet Union, and China.

Kurzman (2004) wrote in his book "The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran" that the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 was "perhaps the most popularly engaged revolution," with 10% of the people taking part. He claims that only 2% of French citizens participated in the French Revolution and that less than 1% of Russian citizens participated in the Russian Revolution. Soon after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Pappas (2006) assessed the crisis in his book, "The Essential Guide to A Country on the Brink." He claims that protesters against the regime in Iran started complaining about the rapid pace of social change and the failure of corrupt and incompetent governments to distribute wealth in 1978, one year before the revolution. The country had gone from a traditional, conservative, and rural society to an industrial, liberal, and urban one. The clerics of Iran made an effort to limit exposure to Western culture in the years following the revolution.

Vatanka (2013) emphasized the shift in the two countries relations since 1979. According to him, after the Iranian revolution of 1979, Islamabad prioritized its connections to the United States and various Arab oil-producing countries in the Gulf region over its ties to Tehran. In his book Afghanistan, published in 2002, Tanner laid up the background of the Soviet-Afghan War and the Jihad of the Mujahidin against the Soviets. Special Soviet forces entered Kabul and Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan on December 24th, 1979. In his account, the Soviet Union's first overseas invasion in over two decades was swiftly organized and executed precisely. He claims that back then, most Americans could not stop thinking about the embassy takeover in Iran.

Pollack's analysis from 2005 says that Washington's decision to form an Islamic Coalition against the Soviets led to much Arab support for the Mujahidin, which helped get the Soviets out of Afghanistan and made it possible for Osama bin Laden and other Islamist terrorists to rise to power. He also talked about how the governments of Pakistan and Iran are handling their plans to make nuclear weapons. Islamabad feared retaliation from the United Nations, so he claims that Pakistan opted for clandestine proliferation and maintained that strategy until 1998, when India conducted nuclear tests. However, news of Iran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons spread.

In his book "Pakistan: A Hard Country," published in 2011, Lieven outlined the history of relations between Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan. He asserted that Pakistan had not been involved in the formation of the Taliban, despite widespread assumptions to the contrary. Madrassa students in Kandahar and the surrounding area formed the backbone of the Taliban leadership. Instead of being motivated by Islamic theology, Islamabad supported the Taliban so India could not use Afghanistan as a springboard for an ethnic uprising inside Pakistan. Musharraf's (2006) book "In the Line of Fire" presented a different viewpoint from the conventional wisdom, which held that Pakistan and Iran had worked together to develop nuclear weapons. He claimed that Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan had been secretly and personally responsible for all nuclear proliferation in Pakistan, despite widespread belief to the contrary. He claimed that in 1987, Abdul Qadeer Khan began sending his nuclear know-how to Iran. He said Abdul Qadeer Khan shipped almost 18 metric tons of nuclear research materials to Iran and Libya through Dubai.

In his book "No departure from Pakistan," Markey (2013) provided one explanation. He saw Pakistan's domestic and international situations as dangers to U.S. interests. He said that nuclear weapons and proliferation, terrorist threats or terrorism, unstable society, expanding connections with China, and tensions with India were the fundamental causes that have challenged American security. Considering these factors, the United States has decided to stop ignoring Pakistan. He concluded that to safeguard American interests in Southeast Asia, the United States must keep its relationship with Pakistan on a solid footing. In their essay titled "Pakistan's Economy: Domestic Dissent and Foreign Reliance," Burki and Naseemullah (2016) noted that periods of military control in Pakistan coincided with the early Cold War, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the global war on terror coincided with times of economic prosperity. The underlying flaws in Pakistan's economy were also outlined (Rahman, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the claims of "neorealism," also called "structuralism." There is much literature to help with the conceptual framework. Kenneth Waltz's work from 1979 is the primary source of motivation. In it, he says that states are the most important players in international politics. Grieco (1988) focuses on "state rationality," while Donnelly (2000) talks about "Hobbesian anxiety" and "uncertainty" about "the intentions of other players." Keohane (1986) acknowledges states as the basic units of action. Waltz (1979) points out that the state has to do more than stay alive, and Gilpin (1983) looks at the link between "wealth and power" in international politics.

Agnew's (2005) definition of "hegemony" and Griffiths's (2008) explication of the hegemon illuminate many features of modern international relations. Lobell and Ripsman explain state foreign policies, as does Taliaferro (2009). Rose's (1998) "neoclassical realism" focuses on how "relative power" and "primary motivation" affect how states act in the international arena. Both Schweller (1996) and Rasler and Thompson (2001) say that "domestic structure and institutions, ideology, and ambitions" affect how states act in the outside world.

Since the modern global system is supposed to make big wars impossible, it was decided that the word "strategy" needed to be rethought or given more meaning. So, it has been said that states' geostrategic rivalries probably will not be limited to just military issues but will instead include a broader range of issues, such as a growing focus on differences in commercial, political, economic, and environmental preferences. The works of several prominent scholars were consulted to arrive at an explanation that would cover the broader aspects of the term "strategy" rather than remaining limited to the earlier understanding of military matters alone.

Research Design: Thematic Analysis

Table 1

Respondents and Coding

No.	Respondents or Profession	Total	Code
1	Foreign Policy Experts	04	A-1; A-2; A-3; A-4
2	Teachers	03	B-1; B-2; B-3
3	Students/Scholars	03	C-1; C-2; C-3

Source: Generated by scholar

The scholar adopted post-positivism to answer the questions and meet the objectives. The primary question was: What factors affect the political relations between Pakistan and Iran? Furthermore, the objective was: To explore the factors which affect the political relations between Pakistan and Iran. A thematic approach was selected to conduct this study.

Based on the researchers' models, the letters A-1, A-2, A-3, and A-4 are the first four Pakistani and Iranian foreign policy experts. The interviewees (C-1, C-2, and C-3) have all earned master's or doctoral degrees from universities in Pakistan and Iran, while the three respondents (B-1, B-2, and B-3) are all experts in the fields of politics, international relations, strategic studies, and peace and conflict studies in Pakistan and Iran, respectively. With a two-row, three-column layout, the tables show the essential semi-structured interview questions, how the participants answered them, and, on the right-hand side, how the researchers interpreted what the participants said. Diplomatic ties between Iran and Pakistan have had ups and downs since their establishment in 1947. Nevertheless, despite difficulties, ties between these two neighboring countries have persisted. This chapter discusses several essential things that significantly affect the diplomatic relationship between Pakistan and Iran.

Impediments in Pak-Iran Political Relations: Thematic Analysis: First Theme generated

Table 2

Qualitative data analysis design

Theme -1	**Afghanistan is a Vital Factor Impacting Pakistan-Iran Political Relations**	
Question: Is the situation in Afghanistan a vital factor in Pakistan-Iran Political Relations?	Interviewee Responses	Interpretation
	A2: Yes, Afghanistan remained a significant issue and hurdle in Pakistan and Iran relations since the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s. Removing the Taliban	Pakistan and Iran had also infrequently agreed on a common way to resolve the situation and probably have similar security issues in Afghanistan. The cost of

	from power in 2001 improved their relations, but the US withdrawal created the same situation again. B1: Yes. Afghanistan is not merely necessary for Pakistan but also for Iran. Iran and Pakistan have been working hard to bring a friendly government to Afghanistan. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has also provided another phase of the Pak-Iran confrontation over the Afghanistan issue. C2: Yes. Of course. Both states have been using their influence to shape the internal politics of Afghanistan for their interests. The same is the situation after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The emergence of the Taliban and its full Pakistani support can deteriorate the Pak-Iran political ties.	the Afghan conflict in the region refugee overflow has been borne primarily by Pakistan and Iran. Drug smuggling, human smuggling, contraband, and rising crime statistics on both sides of the fence are other societal issues. Although Islamabad also struggled with the spread of extremism through the disputed border as Afghan terrorists escaped into an insecure various tribes region, Tehran had dealt with such a water problem and border control concerns. Nevertheless, rather than working together to address the common enemy, the two are getting themselves backing rival factions in Afghanistan: Islamabad backed the Taliban before 9/11, while Tehran steadfastly backed the Northern Alliance.

Source: Generated by the scholar

Afghanistan is a Vital Factor Affecting Pak-Iran Political Relations

Nonetheless, it is not as if the two sides did not try to bridge the gap that the Afghan issue had opened up between them. Both sides' foreign ministry representatives made many attempts to set up meetings to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. After the tragic events of 1998 in Mazar-e-Sharif, where the Taliban killed Iranian consuls and Tehran accused Islamabad of betraying its trust, Iran's foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi, suggested shuttle negotiations solve problems between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance (Laipson, 2012). In November 2001, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar said from Islamabad, "The two countries have decided to work together to get things back to normal in Afghanistan" (Pant, 2009). Once again, American influence overshadowed Pakistan and Iran's attempts to settle their differences and bring peace to Afghanistan. It also worked to keep Tehran out of any regional or international efforts to bring peace and security to Afghanistan.

Reports and polls indicate that the Taliban may still control a sizable area of Afghanistan, casting doubt on the feasibility of a graceful US withdrawal. The United States thinks that Pakistan's lack of full support for its fight against the Taliban and its desire to keep its power in the area has made things worse between the two countries. After President Trump presented the United States' new policy toward Afghanistan, Islamabad rapidly concluded that it no longer considered it a partner in that country and that India should play a much more significant role. Meanwhile, neighboring countries like China, Russia, and Iran would have been worried about Afghanistan's unpredictability for quite some time. Given American hostility toward Pakistan in Afghanistan, it is now easier for Pakistan and Iran to work with other regional partners (Raza & Shapiro, 2021).

Thematic Analysis: Second Theme generated
Table 3
Qualitative data analysis design

Theme -2	**Saudi Arabia is a Vital Factor Impacting Pakistan-Iran Political Relations**	
Question:	Interviewee Responses	Interpretation
Is the situation in Saudi Arabia a vital factor in Pakistan-Iran Political Relations?	A3: *Yes. Saudi Arabia is a close ally of Pakistan, and we also know that Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing for power in the Middle East for regional superiority and leadership. Their animosity can be witnessed in Pakistan. Their rivalry has been witnessed through the alleged funding of their sects' madaris which has time and again contributed to the escalation of sectarian violence in Pakistan.* B3: *Saudi Arabia always considers Pakistan an ally in its struggle for regional dominance. This is why scholars think Saudi Arabia would be a factor in shaping the future of Pak-Iran ties.* C1: *Yes. Saudi Arabia is a significant factor in Pak-Iran political relations.*	Throughout General Zia-ul-rule Haq's in Pakistan, while the 'Islamization' period had been in full flow and shifting the balance away from Tehran, Pakistan's deep connections with Saudi Arabia became cemented. Since 98 percent of Pakistan's Muslims are Sunnis, the religious aspect of the connection was unintentionally added. Throughout this period, zia-ul-promotion Haq's of Sunni Islam attempted to instill a sense of jihad to support the struggle against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Tehran allegedly gave vital religious but monetary help to Shi'ite groups in Pakistan to combat the rise of Sunni Islamic doctrines. In contrast, numerous Arab nations put finance into opposition to this Iranian action. The outcome proved negative since it made Pakistan a sectarian proxy warzone for such conflict between Shias and Sunnis among Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a result, there was a spike in the sectarian conflict, which began at the end of the 1980s but persisted far into the nineties.

Saudi Arabia's Influences on Relations Between Pakistan and Iran

Many safeguards had been put in place to cut off support from all quarters and keep Pakistan from devolving into sectarian strife. Even though the sectarian violence of the early

2000s is not as bad as it used to be, the radicalism it caused is still around and hurting Pakistani society. After that, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran got worse. This made Islamabad try to mediate between the two countries many times, but it did not work. They did this because they were worried that the growing animosity between the two countries could be used to control Pakistan's religious establishment. These two groups are helping different regional and international coalitions fight proxy wars in Yemen and Syria (Fatima, 2020).

Furthermore, relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia are tense. Pakistan faces difficulties since it seeks cordial ties with both groups but needs help striking a fair balance between them. In order to keep things calm between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Islamabad decided not to help Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni conflict. Iran and Syria are not part of the Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), which Saudi Arabia planned to lead (Sultan, 2018). This made Iran angry. Islamabad has clarified that it will only join the IMCTC if assured that it will not be used as a front against Tehran. This relationship must be handled more carefully because Tehran is a sizeable neighboring country, and Islamabad relies on Saudi Arabia for constant political and financial support. Given time, this factor could worsen ties between Pakistan and Iran (Raza, 2020).

Since 1947, when Pakistan was first created, one of its main foreign policy goals has been to make friends with other Muslim countries. Article 40 of Pakistan's constitution reads, "The Government shall seek to preserve and develop brotherly connections among Muslim nations based on Islamic solidarity," although this provision is not legally binding (MOFA 2018a). This phrase serves as the foundation for Pakistan's foreign policy. Hence, it appears multiple times on the ministry's website. Some Muslim groups, however, have voiced opposition to this strategy. Pakistani officials always favored Iran despite appearing neutral during the Iraq-Iran War (1980–88) (Sciolino, 1987). Long after the 2011 Syrian civil war began, a new challenge arose. In 2014, Pakistan's National Assembly Committee on Foreign Affairs said that Iran's interference in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq made it essential for the country to stay neutral (GOP, 2014, p. 13).

Knowing why Pakistan is staying out of the fight between Iran and Saudi Arabia is essential. Even though some writers (Qaiser & Khan, 2017; Tehsin, 2017) have pointed out that competition between Pakistan and Iran is a limiting factor and argued for a more fair approach, there has been no evaluation of the international and domestic issues that force Islamabad to be fairer. It also needs to be clarified how Pakistan's stated impartiality benefits the country regarding its ties with Tehran. Even though the phrase will have different meanings in different places, the possible consequences of staying objective are not considered. Studies have been done on bias in international policy decisions in other places (Anceschi, 2009; Dalsjo, 2014; Moldadossova & Zharkinbaeva, 2015), but not Pakistan. In order to accomplish it, this research offers a viable alternative. This research tries to explain Pakistan's foreign policies by looking at internal and external factors, such as the country's demographics and sensitivity along sectarian lines, historical connections, environment, economy, and geopolitical circumstances. According to the authors of this study, understanding the role of impartiality in any country's policies and activities is crucial for practitioners and academics. Pakistan’s aspiration for it and the actuality of impartiality play different but significant roles in the country's national objectives.

Thematic Analysis: Third Theme generated

Table 4

Qualitative data analysis design

Theme -3	**The United States is a Vital Factor Impacting Pakistan-Iran Political Relations**	
Question: Is the **US** a vital factor in Pakistan-Iran Political Relations?	Interviewee Responses	Interpretation
	A4: *Yes. The US is a global and regional major player. As we know that the US has withdrawn its troops from Afghanistan, but it still has so much influence in regional politics that Pakistan cannot import gas and other petroleum products from Iran.* B1: *As a global superpower, the US has shaped regional political dynamics. The US has constantly been forcing Pakistani governments not to trade with Iran because they believe that Iran is under severe kind sanctions.* C3: *Yes. The US has always been a factor in Pak-Iran relations.*	Owing to the US' strong impact since 9/11 makes relations between Iran and Pakistan complicated and unclear. The foundation of bilateral ties between the countries continues to be the national interest. The broader definition was added to the tense and antagonistic ties between the two Muslim Countries as just a result of changes in administrations within those countries, effectively undermining domineering American influence.

Source: Generated by the scholar

In the post-strategic era, relations between Iran and Pakistan were useless because of the bad relations between the U.S. and Iran after 9/11 and Pakistan's increased political ties with the U.S. as the front partner in the war on terror. After the Taliban were overthrown, the United States, Pakistan, and Iran entered a hasty marriage of convenience, but it did not last. After a long period of hostility, hopes for peace with the United States were crushed on October 4 when Tehran signed a $7 billion weapons deal with Moscow. As part of this agreement, Moscow also promised to send Tehran the nuclear reactor it had bought from Russia for its Bushehr nuclear power complex. The U.S. saw these Iranian moves as proof that Iran was evil and could not be trusted. U.S. officials may have said Iran did not appear to be working on a nuclear weapon. However, the country's purchase of Russian fighter jets and its ongoing development of medium- and long-range missiles prompted concern, leading some to conclude that negotiations with Iran over W.M.D. could put regional security and U.S. friends and allies at risk (Brumberg, 2002).

The United States' retaliation would have alienated Tehran and reduced its influence in Afghanistan. After a period of animosity, relations between Pakistan and Iran were mended throughout the 1990s, due mainly to this event. President Bush exerted enormous pressure on Pakistan's foreign policies, leaving President Musharraf with no choice but to collaborate with the United States to foil Iran's strategic goals. Therefore, Islamabad would not be able to mend its ties with Tehran in the face of continuous U.S. pressure; instead, it started to acquire the upper hand under Afghanistan's new leadership, as reported by Hunter (2010). Because of this, communication between the three countries was made much more complicated, and a sense of not understanding each other grew. Pakistan's relationship with Iran was hurt by how hostile the U.S. was toward Tehran and how it set up military bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The United States eventually surrounded Tehran. During this situation, Tehran thought Islamabad was a pro-American country that would make the U.S. feel safe enough to stay in the area for a long time. This led to problems between Pakistan and Iran and instability worldwide (Wilson, 2005).

Taking the lead in the region requires Iran and Pakistan to rise to the top. Even though the crossbars have been moved, the brothers' relationship, ability to work together, and ability to make money are still strong. Now that the scary threat of financial sanctions has been lifted, the two countries must move quickly to ensure that this is good for their futures and those of the larger areas connected to them. The history of Pakistan and Iran's neighborhood is still being written. Even though Islamabad was aware of outside influences, it maintained a foreign policy that was primarily independent. Islamabad would try to keep good relations with Tehran, a significant but influential neighbor, as a sign that it can run its foreign policy well.

Thematic Analysis: Fourth Theme generated

Table 5

Qualitative data analysis design

Theme -4	**India is a Vital Factor Impacting Pakistan-Iran Political Relations**	
Question:	Interviewee Responses	Interpretation
Is **India** a vital factor in Pakistan-Iran Political Relations?	A1: *Indian strategic relations with Iran significantly hinder Pak-Iran political ties. As we know that India is the arch-rival of Pakistan which always seeks to stop the growth and development of Pakistan. It has always created impediments to Pakistan's progress. Recent developments like Kulbhushan Yadav and his arrival to Pakistan through Iran have also damaged the Pak-Iran political ties.* B2: *India and Iran have friendly relations in many areas, despite India not welcoming the 1979 Revolution. Significant trade ties exist, particularly in oil imports into India and diesel exports to Iran. India is a strategic partner of Iran. The Indian factor became a variable in Pak-Iran relations.* C1: *Yes. Both states have divergent views about the Taliban government there. Pakistan supported the Taliban the past which was severely criticized by*	India agitates Pak-Iran relationships to avoid Pakistan by developing geopolitics and political-economic connections with Iran. When India and Iran created an Indo-Iranian Joint Commission in 1983, their security and government cooperation began. The Indian proclamation marked a significant turning point in their military and strategic cooperation after MOUs on security coordination had been inked in 2001. The momentous Indo-Iran Defence Accord, inked on January 19, 2003, had been made possible by the Tehran Declaration, which laid the foundation for that too. A few days later, the "New Delhi declaration" and related provisions were also inked in New Delhi. That allowed India to use Iran's installations against Pakistan during a conflict. The military secretaries of India and Iran allegedly debated selling Tehran armaments, notably Indian Konkurs anti-tank guided

	the Iranian authorities in the past. The same situation is now; the emergence of the Taliban and their tackling of the Shia community will further deteriorate Pak-Iran relations.	missiles plus replacement components, whenever the MoUs were signed in 2001. Islamabad is now in a pickle due to such a range of Indo-Iranian cooperation and military collaboration. Strategic coherence was boosted by such military agreements but also strengthened military cooperation.

Source: Generated by the scholar

India is a Vital Factor Affecting Pak-Iran Political Relations

Just after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban's leadership came to a close, while ties between Iran and Pakistan resumed their previous cordial nature. Up until 1979, Iran and Pakistan had a wide range of relationships. During the Arab-Israeli war, when Indian oil imports from Tehran increased, the Indian factor came into play in relations between Pakistan and Iran. The significance of such a factor emerged in the 1990s. However, it was only in the dawn of the 21st century that the broad outlines of India and Iran's economic and security relationship were set. Delhi wants to dominate South Asia, and to achieve this goal; it is strengthening its position concerning Islamabad. For that reason, it has developed close ties with Pakistan's western neighbors. India wants to establish geopolitical and political-economic links towards Tehran to avoid Islamabad, which irritates Pakistan and Iran.

Countries that live in this chaotic global system have their own set of problems because of the way the world is changing. The existing international order had reached a time of transformation, and the absence of solid world leadership had significantly contributed to the formation of strategic collaboration and the tearing apart of old alliances. The ongoing coronavirus epidemic that is causing trouble all over the world is the most recent and unique problem we face. Several countries are developing to challenge the imperialist plans of a sole superpower, signaling the end of the unipolar period. However, some adhere to Samuel P. Huntington's theories about uni-polarity, claiming that while there was only one superpower on the planet, there was no uni-polarity in the international political structure (Huntington, 1999). This perspective is also consistent with Fareed Zakariya's "Post-American Worldwide" theory, according to which multiple big countries would soon appear on the international stage, turning global affairs into a "Post-American" concern (Zakaria, 2011). This does not imply that US dominance has completely decreased, in any case. It means there is now more than one leading player in world politics (Raza, 2020).

Discussion

The principal objective of this article was to explore the political dynamics of Pakistan-Iran relations, as we know that both of these states are situated in a significant geostrategic position in the region. Both countries have strong military forces that significantly impact regional and worldwide politics. Pakistan has nuclear weapons, and Iran, who also knows how to make them, is the most critical Muslim country. Both states are neighboring states and also have a strong influence on one another.

At first, the scholar looked into political relationships' history and what things could significantly affect those relationships. It is a matter of fact that both political relationships overlap. However, to understand these things better, the scholar put them into two groups, which can make it hard to improve these relationships—reviewing the existing research and talking to experts about these issues led to the discovery of these factors, which can have a significant effect on the political and economic ties between Pakistan and Iran. Afghanistan's internal and external politics were named as things that could affect political relations. So were Indian collaboration with Iran and their policies toward the region, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and sectarianism issues, and U.S. policies in the area and how they affect regional politics.

The role of India and its ties to the Iranian government, found through thematic analysis and supported by the literature review, can significantly affect how political relations between India and Iran are worsening. Iran-India relations are far-reaching and multidimensional (Singh & Singh, 2019; Maleki, 2013). Iran's geopolitical position is significant for India, as it can counteract China's increasing presence throughout Asia and boost India's regional influence. India is working with Iran to open the Iranian port of Chabahar. The development of this port and Indian infrastructure along Iran's border with Afghanistan not only helps India to counter the massive Chinese investment in Pakistan's Gwadar port but also boosts India's influence in Afghanistan, which counters Pakistan's influence there (Maleki, 2013). It appears understandable in the context of two contradictory developments—Gwadar and Chabahar ports in the South Asian region. Singh (2016) has symbolized it as the Sino-India rivalry in the Arabian Sea.

Iran considers India significant for many reasons.

1. First, India, like Iran, is an Asian country that shares historical, cultural, and ethnic links. India's foreign policy is also congruent with Iran's; they oppose U.S. unilateralism and a unipolar world.
2. Following the New Delhi Declaration of 2003, Iran and India referred to each other as "strategic partners" and embarked on joint military exercises.
3. Iran cannot expect India to favor it in global and security issues, especially in its nuclear issue.

Iran can be helpful to India by providing it with a Muslim partner that acts as a counterbalance to Pakistan, and thus Iran presents a potential strategic advantage for India (Kaura, 2015; Maleki, 2013). Kaura (2015) also has given Pakistan a central place in India's moves toward Eurasian connectivity.

A vast body of academic literature is available on Indo-Iran relations. Topics like India's leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its proximity with the Soviet Union vis-à-vis Iran have been discussed in the works of strategic scholars such as Naaz (2001a), Hunter (2010), Hussain (2012), and Aishwarya (2017). Some strategic scholars (Alam, 2004; Webb, 2011) have concluded that the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979), Iran-US diplomatic relations, and recurrent security threat perceptions changed the geopolitical scenario having drastic bearings on Indo-Iran relations. At the same time, other scholars (Alam, 2004; Fair, 2007; Naaz, 2001b; Tishehyar, 2011; Ramana, 2012) have discussed Iran's and Pakistan's obsession with Islamic posture. Iran's relationships with India, China, and Pakistan have been shaped in many ways by geopolitics. In this respect, geopolitical dynamics like India's relationship with the U.S. on nuclear and terrorism issues and Indo-Pak rivalries have figured prominently in the works of Yazdani (2007) and Teja (2015).

One of the most significant provisions of 2003's New Delhi Declaration sought to upgrade defense cooperation between Iran and India. The wide-ranging partnership involved all three military services: the army, navy, and air force. In 2003, India and Iran signed the Chabahar Port Agreement, strengthening their relationship. It is articulated in the New Delhi Declaration of 2003. It provided a strategic underpinning for bilateral relations and cooperation. It mainly focused on connectivity, including the Chabahar Port and Chabahar-Fahranj-Bam railway network (Fair, 2010, p. 135). Iranian scholar Tishehyar (2011, p. 135) has talked about how important it is for Iran and India to work together on the Chabahar Port from a geopolitical point of view, saying that it would give viable and quick access to the Eurasian region through war-torn Afghanistan. During the visit of Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid (October 2012–May 2014) to Iran in May 2012, both countries showed their commitment to regional security and economic issues, including connectivity. Suresh and Ramesh (2015), on pages 381 and 382, said that these efforts had helped a lot to get the INSTC and Chabahar Port going again in this direction.

After the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran rebuilt its conventional arsenal by purchasing tanks, combat aircraft, and ships from Russia and China. It also reportedly solicited Indian assistance in 1993 to help develop new batteries for three Kilo-class submarines it had purchased from Russia. The batteries the Russians gave to the submarines needed to be changed to work better in the warm waters of the Persian Gulf. India had much experience running Kilo-class submarines in warm water, so this was a good idea. Iran will likely get help from India to improve its Russian-made military equipment, like its MiG-29 fighter jets, warships, and tanks.

Despite these efforts, strategic and military cooperation between the two countries could be much better. This is due to India's turn to the West (Maleki, 2013). The sectarian issue and Saudi Arabia's role significantly affect how Pakistan and Iran get along politically. Yazdani (2007, p. 356) argues that Iran remains apprehensive of Pakistan's involvement in the anti-Iranian Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Also, violence against the Shiite minority in Pakistan worsens because of Sunni sectarian differences. Other gas pipeline routes from Turkmenistan that do not go through Iran are being promoted. Iran was glad that Pakistan took action against anti-Shiite groups on its territory and kept good relations with Shiites by staying out of the Saudi-led war in Yemen (Gulati, 2016).

The current governments of Iran and Pakistan are still hopeful that relations between the two countries will improve. These factors, discussed in this dissertation, strongly influence political and economic relations. To cope with these challenges better, both states' policymakers and decision-makers must play their roles. Their relations can strengthen their political and economic ties if common sense prevails.

Conclusion

The following are the conclusions of the study:

It was concluded that among the factors that can influence

1. Pakistan-Iran political relations are Afghanistan's internal and external policies;
2. US policies toward regional issues following their withdrawal from Afghanistan;
3. India as a factor in critical regional issues and sectarianism issues; and
4. Saudi Arabia's relations with Pakistan

The people we talked to think that sectarianism and Saudi Arabia's policies have the most effect on the relationship between Pakistan and Iran, followed by India.

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The United States and Sino-Pak Strategic Imperatives in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is geo-politically significant; despite two decade long imbroglio and foreign occupation it has been a ground for major powers to establish their influences and to counter their rivals. It is a hub having proximity to the South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Inside Afghanistan the interests of the United States, China and Pakistan converges and diverges on multiple grounds but for all the interests the peace and stability inside Afghanistan is crucial. The research piece investigates strategic interests of Pakistan, China and the United States in Afghanistan and also finds out grounds where these three countries cooperate for the peace and stability of Afghanistan and the region. This research is conducted through mixed method design by using both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to investigate strategic interests of Pakistan, China and the United States inside Afghanistan. These three countries have some diverging interests but rational approach made them cooperate. Accordingly, the grounds of convergence are counter-terrorism, curbing violent extremism and cooperation for economic connectivity and regional relations which are rational choices for players in order to secure win-win situation. Peaceful and stable Afghanistan is the only way for access and utilization of natural resources and for the feasibility of significant economic projects like CASA-1000, China Pakistan Economic Cooperation and Belt Road Initiative .

Keywords: strategic interests, extremism, economic cooperation, China Pakistan economic cooperation, convergence, game theory.

The pivot of international politics is in shift towards rising Asia from the US and Europe. Great powers are striving for access to the Asian huge consumer market and natural resources. The US is expected as dominant military power till 2030 whereby the other aspiring powers are emerging threats for the US due to which it cannot rely on soft power only. For America the “energy independence’ is important because her fiscal policies are dependent on oil and gas in the whole world (Fishelson, 2007). For the diplomatic outreach to the whole world these fiscal objectives are the base. The US after the collapse of USSR is in pursuit of consistent control over the CARs natural resources (Rousseau, 2011). For Nicholas Spikeman, control of Eurasian resources guarantee hegemony over the world. Zbigniew Brzezinki explained in his book ‘The Grand Chessboard” (1998) that control over Central Asia is vital for Eurasian ascendency and the regulation of natural resources of Eurasia is way leading towards the global hegemony (Khan, 2011). Taking this theory in policy making the US invaded Afghanistan for having control to the natural resources of the CARs. In the very start the regional countries aligned with the US in war against Taliban but the interests of these countries were diverged in the later years and they afterwards switched over their policy options. Because the underlying policy contours of the US became evident later as to counter the regional aspiring powers, access to the natural resources of CARs, spoil the development of energy pipelines in order to damage Russia, China and Iran

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(Abbas, 2012). Resultantly, the western powers have not accomplished their goals in Afghanistan while regional countries established regional structure for their mutual interests and for improving regional relations. Hence, for the economic and military interests of these countries regional groups and alliances got more importance.

As mentioned already that Afghanistan is geo-strategically important because it works as connecting regions of north and south of Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East. The three countries Pakistan, China and the US are in struggle to ensure peace and stability inside Afghanistan. Pakistan provides easy access for the landlocked Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea in order to trade with the world market. Natural resources of CARs and Afghanistan are alluring to both China and the US. Contextually, the Afghanistan became focus of foreign policies of the three countries Pakistan, China and the US.

In Afghanistan perspectives as the foreign troops have been withdrawn and the US completely left hence the three players as Pakistan, China and the United States are recently having no other alternative than to converge on bringing peace and stability inside Afghanistan.

Method

For conducting this research Mixed method design is used which is composed of qualitative and quantitative methods. This design is useful for investigation of research questions and ultimately achieve research goals. This design validate research through triangulation techniques.

The quantitative method is used in order to achieve goal of strategic imperatives of Pakistan, the United States and China inside Afghanistan. And qualitative methods give required details of the interests of these three countries in the stability and peace of Afghanistan. This research will be conducted through mixed method design consisted of three phases as initial data gathering, a questionnaire survey and qualitative data gathering.

The Initial Data Gathering Stage

This step is to get all possible recent information and data on the theme of strategic imperatives of Pakistan, China and the United States inside Afghanistan.

The Survey and Qualitative Data Gathering

This stage is to collect primary data in order to impart validity to the research questions and objectives.

Results

Through triangulation analysis of the data was done.

Study population and Sampling

The sample area comprised Pakistan Foreign office, Defence Ministry, ISI, Various public sector universities (Behria University Islamabad, COMSATS Islamabad, Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi, National Defence University Islamabad, University of Peshawar, Indian Think Tank, Thailand Senior Journalist, Director of UK Statecraft.

Table 1
Showing the results of different organizations

	Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	4.3	4.3	4.3	
BU	1	4.3	4.3	8.7	
COMSATS		1	4.3	4.3	13.0
FJWU	7	30.4	30.4	43.5	
India	1	4.3	4.3	47.8	
ISI	1	4.3	4.3	52.2	
NDU	1	4.3	4.3	56.5	
PSU	1	4.3	4.3	60.9	
SPU	1	4.3	4.3	65.2	
TISF	1	4.3	4.3	69.6	
UoP	7	30.4	30.4	100.0	
Total		23		100.0	100.0

Table 2
Showing the number of specialized numbers

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
6	26.1	26.1	26.1
14	60.9	60.9	87.0
1	4.3	4.3	91.3
1	4.3	4.3	95.7
1	4.3	4.3	100.0
23	100.0	100.0	

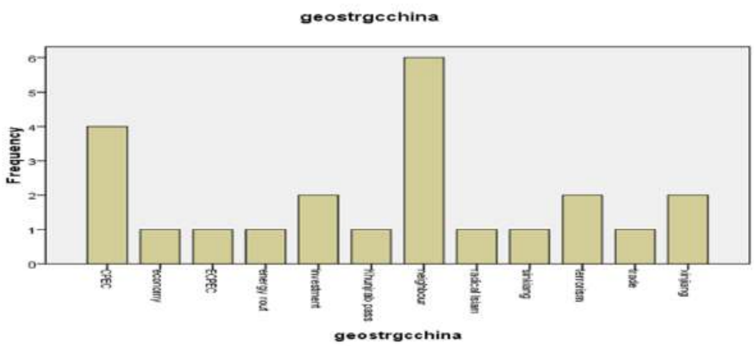
Table 3
Showing respondent male and female gender

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Male	14	11.5	2.5
Female	9	11.5	-2.5
Total	23		

Main grounds for investigation was strategic importance of Afghanistan for Pakistan, China and the US

Geostrategic Significance of Afghanistan for China

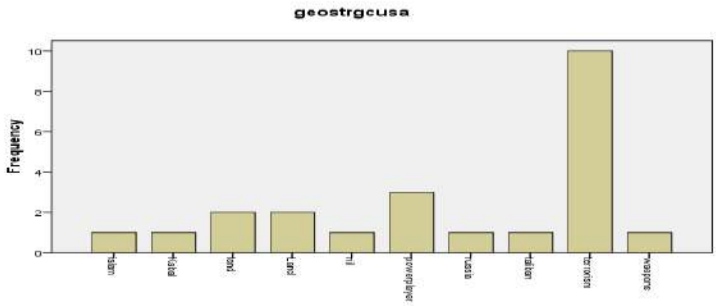
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	CPEC	4	17.4	17.4	17.4
	Economy	1	4.3	4.3	21.7
	ECPEC	1	4.3	4.3	26.1
	energy rout	1	4.3	4.3	30.4
	Investment	2	8.7	8.7	39.1
	Khunjrab pass	1	4.3	4.3	43.5
	Neighbor	6	26.1	26.1	69.6
	radical Islam	1	4.3	4.3	73.9
	Sinkiang	1	4.3	4.3	78.3
	Terrorism	2	8.7	8.7	87.0
	Trade	1	4.3	4.3	91.3
	Xinjiang	2	8.7	8.7	100.0
	Total	23	100.0	100.0	



Geostrategic Significance of Afghanistan for USA

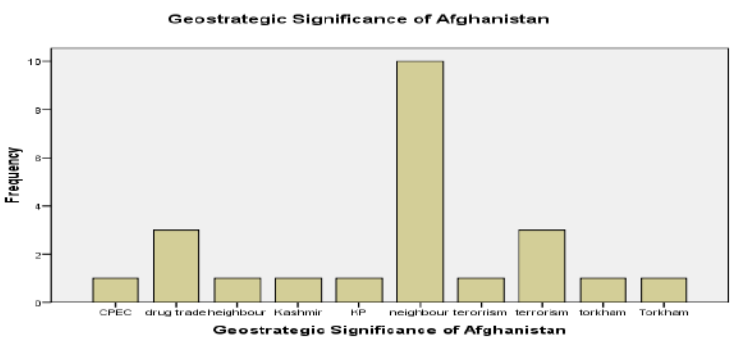
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Islam	1	4.3	4.3	4.3
	Kabal	1	4.3	4.3	8.7
	Land	2	8.7	8.7	17.4
	Land	2	8.7	8.7	26.1
	Nil	1	4.3	4.3	30.4
	Powerplayer	3	13.0	13.0	43.5
	Russia	1	4.3	4.3	47.8
	Taliban	1	4.3	4.3	52.2
	Terrorism	10	43.5	43.5	95.7

Weapons	1	4.3	4.3	100.0
Total	23	100.0	100.0	



Geostrategic Significance of Afghanistan for Pakistan

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	CPEC	1	4.3	4.3	4.3
	drug trade	3	13.0	13.0	17.4
	heighbour	1	4.3	4.3	21.7
	Kashmir	1	4.3	4.3	26.1
	KP	1	4.3	4.3	30.4
	neighbour	10	43.5	43.5	73.9
	terorrism	1	4.3	4.3	78.3
	terrorism	3	13.0	13.0	91.3
	torkham	1	4.3	4.3	95.7
	Torkham	1	4.3	4.3	100.0
	Total	23	100.0	100.0	



Discussion

Strategic Imperatives of the Pakistan, China and the US

To Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Terrorism in Afghanistan has spill over to the Pakistan adjacent areas and to the western part of China as Xinjiang which are directly connected with Afghanistan. The US is also adamant about the very presence of Al-Qaeda, ISKP and other terrorists. So the immediate goal is peace and stability inside Afghanistan and that Afghan soil is not used against any country. Accordingly, the policy priorities of Pakistan, the US and China are to work for curbing terrorism and violent extremism inside Afghanistan.

China is fearful of the fall out of terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang which have been infested from the Wakhan corridor, in northeast of Afghanistan stretched from Tajikistan and China. It channelize Uighur fighters to China which has caused havoc to the law and order situation for China. Looking into history then Taliban have trained militants of ETIM in both Pakistan FATA and Afghanistan whereby these militants were with fissiparous tendencies as manifested in incidents of 1992 and 1997 (Chung, 2002) got strength in 2009. These elements striving for an independent home of their own with no China domination. Resultantly, in order to overcome the threat of Uyghur China is contributing for the anti-terrorism, security and above all to curb the East Turkestan Islamic movement.

China had emphasized for the agreement of Taliban and the United States and later lend her good offices for intra-Afghan dialogues also. As already stated that both Pakistan tribal areas and Xinjiang are with Afghan imbroglio spill over hence China and Pakistan are indispensable in all efforts for counter-terrorism and control over violent religious extremism, separatist tendencies with particular mention of safeguard Xinjiang (Haider, 2005) for which Pakistan too has taken curbing Uighur on exigency after 9/11. Both countries have signed anti-terrorism agreement in 2005 ratified in 2006.

Pakistan had been contemplated as part of problem and solution simultaneously by the US and has taken Pakistan contribution for Afghanistan. For Vali Nasr the US first adopted cooperative policy for Pakistan but then turned towards considering it as hub for militants and that it provides shelter to terrorists. Consequently the gulf between two countries was widened enough and the agony of offenses was again faced by Pakistan (Nasr, 2013). Pakistan has done remarkable military operations in tribal areas as Operation Rah-e Raast, Rah-e-Nijat, Radd Ul Fasad etc where the militant hideouts have been cleared. Pakistan has played huge role against terrorism and extremism and to implement National Action Plan with its true spirit and to keep national security on sound footings.

Improvement of Regional Relations

The potential of Asia is limited not only to the regional security cooperation but it is remarkable for economic aspects also as regarding energy policies. This economic cooperation has linked the region in economic and security cooperation and has ensured regional economic connectivity. As for instance India and China and India contributed fifty percent to the world energy demand consisted twenty percent natural gas and sixty percent oil (Herberg, 2010). The region has been strewn with more energy demand hence protection of transit and transportation of energy is utmost requirement. Approaching energy resources across China, Middle East and China is enhanced which can sufficiently configure geopolitics of the region.

America in the context of economic interdependence will try for more convergence than conflicts with China as the same is evident in the adverse consequences of Afghanistan. (Steinberg and Hanlon, 2014) For some theorist this economic interdependence is main cause of the US convergence with China (Xinbo, 2012). Chinese has never tarnished security relations with the US for the sake of economic and trade ties with other countries. For cooperation and coordination with the US China has even reduced trade and investment in Iran for the containment of nuclear proliferation (Downs, 2013). However China in the recent world has been working through huge investment in different important regions of the world. China has invested amount of dollar 1.3 trillion in the Europe and specifically in the treasury bonds of the US.

While taking the regional countries like Pakistan and China then both are linked through most significant economic project of CPEC linking China Xinjiang with Pakistan Gwadar port. CPEC has dividends for China because trade through Straits of Malacca has security hurdles for China as well as time taking through it is 45 days while trade through CPEC will take only 10 days. Besides CPEC is integral part of Belt and Road Initiative which connect entire Central Asia with South Asia. China attempting to connect with Northern Mediterranean Sea, South Asia, North Africa and South East Asia through maritime routes with whole world (Ahmad, 2015). It provides access of various landlocked regional countries like Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics for trade through Pakistan Balochistan Gwadar port to the Arabian Sea. Similarly for linking Pakistan Gwadar port with CARs for energy and gas is also urgently needed for Pakistan. It will channelize Pakistan trade with European market through Pakistan-Central Asia bilateral trade. Besides these economic dividends the hallmark project of CPEC will boost regional economic cooperation and will overcome regional disputes.

CPEC ensures regional huge investment which in turn will promote economic development and prosperity not only for Pakistan and China but for the whole region. Economic dividends included development of infrastructure, reduced distance of transportation route resulting in reduced cost of communication, installation of industrial production units, and improved time for delivery of goods and reducing inventory cost. This strategic project foresees multi-billion master plan of 2030 timeline comprised various areas of cooperation like construction of road and rail links, fiber optic cable projects, mutual economic and technical cooperation, development of industrial zones and benefits to regional countries will improve relations.

For all these economic dividends peace and stability inside Afghanistan is crucial hence Pakistan and China has always cooperated for the peace talks and lend their good offices for the sake. Peaceful region guarantee regional economic integration through CPEC. In the region Pakistan is also potential because Pakistan being at crossroad is juncture for China, CARs and Gulf countries. Whereas the oil reserves of Gulf countries are expected to last in coming four decades. Consequently, Central Asian natural resources are required for all countries which has accentuated CPEC importance and has imparted geo-strategic importance to Pakistan. Trade through CARs and Pakistan can increase GDP to 2.3 % of China and Central Asia (Sachdeva, 2007). Afghanistan is also taken as conduit of rails, roads and energy supply to Eurasia from Indian Ocean.

Russia and China have huge economic cooperation as an agreement of three decades worth US dollars 400 billion is signed to trade 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China from Russian gas fields in Siberia. Eastern Siberia socio-economic development is designed by Russia.

Imports of value US dollar 24 billion of China and Russia are signed for three years which will lessen Russia dependence on Foreign exchange reserves in dollars. Furthermore, Silk Road Economic Belt revival is initiated by joint build-up of a China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor which is essential for diverse economic growth and development.

Regional Stability and Peaceful Dispensation in Afghanistan

For looking the role of three countries of Pakistan, China and the US then it stretched back towards the axis of these three countries for containment of the USSR in Afghanistan and backing Mujahideen. The Chinese made weapons (Shichor, 2004) were used and the US also provides dollars for the sake. Post 9/11 the role of Pakistan in war on terror has played a pivotal role for China and the US regarding Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and China have invested in recent peace talks between US and Taliban where ultimately the agreement had been signed by both Zalmai Khalilzad (the US special envoy for the task) and Taliban leader. The landmark agreement stipulated a timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces, the US would reduce its forces down to 8,600 from 12,000 in the next three to four months while the remaining US forces would withdraw in 14 months' time.

It also mandated both sides to release prisoners held in their custody. The Kabul government was bound for the Taliban five thousands prisoners release and one thousand Taliban security forces in next 2 weeks. The Taliban have pledged not to allow Afghan soil to be used by any militant group including Al Qaeda or Daesh. The US has agreed to take off Taliban leaders' names from the blacklist of the UN and US. The blacklist barred leaders from travel and movement beyond Afghanistan. Permanent ceasefire was asked through agreement in order to have feasible environment for dialogues so that intra-Afghan talks which had been failed. Consequently Taliban have taken control of the Kabul government.

However, the condition of prisoners release took months and clashes and then intra-Afghan dialogues started. Intra-Afghan dialogues did not yield in any meaningful way and as soon as the US withdrew completed then Taliban got the command of Afghanistan without any meaningful resistance. The Afghan army withered away in couple of weeks. Currently the Taliban have launched an interim government which is still awaiting international recognition and is embroiled in economic crisis.

The US will have to play hard ball in smooth working of the Taliban based government which is mostly having hardliners in cabinet by excluding other factions. Freezing of worth $ 7 billion foreign assets in Afghan central bank is its manifestation. The transition government is to handle any splinter group or Daesh iron handedly. The US has strategic imperatives and wants an eye on Afghanistan for overcoming China influence in CARs and Afghanistan.

China would wait and see. It will pin its hopes on peace taking hold in the country and refrain from taking any partisan role. Because it believes time is on its side and the related economic endeavor of China in Afghanistan and CARs are alarming to the US.

Pakistan wants more economic and strategic cooperation with China keeping Indian factor in calculations. Pakistan will have to accept the reality of a free Afghanistan that may initiate long term policies of enduring friendship with its neighbors and regional countries including India. While Islamabad must however demand and insist that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used covertly or overtly by any country against Pakistan's interests.

Pakistan role can be pivotal in Afghanistan for smoothening trade to and from Afghanistan and successful bilateral trade. It can provide technical support for establishing private and public departments and various infrastructure projects.

For Pakistan the most important is to establish working relations required for Pakistan stability. Strategic imperatives of Pakistan would be fulfilled if Pakistan adopt realistic approach and then set goals according to possibilities. Accordingly Pakistan and India will also have improved bilateral relations by calling on the EU, US and others to support in same. Pakistan can retain its leverage through soft power, mutual cooperation and an approach leading towards more convergence of interests. Border management issues need mutually agreed mechanism.

A peaceful Afghanistan would be a springboard for accessing the Central Asian countries. It will play a crucial role in the iconic Chinese initiative of Belt and Road. It will benefit from exploitation of its proven mineral reserves of more than $ 1.5 trillion.

These three countries interests have simultaneous converging as well as diverging nature but for maximum gains and minimum loss these players tries to overcome complexities in relations and to reach an equillbrium of maximum strength for all the involved countries

Hence these states came to non-zero sum game. As taking the investigation conducted in this research piece it is evident that all the three players as Pakistan, China and the US are with multiple interests in Afghanistan in order to serve their national interests. Although the dimensions of their goals diverge also to the great interests but the rational choices ultimately yield in maximum benefits for all the three players. The rational choices came into notice are to fight terrorism and violent extremism, improvement of regional security and economic interests, to ensure regional economic integration. Their interests converge because of maximum benefits than costs. Which in turn yield in win-win situation for the three players. The regional economic projects like CPEC, TAPI and CASA-1000 can be feasible only through stable region.

The US as manifested after the withdrawal from Afghanistan is mainly focused on containment of China because the assertive military and economy of China is alarming for the US. But the economic interdependence compels the US for convergence with China. Hence according to game theory the rational choices of serving security and economic interests result in cooperation.

The US was involved in an unnecessary conflict and President Joe Biden decided to withdraw in an honorable way and remain as super power not defeated by Taliban. Besides, the US cannot endure China to rise high economically and take political stable region advantages when there was no any investment from China.

Pakistan is dependent on Afghanistan for channeling its access to not only the Central Asian Republics but cordial strategic and economic relations with China are also possible through stable Afghanistan only. Pakistan's economic interests in Afghanistan are bilateral transit trade as APTTA, TAPI but Pakistan economic interests are not fully realized due to Afghan's Turmoil and presence of Anti-Pakistan lobby. Defence interests can be secured by having Pakistan defence industry and military training but this sort of relations are also not fruitful as military Operations in FATA are mainly the outcome of infiltration from Afghanistan.

Pakistan certainly would like to help Afghanistan in addressing the challenges faced by Taliban transition government. It has stakes in peace and stability inside Afghanistan. But then Islamabad also wants to restrict the role of India in Afghanistan---something that causes huge resentment in Afghanistan. Many Afghans continue to harbor a feeling of animosity towards Islamabad because they presume Pakistan wants to have a role in Afghanistan's internal politics and policies.

China's interests in Afghanistan have security and economic dimensions. China major interests are to contribute for Afghanistan peace and stability because the fall out of Afghanistan directly affect the Xinjiang. Besides, China wants an access to the rich natural resources of Afghanistan and CARs hence investing for infrastructure development and exploitation of resources exploitation. China because of its stable economy and assertive military is in position to play promising role in stability of the Afghanistan and the region. China has larger strategic imperatives regarding Pakistan and Afghanistan. Energy supply security is important oil and gas importing states. Central Asian natural resources are energy consuming markets of Asia and Europe. CARs are crucial for China after the collapse of Soviet and to maintain its political, economic and strategic leverage there. For China hydrocarbon resources of CARs are significant and to safeguard Xinjiang of fissiparous elements. For this cause China has hugely invested in building gas and oil fields and oil pipeline projects construct. China needs peaceful and stable Afghanistan having working environment for operation of its economic projects

Afghanistan is economic importance for China as the former has natural gas and oil deposits, copper and iron reserves, in its north. As particularly iron ores are in areas between Panjsher and Herat, northern povinces has gold reserves, In Badakhsha lies gold reserves, copper fields in Takhar, Ghazni Aynak and Jawkhar Darband which are utmost required for China in its struggle for iron ore and copper. Natural gas is also required for China at present and in coming times.

China has an abiding interest in peace in the region. Its 'Belt and road initiative' is going to reshape the regional economic and political configuration.

Beijing is of this view that sooner or later its hegemony as the most powerful economically and militarily would be accepted by countries in the region. But the supremacy will be based on cultural and economic cooperation and not in the context of neo-imperialism which will keep countries in its sphere of influence through coercive ways.

Conclusion

The three countries Pakistan, China and the US have interests in Afghanistan and their policies are focused for securing peace and stability in Afghanistan. For serving their interests they have cooperated in fighting violent extremism and terrorism. Besides security aspects they have cooperated for regional economic cooperation and connectivity. Regional configuration also demands the cooperation than conflicts because the Afghanistan crucial location is in proximity of Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East. Hence all the economic projects as CPEC, BRI, TAPI and CASA-1000 are in need of peaceful Afghanistan. Although aspiring power as China is an alarm for the US hegemony hence the US has completely withdrawn from Afghanistan and is targeting the containment of China in the South East Asia with the assistance of her allies and through various economic pressures. However, the economic interdependence causes the US to converge with China in economic market and to diminish conflicts. Similarly, China also for the sake of the US put at risk its ties with Iran and other countries. The game theory covers the research through illustration of rational choices of the three states to maximize their benefits. In the recent context both Pakistan and China can play role to ask Taliban government for inclusive political dispensation and observance of human rights so to get earliest international recognition of their government in order to overcome financial crisis. This will impart stability to Afghanistan transition government.

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