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CIVIC DIGITAL NATIVES: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING TANZANIAN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

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Abstract: Civic participation, encompassing diverse community activities aimed at addressing shared challenges, plays a pivotal role in fostering associative behavior and building a robust civil society (Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2014). This study delves into the significance of civic participation, with a specific focus on its objective to influence governmental actions on behalf of the civic community (Verba et al., 1978), highlighting its contribution to collective identity, mutual respect, and social responsibility (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2016). The study asserts that engagement in civic activities is fundamental to the democratic process, serving as a cornerstone for collective action. Central to this investigation is the exploration of how youth engagement with social media contributes to their offline civic participation in Tanzania during non-election periods. Recognizing the transformative potential of civic participation, this study aims to unravel the dynamics of youth involvement in both online and offline spheres, elucidating the interplay between social media use and tangible civic actions. The study draws attention to the notion that civic participation not only nurtures a sense of collective identity but also instills mutual respect and social responsibility. As the foundation for collective action, these elements are indispensable for the functioning of a vibrant democracy This research adopts a multidimensional approach, acknowledging the complex interrelationships between online and offline civic realms. By examining the role of social media in shaping youth civic participation during non-election periods, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of contemporary civic dynamics. Furthermore, it sheds light on the potential of digital platforms to bridge the gap between virtual discourse and tangible collective action.

Keywords: Civic Participation, Youth Engagement, Social Media, Democracy, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Civic participation includes all types of activities that communities engage in with the sole aim of solving a common problem. Civic participation is essential because it nurtures associative behaviour while building a strong

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civil society (Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2014). This study is interested in civic participation because the objective of this type of activity is to influence the government to undertake certain actions (Verba et al., 1978) on behalf of the civic community (Nah and Yamamoto, 2017). It must be therefore noted that participation in civic activities, according to Gil de Zuniga et al. (2016), nurtures the spirit of collective identity, mutual respect and social responsibility which serve as a basis for collective action. It is against this backdrop that the study demonstrates that participating in civic activities is an essential aspect of democracy. Hence, this study focuses on how social media use among youth fosters their offline civic participation in Tanzania during non-election periods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Civic participation and engagement

Here, reviews the concept of civic participation. Engaged citizenship, civic participation, civil society and democracy are often used synonymously. The result is that the definition of these terms depends upon who is using them and why (Gibson, 2001). Civic engagement or participation is a broad term. There seems to be no consensus among scholars regarding their use and meaning (Gibson, 2001; Mohammadi et al., 2011). Civic engagement could be understood from the historical root words. The word civic, of Latin origin, implies city and citizen, political participation and the life of the polis. "The word *civic,* when connected to engagement, implies work that is done publicly, benefits the public, and done in concert with others" (Ronan, as cited in Diller, 2001: 238). Based on place and need, academics derive their meaning for civic participation or engagement. According to Berger (2009), civic participation is "like other buzzwords; civic engagement means so many things to so many people that it clarifies almost nothing"). This lack of clarity originates from the use of the term "civic participation" to refer to activities as diverse as watching political television programs, political engagement, and participation in charitable organisations. Because such activities as those previously noted are not clearly defined, Berger concluded that the use of the term "civic participation" is broad and covers a variety of actions. Although scholars have used civic engagement and political participation to mean the same thing, these terms are treated separately in this study. They relate to two distinct research questions. Subsequently, the dimensions of civic engagement are elucidated.

Expanding the definition by Berger (2009) stated earlier, Ekman and Amnå (2012) described civic engagement as being a collective action. They assumed that "engagement most often comes in the form of collaboration or joint action to improve conditions of the civil sphere" (Ekman and Amnå, 2012: 285). The definition by Ekman and Amnå (2012) identified and clarified that civic participation is community service and volunteer work for the community. It relates to the duty or service of all citizens. This definition is supported by Mohammedi et al. (2011) who said that participation promotes good governance. Therefore, civic engagement and people participation reinforce each other and affect governance.

Comparable to the citizens' duty to the community, Diller defined civic engagement "as an individual's duty to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship with the obligation to actively participate, alone or in concert with others, in volunteer service activities that strengthen the local community". Diller (2001) emphasised volunteer service to the community by an individual or group by stating that "civic engagement is any activity where people come together in their role as citizens". Definitively, civic engagement is a collective action (Adler and Goggin, 2005) to improve quality of life.

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Scholars have concluded that civic engagement positively influences and strengthens communities. According to Adler and Goggin (2005), there are five dimensions of civic engagement: community service, collective action, active citizenship, political involvement and social change. The dimensions examined by Adler and Goggin (2005) motivate the reader to understand that a citizen has a responsibility individually or collectively to actively engage in work in their society to bring about social change. This wide range of definitions takes into account the varied scope and aspects of civic engagement. Diller (2001) developed a subjective definition (Adler and Goggin, 2005) of civic engagement of "experiencing a sense of connection, interrelatedness and natural commitment towards the greater community

(all life forms)" (Diller, 2001). Diller's definition reflected more of a subjective perspective as well as explored different forms of commitment of the individual to society.

Expanding on the aforementioned definitions, Keeter et al. (2002) explained 19 core indicators of engagement in three different dimensions: electoral, civic and political. In the electoral dimension, Keeter et al. (2002) analysed actions people take around campaigns and elections, such as regular voting, persuading others, displaying buttons, signs and stickers, contributing to campaigns and volunteering for a candidate or political organization. In the civic dimension, the authors identified activities that citizens engage in to support their communities, such as community problem solving, regular volunteering for a non-electoral organisation, active membership in a group or association, and participation in fund-raising activities for groups including charitable organizations.

Lopez et al. (2006), Campbell and Kwak (2010), Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) and Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014) characterised civic participation by measuring five components: volunteering for non-political groups, raising money for charity, attending meetings to discuss neighbourhood problems, purchasing products based on social values, and working to ban services or products which are deemed unethical. The last two components illustrate an individual's sense of connection with and responsibility towards society. This characterization agrees with the definition by Diller (2001) which emphasized connection, interrelatedness and commitment on behalf of the community. Civic participation serves as the basis for the sustainability of the civic community together with concerned residents' actions regarding problem-solving and decision-making processes as well as outcomes (Nah and Yamamoto, 2017). Participation according to Gil de Zuniga et al. (2012) occurs either online or offline. Nah and Yamamoto (2017) and Putnam (2000) concur that civic participation is defined as efforts that are purely voluntary towards improving the quality of life within communities through non-political actions.

Scholars have interchangeably used civic participation and engagement. In contrast, Barrett and Brunton-Smith (2014) differentiated between these two terms, claiming participation to be behavioural, while engagement remains psychological. Their study embraced the concept of civic participation. Barrett and Brunton-Smith (2014) identified ten components used to measure civic participation:

 Informally assisting the well-being of others in the community; community problem solving through community organisations; attending community organisation meetings and actively participating in their activities; attending meetings of non-political organizations (religious institutions, sports clubs, etc.) and actively participating in their activities; participating in school-based community service and organized volunteer work; translating and assisting with the completion of documents for non-native speakers; sending remittances to others living elsewhere; donations to charities; fundraising activities for good causes and consumer activism: boycotting and preferential buying   (p.3)

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Barrett and Brunton-Smith (2014) have differentiated civic participation and civic engagement. While participation is behavioural, engagement is psychological. However, in this study, civic participation and engagement are used to mean the same thing and are used interchangeably. The indicators to study civic engagement are adopted as identified by Barrett and Brunton-Smith (2014).

Social media

Following the introduction of television in the 1950s, the internet in the 1990s, and mobile smart telephone technologies (Mwithia, 2015), social media has defined a cultural shift attracting billions of people globally (Baatarjav and Dantu, 2011). In another study, Edosomwan et al. (2011) confirmed that social media has altered and transformed the way we interact and communicate with individuals throughout the world. Social media has been and continues to be a game changer in communication (Edwards, 2011), thus leaving a profound impact on the modern world by reshaping the way we access information and spend our time (Allcott et al., 2020).

Scholars have defined social media in numerous ways. Making an effort to explore some of the significant definitions can help us to have a broader understanding of social media. Beer (2008) conceptualized social media as being a cluster of online applications which enable expression and interaction. Similarly, Bercovici (2010) defined social media as being a web-based communication tool which facilitates online interaction. In the same spirit, Manning (2014) noted that social media involves interactive participation and thus, social media involves two main characteristics: interaction and participation.

Based on attributes and typology, Kietzmann et al. (2011) noted that social media employs mobile and web based technologies to create highly-interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, cocreate, discuss and modify user-generated content. All these definitions clarify and enlighten us to better comprehend social media as a web-based technology that creates pathways for relationships through enhancing interaction and participation for innumerable purposes. It is also important to note that Trottier and Fuchs (2015) identified three aspects of social interaction while attempting to define social media: cognition, communication, and cooperation. Cognition is concerned with shared knowledge; communication leads to social relations and interactions; cooperation deals with interdependent acts towards communal goals.

Participation and interaction have become unique aspects of social media, making social media a crucial component of the human condition. People use social media for several purposes. Individuals use it for expressing their identities (Van Dijck, 2013). Some use it for meaning-making (Boczkowski et al., 2018), and a few others use it to interact with friends (Ariel and Avidar, 2015; Nah and Yamamoto, 2017) and for personal satisfaction (Rauniar et al., 2013). People also use social media to mobilize and coordinate their activities to protest government actions as in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other parts of the Arab world during the Arab Spring (AlSayyad and Guvenc, 2015; Freelon et al., 2016; Hanska-Ahy, 2016). In addition, due to data conglomerates, social media is used by corporations/researchers (Fuchs, 2014; Humphreys and Wilken, 2015) to gain insights into their customers/fields of research. Social media over the past two decades according to Treem et al. (2016) has evolved into a universal means of interaction, organizing, information gathering, and commerce. These studies illustrate that social media continues to influence and penetrate the lives of people in multiple ways.

Types of social media considered in the study

To examine social media use in the civic participation of youth, this study examined how young people use four of the five most common social media platforms in Tanzania. Based on interactivity function, the top four:

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Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter, have been considered for the study, YouTube has been omitted, and JamiiForums included because it is a Tanzanian-based social networking website in East Africa.

Facebook

Facebook promotes strong ties among users due to its interconnectivity design. It allows information sharing on a diversity of topics in different ways: instant messaging, photos, audio, video and file sharing. In addition, users also seek political information and engagement. Facebook pages or groups, allow "people to express their opinions and sentiments on a given topic, news item or person while allowing social and political scientists to conduct analyses of political discourse" (Stieglitz and Linh, 2012).

Instagram

Like other social media, Instagram also offers social connectivity, allowing users to follow any number of other users called friends. Users who are following are called
"followers" (Hu et al., 2014). It is important to understand Instagram for it can "help us to gain deep insights about social, cultural and environmental issues about peoples' activities" (Hu et al., 2014) including politics.

WhatsApp

This is a smartphone social media application enabling instant messaging. Due to its nature and function, it has become the most popular application used for messaging with the largest recognition by name (Rosenfeld et al., 2018). It provides users space for instant messaging, photo sharing, video sharing, audio and video calling, and audio and video recording. WhatsApp also allows group sharing, chatting and location sharing. It has emerged as a largely free alternative to standard SMS messaging. Use of WhatsApp is most popular among youth due to its features with multiple functions (Jisha and Jebakumar, 2014). It allows users to interact with one-to-one or oneto-many with ease.

Twitter

This medium helps one get connected with more people, including strangers, more than any other social media. Utilising its functional features, Twitter has largely been used by journalists, media organisations, politicians, scholars and civil activists to post news and share ideas (Stieglitz and Linh, 2012; Mohammadi et al., 2018). Users tweet and retweet information on issues of current affairs, as "retweeting is an important part of the Twitter information ecosystem" (Mohammadi et al., 2018).

JamiiForums

It is the most influential and notable social networking media website based in Tanzania, founded in 2006 by Mike Mushi and Maxence Melo. Similar to other social media, it is a user-generated content website and a catalyst for great conversation in Swahili with over 2.5 million unique monthly users. JAMII translated from Kiswahili to English means society, resulting in the English translation of Society Forums. This platform serves a whistleblowing function by focusing on various issues such as current events and news. *JamiiForums* remains a fast but also secure online public space for discussion. The content is encrypted and stored offshore.

All these social media platforms have three common functional features. They are web-based, user-generated and interactive (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Fuchs,
2017).

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Social media in the context of Tanzania

Some of the available studies on social media in Tanzania are related to online current trends (Sedoyeka, 2016); social media and music (Clark, 2014); internet use behaviour of cybercafé users (Sife, 2013); student's motives for utilising social networking (Muriithi and Muriithi, 2013); online social networks among students (Shao and Seif, 2014) and social media leveraging in implementing E-government goals/objectives (Mandari and Koloseni, 2016). This confirms that there is limited research on social media concerning civic participation.

Apart from developing theoretical frameworks and scholarship, studies investigating social media have focused largely on the election and voting behaviour of the youth (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). In contrast to previous studies, there has been no study to date on how social media use among the youth influences their offline civic participation outside the election period with multidimensional variables in the Tanzanian context. This research attempts to address this issue.

METHODOLOGY

The study builds upon the analysis of research data gathered for a larger study: social media and democracy. This study uniquely and distinctively illustrated the findings regarding youths' social media use and civic participation. Multiple case studies and surveys were referenced for the exploration of social media use and youth civic participation. Based on time and emphasis, this study adopted the *concurrent qualitative dominant* mixed method research (QUAL+quan research).

Quantitative approaches were used to conduct a largely qualitative study. To gain an in-depth understanding, this research implemented four *single focus group* (Nyumba et al., 2018) discussions based on two questionnaires as one of the data collection methods. The focus groups, each comprising 8 to 12 members, were drawn from the most popular areas of study in each of two universities.

Research also included the survey technique to collect data. Considering the importance of the location, this research was conducted among youths in two universities located in Dar es Salaam and Mwanza. The target population for this study was youth between the ages of 18 and 35 who can access the internet and are social media users. For the survey, Likert-scale questionnaire was used as a tool. For coding and analysing, this study followed methodological guidelines established by influential researchers. Guided by concurrent qualitative dominant mixed methods, this research applied two major ways of analysing the data. The questionnaires were analysed using IBM SPSS statistics 26 software. Qualitative data generated through focus group discussion was organised into themes using NVivo 12 software.

Ethical considerations

Special importance was given to important ethical dimensions such as informed consent, privacy and anonymity, confidentiality, risk of harm and academic freedom from the personal point of view. Before fieldwork, the researcher obtained a permission letter from the university's Institutional Review Board, which made it possible to obtain permission letters from the two universities that allowed the research to take place. In the field, consent of the respondents was obtained before conducting any interview, group discussions or survey. The respondents of the research were assured of their privacy and autonomy.

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RESULTS

Here, describes and summarises data collected from 372 questionnaires and four focus group discussions among youth in Tanzania. This study had a response rate of 97.89%. The data helped to determine the trends and relationships among variables concerning the focus of the study which is social media use and civic participation. Of the 372 respondents contributing to this research, 51.9% of them were female; 48.1% were male, reflecting the presence of a greater number of female students registered in these two universities. Although the study was aligned with the principles of gender parity, it appreciates the evident dimensions of gender differential. The respondents' ages varied from 18 to 35 years. The data revealed that 270 students (72.65% of the total) were 18-23 years old; 91 students (24.5%) were 24-29 years old; and 11 students (3.0%) were 30-35 years old.

The respondents were asked how often they had participated in a variety of community activities. Indicators for the community activities included volunteer work for nonpolitical groups, informally assisting the well-being of others in the community, community problem solving through community organizations, attending meetings to discuss neighborhood problems, expressing points of view at these meetings, school/college based community service, undertaking organized volunteer work, sending gifts to others living elsewhere, donations to charities, and fundraising activities for good causes. They were also asked to use the Likert scale (ranging from never, rarely, occasionally, sometimes, frequently, usually to every time) to rate their community participation.

The study findings show that only 5.7% of Facebook users participated in civic activities in the last three months while 2.2% of non-Facebook users took part every time in the activities (Table 1). The study also shows that 28.3% of Facebook users and 32.0% of nonFacebook users sometimes participated in civic activities.

In conclusion, the majority of Facebook users and nonusers occasionally, sometimes, and frequently participated in different civic activities.

A minority of 1.9% of Instagram users and 1.2% of nonInstagram users had not participated in various civic activities in the last three months (Table 2). Only 1.9% of Instagram users and 3.7% of non-Instagram users participated every time in various civic activities. Therefore, the majority of Instagram users and nonInstagram users occasionally, sometimes, and frequently participated in civic activities.

Study results show that 2.0% of WhatsApp users and 3.2% of non-WhatsApp users participated every time in various civic activities in the last three months (Table 3). The study further indicates that only 2.6% of WhatsApp users and 0.9% of non-WhatsApp users never participated in various civic activities. Based on the study analysis, the majority of WhatsApp users and nonWhatsApp users occasionally, sometimes, and frequently participated in civic activities.

Most Twitter users and non-Twitter users, at 29.6 and 31.9%, respectively, sometimes participated in various civic activities in the last three months. Only 1.4% of Twitter users and 1.7% of non-Twitter users never participated in these types of activities (Table 4). Also, the study indicates that 4.2% of Twitter users and 2.3% of non-Twitter users participated every time in various civic activities. Thus, the majority of Twitter users and nonTwitter users occasionally, sometimes, and frequently participated in civic activities.

The study findings show that 3.0% of JamiiForums users and 2.6% of non-JamiiForums users participated every time in various civic activities in the last three months (Table 5). In addition, whereas all JamiiForums users participated in various civic activities, only 2.0% of non-JamiiForums users never participated in civic activities.

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Based on the analysis, the majority of JamiiForums users and non-JamiiForums users occasionally, sometimes, and frequently participated in civic activities.

Additional insights were gathered from the survey questionnaire and focus group discussion. Without exception, the participants use social media to get information about events, public issues and politics. Participants indicated that Instagram and WhatsApp are the most commonly used social media platforms while Twitter, JamiiForums and Facebook are used by a smaller percentage of the participants. Instagram stands out as a frequently used social media application. Participants reported that they use social media as a means of communication and source of information, selling products and knowing people, understanding culture, and sharing personal and family information. Some of the focus group discussion members expressed the notion that they cannot live without social media.

To examine the use of social media in facilitating civic participation among the youth in Tanzania outside of the election period, the following themes were identified from the focus group discussion: (1) Organising, (2) sharing, (3) commenting, (4) discussing as a way of using social media towards civic participation. The civic activities respondents identified with as civic participation were: (a) the well-being of others, (b) volunteer work, (c) community problem solving, (d) giving donations and helping schools and hospitals, (e) attending community meetings, (f) blood donations.

Table 1. Facebook users and their civic participation.

Response	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Every time
Yes	0	7.5	20.8	28.3	28.3	9.4	5.7
No	1.9	6.3	24.5	32	22.9	10.3	2.2

Source: Author.

Table 2. Instagram users and their civic participation.

Response	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Every time
Yes	1.9	7.1	26.1	31.3	21.8	10	1.9
No	1.2	5.6	21.1	31.7	26.1	10.6	3.7

Source: Author.

Table 3. WhatsApp users and their civic participation.

Response	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Every time
Yes	2.6	6.6	25.7	33.6	18.4	11.2	2
No	0.9	6.4	22.7	30	27.3	9.5	3.2

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Source: Author.

Table 4. Twitter users and their civic participation.

Response	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Every time
Yes	1.4	5.6	19.7	29.6	31	8.5	4.2
No	1.7	6.6	24.9	31.9	21.9	10.6	2.3

Source: Author.

Table 5. JamiiForums users and their civic participation.

Response	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Every time
Yes	0	4.5	22.4	25.4	32.8	11.9	3
No	2	6.9	24.3	32.8	21.6	9.8	2.6

Source: Author.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are in agreement with the reviewed literature regarding civic participation. Previous studies undertaken referred to civic participation as community service and volunteer work or service to the community, responsible citizenship and promoting good governance (Diller, 2001; Ekman and Amna, 2012). The participants in the study indicated that they participate in community activities at different levels.

Respondents, during focus group discussions, revealed that they participate in civic activities in a variety of ways. They shared that they volunteer for community work, attend community meetings to discuss neighbourhood problems, improve the quality of community living, take care of the environment, and take care of the well-being of others in society. The findings of this study concerning civic participation complemented the work of Putnam (2000), Lopez et al. (2006), Campbell and Kwak (2010), Gil de Zuniga et al. (2012), Gil de Zuniga et al. (2014), and Nah and Yamamoto (2017). All these studies contribute to the acknowledgement of the wide range of issues and activities which comprise civic participation.

From the focus group discussions of this study, various themes emerged concerning civic participation. Participants of the study added to the varying dimensions of civic participation to those identified by Barret and Brunton-Smith (2014) such as the well-being of others, volunteer work for the community, community problem solving, giving donations, helping schools and hospitals, as well as attending community meetings. Some of them expressed that they also participated in fundraising for a community cause. The results of the focus group discussion concerning study objectives and the data collected using survey questionnaires were in agreement.

The study results show that there were additional community activities as compared to those reported in the existing literature. Participants in this study were also involved in planting trees, helping school children, assisting economically poor children in their studies, visiting orphanages and donating blood. The results demonstrate that youth use social media as a tool for their civic participation as well as to organise their activities,

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some of which are conducted online; for example, fundraising for a community cause. Other community activities are executed offline, but planned on social media.

From both qualitative and quantitative data, the study identified that youth participate in a variety of civic activities. The participants from this study agreed that on social media, they comment and share messages, photos, voice messages and videos related to civic activities. Therefore, the interactivity of young people on social media helps to promote organisation and offline discussion of issues relating to community well-being and improvement of the quality of life of the participants.

The aforementioned findings are also explained in the works of Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke (2014) that social media platforms facilitate information sharing and participation. Also, participants' organisation, commenting, sharing, and discussion of issues are greatly facilitated by the in-depth social interactive nature (Van Dijck, 2013; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Hunsinger and Senft, 2014; Ariel and Avidar, 2015; Jiang, 2017) and reciprocal interaction process between at least two parties (Fuchs, 2014) on social media.

Quantitative data is in agreement with qualitative data. People who use social media are active both online and offline in civic participation. Based on the analysis, the majority of social media users occasionally, sometimes and frequently, participated in the civic activities of the community. It must be noted that some participants, not using particular social media, were also participating in civic activities. Interestingly, Instagram and WhatsApp users were more active in civic participation than other social media users like Facebook, Twitter, and JamiiForums.

Conclusion

There is rapid growth and use of social media among the youth in Tanzania for various purposes. Social media has become the life vein of the youth in Tanzania. The study also shows that youth organise themselves on social media through commenting, sharing and discussing and are active both online and offline regarding issues relating to civic participation.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in the field of social media, democracy, and civic participation. The research findings, discussion and recommendations for further studies could inspire other scholars to investigate, evaluate or compare and contrast the findings in different contexts and settings. This study lays the foundation for further research and theory development.

Though the mixed method appeared to be the correct option for this study, it would be interesting if researchers could consider adopting a different methodology to the currently adopted concurrent qualitative dominant mixed methods design to gain more insight. It would be also more valuable to do a purely qualitative research approach might provide more useful insight in future studies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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