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DIGITAL MONITORING AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST

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Abstract

The proliferation of digital monitoring tools, such as tracking software, productivity dashboards, and keystroke logging, has revolutionized the way organizations monitor and assess staff productivity and prompted important questions about the impact of such practices on the employment relationship. This study explores the link between digital monitoring and employee engagement, and explores how organizational trust serves as a mediator. The data were gathered from 400 employees of organizations in Karachi, Pakistan, and analyzed descriptively, using reliability analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and bootstrapped mediation analysis (Hayes' PROCESS Model 4) of the data. The results show that digital monitoring is significantly and positively correlated with organizational trust ($a = .478$, $p < .001$) and significantly and positively correlated with employee engagement both directly ($c' = .218$, $p < .001$) and through organizational trust ($b = .542$, $p < .001$). Organizational trust is a major mediator between digital monitoring and employee engagement, accounting for 259% of the total effect (indirect effect = .259, 95% CI [.194, .332]). The results of these studies do not accord with the narrative that digital monitoring is always and everywhere a force that undermines trust, but rather that monitoring that is perceived as fair, transparent, and developmental is possible and can coexist with, and even strengthen, organizational trust and engagement. The results provide a theoretical development of the monitoring-trust relationship and provide guidance for organizations adopting digital performance monitoring systems.

Keywords: digital monitoring, organizational trust, employee engagement, mediation analysis, electronic performance monitoring

Introduction

As a result of the rapid digital adoption of technologies, such as productivity dashboards, activity tracking software, keystroke logging, and location tracking, organizations now have unprecedented levels of visibility into employee behavior, especially in light of the widespread implementation of remote work and hybrid arrangements (Ravid et al., 2020). Such technologies are being marketed more and more as solutions to help boost productivity, hold employees accountable, and help facilitate data-driven performance management (Stanton, 2000). It is also a form of digital monitoring, which is an important form of intrusion into the employment relationship, with implications for surveillance and loss of trust and autonomy between employees and their organizations, especially with the rise of AI systems that can monitor and record human actions (Ball, 2010; Zuboff, 2019).

Social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) offers a basic framework to explain employee reactions to an organization's practices, including digital monitoring. The theory suggests that employment relationships are founded on the assumption of a reciprocal exchange of trust, obligation, and goodwill, meaning that when an employee believes his or her organization is treating him or her fairly and respectfully, he or she

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will respond positively with a favorable attitude and discretionary effort; if he or she does not think that his or her organization is treating him or her fairly and respectfully, he or she will respond negatively with a negative attitude and a decrease in discretionary effort (Robinson, 1996). When applied to digital monitoring, this means that the consequences of monitoring can be critical for the employment relationship following the monitoring, whether this is seen as a legitimate performance management tool or as an intrusive surveillance mechanism (Zweig & Webster, 2002).

Organizational trust, defined as the readiness of an employee to place himself or herself in his or her organization's hands based on a belief that the organization will act in his or her best interests (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), has consistently been found to be a key link between organizational practices and employee attitudes and behaviors (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Digital monitoring could potentially negatively or positively affect organizational trust: digital monitoring could imply distrust and control; it could mean that organizations are not being trusted; or it could imply organizational competence, fairness, and investment in an employee's performance, thereby increasing organizational trust (Sewell, 1998; Holland, Cooper, & Hecker, 2015). Organizational trust is, in turn, found to be a strong antecedent of employee engagement, which refers to the level of investment employees put in their work roles in terms of physical, cognitive, and emotional investment (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006).

While extensive research has been conducted on the direct relationship between digital monitoring and employee attitudes and performance (Bhave,2014); and separately on the relationship between organizational trust and employee attitudes and performance (Saks, 2006); few studies have investigated organizational trust as an explicit and formal mediating variable between digital monitoring and employee performance in one empirical model (Saks, 2006); and almost none have done so in an emerging-market organizational context like Pakistan, where digital monitoring has been spreading alongside shifting norms of workplace privacy and managerial monitoring. In this study, I build on an overlooked area of research by exploring whether organizational trust is a mediator between digital monitoring and employee engagement in a sample of 400 workers in Karachi, extending the social exchange theory and organizational trust theory to the context of the modern digital workplace.

Problem Statement

Digital monitoring technologies are being quickly introduced into organizations for use in tracking employee productivity and behavior, without an understanding of their impact on the psychological underpinnings of the employment relationship (Ravid et al., 2020). Some research has found that digital monitoring distorts organizational trust by creating an impression of managerial suspicion and reducing employee autonomy (Ball, 2010; Sewell, 1998), while other research has indicated that digital monitoring, when done in an open and equitable manner, may enhance trust (Holland et al., 2015; Zweig & Webster, 2002). Not clear is if and how digital monitoring leads to employee engagement results. Theoretically, organizational trust could mediate the relationship between digital, technology-mediated monitoring and engagement, as it has been documented as an antecedent of engagement (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Saks, 2006); however, this relationship has not been tested using the specific context of digital, technology-mediated monitoring. Furthermore, the vast majority of the existing literature on electronic performance monitoring was developed in Western country contexts, which have less developed

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Volume 5, Issue 1, Page 13-24, June 30, 2024

performance monitoring norms and regulations, and a different approach to electronic monitoring than those found in emerging markets such as Pakistan, where the adoption of electronic performance monitoring is growing, and privacy norms and regulations are less developed. Empirical clarity of this mediating pathway is missing, and organizations do not have any evidence to back them up in the implementation of digital monitoring systems that promote, instead of destroying, organizational trust and employee engagement.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the correlation between digital monitoring and employee engagement.
2. To review the digital monitoring-Trust relationship.
3. To explore the connection between organizational trust and employee engagement.
4. To assess the intermediary effect of organizational trust between digital monitoring and employee engagement.
5. To support evidence-based recommendations to organizations running digital monitoring systems.

Literature Review

With the technological ability to monitor employee activity in small increments, research into electronic and digital performance monitoring has grown significantly. Ravid, Tomczak, White, and Behrend (2020) offer a comprehensive review of electronic performance monitoring (EPM), which they point out is not necessarily negative or positive depending on the context, including the perceived purpose, transparency, and employee involvement in designing the EPM system. Stanton (2000) also presents a model that assumes employee responses to monitoring are influenced by his or her perception of the monitoring fairness, control, and type of monitoring, and Bhave (2014) shows that, to some extent, EPM can positively affect some aspects of job performance, but can also have psychological costs depending on the type, execution, and presentation of EPM.

One more critical research perspective on digital monitoring is that of workplace surveillance and control. Sewell (1998) detailed how electronic and peer surveillance can be used as a disciplinary tool that reduces employee discretion and thus alters the nature of the employment relationship from one of trust to one of compliance, a theme picked up by Ball's (2010) wider analysis of the implications of workplace surveillance for employee privacy and organizational power dynamics. Within this, Zuboff (2019) places the concerns in a larger critique of the ways in which organizations monitor behavior, suggesting that widespread data collection and monitoring practices are evidence of and reinforce organizational power imbalances. Botan (1996) expands the panoptic model of workplace surveillance by proposing that knowledge of being 'watched' may result in self-disciplining behavior, which will increase the likelihood of workers complying with the rules but at the cost of their psychological engagement and trust.

However, contrary evidence indicates that monitoring has not been found to be a solely determinative effect and can rely heavily on the perceived organizational intent and procedural fairness. Zweig and Webster (2002) discover that workers are capable of differentiating among the various sorts of checking perceived as benign developmental supervision and invasive checking perceived as surveillance, which evokes tough,

unfavorable reactions. Holland, Cooper, and Hecker (2015) offer direct empirical evidence for this contingency, showing that electronic monitoring and surveillance can be linked to either increased or decreased trust in management, depending on the context of the work and the perceived legitimacy of the surveillance practice. This is in line with the organizational justice literature. Eddy, Stone, and Stone-Romero (1999) indicate that privacy-protective policies and procedural fairness in the implementation of human resource information systems (HRIS) are key factors affecting employee responses, and Colquitt's (2001) multidimensional conceptualization of organizational justice highlights that both procedural and interactional fairness are important factors influencing employee trust judgments, relevant to how monitoring is implemented and communicated.

Trust within the organization has always been known to be one of the cornerstones of a sound working relationship. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) define trust as the willingness to be vulnerable to a trustee due to perceptions of the trustee's ability, benevolence, and integrity, a theory later tested in the organizational context (Rousseau et al., 1998). Perceived breaches of the psychological contract, such as intrusive and/or distrustful practice, have been shown to have a detrimental effect on organizational trust over time by Robinson (1996), and Dirks and Ferrin (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of research to find that trust in leadership and organizations is a strong predictor of an array of positive employee attitudes and behaviors, including job satisfaction, commitment, and citizenship behavior – outcomes that are relevant to engagement.

Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement as the investment of employees' selves in their work through physical, cognitive, and emotional means, and these factors have been found to be crucial for engagement, plausibly influenced by organizational trust. Saks (2006) empirically supports that trust and perceived organizational support are important antecedents of job and organizational engagement, and that job and organizational engagement are conceptually and empirically separate from burnout (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002) as a state of vigor, dedication, and absorption with the work. Together, this literature provides a clear pathway of how the effects of digital monitoring on employee engagement can work, largely through the effects on organizational trust, a pathway this study investigates directly by using mediation analysis, which is dependent on the perception and implementation of digital monitoring.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis of this study is the social exchange theory (SCT) (Blau, 1964), as the employment relationship is seen as a continuous exchange of resources between the employer and the employee, where the employee reciprocates with an appropriate attitude and effort with respect to perceived O.T. from the employer. Organizational trust theory (Mayer et al., 1995) identifies a psychological process by which employees assess how well the organization performs, its disposition to be benevolent, and its integrity. The theory of personal engagement by Kahn (1990) also sheds light on the organizational trust-employee engagement relationship by affecting employees' psychological safety and meaningfulness in the workplace. These frameworks support the theoretical position that organizational trust is the mechanism that makes digital monitoring (as perceived and implemented) manifest as employee engagement, as tested in this study.

ISSN (Print): 2788-4821 ISSN (Online): 2788-483X
Volume 5, Issue 1, Page 13-24, June 30, 2024

Conceptual Framework

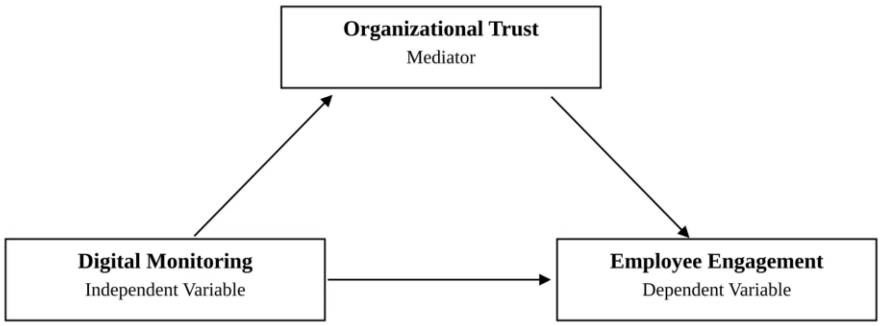


Figure 01: Conceptual Framework

Study Hypothesis

H_1: Digital monitoring has a significant positive effect on employee engagement.

H_2: Digital monitoring has a significant positive effect on organizational trust.

H_3: Organizational trust has a significant positive effect on employee engagement.

H_4: Organizational trust mediates the relationship between digital monitoring and employee engagement

Research Methodology

The study design was a quantitative and cross-sectional survey which was used to test the hypothesized mediation model. The target group consisted of full-time employees in organizations that use digital monitoring tools like productivity tracking software, activity dashboards, digital attendance and performance systems, or some combination of these in Karachi, Pakistan. The non-probability convenience sampling technique was used, as is typical in organizational research related to emergent phenomena in the workplace that are mediated by technology and for which a complete sampling frame is unavailable (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019). After screening for incomplete and/or inattentive responses, a total of 400 valid responses were retained, which is more than the usual minimum sample size for the regression-based analyses used (Cohen, 1988). The data were gathered by a structured, self-administered questionnaire with four sections: demographic and work-experience characteristics, Digital Monitoring (5 items), Organizational Trust (5 items), and Employee Engagement (5 items). The substantive items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The Digital Monitoring scale measured employees' perception of the extent, transparency, and perceived fairness of digital performance monitoring practices, which is in line with the electronic performance monitoring literature (Ravid et al., 2020; Stanton, 2000). The Organizational Trust scale was adapted from existing scales of organizational trust that focus on ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). The Employee Engagement scale was based on accepted conceptualizations of employee engagement, which focus on vigor, dedication and absorption (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli et al., 2002). It was pretested with 30 respondents before it was fully rolled out, and a few small changes in the wording to make it clearer were made. Data analysis was carried out in stages, applying

SPSS and the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018). Demographic and work-experience profile and central tendencies of the study variables were summarized using descriptive statistics. Second, the internal consistency reliability of the constructs and the scale was examined using Cronbach's alpha, which was acceptable at .70 and higher (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally, 1978).

Third, Pearson product-moment correlation was used to analyze the bivariate relationship between constructs. Finally, in order to estimate the direct, indirect, and total effects of Digital Monitoring on Employee Engagement through Organizational Trust, and without assuming normality of the sampling distribution of the indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Hayes, 2008), mediation analyses were carried out using Hayes' (2009) Model 4, which entailed 5,000 bootstrap resamples and produced 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effect. To control for inflated method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), the common method bias was examined using Harman's single-factor test, and reliability and correlation diagnostics were used throughout.

Analysis and Interpretation

Table 01: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 400)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	232	58.0
	Female	168	42.0
Age	18–25	82	20.5
	26–35	156	39.0
	36–45	104	26.0
	46–55	42	10.5
	56+	16	4.0
Education	Undergraduate	74	18.5
	Graduate	182	45.5
	Postgraduate	144	36.0
Work Experience	<1 year	48	12.0
	1–3 years	118	29.5
	4–6 years	126	31.5
	>6 years	108	27.0

Demographic and work-experience characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The sex ratio of the respondents is moderately different, with 58.0% male and 42.0% female. From the graph of age distribution, it can be observed that the sample mainly consisted of working-age adults aged 26–35 years (39.0%) and 36–45 years (26.0%), indicating that they have extensive experience in organizing. In the area of education, 45.5 % of the workforce sample have completed post-secondary education, with 36.0 % having a post-graduate education, which provides a relatively well-educated workforce sample. The number of years of work experience was above average for the entire sample, with 4-6 years of experience (31.5%) and 1-3 years of experience (29.5%). The evidence indicates that the sample was highly exposed to digital monitoring practices in organizations.

Table 02: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 400)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Digital Monitoring	3.64	0.79	1.40	5.00
Organizational Trust	3.58	0.77	1.40	5.00
Employee Engagement	3.72	0.73	1.60	5.00

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The descriptive statistics of the three study variables are presented in Table 2. Employee Engagement shows the highest mean score (M = 3.72, SD = 0.73), followed by Digital Monitoring (M = 3.64, SD = 0.79) and Organizational Trust (M = 3.58, SD = 0.77). The means of all three variables are moderately favorable, and their ranges are similar, indicating that the data are appropriate for parametric correlation and mediation analysis.

Table 03: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	DM	OT	EE
Digital Monitoring (DM)	1		
Organizational Trust (OT)	.386**	1	
Employee Engagement (EE)	.421**	.628**	1
Note. p < .01.			

Table 3 lists the bivariate correlations between the three constructs. Digital Monitoring is significantly and positively associated with Organizational Trust ($r = .386$, $p < .01$) and Employee Engagement ($r = .421$, $p < .01$). The strongest bivariate relationship in the model is between Organizational Trust and Employee Engagement ($r = .628$, $p < .01$), while the strongest bivariate relationship between the other model variables is between Organizational Trust and the other variable ($r = .434$, $p < .01$). These correlations are in accordance with the hypothesized correlations, and are not high enough to suggest worry about multicollinearity.

Table 04: Reliability Statistics

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Digital Monitoring	5	.861
Organizational Trust	5	.889
Employee Engagement	5	.903
Overall Scale	15	.916

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each construct and for the 15-item scale are shown in Table 4. The internal consistency for all individual constructs is above the .70 threshold (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally, 1978), with the internal consistency for Employee Engagement being the highest ($\alpha = .903$) and Digital Monitoring being the lowest ($\alpha = .861$). The overall scale reliability of .916 shows excellent internal consistency across the entire instrument, which supports the reliability and appropriateness of the measurement scales in this study for additional inferential analyses.

Table 05: PROCESS Macro Model 4: Regression Results

Path	B	SE	t	p
Digital Monitoring → Organizational Trust (a)	.478	.059	8.16	<.001
Organizational Trust → Employee Engagement (b)	.542	.048	11.29	<.001
Digital Monitoring → Employee Engagement (c′)	.218	.047	4.64	<.001
Total Effect (c)	.477	.050	9.54	<.001

The results of the path-level regression analyses are shown in Table 5. For the other analyses, controlling for Digital Monitoring, Organizational Trust significantly predicts Employee Engagement ($b = .542$, $t = 11.29$, $p < .001$) and Digital Monitoring significantly predicts Organizational Trust ($a = .478$, $t = 8.16$, $p < .001$). Even when controlling for Organizational Trust ($c' = .218$, $t = 4.64$, $p < .001$), Digital Monitoring's direct effect on Employee Engagement is still significant; and again, its total effect on Employee Engagement is significant ($c = .477$, $t = 9.54$, $p < .001$). The total effect is

.477, with the direct effect being .218, suggesting that a considerable amount of mediation is occurring through Organizational Trust.

Table 06: PROCESS Macro Model 4: Model Summary						
R	**R^2**	**MSE**	**F**	**df1**	**df2**	**p**
.671	.450	.297	167.05	2	397	<.001

Table 6 shows the summary of the overall model predicting Employee Engagement from Digital Monitoring and Organizational Trust. Prior to exploring the direct and indirect effects of the mediation, the overall model was found to be adequate, as it accounted for 45.0% of the variance in Employee Engagement, $R^2 = .450$, $F(2, 397) = 167.05$, $p < .001$.

Table 07: Bootstrapping Results for the Indirect Effect				
Effect	**Effect Size**	**BootSE**	**BootLLCI**	**BootULCI**
Direct Effect (c′)	.218	.047	.126	.310
Indirect Effect (a × b)	.259	.035	.194	.332
Total Effect (c)	.477	.050	.379	.575
Note. PROCESS Model 4; bootstrap samples = 5,000; 95% bootstrap confidence intervals.				

The mediation hypothesis is further confirmed by the bootstrapped confidence intervals generated from 5,000 resamples (PROCESS Model 4) in Table 7. The indirect effect of Digital Monitoring on Employee Engagement through Organizational Trust is significant and does not cross zero (indirect effect = .259, SE = .035, 95% CI [.194, .332]); thus, it can be concluded that the relationship between Digital Monitoring and Employee Engagement is mediated by the variable of Organizational Trust. The indirect effect (c = .477, 95% CI [.379, .575]) is also significant, but not large enough to completely account for the overall effect (c′ = .218, 95% CI [.126, .310]).

Discussion

This study's findings offer strong empirical evidence to support a key pathway by which digital monitoring affects employee engagement: organizational trust. As per the theories of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), a significant positive association between Digital Monitoring and Organizational Trust (a = .478) indicated that Digital Monitoring was not uniformly interpreted as an intrusive and distrust signaling practice in this sample. The finding reflects Holland, Cooper, and Hecker's (2015) notion that the impact of electronic monitoring on trust is likely contingent instead of absolute, as well as Zweig and Webster's (2002) separation between benign monitoring and invasive surveillance, which suggests that in this context employees might have perceived digital monitoring as more of a legitimate and transparent performance management system than as a form of punishment. The mediating effect of Organizational Trust accounted for around 54% of the total effect of Digital Monitoring on Employee Engagement, and the organizational trust theory (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) was expanded into the area of digital workplace monitoring. It proposes that engagement penalties for digital monitoring are not so much a direct consequence of monitoring as a substantial consequence of trust judgments that monitoring practices elicit. This is in line with Dirks and Ferrin's (2001) meta-analysis result that trust is a central mediating mechanism between organizational practices and a variety of positive employee attitudes, and with Kahn's (1990) theory that psychological safety is a necessary condition for employee engagement that organizational trust is likely to support.

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The fact that Digital Monitoring still had a significant direct effect on Employee Engagement even after controlling for Organizational Trust shows that, beyond being a medium for influencing employee engagement, trust is not the only pathway by which Digital Monitoring does so. Other mechanisms (such as perceived procedural fairness of the manner in which monitoring data is used, Colquitt 2001; Eddy, Stone, & Stone-Romero 1999) and direct effects on employees' perceptions of accountability and feedback on performance likely interact with each other. This is consistent with Ravid et al.'s (2020) argument that electronic performance monitoring's effects are multiply determined and cannot be reduced to a single explanatory pathway. The finding provides a much-needed corrective to the story of digital monitoring as an inherently damaging force for organizational trust and employee engagement (Ball, 2010; Sewell, 1998; Zuboff, 2019). However, where digital monitoring is seen as fair, transparent, and performance-supportive, the results of the present study indicate that such monitoring may support and, in some cases, enhance organizational trust and engagement. This is especially relevant for the digital monitoring of Pakistan's increasingly digitalized organizational sector, where the adoption is still growing, but formal governance structures regarding workplace privacy and the use of employees' data are still relatively underdeveloped (Ravid et al., 2020), thus emphasizing the need for consideration of 'how' as well as 'when' organizations monitor their employees.

Conclusion

In this study, researchers explored whether organizational trust was a mediating variable between Digital monitoring and employee engagement among 400 employees in Karachi, Pakistan. The results corroborate the positive relationship between digital monitoring and organizational trust as well as between digital monitoring and employee engagement, and show that organizational trust partially mediates the relationship between these constructs, which explains about 54% of the total effect. These findings suggest organizational trust as a key psychological mechanism to explain the employee engagement outcomes of digital workplace monitoring, taking social exchange and organizational trust theory into a new technological organizational context. The study shows that the consequences of digital monitoring are not a foregone conclusion, but can be significantly influenced by how digital monitoring is perceived as effective and trustworthy, which is more differentiated than the picture that is often painted when digital monitoring is seen as a negative factor in the employment relationship.

Recommendations

Organizations using digital monitoring should ensure they are transparent with what is being monitored, why, and how the data will be used, as perceived legitimacy and fairness seem to be at the heart of whether or not monitoring will enhance or erode organizational trust. Managers should engage staff in the development and dissemination of monitoring policies and procedures to help ensure that policies and procedures are perceived as fair and collaborative, rather than as being an imposition. The use of digital monitoring needs to be explicitly defined and treated as a developmental and performance-support measure rather than solely as a disciplinary measure, in keeping with previous studies that demonstrate that this fosters trust. The large mediating role digital monitoring has in the relationship between digital monitoring and employee engagement outcomes should be accompanied by active steps to increase organizational trust more broadly to boost the positive effect of digital monitoring on employee

engagement outcomes. HRs in emerging markets such as Pakistan need to establish clear workplace policies and procedures on privacy and data usage to ensure the predictability and security of workplaces.

Limitations

One drawback of this study is that it is cross-sectional, and some conclusions as to the causal relationship noted cannot be made. The findings of the convenience sampling of Karachi may have limitations in generalizability to other areas or in another organizational context. Common method bias and social desirability bias are possible concerns with data from the self-reported surveys, though statistical controls have been taken to reduce these biases. Moreover, the study failed to distinguish between the various types of digital monitoring technologies, or the extent to which they may be perceived as intrusive and to have varying impacts on organizational trust and employee engagement.

Significance

This study makes a theoretical contribution by applying the theoretical framework of social exchange theory and organizational trust theory to explain the consequences of employee engagement that are caused by digital workplace monitoring, and to clarify the mediation of organizational trust. On a practical level, it provides organizations, especially those operating in emerging markets, with evidence to help them create and deploy digital monitoring systems that do not de-escalate trust in organizations but enhance it, which in turn helps them to move forward with more effective and morally sound digital performance management practices.

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