A Case Study of Factors of Soft Leadership in Higher Education Institutions of Yunnan Province, China

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This research employed an exploratory sequential research design, commencing with a qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase. The initial qualitative segment utilized a semi-structured research design to investigate the determinants of soft leadership exhibited by leaders within Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The study enlisted 12 key informants, comprising presidents and deans, and an additional 24 minor key informants, consisting of teachers. Data analysis involved content analysis, leading to the identification of six objective factors and six subjective factors that contribute to the configuration of soft leadership. The objective factors encompassed gender, age, working experience, lifelong learning, education and training, and working environment, while the subjective factors encompassed effective communication and consideration, triggering self-reflection of subordination, forward-looking based on past experience, acceptance of others' abilities, staying attuned to the younger generation, and introspective self-assessment. Following the initial phase findings, a 30-question questionnaire derived from the six subjective factors was administered. Five hundred questionnaires were distributed to presidents, deans, administrators, and teachers, with 422 returned and subjected to exploratory factor analysis. The results demonstrated that all factors scored around 90%, affirming the significant contribution of each of the six factors to the development of soft leadership. Consequently, this study concludes that these six factors are imperative for embodying the traits of a soft leader.

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1. Introduction

Diverse theoretical frameworks exist for the examination of leadership behaviour, with several garnering considerable attention in scholarly research. Among these, transformational leadership emerged as the most extensively investigated theory during the 1990s, as evidenced by a substantial body of published research dedicated to its exploration (Bono & Judge, 2004).

The predominant emphasis of leadership research has historically overlooked the mental well-being of educators, with discussions on transformational leadership prevalent since the 1980s. This study addresses this lacuna by investigating the constituents of soft leadership, thereby aiming to rectify the dearth of leadership research within HEIs & engender increased scholarly interest in the study of soft leadership. Additionally, the research endeavours to elucidate the factors associated with soft leadership and its theoretical underpinnings, with the intention of applying this understanding to cultivate an enhanced working environment conducive to fostering the mental well-being of teachers. This endeavour represents a novel trajectory in leadership studies, paving the way for subsequent research in the realm of leadership development.

2. Literature Review

In accordance with Chinese scholarly investigations, the prevailing leadership paradigm in the region is characterized by traits of centralization, hierarchy, and instructional orientation. Notably, the findings articulated by Feng and Sun (2013) assert that leaders within this context commonly embrace a bureaucratic leadership style, employing hierarchical power structures to mandate predetermined objectives. A leader is perceived as an authoritative figure directing followers to execute designated tasks. In the execution of these tasks, a stringent application of rules and regulations is expected, underscored by an emphasis on the enforcement of strict control measures and the application of scientific management principles (Feng & Sun, 2013). An expanding corpus of research has revealed associations between diverse leadership styles and the behaviours and perceptions of employees (Bass, 1999). Furthermore, preceding literature reviews have concentrated on particular leadership styles and their resultant outcomes, neglecting a systematic investigation of the mechanisms inherent in the association between leadership behaviour and well-being (e.g., Arnold et al., 2015; Harms et al., 2017; Montano et al., 2017; Skakon et al., 2010). Hence, an examination of leadership styles is imperative to identify a more efficacious approach that, when integrated with existing leadership paradigms, can augment the mental well-being of employees within HEIs.

Proficient educational administrators employ a blend of leadership frameworks, demonstrating adaptability to contextual factors such as school objectives, organizational structure, and culture (Bush, 2013; Leithwood, 2007).

Soft leadership involves guiding through the utilization of soft skills and interpersonal capabilities, seamlessly integrating these attributes with both hard skills and leadership principles. This approach underscores the paramount importance of human resources, adeptly managing emotions, egos, and sentiments. It directs attention to the individual's personality, attitude, and behaviour, emphasizing the imperative of fostering a sense of importance among others. Characterized as an integrative, participative, relationship-oriented, and behavioural leadership model, it employs tools such as persuasion, negotiation, appreciation, motivation, and collaboration to achieve tasks with efficacy (Rao, 2013).
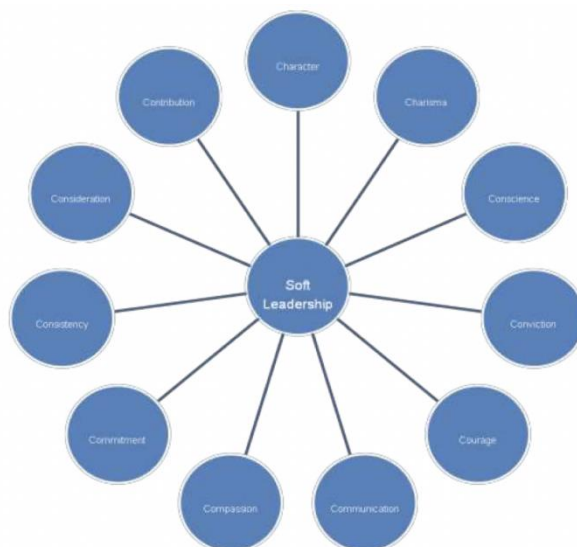
Figure 1. *11 C's That Collectively Constitute Soft Leadership.*

3. Methodology

This investigation employed a qualitative research approach within an exploratory research design. A case study methodology was utilized, involving the selection of six HEIs from a total pool of 79 within Yunnan Province for comprehensive data collection and analysis. Stratified data collection facilitated the acquisition and analysis of information from presidents, deans, and teachers through qualitative semi-structured interviews. All respondents possessed a minimum of three years' professional experience and were drawn from both public and private HEIs, encompassing the capital city and five additional cities, namely Qujing, Lijiang, Yuxi, Honghe, and Puer.

In the course of this research, a semi-structured interview methodology was employed, encompassing interviews with one president, one dean, and four academic teachers from each of the six HEIs under investigation. The interview sequence commenced with key informants, specifically the dean and vice dean, followed by the minor key informants, namely the president, vice president, and academic teachers. Each interview session, lasting approximately 30-60 minutes per respondent, aimed to elicit comprehensive and detailed information. The qualitative data amassed through these interviews underwent analysis using content analysis techniques.

The subsequent phase of this study embraced a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis. Drawing from the findings of the initial phase's content analysis, a questionnaire comprising 30 questions rooted in six constructs was formulated. Subsequently, 500 questionnaires were distributed via WeChat to presidents, deans, and teachers across six HEIs situated in Yunnan Province, China. Of the distributed questionnaires, 422 were retrieved and subjected to analysis through the statistical software SPSS.

Derived from extensive in-depth interviews conducted with principals, administrative teachers, and academic teachers within HEIs in Yunnan Province, China, the researcher formulated a soft leadership questionnaire via content analysis in the initial phase. In the subsequent quantitative phase, over 450 questionnaires, containing 30 statements, were disseminated to both administrative and academic teachers across 43 HEIs within the province. These statements, structured in a five-level Likert-type scale encompassing responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," were designed for the purpose of scrutinizing the factors contributing to the development of soft leadership.

The questionnaire comprised six dimensions, namely Effective Communication and Consideration, Triggering Self-reflection of Subordination, Forward-looking based on Past Experience, Acceptance of Others' Ability, Keeping Pace with the Younger Generation, and Self-examination. A total of 422 questionnaires were returned, constituting the dataset subjected to quantitative data analysis.

During the second phase, quantitative data analysis was employed to scrutinize the psychological factors associated with soft leadership among both administrative and academic teachers. Participants for this phase were randomly selected from HEIs situated in Yunnan Province.

4. Results

This study utilized a semi-structured, in-depth interview approach to systematically collect stratified data from various hierarchical positions within HEIs, encompassing the president, vice president, dean, vice dean, and academic teacher roles. Through the application of coding and grouping techniques, the investigation discerned both objective and subjective factors influencing the development of soft leadership in higher education management. The study identified a total of twelve factors, encompassing gender, age, working experience, lifelong learning, education and training, working environment, effective communication and consideration, triggering self-reflection of subordination, forward-looking based on past experience, acceptance of others' abilities, staying attuned to the younger generation, and introspective self-assessment.

5. Objective Factors of Soft Leadership

Gender

Female leaders are perceived as possessing a heightened curiosity about individuals and a more affable demeanour, fostering a proclivity among followers to share a greater abundance of ideas and problems with them. Additionally, the relational distance between female leaders and subordinates is noted to be closer in comparison to the distance observed in relationships with male leaders.

"I work with the dean of our department, I like her working style as she was promoted from a teacher who used to be my colleague. She is more like a coworker even she has become the vice dean of our department." (vice dean)

Age

There exists a significant correlation between age and soft leadership, as senior leaders in higher positions typically exhibit soft leadership, while middle managers tend to demonstrate instructional leadership. Young leaders, occupying positions at both middle and top levels within HEIs, display a hybrid leadership style that encompasses elements of soft leadership.

"Working with top leaders make me feel more relaxed cause the senior leaders would take us like their grand child, not to blame us but to offer sympathy and understanding. Compared with middle manager, they give me more concern and care." (vice dean)

Working Experience

According to the deans, their understanding of the followers' experiences stems from their own prior experiences. Even after ascending from academic to middle managerial roles, they retain a follower-centric orientation, offering support through communication informed by past experiences. Furthermore, the deans acknowledge the role of educational background in shaping the development of soft leadership in their daily *professional endeavours.*

"They have a common point that they can strive for the interest for teachers when we met some unfair treatment. For example, I am the training teacher of English Test of Graduates, but all the courses are taken in weekend. While the payment for all the teachers is 100 yuan per session, and the leader of our department thought it should be 150 yuan per session as it has taken up our spare time." (academic teacher)

Life-Long Learning

Confronted with an excessive workload, leaders may find it challenging to alter the prevailing conditions. However, their capacity to safeguard the interests of subordinates, fostering a familial connection, becomes instrumental. In this context, leaders play a pivotal role in cultivating a conducive learning environment, fostering both self-directed learning and collaborative knowledge acquisition for mutual development.

"Although my job is busy, I find some time to read books like history and philosophy and share what I have learned to my followers. I would recommend some books for them to read as there are many books in market while some of them are worth reading. I like to explain some problems with my followers to combine historical cases to convince them."(president)

Education and Training

Leadership is an acquired skill rather than an innate trait. The educational background of leaders equips them with theoretical knowledge and practical insights necessary for the development of their unique leadership style. Simultaneously, continual learning from familial, peer, and subordinate interactions allows leaders to integrate these experiences with their formal education, contributing to the formulation of a nuanced and adaptive *soft leadership approach.*

"What I have learned in management provided enough theories in my career as I have taken the training course before being the president of our college. I remember it's a ten days' training about management theories and practices, similar with a seminar to share our experience in the past. We exchanged our perceptions and achievements, and this event is held annually that I have taken for several years." (president)

Working Environment

The Chinese government has advocated for the establishment of a harmonious society, wherein harmonious HEIs play a vital role. In accordance with this policy, there is a necessity for an egalitarian, congenial, and stable working environment, particularly given the influx of the younger generation into positions of influence and the prevailing circumstances within Higher Education Institutions in Yunnan Province.

"Building a more harmonious working environment is necessary based on the current condition. The requirements of Education Reform of Higher Education includes the construction harmonious campus align with the harmonious community. So we are striving for making our working environment more harmonious and efficient." (dean)

6. Subjective Factors of Soft Leadership

Effective Communication and Consideration

Soft leaders engage in proactive communication with their followers, fostering a familial dynamic, particularly evident among elder leaders. These leaders offer emotional solace and guidance, addressing both professional and personal facets of their followers' lives.

"To the new teachers, she is willing to communicate with them like a parent to know some details of your family, your career plan like that. Apart from the concern of our work, she also cares about our private life, like giving suggestions to our family problems from her experience. I think she knows what we need in our difficult time, and her motivation is really important during that time." (academic teacher)

Trigger Self of Subordination

Soft leaders exhibit motivational prowess not only in their own endeavours but also extend this motivational influence to their followers. They impart encouragement, appreciation, and rewards to cultivate a driving force among their followers in their daily tasks. Drawing from personal experiences, these leaders strive to embody soft leadership, thereby reducing the perceived distance between themselves and their followers. The implementation of soft leadership practices within their professional spheres aims to cultivate a more comfortable working environment.

"I want to be a great leader to work in a team without a strong hierarchical relationship with my employees. They have been working hard enough which makes me think that I should give them more recognition rather than criticism. So I always encourage them and help the new comers as I have experienced their confusion when I was young." (president)

Look Forward Based on Past Experience

Soft leaders endeavour to align with the evolving landscape of education, informed by policy mandates and practical exigencies. They espouse a growth-oriented mindset, prioritizing the development of themselves, their followers, and the entire institution. These leaders adopt a posture of humility, embracing a continuous learning ethos by gleaning insights from others to fortify and refine their own leadership competencies.

"I think all the administers and teachers are growing with the development of our college in both management capability and academic development. We are trying our best to build a better faculty." (vice dean)

Accept Other's Ability

Soft leaders value the capabilities of their followers, acknowledging that their assistance significantly contributes to the leaders' success in their roles. These leaders recognize and accept the abilities of their followers from their unique perspectives.

"I have a strong belief that young generation is doing better in the office and classroom. I used to take the lectures of young teachers, they adopt new ways in teaching and giving more new knowledge that complied with current job market. Besides, the recently promoted vice dean is working well with young teachers, they have more commonalities to communicate with each other."(dean)

Keep Up with Young Generation

Soft leaders maintain a positive outlook and strive to align with the younger generation and newcomers. They consistently glean insights from others' strengths to integrate into their own leadership style

"I am a kind of leader who doesn't want to lose track with young people, so I like to talk with them to know what they are thinking about. That's why I would like to invite them to have a dinner to share our experience, most of the experience is not instructional. I prefer to stay with young people and communicate with them."(president)

Check the Inner Self

Soft leaders consistently scrutinize their conduct in an ongoing pursuit of optimizing their leadership efficacy. They maintain a distinct objective of enhancing their proficiency in areas such as learning, self-regulation, and self-reflection in managerial capacities.

"I can control my tamper since I have been working for more than 10 years. The first year of my career, I cannot control my tamper well. But recent years, I learned to control my emotion, even some mistakes make me angry, I can make myself calm down and try to solve the problem first."(dean)

7. Quantitative Results

Cronbach's Alpha gauged the questionnaire's internal reliability in this study. A coefficient exceeding 0.9 signified high internal consistency, while a range between 0.8 and 0.9 indicated good internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient ranged between 0.7 and 0.8, suggesting a moderate level of internal consistency for the questionnaire. If the coefficient fell below 0.7, it indicated poor internal consistency, rendering the questionnaire unsuitable as a research tool.

Table 1.

Constructs	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
A	5	0.892
B	5	0.910
C	5	0.927
D	5	0.935
E	5	0.929
F	5	0.926

The internal consistency of each segment of the scale was individually assessed to evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire. The outcomes are presented in Table 2. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the scale surpassed 0.7, signifying a relatively high internal consistency. Therefore, the questionnaire was deemed suitable for utilization in this study.

The table displays the questionnaire's division into 6 dimensions, each exhibiting a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient exceeding 0.7. The overall questionnaire meets the basic reliability standard. Hence, the questionnaire employed in this study demonstrates commendable reliability, rendering the data credible.

Exploratory factor analysis assesses the structural validity of the scale, gauging the stability and consistency of observed variables within each latent variable. This method, a widely utilized indicator for scale validity evaluation, is contingent upon meeting specific conditions. Two pivotal criteria include a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value surpassing 0.7 and significance in Bartlett's sphericity test below 0.05. Satisfying these conditions denotes a robust correlation among observed variables, rendering the dataset apt for factor analysis. Subsequently, principal component analysis was employed, employing the maximum variance method for factor extraction via rotation with a maximum of 25 iterations. The assessment criteria for analysis results were as follows: (1) The cumulative variance interpretation rate exceeding 60%. (2) The factor loading value for each item exceeding 0.5 without any negative loads. The outcomes are delineated as follows:

Table 2.

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.918
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	10477.104
	df	435
	Sig.	.000

The KMO and Bartlett test results indicate the questionnaire's suitability for factor analysis, with a KMO value of 0.918 exceeding the threshold of 0.70, and a significant Bartlett sphericity test value of 10477.104 (P = 0.00). Subsequently, principal component analysis was implemented, extracting factors with eigenvalues surpassing 1, and obtaining the component matrix through orthogonal rotation via the maximum variance method, as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3.

Total Variance Explained

Constructs	Eigenvalue			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	Percentage of Variance	Accumulative	Total	Percentage of Variance	Accumulative	Total	Percentage of Variance	Accumulative
1	11.112	37.04	37.04	11.112	37.04	37.04	3.984	13.279	13.279
2	3.34	11.135	48.174	3.34	11.135	48.174	3.979	13.263	26.542
3	2.729	9.097	57.272	2.729	9.097	57.272	3.933	13.109	39.652
4	2.316	7.719	64.991	2.316	7.719	64.991	3.809	12.698	52.349
5	2.176	7.254	72.245	2.176	7.254	72.245	3.745	12.484	64.833
6	1.407	4.69	76.935	1.407	4.69	76.935	3.63	12.101	76.935

The method of principal component analysis was employed to extract factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, yielding six common factors. The cumulative sum of squares after rotation amounted to 76.935%, surpassing the threshold of 60%.

Table 4.

The Rotated Component Matrix

	Components					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
itme 1						0.839
item 2						0.777
item 3						0.743
item 4						0.804
item 5						0.789
item 11		0.900				
item 12		0.838				
item 13		0.842				
item 14		0.807				
item 15		0.854				
item 6					0.893	
item 7					0.761	
item 8					0.814	
item 9					0.765	
item 10					0.826	
item 16	0.816					
item 17	0.847					

item 18	0.805		
item 19	0.808		
item 20	0.791		
item 21			0.824
item 22			0.816
item 23			0.781
item 24			0.769
item 25			0.767
item 26		0.837	
item 27		0.849	
item 28		0.834	
item 29		0.814	
item 30		0.819	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

In Table 4, orthogonal rotation using the maximum variance method converges after 6 iterations. The 30 items are categorized into 6 common factors, each with a factor load exceeding 0.5, affirming comprehensive information. No substantial double factor loads are observed, allowing for the aggregation of items into each dimension according to theoretical assumptions. The six common factors extracted exhibit non-overlapping components, indicating sound structural validity for the chosen scale.

8. Discussion

Given the absence of a singular leadership paradigm universally applicable to HEIs, effective leaders employ a hybrid approach, integrating various leadership styles into their management practices. Soft leadership, notably, has been identified as a constituent of an effective leadership style. This suggests that soft leadership has the capacity to synergistically blend with other leadership styles, contributing to the formulation of a comprehensive and effective leadership approach.

Through in-depth interviews with key and minor respondents, a comprehensive examination of soft leadership revealed twelve salient factors. Notably, the dimensions of life-long learning and the disposition to acknowledge others' capabilities exceeded initial expectations. Leaders adept in the art of continuous learning exhibit enhanced managerial prowess, fostering improved interpersonal relationships with both peers and subordinates. Moreover, they demonstrate a discerning capability to recognize potential, both within their followers and themselves. This discernment extends to effective human resource allocation in the recruitment and subsequent operational phases.

The escalation of workload is an inescapable reality within HEIs in Yunnan Province. This surge in responsibilities has engendered considerable stress among educators. However, individuals who experience acknowledgment, as well as participatory decision-making from their leaders, report heightened job satisfaction, even in the face of substantial work demands. This observation underscores the substantial influence of the working

environment on the mental well-being of teachers, emphasizing the close association between leadership and the work environment. The findings of this study indicate that soft leadership serves as a facilitative mechanism for leaders to cultivate a more congenial and relaxed working milieu for both leaders and followers. It is imperative to note that further research is warranted to validate and corroborate the identified factors in subsequent investigations.

This study aimed to identify and validate factors associated with soft leadership in Chinese higher education. Analysis of questionnaire responses revealed that all factors held nearly equal significance for embodying soft leadership, with the exception of the fourth factor which exhibited a relatively higher importance. In contrast to previous interviews conducted by the researcher, effective communication emerged as a pivotal element in soft leadership. The questionnaire results indicated that followers prioritize leader recognition of their capabilities. Consistent with interview findings, the younger generation expressed concerns about the generation gap between leaders and followers. They emphasized the importance of leaders aligning with contemporary trends and affording greater opportunities to young followers.

A notable distinction between the interview and questionnaire segments may stem from the age demographics of the respondents. The interview section predominantly centred on leaders within HEIs, whereas the questionnaire section primarily encompassed teachers, with young educators constituting over 60% of the total respondents. Leaders, on average, were aged over 54, whereas the teachers' average age hovered around 32. Consequently, future research endeavours might direct attention towards the exploration of younger leaders. It is imperative to acknowledge that the data collection was confined to Yunnan Province, China, and, as such, the outcomes of this study may not be readily extrapolated to other countries.

9. Conclusion

In prior research, HEIs tended to favor a bureaucratic leadership style, emphasizing an authoritative image through the imposition of strict rules and regulations on administrators and academic teachers. Concurrently, distributed and servant leadership styles were observed in school management. These leadership approaches were found to be associated with employee behaviors and perceptions, consequently influencing teaching performance and school effectiveness. Notably, most HEI leaders ascend from teaching or administrative roles without formal leadership training, often emulating the styles of their predecessors. Given the intensifying competition in higher education, both domestically and internationally, the adaptability of traditional leadership styles to contemporary conditions is increasingly questioned.

Soft leadership, as a nascent leadership paradigm, specializes in adeptly handling the emotions, egos, and sentiments of followers. In contrast to the hierarchical power dynamics inherent in distributed leadership, soft leadership endeavours to forge a cohesive team by employing persuasive techniques, sustained motivation, negotiation strategies, and expressions of appreciation to effectively attain organizational objectives.

This research delves into both objective and subjective factors influencing soft leadership, seeking insights into the perceptions of soft leadership among academic

teachers and administrators in Chinese HEIs. The primary goal is to augment the leadership proficiency of these leaders, thereby enhancing the overall management of HEIs.

The researcher employed a mixed-method exploratory sequential research design. The initial phase utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews with school presidents, deans, administrators, and academic teachers from the English Language Faculty in Yunnan Province HEIs, aiming to explore both objective and subjective aspects of soft leadership. In the second phase, a questionnaire comprising 30 questions derived from 11 components of soft leadership was developed and distributed to 500 respondents, including deans, administrators, and academic teachers from six HEIs in Yunnan Province, China, with 422 responses received.

The outcomes of this study illuminate seven discernible factors, emphasizing the accountability and validity of soft leadership as perceived by leaders within HEIs. Additionally, the study substantiates the role of this leadership style in cultivating a conducive learning-oriented work environment and its influence on follower stress levels.

Soft leaders exhibit heightened proficiency in soft skills, fostering egalitarian working relationships. They extend encouragement, care, and concern to followers, drawing from personal life and professional experiences. The continual pursuit of self-learning contributes to the intrinsic development of a soft leader. The current study provides a foundational framework for future research on leadership and mental well-being. Soft leadership introduces a novel paradigm in leadership studies, with the factors warranting further validation, as the qualitative study herein presents only a partial perspective.

10. Recommendations

The present study does not consider the working climate, which could potentially serve as a mediating factor within this framework. Subsequent research endeavours could incorporate working environment, given its pivotal role in the development of soft leadership. Furthermore, there exists a close correlation between leadership style and the mental well-being of followers. Exploring whether soft leadership contributes to the mitigation of anxiety, depression, and turnover rates necessitates further investigation.

11. Limitations

The current study lacks an examination of the working climate, a potential mediating factor within the existing framework, which could be integrated into subsequent research endeavours. Additionally, further investigation is warranted to explore the associations between soft leadership and mental well-being.

The study is constrained by its geographical scope, as it is confined to Yunnan Province. The data collection, therefore, does not encompass all HEIs within the province, let alone extend to the entirety of mainland China. Given the distinctiveness of Yunnan Province in comparison to the broader mainland, the findings may not be representative of the entire nation. Consequently, the statistical analyses and outcomes derived from the study, centred on this particular province, may lack generalizability and applicability to other provinces and countries.

12. Conflict of Interest

We declare that we have no financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that can inappropriately influence our work, there is no professional or other personal interest of any nature or kind in any product, service and/or company that could be construed as influencing the position presented in, or the review of the manuscript.

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