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Identification and Ranking of Key Factors in Responsibility Culture with a Blame-Free Management Approach in Iranian Public Organizations

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A B S T R A C T

The culture of responsibility in Iranian public organizations, as a key factor for improving performance, transparency, and organizational trust, requires an innovative approach such as blame-free management, which promotes learning from mistakes without fear of punishment. This study aimed to identify and rank the key factors influencing the development of a responsibility culture using a blame-free management approach in Iran's public sector. Employing a mixed-methods approach, thematic analysis was applied in the qualitative phase to identify key factors, and the fuzzy DEMATEL method was used in the quantitative phase to rank these factors. The statistical population consisted of 20 experts (senior managers, human resources specialists, academic researchers, and policymakers) who were studied through semi-structured interviews and fuzzy DEMATEL questionnaires. Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2020 and MATLAB software, resulting in 455 semantic units categorized into 132 initial codes, 35 sub-themes, and 8 main themes: leadership and management, culture and trust, environmental and contextual factors, structure and technology, training and capacity building, measurement and evaluation, legal and regulatory framework, and economic and resource-based factors. Findings revealed that "leadership and management" (D+R = 4.178) and "culture and trust" (D+R = 3.565) are the most significant factors in strengthening a responsibility culture. The study proposes a localized network theory of blame-free responsibility culture, offering a framework that bridges existing gaps in the literature by emphasizing ethical values, utilizing modern technologies such as artificial intelligence, aligning legal frameworks with labor laws, and promoting inter-organizational training. Practical recommendations include designing training programs for managers, implementing digital platforms for anonymous error reporting, drafting supportive guidelines, and benchmarking against international best practices. This model can enhance organizational performance, increase transparency, and reinforce trust in Iran's public sector, although limitations such as organizational resistance and resource constraints warrant further investigation.

Keywords: *Responsibility Culture, Blame-Free Management, Leadership and Management, Organizational Trust, Modern Technologies*

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era of administrative transformation, the development of a responsibility-oriented organizational culture is a foundational requirement for achieving effective governance, sustainable performance, and employee engagement. Iranian governmental organizations, characterized by bureaucratic legacies and centralized structures, increasingly face demands—both internal and external—to foster accountability without reinforcing punitive environments. This imperative calls for a paradigmatic shift toward *blame-free management* approaches that emphasize learning from mistakes, fostering trust, and strengthening responsibility through constructive, non-punitive mechanisms (Lupton & Warren, 2018; Roulet & Pichler, 2020).

Accountability in organizations refers to the commitment and acceptance of the consequences of informed decisions and actions by the organization and its employees concerning their duties, actions, and the outcomes of their professional roles (Golrokh et al., 2025). Within this framework, accountability is not an isolated administrative process, but an embedded ethical and structural component that interacts with values, behaviors, and systems of trust. The ability of individuals to assume responsibility relies greatly on the organizational climate that either encourages openness and learning or promotes fear and evasion.

Organizational culture is a critical element in this dynamic, representing the attitudes, beliefs, traditions, and values that pervade the organization and reflect the core concerns of organizational sociology (Kiakojouri, 2024). As such, it serves not only as a symbolic structure but also as an operational mechanism that shapes the behavior of individuals and groups. Therefore, to make organizations more dynamic and consequently more innovative, the driving and reinforcing factors of culture must be identified and enhanced (Firouzyar & KiaKojouri, 2013). This cultural revitalization requires the integration of adaptive management logic, systems thinking, and values-based leadership, which align with broader goals of public sector reform.

As Deming and Juran have long emphasized in the field of quality management, sustainable improvement is rooted not in controlling individuals but in improving systems (Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988). Their views converge with organizational learning theories that advocate for continuous feedback, team reflection, and system-wide correction as levers of high performance and ethical responsibility. These frameworks resonate with Senge's concept of the "learning organization," where shared vision, mental models, and team learning serve as pillars of adaptability and long-term effectiveness (Garvin et al., 2008; Senge, 1991).

Building on this, blame-free management represents a governance strategy that aims to remove the fear of punishment in order to promote open error reporting, reflective learning, and trustful accountability. As Lupton and Warren note, this approach is rooted in the ethical discourse of blame attribution, raising fundamental questions about justice, organizational control, and moral agency (Lupton & Warren, 2018). In contrast to traditional bureaucracies, where blame often serves as a deflective tactic, blame-free organizations seek to institutionalize learning through transparent reporting systems and inclusive leadership. However, as Roulet explains, such environments must also navigate the complexities of whistleblowing, scapegoating, and the strategic use of blame in organizational discourse (Roulet & Pichler, 2020).

For public organizations, particularly in the Iranian context, this transformation requires alignment between culture, leadership, and systems. Leadership plays a pivotal role in establishing a non-punitive accountability framework, where ethical modeling and participatory practices replace command-and-control structures (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985). Moreover, public institutions must be equipped to operate in modern educational and administrative environments, prepared to synchronize with the information age and reform educational systems accordingly (MirTaghian Rudsari & Kiakojouri, 2016).

This alignment between structural and cultural components has been underscored in various empirical studies in Iran. Research has shown that accountability is undermined in rigid, hierarchical cultures that lack psychological safety and value conformity over innovation (Golrokh et al., 2025; Zarei, 2022). Conversely, ethical climates and participatory leadership have been shown to enhance employee responsibility, trust, and proactive engagement (Jafari et al., 2022; Jamiri et al., 2022; Yeganeh-Mazhar & Ebrahimipour, 2022). In addition, organizational culture directly influences how employees perceive, internalize, and act upon responsibilities, with factors such as moral leadership, communication style, and reward systems playing key roles in shaping behavior (Hosseini & Sargazi, 2020; Karimi, 2020).

Given the complexity of public sector ecosystems, responsibility culture must be conceptualized as a complex adaptive system (Holland, 1992; Mitleton-Kelly, 1997). This

approach recognizes the interdependence of agents, the non-linear evolution of organizational behavior, and the importance of context in determining outcomes. In such systems, cause and effect are not always immediate or traceable, which makes reactive blaming not only ineffective but potentially harmful. Instead, what is required are tools and frameworks that enable organizations to learn from feedback loops, adapt to change, and develop resilience over time.

Modern public organizations must therefore prioritize digital transformation, integrated learning systems, and adaptive structures to respond effectively to contemporary challenges. These include not only technical reforms but also cultural shifts that support emotional safety, shared responsibility, and the institutionalization of learning (Becker et al., 2009; Garvin et al., 2008). Models proposed in recent literature, such as the one by Golrokh et al. (2025), integrate these principles into a multidimensional construct consisting of leadership, culture, structure, legality, resources, evaluation, context, and capacity-building (Golrokh et al., 2025). This model reflects both global trends and local contextual needs, offering a systemic perspective for transforming Iranian governmental organizations into accountable, transparent, and learning-focused institutions.

Furthermore, the role of strategic human resource management must not be overlooked. As Becker and colleagues argue, a differentiated workforce strategy that aligns talent management with strategic goals significantly enhances organizational capacity for responsibility (Becker et al., 2009). Similarly, Lepak and Snell highlight the importance of human capital architecture in allocating and developing resources where accountability can be nurtured and operationalized (Lepak & Snell, 1999).

To strengthen this culture, the modernization of performance evaluation systems and support for ongoing training are crucial (Ramezani et al., 2022; Zamaniyan et al., 2023). The role of evaluation is not simply to monitor compliance but to reinforce learning, adaptation, and responsibility through constructive feedback and performance dialogue (Schloetzer et al., 2021). Additionally, public organizations must be responsive to their broader institutional environment and prioritize ethical engagement with society through models of corporate social responsibility (Lopushniak et al., 2021; Madhoshi & Norouzi, 2015).

In sum, the development of a responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in Iranian governmental organizations requires a multidimensional strategy anchored in systems thinking, ethical leadership, and learning-based governance.

2. Methods and Materials

This study was conducted with the aim of identifying and ranking the key factors influencing the culture of responsibility using a blame-free management approach in Iranian public organizations. It employed a mixed-methods approach, using thematic analysis in the first phase to identify key factors and the fuzzy DEMATEL method in the second phase to rank these factors.

The target population included experts in public management, including senior and mid-level managers with at least 10 years of managerial experience, human resources specialists focused on organizational culture development, academic researchers in public administration or organizational behavior with a minimum of five years of relevant research experience, and policymakers in the field of labor laws and public service regulations. Inclusion criteria involved practical or research experience in organizational responsibility, familiarity with the bureaucratic challenges of Iran's public sector, and the ability to provide in-depth insights into blame-free culture. To ensure comprehensive perspectives, a diverse group of experts was selected from various governmental organizations and different geographical regions of Iran. Individuals without direct public sector experience or relevant specialized knowledge were excluded from the study.

In the qualitative phase, purposive and snowball sampling was used, and 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. In the quantitative phase, for ranking the factors using the fuzzy DEMATEL method, the opinions of 12 of the same experts (those with sufficient knowledge to evaluate inter-factor relationships) were collected. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews lasting between 40 and 100 minutes (average: 60 minutes). The interview questions focused on identifying key factors and concluded with an open-ended prompt such as: "Is there anything you think we haven't addressed?" To uphold ethical standards, written consent was obtained for recording and using the data. Interviews were conducted at mutually agreed-upon locations, and data were accurately documented through note-taking and audio recording.

In the quantitative section, a questionnaire based on the fuzzy DEMATEL method was designed, including a matrix

of pairwise relationships among the identified factors. Experts evaluated the interrelationships using a fuzzy linguistic scale (e.g., very low, low, medium, high, very high).

Qualitative data analysis was performed using six steps of thematic analysis. First, interview transcripts were read and audio recordings reviewed. Then, 455 semantic units were extracted and grouped into 132 initial codes. These codes were then condensed into 35 sub-themes, and ultimately categorized into 8 main themes: culture and trust, structure and technology, leadership and management, legal and regulatory framework, economic and resource-based factors, measurement and evaluation, environmental and contextual dimensions, and training and capacity building. This process was facilitated using MAXQDA 2020 software.

In the quantitative phase, the fuzzy DEMATEL method was used to rank the factors and identify their interrelationships. This involved constructing the direct relationship matrix based on experts' fuzzy evaluations, normalizing the matrix, calculating the total relation matrix to determine direct and indirect effects, ranking the factors based on their prominence and relation values, and drawing a cause-effect diagram. All calculations were performed using MATLAB software.

To ensure the validity of the research, four criteria were addressed: credibility (by having participants review the transcripts and codes), transferability (through detailed documentation of demographic and contextual data), confirmability (via transparent documentation of the coding process in MAXQDA), and dependability (evidenced by an average coding reliability of 84.57% and a Cronbach's alpha above 0.7 for the fuzzy DEMATEL questionnaire).

All procedures were conducted in adherence to ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and providing information about the study's objectives and data usage.

This mixed-methods design, combining thematic analysis to identify the factors and fuzzy DEMATEL to rank them, presents a comprehensive and rigorous framework for studying the culture of responsibility under a blame-free management approach in Iranian public organizations.

3. Findings and Results

Table (1) presents the demographic information of the interview participants.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Research Participants

No.	Position/Role	Education Level	Age	Gender	Field of Expertise	Sector
M1	University Professor	PhD	45	Male	Public Administration	Academic
M2	Senior Government Manager	PhD	52	Male	Human Resource Management	Executive
M3	HR Expert	MA	40	Female	Organizational Behavior	Executive
M4	Academic Researcher	PhD	47	Female	Organizational Culture	Academic
M5	Middle Government Manager	MA	40	Male	General Management	Executive
M6	Policy Maker	PhD	50	Male	Labor Law and Civil Service	Executive
M7	University Professor	PhD	42	Female	Strategic Management	Academic
M8	Senior Ministry Manager	PhD	55	Male	Executive Management	Executive
M9	Organizational Behavior Scholar	PhD	39	Female	Organizational Responsibility	Academic
M10	Senior Government Expert	MA	40	Male	Organizational Development	Executive
M11	University Professor	PhD	48	Male	Public Administration and Bureaucracy	Academic
M12	Director of Oversight Body	PhD	53	Female	Supervision and Performance Evaluation	Executive
M13	Academic Researcher	PhD	41	Female	Professional Ethics	Academic
M14	Mid-level Executive Manager	MA	44	Male	Change Management	Executive
M15	HR Policy Maker	PhD	49	Male	Human Resource Policy Making	Executive
M16	University Professor	PhD	46	Female	Knowledge Management	Academic
M17	Senior Executive Manager	PhD	51	Male	General Management	Executive
M18	Academic Researcher	PhD	40	Female	Organizational Behavior	Academic
M19	Labor Law Specialist	MA	39	Male	Civil Service Law	Executive
M20	Middle Ministry Manager	PhD	50	Female	Human Resource Management	Executive

To develop a qualitative model of responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in the Iranian public sector, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts. Thematic analysis of these interviews led to the extraction of 455 semantic units. During the open coding phase, these units were categorized into 132 initial codes.

Through deeper analysis, these codes were condensed into 35 axial codes. Finally, the 35 axial codes were classified into 8 selective codes.

The results of the interviews, categorized into sub-themes and main themes, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Codes Derived from Interviews

Interview Codes	Open Code	Sub-theme	Main Theme
M7, M12, M3, M15, M8, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6	Accepting mistakes for improvement, motivation from learning errors, sharing mistakes for innovation	Belief in learning from mistakes	Culture and Trust
M14, M9, M17, M5, M13, M1, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3	Trust through open expression, participation from psychological safety, transparency and stress reduction	Psychological safety for error expression	Culture and Trust
M12, M8, M9, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18	Trust from professional ethics, responsibility from ethical behavior, cooperation from ethical values	Ethical values	Culture and Trust
M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M2	Trust through apology, open dialogue, respect through apology	Promotion of a formal apology culture	Culture and Trust
M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3	Transparency through formal mechanisms, quick identification, cooperation from formal reporting	Formal mechanisms for error reporting	Structure and Technology
M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M3, M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16	Trust through anonymous reporting, secure logging, error analysis via technology	Digital platforms for anonymous error reporting	Structure and Technology
M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9	Documentation from knowledge management, experience sharing, access to solutions	Organizational knowledge management systems	Structure and Technology
M4, M19, M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10	Accuracy from data mining, risk prediction via AI, root analysis, decision-making	Data mining and artificial intelligence tools for error analysis	Structure and Technology
M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4	Cost reduction, efficiency, easy access through system integration	Integration with existing organizational systems	Structure and Technology
M19, M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18	Trust from participatory leadership, innovation via managerial support	Supportive and participatory leadership style	Leadership and Management
M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19	Responsibility and accountability through empowerment, creativity	Employee empowerment for decision-making	Leadership and Management
M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15	Reporting culture, safety via managerial training, trust from blame-free training	Training managers to avoid blame	Leadership and Management
M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6, M17	Acceptance through resistance management, trust via support for change	Managing resistance to change	Leadership and Management
M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8	Trust from legal support, participation via protective laws, transparency	Legal framework for whistleblower protection	Legal and Regulatory
M12, M9, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6, M17, M5	Honesty and follow-up through regulations, safety via protective policies	Supportive regulations for error reporting	Legal and Regulatory
M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19	Trust, fairness, support, and transparency via legal alignment	Alignment with labor and civil service laws	Legal and Regulatory
M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20	Transparency and fairness under defined limitations	Defining responsibility limitations in specific contexts	Legal and Regulatory
M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M2	Coordination and trust through conflict resolution	Managing inter-organizational legal conflicts	Legal and Regulatory
M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7	Training budgets for skill development, participation, and sustainability	Budget allocation for training and development	Economic and Resource Factors
M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M2, M11	Participation and motivation through financial incentives	Financial incentive systems for honest reporting	Economic and Resource Factors
M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12	Justification and cost savings from blame-free analysis, resource allocation	Cost-benefit analysis of the blame-free approach	Economic and Resource Factors
M9, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14	Facilitation and sustainability via external resources	Attracting external resources	Economic and Resource Factors
M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9	Accurate evaluation via KPIs, transparency, satisfaction, continuous improvement	Qualitative and quantitative performance indicators	Assessment and Evaluation
M17, M5, M14, M1, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6	Organizational performance impact assessment methods	Impact evaluation methods	Assessment and Evaluation

M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M2, M11	Benchmarking for standards, innovation, and trust	Benchmarking with international experiences	Assessment and Evaluation
M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18	Quality and sustainability via monitoring and control	Quality monitoring and control	Assessment and Evaluation
M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6	Acceptance, trust, and motivation via satisfaction evaluation	Employee satisfaction assessment on blame-free culture	Assessment and Evaluation
M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15	Cultural fit, cooperation, and reporting methods	Adaptation to Iranian administrative culture	Environmental and Contextual
M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6, M17	Facilitation, transparency, and sustainability via bureaucratic alignment	Alignment with governmental bureaucratic features	Environmental and Contextual
M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4	Flexibility, adaptation, transparency, and innovation via external environment	Consideration of external environmental factors	Environmental and Contextual
M19, M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13	Facilitation, trust, and coordination through political management	Managing political influences	Environmental and Contextual
M16, M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19	Institutionalization, skills, and participation through continuous learning	Continuous educational programs	Training and Capacity Building
M2, M11, M6, M17, M5, M14, M1, M13, M16	Acceptance, skill development, and collaboration via workshops	Practical workshops to promote a blame-free culture	Training and Capacity Building
M10, M18, M20, M7, M3, M15, M8, M12, M9, M4, M19, M2, M11, M6, M17	Root cause analysis, decision-making, cooperation, and innovation via systems thinking	Developing systems thinking skills	Training and Capacity Building
M5, M14, M1, M13, M16, M10, M18, M20, M7	Coordination and standardization via inter-organizational and national training	Inter-organizational training for national coordination	Training and Capacity Building

Based on the results of axial coding and the shared conceptual patterns among the categories (Table 2), eight core categories were identified for developing a qualitative model of responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in Iranian public organizations.

In line with the title "Developing a Qualitative Model of Responsibility Culture with a Blame-Free Management Approach in Iranian Public Organizations," and based on the research findings, a theoretical framework titled the Network Theory of Blame-Free Responsibility Culture is proposed. This theory rests on the assumption that the culture of responsibility in Iranian public organizations is shaped through a dynamic and multilayered network of interrelated factors, including: Culture and Trust, Structure and Technology, Leadership and Management, Legal and Regulatory, Economic and Resource-Based, Measurement and Evaluation, Environmental and Contextual, and Training and Capacity Development.

To apply the fuzzy DEMATEL method in this study, input was gathered from 12 experts who had previously participated in the qualitative interview phase. These experts, leveraging their experience and knowledge, assisted in evaluating and analyzing the interrelationships between the identified factors. Their perspectives played a critical role in determining the degree of influence and dependency among the various dimensions. This collaboration contributed to developing a more precise and practically grounded fuzzy DEMATEL model.

Steps of the Fuzzy DEMATEL Method

Step 1: Forming the Fuzzy Direct-Relation Matrix

To identify the relational pattern among n criteria, an n×n matrix is constructed. The influence of the row element on the column element is represented by a fuzzy number. If multiple expert perspectives are used, each expert completes the matrix, and the arithmetic mean of the responses is then used to construct the final direct-relation matrix Z.

$$z = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & \cdots & \tilde{z}_{n1} \\ \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ \tilde{z}_{1n} & \cdots & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

The following table presents the fuzzy direct-relation matrix, which reflects the pairwise comparisons by the experts. Since multiple experts contributed, the matrix below represents the arithmetic average of all expert inputs.

Table 3

Abbreviations of Dimensions

Dimension	Abbreviation
Culture and Trust	F&E
Leadership and Management	L&M

Structure and Technology	S&T
Legal and Regulatory	L&R
Economic and Resources	E&R
Measurement and Evaluation	M&E
Environmental and Contextual	E&C
Training and Development	T&D

Table 4

Fuzzy Direct-Relation Matrix of Factors

	F&E	L&M	S&T	L&R	E&R	M&E	E&C	T&D
F&E	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.625,0.875,1.000)	(0.333,0.583,0.833)	(0.000,0.167,0.417)	(0.083,0.333,0.583)	(0.354,0.604,0.854)	(0.583,0.833,1.000)	(0.333,0.583,0.833)
L&M	(0.688,0.938,1.000)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.583,0.833,1.000)	(0.354,0.604,0.854)	(0.167,0.417,0.667)	(0.625,0.875,1.000)	(0.625,0.875,1.000)	(0.750,1.000,1.000)
S&T	(0.104,0.354,0.604)	(0.333,0.583,0.833)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.583,0.833,1.000)	(0.000,0.125,0.375)	(0.375,0.625,0.875)	(0.167,0.417,0.667)	(0.375,0.625,0.875)
L&R	(0.167,0.417,0.667)	(0.125,0.375,0.625)	(0.375,0.625,0.875)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.000,0.125,0.375)	(0.125,0.375,0.625)	(0.625,0.875,1.000)	(0.000,0.167,0.417)
E&R	(0.000,0.125,0.375)	(0.104,0.354,0.604)	(0.000,0.125,0.375)	(0.000,0.000,0.250)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.000,0.125,0.375)	(0.000,0.000,0.250)	(0.000,0.250,0.500)
M&E	(0.375,0.625,0.875)	(0.625,0.875,1.000)	(0.333,0.583,0.833)	(0.125,0.375,0.625)	(0.000,0.125,0.375)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.000,0.167,0.417)	(0.333,0.583,0.833)
E&C	(0.583,0.833,1.000)	(0.604,0.854,1.000)	(0.146,0.396,0.646)	(0.625,0.875,1.000)	(0.000,0.125,0.375)	(0.167,0.417,0.667)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.167,0.417,0.667)
T&D	(0.500,0.750,1.000)	(0.646,0.896,1.000)	(0.396,0.646,0.896)	(0.000,0.167,0.417)	(0.000,0.146,0.396)	(0.167,0.417,0.667)	(0.083,0.333,0.583)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)

Table 5

Fuzzy Linguistic Scale Used in the Model

Code	Linguistic Term	L	M	U
1	No influence	0	0	0.25
2	Very low influence	0	0.25	0.5
3	Low influence	0.25	0.5	0.75
4	High influence	0.5	0.75	1
5	Very high influence	0.75	1	1

To normalize the fuzzy direct-relation matrix, the following formula is used:

$$r = \max_{i,j}\left\{\max_i \sum_{j=1}^{n} u_{ij}, \max_j \sum_{i=1}^{n} u_{ij}\right\} \qquad i,j \in \{1,2,3,\dots,n\}$$

$$\tilde{x}_{ij} = \tilde{z}_{ij} / r = (l_{ij} / r, m_{ij} / r, u_{ij} / r)$$

Where:

Table 6

Normalized Fuzzy Direct-Relation Matrix of Factors

	F&E	L&M	S&T	L&R	E&R	M&E	E&C	T&D
F&E	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.096,0.134,0.153)	(0.051,0.089,0.128)	(0.000,0.026,0.064)	(0.013,0.051,0.089)	(0.054,0.093,0.131)	(0.089,0.128,0.153)	(0.051,0.089,0.128)
L&M	(0.106,0.144,0.153)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.089,0.128,0.153)	(0.054,0.093,0.131)	(0.026,0.064,0.102)	(0.096,0.134,0.153)	(0.096,0.134,0.153)	(0.115,0.153,0.153)
S&T	(0.016,0.054,0.093)	(0.051,0.089,0.128)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.089,0.128,0.153)	(0.000,0.019,0.058)	(0.058,0.096,0.134)	(0.026,0.064,0.102)	(0.058,0.096,0.134)
L&R	(0.026,0.064,0.102)	(0.019,0.058,0.096)	(0.058,0.096,0.134)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.000,0.019,0.058)	(0.019,0.058,0.096)	(0.096,0.134,0.153)	(0.000,0.026,0.064)
E&R	(0.000,0.019,0.058)	(0.016,0.054,0.093)	(0.000,0.019,0.058)	(0.000,0.000,0.038)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.000,0.019,0.058)	(0.000,0.000,0.038)	(0.000,0.038,0.077)

M&E	(0.058,0.096,0.134)	(0.096,0.134,0.153)	(0.051,0.089,0.128)	(0.019,0.058,0.096)	(0.000,0.019,0.058)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.000,0.026,0.064)	(0.051,0.089,0.128)
E&C	(0.089,0.128,0.153)	(0.093,0.131,0.153)	(0.022,0.061,0.099)	(0.096,0.134,0.153)	(0.000,0.019,0.058)	(0.026,0.064,0.102)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)	(0.026,0.064,0.102)
T&D	(0.077,0.115,0.153)	(0.099,0.137,0.153)	(0.061,0.099,0.137)	(0.000,0.026,0.064)	(0.000,0.022,0.061)	(0.026,0.064,0.102)	(0.013,0.051,0.089)	(0.000,0.000,0.000)

Step 3: Calculating the Fuzzy Total Relation Matrix

The fuzzy total relation matrix is computed using the following formula:

$$\tilde{T} = \lim_{k\to+\infty} (\tilde{x}^1 \oplus \tilde{x}^2 \oplus \ldots \oplus \tilde{x}^k)$$

If each element of the total relation matrix is a fuzzy number defined as:

$$\tilde{t}_{ij} = (l''_{ij}, m''_{ij}, u''_{ij})$$

$$[l''_{ij}] = x_l \times (I - x_l)^{-1}$$

$$[m''_{ij}] = x_m \times (I - x_m)^{-1}$$

$$[u''_{ij}] = x_u \times (I - x_u)^{-1}$$

In other words, first the inverse of the normalized matrix is calculated, then it is subtracted from the identity matrix, and finally, the normalized matrix is multiplied by the result. Table 7 presents the fuzzy total relation matrix.

Table 7. Fuzzy Total Relation Matrix of Factors

(The matrix values are listed exactly as they were in your original document; translation of structure and labels is already shown.)

Step 4: Defuzzification of the Total Relation Matrix

The CFCS (Converting Fuzzy data into Crisp Scores) method by Opricovic and Tzeng is used for defuzzification. The steps are:

$$l_{ij}^n = \frac{(l_{ij}^t - \min l_{ij}^t)}{\Delta_{min}^{max}}$$

$$m_{ij}^n = \frac{(m_{ij}^t - min\ l_{ij}^t)}{\Delta_{min}^{max}}$$

$$u_{ij}^n = \frac{(u_{ij}^t - min\ l_{ij}^t)}{\Delta_{min}^{max}}$$

Where:

$$\Delta_{min}^{max} = \max u_{ij}^t - \min l_{ij}^t$$

Then, the normalized upper and lower bounds are calculated as:

$$l_{ij}^s = {m_{ij}^n}/{(1 + m_{ij}^n - l_{ij}^n)}$$

$$u_{ij}^s = {u_{ij}^n}/{(1 + u_{ij}^n - l_{ij}^n)}$$

The output of the CFCS algorithm is a crisp matrix. The final crisp values are calculated using:

$$x_{ij} = \frac{[l_{ij}^s(1 - l_{ij}^s) + u_{ij}^s \times u_{ij}^s]}{[1 - l_{ij}^s + u_{ij}^s]}$$

Table 7

Defuzzified (Crisp) Total Relation Matrix

	F&E	L&M	S&T	L&R	E&R	M&E	E&C	T&D
F&E	0.178	0.302	0.247	0.172	0.130	0.240	0.263	0.243
L&M	0.327	0.238	0.308	0.248	0.153	0.298	0.297	0.315
S&T	0.212	0.253	0.157	0.239	0.097	0.229	0.205	0.231
L&R	0.201	0.208	0.220	0.119	0.088	0.181	0.242	0.157
E&R	0.090	0.127	0.088	0.058	0.032	0.084	0.064	0.103
M&E	0.242	0.282	0.233	0.179	0.098	0.143	0.172	0.228
E&C	0.281	0.295	0.225	0.251	0.104	0.215	0.163	0.217
T&D	0.260	0.287	0.242	0.156	0.102	0.205	0.193	0.150

Step 5: Threshold Calculation

All values in the defuzzified total relation matrix that are less than the average (threshold) are removed using the following formula:

$$TS = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}\sum_{j=1}^{m} V_{ij}}{m \times n}$$

$$U_{ij} = \begin{cases} V_{ij} & V_{ij} \geq TS \\ 0 & Others \end{cases}$$

The matrix with values below the threshold removed is presented in Table 9. The threshold value (TS) in this study is calculated to be 0.196.

Table 8

Crisp Total Relation Matrix with Threshold Filtering

	F&E	L&M	S&T	L&R	E&R	M&E	E&C	T&D
F&E	0	0.302	0.247	0	0	0.240	0.263	0.243
L&M	0.327	0.238	0.308	0.248	0	0.298	0.297	0.315
S&T	0.212	0.253	0	0.239	0	0.229	0.205	0.231
L&R	0.201	0.208	0.220	0	0	0	0.242	0
E&R	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
M&E	0.242	0.282	0.233	0	0	0	0	0.228
E&C	0.281	0.295	0.225	0.251	0	0.215	0	0.217
T&D	0.260	0.287	0.242	0	0	0.205	0	0

Step 6: Final Output and Cause-Effect Diagram

The next step is to calculate the sum of the rows (D) and columns (R) of the matrix *T*. These are computed using the following formulas:

$$D = \sum_{j=1}^{n} T_{ij}$$

$$R = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \tilde{T}_{ij}$$

Then, $D + R$ and $D - R$ are calculated. $D + R$ indicates the total level of interaction (influence and dependence), and $D - R$ indicates the net cause-effect power of each factor. The final output is shown in Table 10.

Table 9

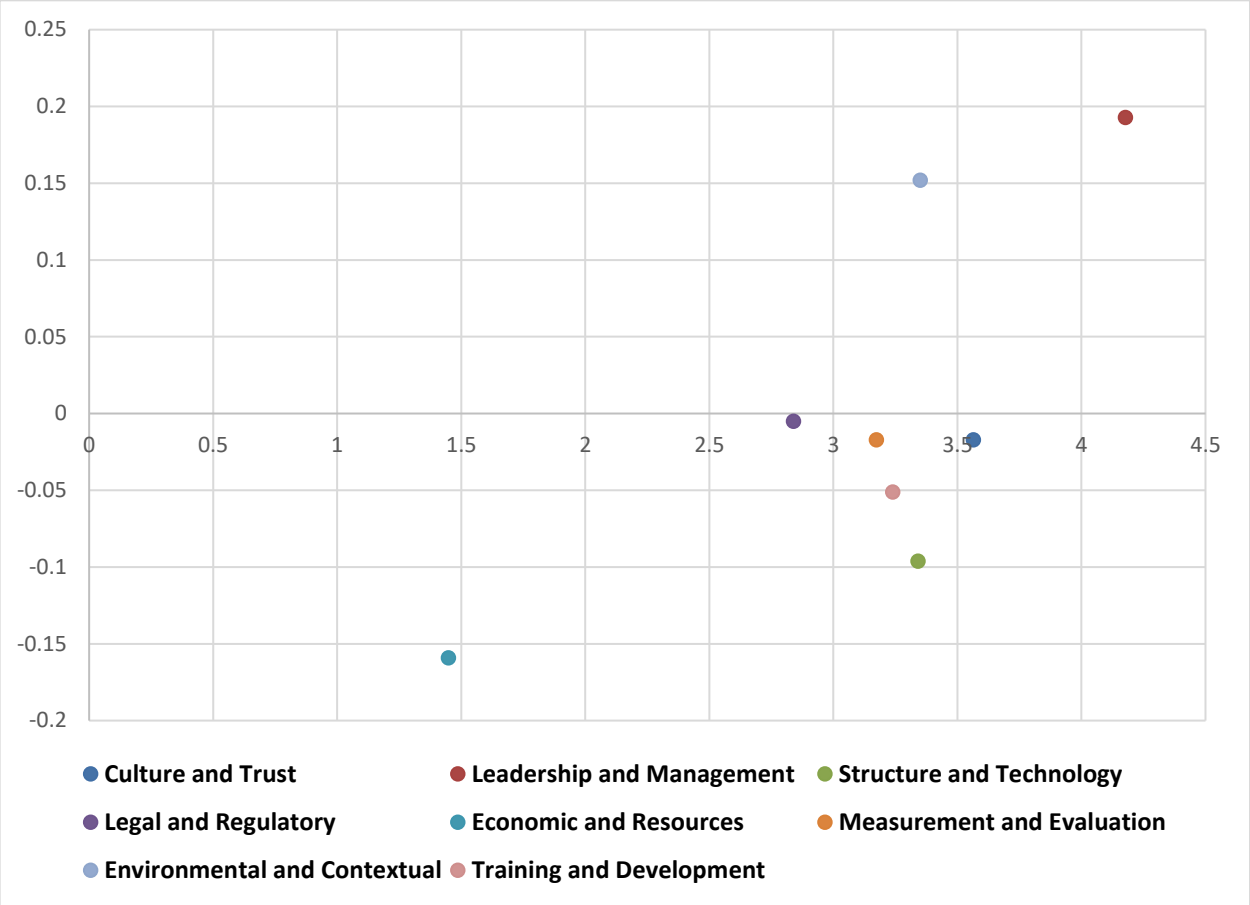
Final Output

Factor	R	D	D + R	D - R
Culture and Trust	1.791	1.774	3.565	-0.017
Leadership and Management	1.993	2.185	4.178	0.193
Structure and Technology	1.719	1.623	3.342	-0.096
Legal and Regulatory	1.422	1.417	2.839	-0.005
Economic and Resources	0.804	0.645	1.449	-0.159
Measurement and Evaluation	1.596	1.578	3.174	-0.017
Environmental and Contextual	1.599	1.751	3.350	0.152
Training and Development	1.645	1.594	3.239	-0.051

The following diagram illustrates the meaningful relationships. The vertical axis represents $D + R$, and the horizontal axis represents $D - R$. Each factor is positioned at a coordinate point $(D + R, D - R)$ on the chart.

Figure 1

Pattern of Causal Relationships Among Factors



Step 7: Interpretation of Results

In the fuzzy DEMATEL method, *Leadership and Management* (R = 1.993, D = 2.185) shows the highest level of both influence and dependency among all factors of responsibility culture in Iranian public organizations. This highlights its central and driving role.

Culture and Trust, *Structure and Technology*, *Environmental and Contextual*, *Training and Development*, and *Measurement and Evaluation* demonstrate a moderate level of interaction (both influencing and being influenced).

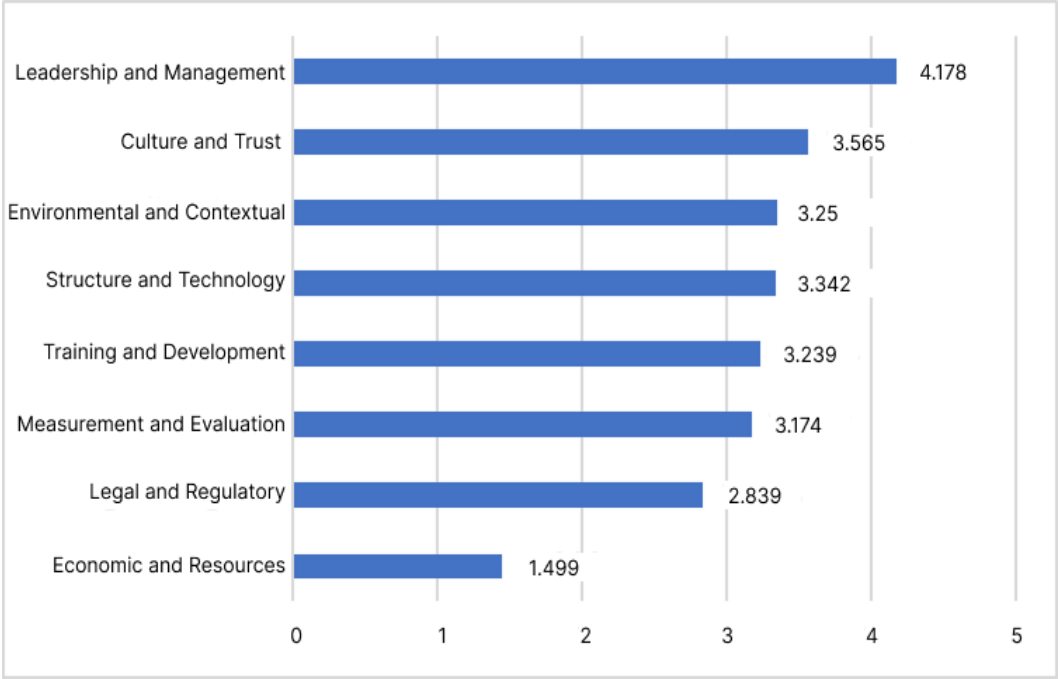
In contrast, *Legal and Regulatory* and *Economic and Resources* show the lowest interaction levels, indicating they are more influenced by other factors than they influence others.

Overall, *Leadership and Management* and *Culture and Trust* are identified as the most critical key factors (with the highest D + R values). Moreover, *Leadership and Management* and *Environmental and Contextual* are categorized as the primary causal and driving factors (positive D - R values), meaning they must be emphasized when initiating fundamental change in the system.

To rank the criteria, the "D + R" column should be used. The D + R value represents the overall influence and susceptibility of each factor in the system and serves as an appropriate criterion for assessing the overall importance of factors. The higher the D + R, the more central and interactive the factor is in the network.

Figure 2

Ranking of Influential Factors



Leadership and Management (D + R = 4.178) has the highest D + R value, making it the most critical and central factor in establishing and strengthening a responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in Iran's public organizations. It both affects and is affected by the highest number of factors, reflecting its vital systemic role. Any initiative to improve responsibility culture should begin by focusing on this factor.

Culture and Trust (D + R = 3.565) ranks second and plays a highly significant role in the system. This factor also exhibits strong interactions with others and is crucial for the success of a blame-free management approach.

Environmental and Contextual (D + R = 3.350) ranks third, indicating that the situational and environmental conditions in which an organization operates significantly influence responsibility culture and must be accounted for.

Structure and Technology (D + R = 3.342) is closely behind in fourth place. This underscores the importance of organizational structure and the adoption of suitable technologies in either facilitating or hindering a culture of responsibility.

Training and Development (D + R = 3.239) ranks fifth, emphasizing the importance of employee training and empowerment in building and sustaining responsibility culture.

Measurement and Evaluation (D + R = 3.174) is sixth, pointing to the significance of performance assessment mechanisms and feedback in reinforcing accountability.

Legal and Regulatory (D + R = 2.839) comes in seventh. Although less influential than other factors, regulatory frameworks still play a role in shaping responsibility culture.

Economic and Resources (D + R = 1.449) ranks lowest. This indicates that among the factors studied, it has the least interaction and overall relevance in the network of relationships pertaining to a blame-free responsibility culture.

This ranking demonstrates that, to strengthen a responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in Iranian public organizations, the greatest focus and resources should be dedicated to *Leadership and Management* and *Culture and Trust*, as these two factors have the highest impact and interaction levels in the system. Other factors should also be considered in descending order of importance to build a comprehensive and effective framework.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to develop and validate a qualitative model of responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in Iranian governmental organizations. To achieve this, the study employed a two-

phase mixed-method design using thematic analysis and fuzzy DEMATEL. The results of the thematic analysis revealed eight core dimensions: *leadership and management*, *culture and trust*, *structure and technology*, *legal and regulatory*, *economic and resource-based*, *measurement and evaluation*, *environmental and contextual*, and *training and capacity development*. These categories represent a comprehensive framework through which organizational responsibility can be fostered and sustained in the absence of punitive blame culture. The results of the fuzzy DEMATEL analysis further allowed for prioritization of these dimensions. Among all factors, *leadership and management* (D+R = 4.178) and *culture and trust* (D+R = 3.565) were identified as the most influential and interactive dimensions in promoting a responsibility-oriented culture.

This finding confirms that leadership plays a central role in shaping responsibility culture in public organizations. Leaders not only set the tone for accountability by modeling ethical behavior, but also serve as agents of transformation in fostering psychological safety and non-punitive learning environments (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985). In contexts where fear of blame is dominant, transformational leadership can neutralize resistance by reframing errors as learning opportunities rather than causes for punishment (Garvin et al., 2008; Senge, 1991). These findings align with previous studies emphasizing that participatory and ethical leadership directly affect the willingness of employees to accept responsibility and engage in transparent communication (Jafari et al., 2022; Yeganeh-Mazhar & Ebrahimipour, 2022). In the Iranian context, where hierarchical and bureaucratic cultures often restrict openness, this leadership dimension is even more critical.

Similarly, the emphasis on *culture and trust* as the second most important factor is consistent with theoretical and empirical evidence that organizational culture is both a product and driver of responsible behavior (Kiakojouri, 2024; Sackmann, 2022). A culture characterized by mutual trust, value alignment, and shared ethical standards encourages individuals to act accountably even in the absence of formal oversight (Hosseini & Sargazi, 2020; Jamiri et al., 2022). The importance of trust was also highlighted in the coding results, which revealed subthemes such as psychological safety, ethical climate, and acceptance of error sharing. These are essential features of blame-free cultures that prioritize human dignity, learning, and collective progress over punitive control (Golrokh et al., 2025; Lupton & Warren, 2018).

Structure and technology, ranked fourth, was also identified as a significant enabler of responsibility culture. Structural supports such as error-reporting platforms, knowledge-sharing systems, and integrated digital dashboards can facilitate transparency and continuous improvement (Garvin et al., 2008; Schloetzer et al., 2021). In particular, digital transformation provides opportunities for anonymous feedback, secure documentation of incidents, and systemic analysis of root causes—elements that reduce individual defensiveness and promote shared learning (Georgaki & Anastasiou, 2019; Salehi-Kajoor & Dousti, 2024). Prior studies have also underscored the importance of aligning technological infrastructure with the needs of adaptive learning organizations (MirTaghian Rudsari & Kiakojouri, 2016).

In contrast, the *legal and regulatory* and *economic and resource-based* dimensions were found to have lower levels of influence (D+R = 2.839 and 1.449 respectively). While still important, these areas appear to be more reactive than proactive. That is, they are influenced by other dimensions rather than driving change independently. Nevertheless, the presence of clear legal protections for whistleblowers, accountability guidelines, and institutional standards remain important for reinforcing formal responsibility norms (Zamaniyan et al., 2023; Zarei, 2022). Similarly, economic constraints can limit the feasibility of implementing training programs, digital platforms, and performance management systems that are essential for sustaining blame-free cultures (Lopushniak et al., 2021; Madhoshi & Norouzi, 2015).

The *measurement and evaluation* dimension ranked sixth (D+R = 3.174) and was shown to be essential in reinforcing accountability through systematic feedback. Evaluations that focus on developmental performance indicators rather than punitive measures are more likely to cultivate responsibility (Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988). Furthermore, effective evaluation systems help diagnose cultural weaknesses and highlight the alignment or misalignment between stated values and observed behaviors (Ramezani et al., 2022; Schloetzer et al., 2021). The qualitative analysis identified indicators such as clarity of performance criteria, feedback loops, and benchmarking as practical tools for aligning responsibility culture with strategic objectives.

Environmental and contextual factors ranked third in influence, highlighting the importance of cultural, social, and bureaucratic environments in shaping responsibility-related behaviors. These factors include cultural norms, inter-organizational coordination, and alignment with bureaucratic procedures (Firouzyar & KiaKojouri, 2013;

Topa-Esfandiari et al., 2024). For example, rigid bureaucracies tend to discourage feedback and reward conformity, whereas flexible and learning-oriented contexts provide the necessary space for growth, collaboration, and ethical risk-taking (Holland, 1992; Mitleton-Kelly, 1997).

Finally, the study confirmed the centrality of *training and capacity development* (D+R = 3.239), particularly in empowering managers and employees to understand and enact responsibility in their daily roles. Training was shown to support behavior change, reduce fear of blame, and foster shared understanding of accountability frameworks (Becker et al., 2009; Lepak & Snell, 1999). Several studies have stressed the importance of ongoing professional development in instilling ethical competence, communication skills, and a sense of shared mission (Izanloo et al., 2023; Jamiri et al., 2022). This finding affirms the notion that responsibility culture is not innate but learned and reinforced through continuous education.

While this study provides a comprehensive model of responsibility culture with a blame-free approach, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size of experts, though selected based on theoretical saturation, may not capture the full diversity of perspectives across all governmental sectors in Iran. The inclusion of only experienced professionals may have introduced bias toward senior-level perspectives, potentially underrepresenting grassroots views on accountability. Second, the generalizability of the model is limited to Iranian governmental organizations, and cultural factors may affect its applicability in different national or institutional contexts. Third, while fuzzy DEMATEL is a powerful tool for analyzing interrelations among factors, it relies on subjective expert judgments, which, despite triangulation efforts, could still be influenced by individual interpretation.

Future research should focus on quantitative validation of the proposed model across different organizational contexts, such as municipalities, ministries, and public universities. Comparative studies across countries or regions could offer insights into the cross-cultural applicability of blame-free responsibility frameworks. Moreover, longitudinal research designs would help assess the impact of implementing the proposed model over time, tracking changes in organizational culture, employee engagement, and performance. Investigating the role of digital technologies—such as artificial intelligence in accountability systems—could also expand our understanding of how technology intersects with responsibility practices. Finally, future studies could integrate perspectives from employees at all hierarchical levels, including those in entry-level or field roles, to provide a more comprehensive view of how blame and responsibility are experienced.

Organizations seeking to enhance responsibility culture through a blame-free approach should begin by investing in leadership development programs that emphasize ethical decision-making and psychological safety. Establishing secure digital platforms for anonymous error reporting and feedback can promote transparency while minimizing fear. It is also recommended that institutions revise their performance evaluation systems to focus on learning and improvement rather than punishment. Cultural change initiatives should involve participatory planning, involving staff at all levels, to ensure shared ownership of accountability values. Finally, integrating training modules into existing human resource strategies can empower employees to internalize and operationalize responsible behavior in their everyday work.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were considered.

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