

The Impact of Lunchtime Social Activities on Emotional Exhaustion among Workplace Newcomers

Chen Liu^{1,*}, Qianqian Xi²

¹*School of Management, China Women's University, Beijing, China*

²*Lintao County Tax Service, Gansu Provincial Tax Service, State Taxation Administration, Lintao, Gansu, China*

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: Newcomers in the workforce represent a demographic that warrants special attention within organizations. As the lifeblood of companies, they infuse vitality and innovation but simultaneously confront the challenges of acclimating to new environments and adapting to unfamiliar roles. This study concentrates on this group, aiming to explore how lunchtime social activities influence emotional exhaustion among workplace newcomers by alleviating feelings of isolation. It also examines the role of inclusive leadership as a moderating factor. Through comprehensive data analysis, the findings reveal that lunchtime social engagements significantly reduce the feelings of workplace loneliness experienced by newcomers, thereby mitigating their emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, inclusive leadership emerges as a crucial moderating influence in this context. The conclusions drawn from this research hold substantial implications for enhancing the mental well-being of workplace newcomers, optimizing organizational culture, and improving operational efficiency.

Keywords: Workplace Newcomers; Lunchtime Social Activities; Workplace Loneliness; Emotional Exhaustion; Inclusive Leadership

1. Introduction

As the pace of life quickens and competition intensifies across various industries, an implicit sense of competition emerges among departments and employees within companies. This phenomenon often leads to heightened managerial expectations, causing individuals to feel that their capabilities and resources may not suffice to meet job demands. Consequently, self-doubt arises, contributing to emotional

exhaustion. Particularly for those who are new to the workforce, issues such as role conflicts during the adaptation period, lack of social support, and occupational uncertainties make them more susceptible to emotional exhaustion. Workplace newcomers generally refer to employees who have recently entered the workforce, still in the process of socialization within the organization or undergoing role transitions [1]. Faced with new work environments, they must establish new relationships with colleagues and leaders. However, in this process, they often feel out of sync with those around them, struggling to integrate into new teams, thus triggering emotional exhaustion. This state not only harms the mental and physical well-being of employees but also diminishes work performance, increases intent to leave, and impacts organizational effectiveness. Research indicates that informal social activities serve as an emotional resource to alleviate the negative impact of work pressures on individual psychological well-being [2]. Nevertheless, the mechanisms through which lunchtime social activities, as a prevalent form of informal interaction during workdays, influence the emotional exhaustion of workplace newcomers remain inadequately explored. Therefore, this study focuses on examining the impact of lunchtime social activities on the emotional exhaustion of workplace newcomers, aiming to provide management insights and theoretical references for organizations and newcomers to alleviate emotional exhaustion.

2. Research Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Social Sharing of Emotions Theory

Social Sharing of Emotions Theory posits that individuals tend to share their emotional experiences with others, aiding in emotional regulation and recovery [3]. This theory can be

employed to elucidate the relationship between lunchtime social activities, workplace loneliness, and emotional exhaustion in this study. For workplace newcomers, lunchtime social activities serve as a crucial avenue for their integration into teams. Without such activities or the opportunity for emotional sharing during these interactions, newcomers may experience emotional isolation, consequently leading to emotional exhaustion.

2.2 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory contends that individuals strive to obtain and maintain positive social identities, which involves their perception of their membership status within social groups [4]. This study employs this theory to explain the moderating role of inclusive leadership. Inclusive leadership fosters a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere for workplace newcomers, making it easier for them to assimilate into a group and gain a sense of belonging. Consequently, this diminishes feelings of workplace loneliness among newcomers.

2.3 Impact of Lunchtime Social Activities on Emotional Exhaustion

Drawing upon the Social Sharing of Emotions Theory, workplace newcomers, undergoing the process of adapting to new environments and acquiring new skills, often experience stress and fatigue. By engaging in lunchtime social activities, newcomers tend to seek connections with individuals similar to themselves to create their social circles. This facilitates better integration into teams, enhances understanding and trust among colleagues, and fosters a sense of belonging. Consequently, these social activities help alleviate the stress of adapting to a new environment, thereby reducing emotional exhaustion. In the absence of effective social support and emotional exchanges, newcomers may face exacerbated emotional exhaustion issues. In conclusion, through participation in lunchtime social activities, workplace newcomers can establish closer connections with colleagues, aiding them in alleviating work pressure, reducing negative emotions, and consequently mitigating the risk of emotional exhaustion. Therefore, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H1: Lunchtime social activities have a negative impact on the emotional exhaustion of workplace newcomers.

2.4 The Mediation Role of Workplace Loneliness

Drawing upon Social Sharing of Emotions Theory lunchtime social engagements offer employees, particularly newcomers, a platform for social interaction and dialogue. This environment facilitates the sharing of both positive and challenging experiences at work, fostering a sense of camaraderie and joy, thereby mitigating feelings of isolation in the workplace. Previous studies suggest that workplace loneliness, a detrimental emotional state, can trigger emotional turmoil among employees, impacting their mental well-being and job effectiveness over time [5]. When employees experience loneliness at work, they may withdraw from social engagements, limit interactions with colleagues, leading ultimately to emotional exhaustion, particularly among new hires. To summarize, regular lunchtime social activities have the potential to diminish the perceived workplace loneliness felt by new team members, subsequently reducing the intensity of individual emotional burnout. As a result, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H2: Workplace loneliness mediates the negative impact of lunchtime social activities on the emotional exhaustion of newcomers.

2.5 The Moderating Role of Inclusive Leadership

Aligned with Social Identity Theory, individuals within a workplace naturally establish a sense of identity with their professional personas and values by engaging with peers. Inclusive leadership, a constructive leadership approach, underscores the importance of showing respect, empathy, and backing for team members. An inclusive leader's receptive attitude towards differing perspectives and setbacks acts as a comforting presence, especially for new employees, fostering a climate of psychological safety [6]. During lunchtime social engagements, this leadership style fosters an ambiance of openness, equality, and warmth, encouraging novices to participate in social exchanges and forge connections with coworkers, thereby gaining deeper insights into their requirements and obstacles. This leadership approach diminishes feelings of isolation among staff and bolsters their social identity. Moreover, inclusive leadership aids employees in confronting work-related hurdles and stressors, thereby

mitigating the intensity of emotional burnout. Therefore, grounded in the aforementioned points, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Inclusive leadership positively moderates the relationship between lunchtime social activities and workplace loneliness.

In conclusion, the theoretical model of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

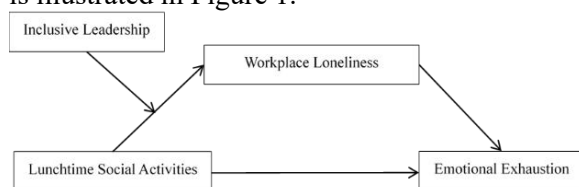


Figure 1. Research Model

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Participants

Based on the perspectives of most researchers both in China and internationally, this study selects a group of new employees with work experience of three years or less as its subjects. Utilizing enterprise connections, a questionnaire survey was conducted, collecting data from companies in three provinces: Beijing, Hebei, and Gansu. Ultimately, 317 employee samples were selected for analysis.

3.2 Measurement Tools

In this study, established Chinese and international scales were employed, utilizing a Likert five-point scoring system.

Lunchtime Social Activities: The questionnaire, developed by Trougakos et al. (2014) [7], assessed the level of participation, quality of interaction, and overall satisfaction of new employees in lunchtime social activities. The scale comprised items on “Engagement in social activities with others” and “Spending more time talking to others”.

Workplace Loneliness: The scale developed by Mao Chonglin (2013) [8] was used to evaluate the feelings of loneliness among new employees in the workplace. Items on the scale included statements like “At work, I found it difficult to find close friends” and “At work, I felt a lack of belonging”.

Emotional Exhaustion: The Chinese version of the Occupational Burnout Inventory, developed by Li Chaoping and Shi Kan (2003) [9], was employed to assess the level of emotional exhaustion among new employees in their work.

The scale included items such as “I felt exhausted from work” and “I found work caused my emotions to fluctuate”.

Inclusive Leadership: The scale developed by Carmeli et al. (2010) [10] consisted of three dimensions: openness, availability, and approachability. Items included statements like “I could discuss issues with my superior when problems arose” and “My superior paid attention to opportunities for improving work”.

3.3 Questionnaire Distribution and Collection

This study distributed questionnaires in a combined online and offline format. To mitigate the impact of common method bias on research outcomes, a multi-time-point data collection method was employed. At time point 1, new employees were invited to fill out background information and measures of lunchtime social activities and inclusive leadership. At time point 2 (2 weeks later), measures of workplace loneliness and emotional exhaustion were taken. A total of 620 questionnaires were distributed in this study, with 476 questionnaires collected cumulatively. Ultimately, 317 valid questionnaires were obtained, resulting in an effective questionnaire response rate of 66.6%.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

This study utilized SPSS 21.0 software for descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis of the main variables. To assess the mediating effects, the PROCESS plugin was utilized to estimate the 95% confidence intervals of the mediating effects through 1000 iterations of resampling.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Reliability Analysis

As shown in Table 1, the overall Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient for the questionnaire is 0.85, indicating a certain level of reliability. The Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients for the four variables are all greater than 0.7, indicating good internal consistency.

Table 1. Reliability Test

Category	Number of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha
Lunchtime Social Activities	6	0.75
Workplace Loneliness	5	0.94
Emotional Exhaustion	9	0.90
Inclusive Leadership	3	0.83
Overall Scale	35	0.85

4.2 Validity Analysis

As shown in Table 2, the KMO value of 0.94 indicates that the data in this study are highly suitable for factor analysis. The significance of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is less than 0.05, further supporting the use of principal component analysis for factor extraction. In this study, five factors were extracted, cumulatively explaining 57.45% of the variance, demonstrating that these five factors can account for the data in the questionnaire. The rotated factor loading matrix reveals that each item loads significantly on its corresponding factor with values exceeding 0.4, without any instances of cross-factor loadings, indicating excellent structural validity of the questionnaire.

Table 2. Validity Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.94
---	------

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	5942.53
	Degrees of Freedom	595
	Significance	0.00
Cumulative %		57.45

4.3 Descriptive Statistics Analysis

From Table 3, among the 317 valid samples, there is a slightly higher representation of female participants compared to male participants. In terms of age, the majority fall within the 23-27 age group (59.6%), followed by the 18-22 age group (32.8%). Regarding marital status, 80.8% of the employee population is unmarried. In terms of education, the majority of participants (57.4%) have obtained a bachelor's degree, while 38.8% hold a master's degree or higher. Concerning company type, employees from private companies constitute the largest proportion at 52.1%.

Table 3. Demographic Variables Analysis

Category	Number	Percentage
Age	18-22 years	104
	23-27 years	189
	28 years and above	24
Gender	Male	121
	Female	196
Education	College degree or below	12
	Bachelor's degree	182
	Master's degree or above	123
Marital Status	Unmarried	256
	Married	61
Work Experience	Less than 1 year	88
	1-3 years	229
Company Type	Private Enterprise	165
	State-owned Enterprise	60
	Foreign Enterprise	53
	Public Institution	39

4.4 Correlation Analysis

According to Table 4, lunchtime social activities exhibit a significant negative correlation with workplace loneliness (-0.25) and emotional exhaustion (-0.24). Workplace loneliness shows a significant positive correlation with emotional

exhaustion at a significant level below 0.01, with a correlation coefficient of 0.77. Inclusive leadership is significantly negatively correlated with workplace loneliness (-0.19) and emotional exhaustion (-0.11).

Table 4. Correlation Analysis between Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	1.76	0.66	1.00							
2. Education	2.64	0.64	-0.05	1.00						
3. Gender	1.72	0.45	0.21**	0.07	1.00					
4. Company Type	1.95	1.19	0.00	0.04	-0.11	1.00				
5. Lunchtime Social Activities	2.06	0.47	0.10	0.05	0.03	-0.03	1.00			
6. Workplace Loneliness	3.45	0.88	0.15**	-0.03	0.05*	-0.07	-0.25**	1.00		

7. Emotional Exhaustion	3.46	0.90	0.12*	-0.01	0.06	0.00	-0.24**	0.77**	1.00	
8. Inclusive Leadership	2.05	0.45	0.12*	-0.02	0.07	-0.01	0.70**	-0.19**	-0.11*	1.00

Note: *. indicates significance at the 0.05 level (two-tailed); **. indicates significance at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

4.5 Regression Analysis

For a more in-depth exploration of the relationships between variables, this study conducted hierarchical regression analyses after controlling for sample gender, age, education, work experience, company type, and other relevant factors.

4.5.1 Regression analysis of lunchtime social activities on emotional exhaustion

As indicated in Model 7 of Table 5, the R^2 value is 0.02, suggesting that factors such as age,

education, and company type can explain about 2% of the variance in emotional exhaustion. With the introduction of the new independent variable in Model 8, the R^2 value increases from 0.02 to 0.08, signifying a 6% enhancement in the explanatory power of lunchtime social activities on emotional exhaustion. The β coefficient for lunchtime social activities is -0.26, with an F value of 4.52 and significance at $p < 0.01$, indicating a significant negative impact of lunchtime social activities on emotional exhaustion. Hence, H1 is confirmed.

Table 5. Results of Regression Analysis

Variable	Workplace Loneliness						Emotional Exhaustion			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Control Variables										
Age	0.15*	0.17**	0.17**	0.17**	0.15**	0.17**	0.11	0.13**	0.11	-0.01
Education	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Work Experience	0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03
Company Type	-0.07	-0.08	-0.08	-0.06	-0.07	-0.07	0.00	-0.01	0.00	0.06
Gender	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
Independent Variable										
Lunchtime Social Activities		-0.27**	-0.25**	0.19				-0.26**		
Moderating Variable										
Inclusive Leadership			-0.04**	0.39		-0.21**				
Interaction Term				-0.81*						
Mediating Variable										
Workplace Loneliness										0.78**
F	1.85	5.92**	5.09**	5.19**	1.85	4.01**	0.93	4.52**	0.93	78.13**
R^2	0.03	0.10	0.10	0.12	0.03	0.07	0.02	0.08	0.02	0.60

4.5.2 Regression analysis of lunchtime social activities on workplace loneliness

Referring to Table 5, in Model 1, the R^2 value is 0.03, indicating that variables like age, education, work experience, and company type can account for approximately 2.9% of the variance in workplace loneliness. Upon the inclusion of the independent variable of lunchtime social activities in Model 2, the R^2 value increases to 0.10, implying that lunchtime social activities can explain about 7.1% of the variance in workplace loneliness. The β coefficient for lunchtime social activities in Model 2 is -0.27, with significance at $p < 0.01$, indicating a negative impact of lunchtime social activities on workplace loneliness. In Model 4, the R^2 value increases by 1.6%, and the interaction term

between lunchtime social activities and inclusive leadership has a β value of -0.81, with significance at $p < 0.05$, suggesting a significant moderation effect of inclusive leadership in the relationship between lunchtime social activities and workplace loneliness. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

4.5.3 Regression analysis of inclusive leadership on workplace loneliness

From Models 5 and 6, it is observed that after the inclusion of inclusive leadership, the R^2 value rises from 0.03 to 0.07, and the significance of inclusive leadership is less than 0.01, indicating its substantial impact on workplace loneliness.

4.5.4 Regression analysis of workplace loneliness on emotional exhaustion

In Model 10, after the inclusion of workplace loneliness, the β coefficient for workplace loneliness is 0.78, signifying a significant impact on emotional exhaustion.

4.6 Examination of the Mediation Effect

Utilizing the PROCESS model to examine the mediating role of workplace loneliness, as presented in Table 6, the path coefficient between the independent variable, lunchtime social activities, and the mediator, workplace

loneliness, is -0.52 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that lunchtime social activities exert a negative influence on workplace loneliness. The path coefficient between workplace loneliness and emotional exhaustion is 0.80 ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that the mediator positively affects the outcome variable. Furthermore, the path coefficient between lunchtime social activities and emotional exhaustion is -0.51 ($p < 0.05$), demonstrating a significant direct effect.

Table 6. Path Coefficients Between Variables

Path	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Lunchtime Social Activities — Workplace Loneliness	-0.52	0.10	-5.05	0.000	-0.72	-0.32
Workplace Loneliness — Emotional Exhaustion	0.80	0.04	20.22	0.000	0.72	0.88
Lunchtime Social Activities — Emotional Exhaustion	-0.51	0.11	-4.71	0.000	-0.73	-0.30

From Table 7, it is evident that the confidence interval for the direct effect [-0.73, -0.30] does not include zero, while the confidence interval for the mediation effect [-0.34, -0.09] also does not contain zero. Therefore, workplace

loneliness partially mediates the negative impact of lunchtime social activities on workplace newcomers' emotional exhaustion, with the mediation effect constituting 40.95% of the total effect. This confirms H2.

Table 7. Mediation Analysis Results

	Effect Value	SE	95%CI	Proportion in Total Effect
Total Effect	-0.51	0.11	[-0.73,-0.30]	
Direct Effect	-0.41	0.12	[-0.66,-0.19]	
Mediation Effect	-0.21	0.06	[-0.34,-0.09]	40.95%

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study has constructed a model to delve into how lunchtime social activities influence workplace newcomers' feelings of workplace loneliness, subsequently leading to emotional exhaustion. Additionally, the study has taken into account the moderating role of inclusive leadership as a factor.

Initially, the research has unearthed a significant alleviating effect of lunchtime social activities on workplace newcomers' emotional exhaustion. Workplace newcomers actively engaging in lunchtime social activities often proactively establish connections with others, share experiences, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness in the workplace. This, in turn, increases psychological resources to alleviate stress and ultimately aids in reducing individual emotional exhaustion.

Furthermore, inclusive leadership has been validated as a crucial moderating variable. During social interactions at lunchtime, when workplace newcomers perceive inclusivity, openness, and understanding from their leaders,

not only does it enhance their psychological resilience, but it also enhances their sense of identity and belonging within the organization, thereby alleviating feelings of loneliness when faced with the work environment.

5.2 Recommendations

The mental well-being of workplace newcomers is crucial for the future development of an organization. Failure of new employees to fully utilize lunchtime social activities to alleviate workplace loneliness and emotional exhaustion could significantly impact work efficiency and career progression. To maintain the psychological health of workplace newcomers and reduce the occurrence of emotional exhaustion, this study proposes the following recommendations:

5.2.1 Recommendations for workplace newcomers

Firstly, actively integrating into lunchtime social interactions is necessary. Lunchtime presents an opportunity to forge relationships and expand networks. Newcomers can start with small exchanges and gradually partake in shared meals, conversations, or interest group activities, actively connecting with different colleagues to

broaden their social circles.

Secondly, enhancing communication and emotional regulation skills is essential. By observing, imitating, and seeking guidance on appropriate ways of expression and listening, individuals can bolster their communication confidence. Simultaneously, viewing initial workplace loneliness as a transitional phase, it is essential to seek companionship or participate in group activities to alleviate these feelings.

Thirdly, prioritizing self-care and personal growth is crucial. Newcomers should focus on emotional management, learning to relax and reduce stress through activities like walking, listening to music, or meditation to maintain a positive mindset. Additionally, continuously acquiring new knowledge and accumulating experiences can facilitate quicker adaptation to the environment, enhancing feelings of achievement and belonging.

5.2.2 Implications for organizational management

Firstly, companies and organizations should actively prioritize the needs and experiences of workplace newcomers during lunchtime social activities. The lunchtime break is not merely a physical restoration period for employees but also a vital window for emotional connection and social support. Managers should encourage diversified communication activities during this time, such as communal meals, interest groups, and brief sharing sessions, fostering a relaxed and amicable lunchtime social atmosphere. This supportive environment aids in reducing feelings of workplace loneliness, subsequently mitigating the risk of emotional exhaustion.

Secondly, leaders need to demonstrate proactive management and exemplify inclusive leadership, particularly showcasing a style of leadership that is accepting and understanding. When leaders exhibit attitudes of understanding, acceptance, and tolerance, approaching employee differences, mistakes, or work setbacks with tolerance and support, it is easier to evoke a sense of psychological safety and belonging among employees, thereby diminishing the impact of loneliness on emotional exhaustion. Organizations can enhance leaders' attitudes of inclusivity and emotional management through leadership development programs, manager training, and similar initiatives.

Thirdly, organizations should identify and intervene with individuals in the workplace newcomer group who exhibit high levels of

loneliness. Research indicates that workplace loneliness mediates between lunchtime social activities and emotional exhaustion. Therefore, HR departments or line managers can assess employees' social needs and psychological states through regular interviews, surveys, and other methods, identifying potential issues early and providing timely support measures such as psychological counseling and social skills training to reduce feelings of loneliness.

Lastly, for the professional adaptation and psychological development of workplace newcomers, organizations should establish systematic onboarding training, coaching, and support mechanisms. For instance, implementing a mentorship program for newcomers, where experienced and empathetic employees serve as guides, can help newcomers integrate into the organization more swiftly, establish initial social networks, and support systems. Encouraging proactive participation in lunchtime social activities can help newcomers cultivate the ability to form deep relationships with colleagues, reducing feelings of isolation and adaptation pressure resulting from insufficient social skills.

In conclusion, the mechanism of lunchtime social activities on emotional exhaustion among workplace newcomers is a research direction worthy of further exploration. Future endeavors can expand research content, refine research methods, enhance theoretical frameworks, and provide intervention suggestions to offer more targeted and practical academic support and practical guidance for the professional adaptation and emotional management of workplace newcomers.

References

- [1] Wang Chengyu. The Impact Mechanism of Interpersonal Emotional Management by Leaders on the Work Prosperity of Newcomers in the Workplace. Jiangsu University, 2024.
- [2] Kim, S., Park, Y., & Headrick, L. Daily micro-breaks and job performance: General work engagement as a cross-level moderator. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2018, 103(7): 772–786.
- [3] Rimé, B., Zech, E., & Philippot, P. Social sharing of emotion: Emotional expression and well-being. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2009, 3(5): 611-629.
- [4] Brown R. Social Identity Theory: past

- achievements, current problems and future challenges. *European Journal Social Psychology*, 2000(30): 745-778.
- [5] Zheng Chijian, Zhou Jie, Liu Shijuan, Li Xiaomin. The Impact of Workplace Loneliness on Employee Helping Behavior: Based on the Perspective of Conversation of Resource Theory. *Journal of Hunan University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2022, 27(1): 43-51.
- [6] Fang Yangchun, Yuan Qing, Zang Rui, Ren Yanhong. Effects of inclusive leadership on employees' job-related happiness in the new era. *Science Research Management*, 2022, 43(2): 184-192.
- [7] Trougakos, J.P., Hideg, I., Cheng, B.H., & Beal, D.J. Lunch Breaks Unpacked: The Role of Autonomy as a Moderator of Recovery during Lunch. *Academy of Management Journal*, 2014, 57(2): 4-5-421.
- [8] Mao Chonglin. Development of the Workplace Loneliness Questionnaire and a Study on Its Influencing Factors. South China Normal University, 2013.
- [9] Li Chaoping, Shi Kan. The Influence of Distributive Justice and Procedural Justice on Job Burnout. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 2003 (5): 677-684.
- [10] Carmeli, A., & Reiter-Palmon, R. Inclusive leadership and employee involvement in creative tasks in the workplace: The mediating role of psychological safety. *The Creative Industries Journal*, 2010, 3(1): 75-90.