New Path & Research Directions in Virtual Work: A Micro, Meso, Macro View

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This study explores the field of virtual work with a focus on identifying its consequences at individual, group, and organizational levels. The authors conduct a micro-meso-macro level-wise analysis of the virtual work literature using bibliography to highlight two aspects: 1) The under researched constructs in context of virtual work, and 2) the under researched linkages within various constructs, where an impact on one construct may influence other constructs in the context of virtual work. The future research directions are presented in the form of six propositions that will help build a theoretical understanding and provide solutions for practical implication in the field of virtual work.

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Introduction

Virtual work, which was once a rare option for a select few, became a common way of working during the COVID-19 pandemic. While several organizations are recalibrating their strategies and are emphasizing return to office spaces, virtual work continues to be a preferred model of work for organizations especially in the technology, fintech, and digital services industries (Forbes, Dec 2024; The Economic Times, Feb 2025). It continues to be a preferred mode of work for employees too. In 2024, 55% of U.S. employees in remote-capable roles worked in a hybrid model, while 26% worked entirely on remote (Gallup, 2025). In European nations like Ireland and Finland, 21% of employees worked remotely (Eurostat, Mar 2025). In India, 68% companies continue to offer work from home option (The Economic Times, November 2024).These reports emphasize the substantial proportion of the workforce engaged in virtual work at varying frequencies. However, several reports also highlight the personnel challenges remote-capable organizations face, such as declining employee engagement and weak-

ening connections between employees and their organizations (Gallup, 2025). Hence, it is vital to understand the dynamics that come into play when employees work virtually and define ways in which organizations can address the challenges arising due to virtual work.

Although several reviews have examined virtual work (Cortés-Pérez et al., 2020; Raghuram et al., 2019), few have explored the consequences it has at individual, group, and organizational levels and how constructs at different levels interplay within the context of virtual work. To address this gap, we approach the field from a distinct perspective, focusing on its impact at the micro (individual), meso (team), and macro (organizational) levels. Here, "level" does not refer to the specific research focus (e.g., within individual/group, between individual/group), but rather the level at which a construct comes into play. For instance, "employee well-being" is important at the individual level, "knowledge sharing" at the group level, and "culture" at the organizational level. We believe that analyzing the literature in this way will offer two key benefits: First, it will highlight both well-researched and under-researched constructs at each level, directing attention to areas in need of further exploration. Second, it will reveal the interconnections (or linkages) between constructs within and across levels, identifying those that have been adequately explored and those requiring more attention. Understanding these linkages will enhance our theoretical insights into virtual work dynamics, shedding light on how changes at one level can influence another. By examining these linkages, we can deepen the theoretical understanding and offer practical solutions for the virtual work field. Hence, our research questions are:

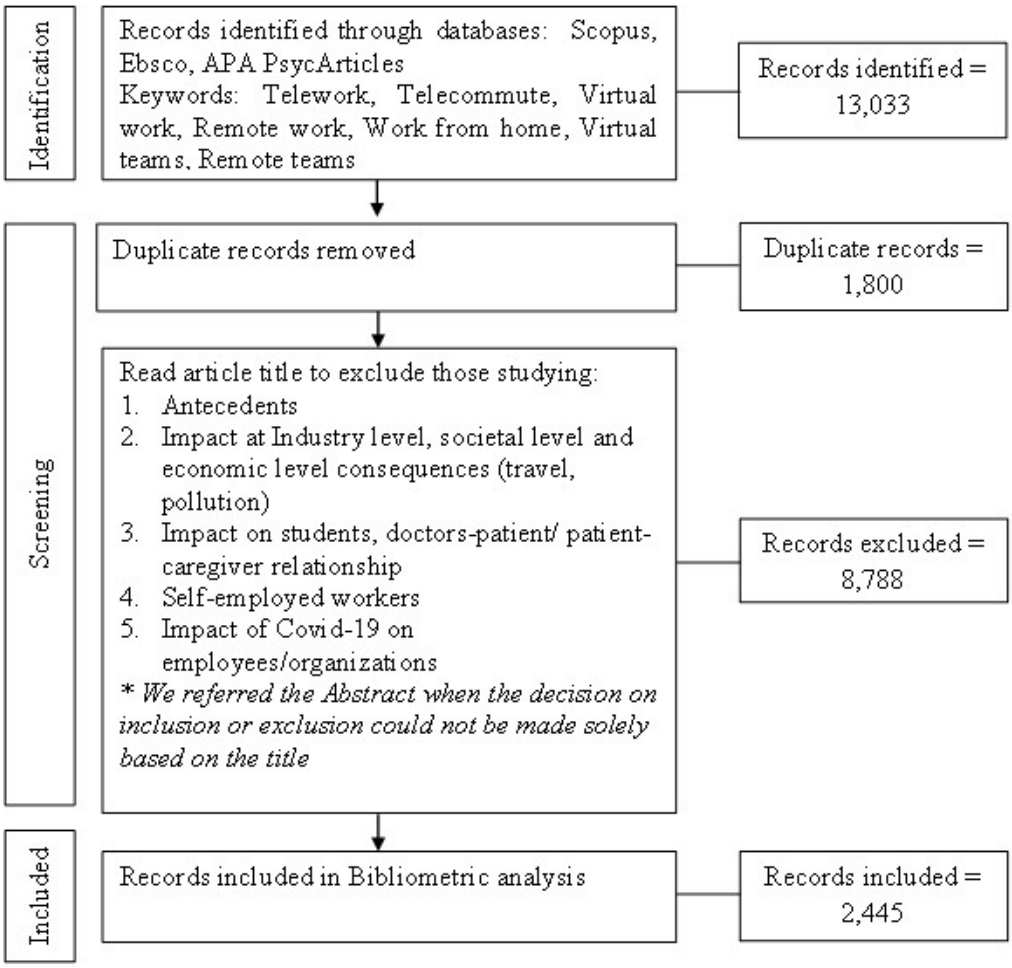
RQ 1: What are the constructs at individual, team, and organizational levels on which the impact of virtual work needs further investigation?

RQ 2: In the context of virtual work, what linkages between constructs need further investigation?

Methodology

Fig. 1 summarizes our search strategy and data retrieval process. We used Scopus, Ebsco, and APAPsycarticles databases to identify the research papers that studied the consequences of virtual work between 2000 (January) and 2024 (September). Since several terminologies represent virtual work, we used the following search terms: virtual work, telework, telecommute, work from home, remote work, hybrid work, remote team, virtual team, and hybrid team. We searched for these terms in the research papers' abstract, title, or keywords. We limited our search to academic journals published in English across disciplines (Business, Accounting & Finance, Social Sciences, Psychology, Engineering, Computer Science, Economics, Art & Humanities, Nursing, Health Professions, Medicine, and Environmental Science). This search gave us a total of 13,033 records. Of these, we removed 1,800 duplicate records that left us with a total of 11,233 records.

Fig. 1 PRISMA Search Strategy & Data Retrieval Process



Since our focus is to consolidate the research studying the impact of virtual work, we excluded all articles that focused on antecedents of virtual work (e.g., adoption of virtual work), and mediating mechanisms that lead to virtual work. Also, our focus is on identifying the impact at the employee (micro), team (meso), and organization (macro) levels. Therefore, we excluded all papers that studied the impact of virtual work at an industry, societal, and economic levels (e.g., impact on commuting, impact on environment and pollution, etc.). Since we are studying the employee-team-employer relationship, we excluded articles that studied consequences for self-employed workers and student-teacher, patient-doctor, and caregiver-patient relationships. A lot of research on virtual work happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of these, we included the articles that focused on studying the impact of virtual work enforced due to the

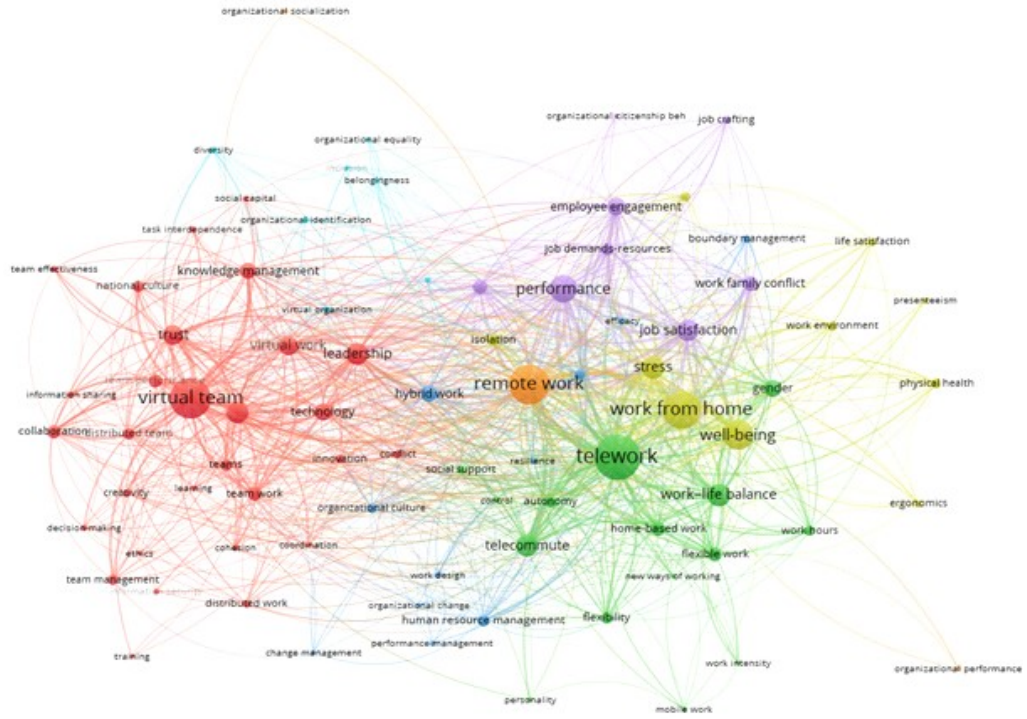
pandemic but excluded the articles where the main focus was on studying the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on employees and employers. For example, we included articles on virtual work's impact on employees' self-assessed job performance during the COVID-19 pandemic but excluded articles that studied the impact of COVID-19 on employment status, physical activity, etc. All of the mentioned exclusions were made by reading the titles and abstracts of the articles. In the end, we had 2,445 articles that made the base for our bibliometric analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we utilized co-word analysis which is a bibliometric technique that examines the relationship between two terms/words/research constituents that frequently appear together in the literature. The unit of analysis in co-word analysis is the "Keywords" as defined by the author in the research article. This analysis assumes that the keywords that frequently appear together have a thematic relationship with one another (Donthu et al., 2021). We used VOSviewer as a tool to generate a network map of all the keywords defined in the 2,445 articles that make the base of our analysis (Fig. 2). This network map displays each keyword (construct) as a node. The size of the node represents the frequency with which a particular keyword appears in our database. The line connecting two nodes signifies a link between them which means that they appear together in the same document or are frequently used together in the literature. The strength of the link reflects how frequently the two constructs (authors, papers, keywords, etc.) are associated with one another. Stronger links indicate a higher frequency of co-occurrence or a closer relationship. Also, the keywords frequently appearing together in publications are placed close to each other. The physical distance between two terms can reflect how often they appear near each other in the same document or within a short span in the text. A smaller distance means the terms appear closer together, which suggests a stronger relationship or higher likelihood of being discussed together.

The co-word analysis using VOSviewer also clubs the constructs into clusters. A cluster is a set of closely related constructs, i.e. those that have been closely studied together. Each of the construct in a network is assigned to exactly one cluster (Waltman et al., 2010). In our analysis, seven clusters appeared each containing a number of constructs.On taking a closer look at each of the clusters, we observed that three of such clusters consistmostly of individual level constructs, one consists of team level constructs, and the remaining three oforganizational level constructs. Thus, through clusters, we were able to segregate the constructs studied in virtual work research into micro (individual), meso (team), and macro (organization) level constructs. To provide a comprehensive view of these, we created an integrated framework highlighting the frequency with which these constructs have been studied, the level at which they have been studied, and the keywords that have been mostly studied with (Fig. 3).

Fig. 2 Co-word Analysis



**The size of the bubble indicates the most frequent keyword in the literature. A threshold of at least five occurrences is applied*

It is important to note that certain constructs such as organization control and work environment appear at micro-level, whereas organizational identification and motivation appear along with macro-level constructs. This is because a construct is clubbed in a cluster based on how closely it has been studied with other constructs within that cluster. For example, work environment (ideally a macro concept) has been studied closely with an individual's physical health and well-being, and hence instead of appearing at macro level, appears at micro level. For the purpose of drawing linkages, we have placed such constructs at levels where they actually come into play (e.g. organizational identification at micro level, organizational control and work environment at macro level).

Next, by using link strength assigned by VOSviewer, we created linkage maps between various constructs within a level (Figs. 4, 5, & 6) as well as across the levels (Fig. 7, 8&9). VOSviewer allots a strength value (positive numerical value) to each link.

The greater the frequency of the keywords' co-occurrence, the higher is the link strength. By this value, we were able to identify the extent to which any two construct have been studied together.

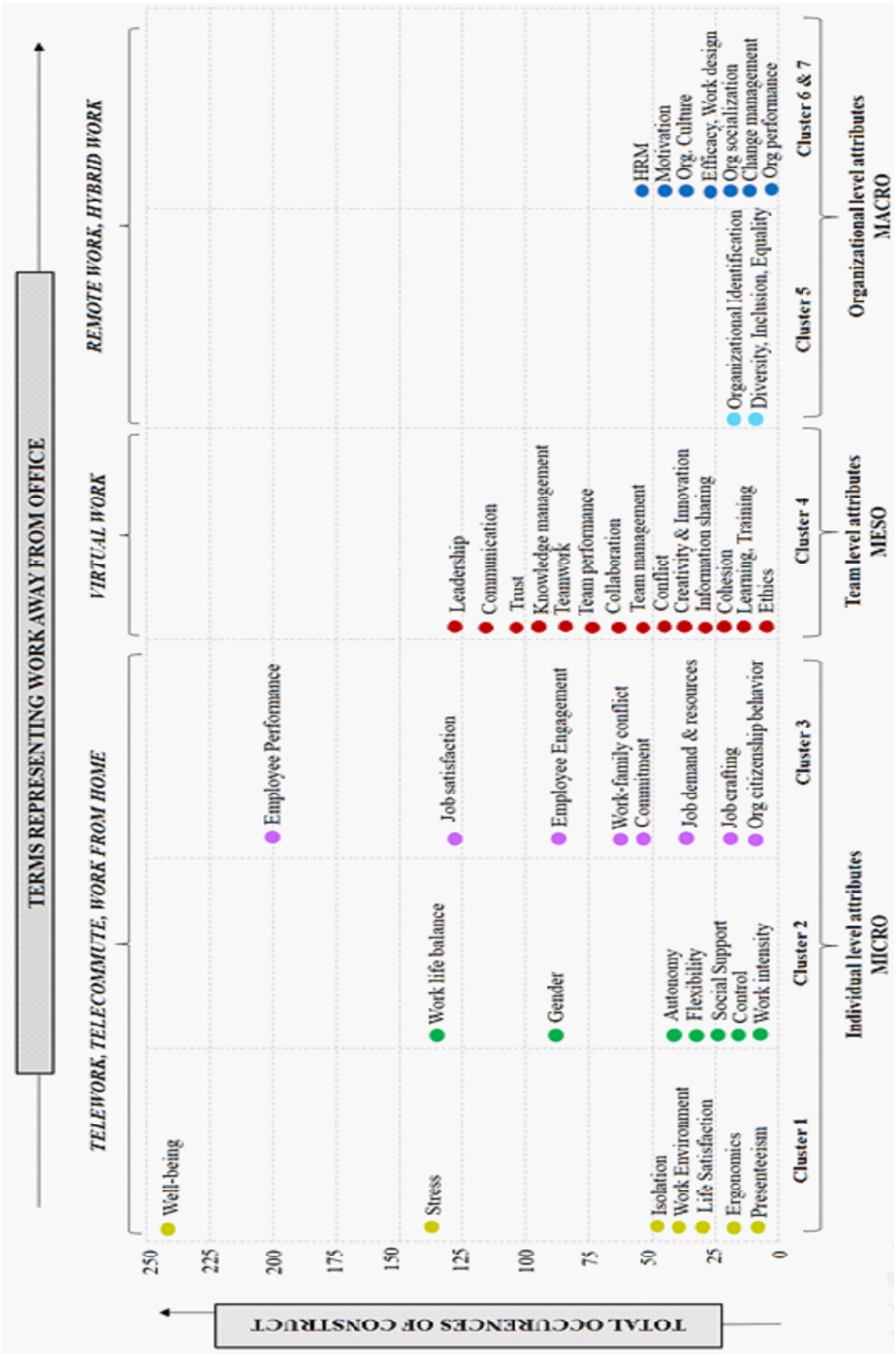
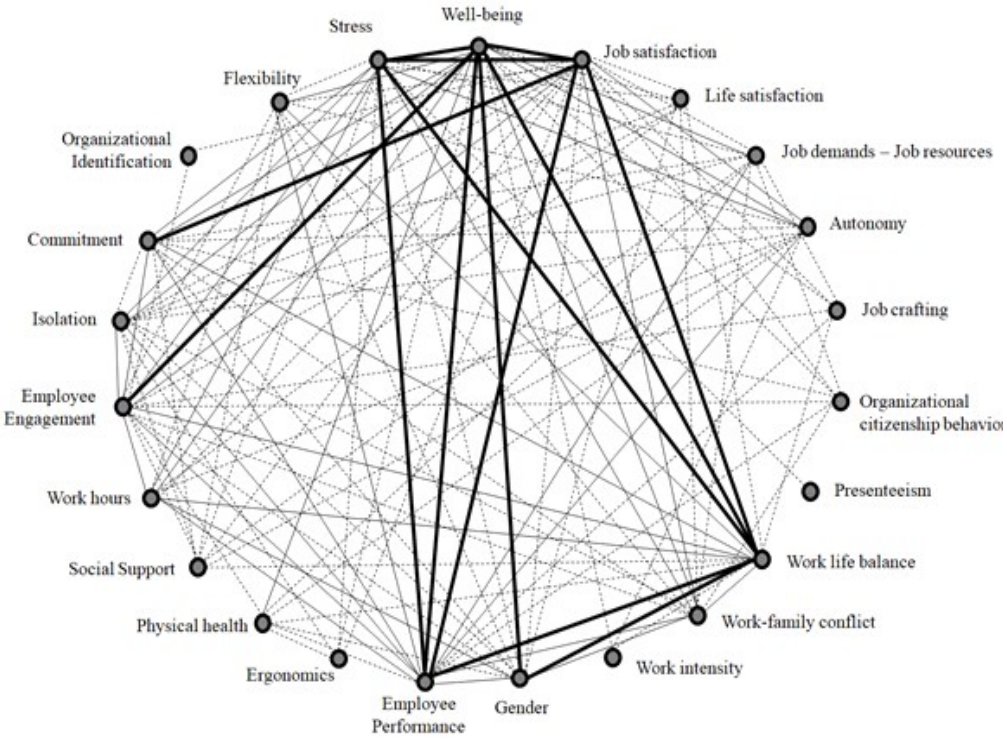


Fig. 3 Integrated Framework of Constructs, Level, & Terminology Representing Work Away from Office

The greater the frequency of the keywords' co-occurrence, the higher is the link strength.

For example, the strength value of the link between "Individual performance" and "Job satisfaction"reflected as 22, whereas the link strength between "Organizational culture" and "Job satisfaction" reflected as 3. This meansthat the relationship between a virtual worker's job satisfaction and performance has been studied much more than the relationship between an organization's culture and virtual worker's job satisfaction.

Fig. 4 Micro –level Linkages



*In figs. 4,5,6,7,8& 9 the lines connecting two constructs signify a link. "▬▬" signifies High link strength (15 and above), "▬▬" signifiesMedium link strength (5 to 14), and "- - - - - -" signifies Low link strength (4 and below)

Findings

The integrated framework (Fig. 3) illustrates that the majority of research has concentrated on examining the impact of virtual work at the individual (micro) level, followed by the group (meso) level. However, organizational-level constructs (macro), including organizational culture, control mechanisms, human resource management practices, and diversity and equality,

Fig. 5 Meso–level linkages

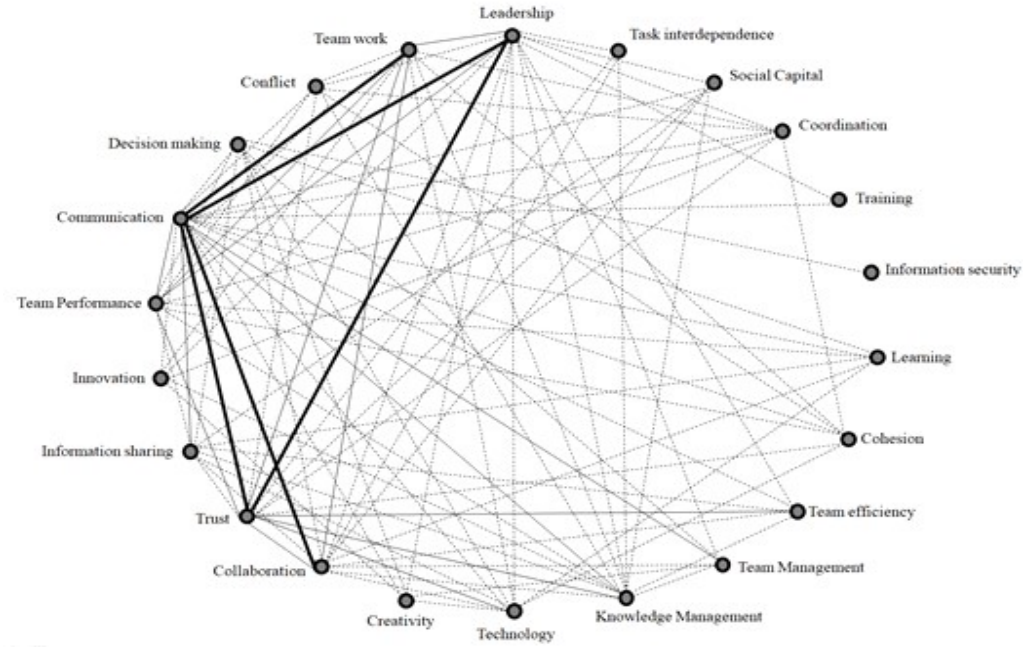
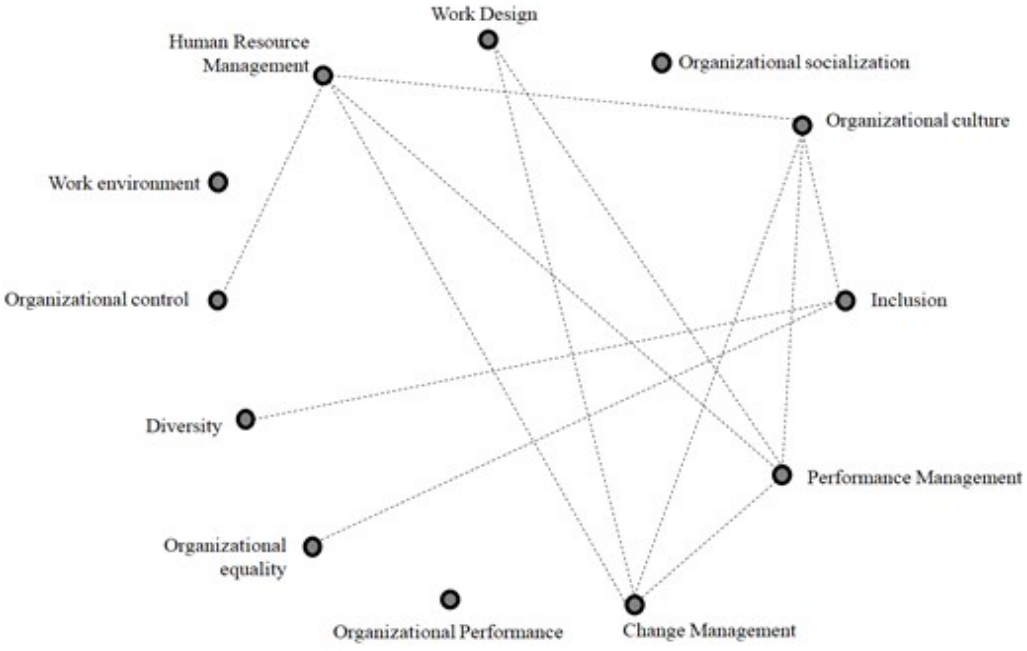


Fig. 6 Macro-level Linkages



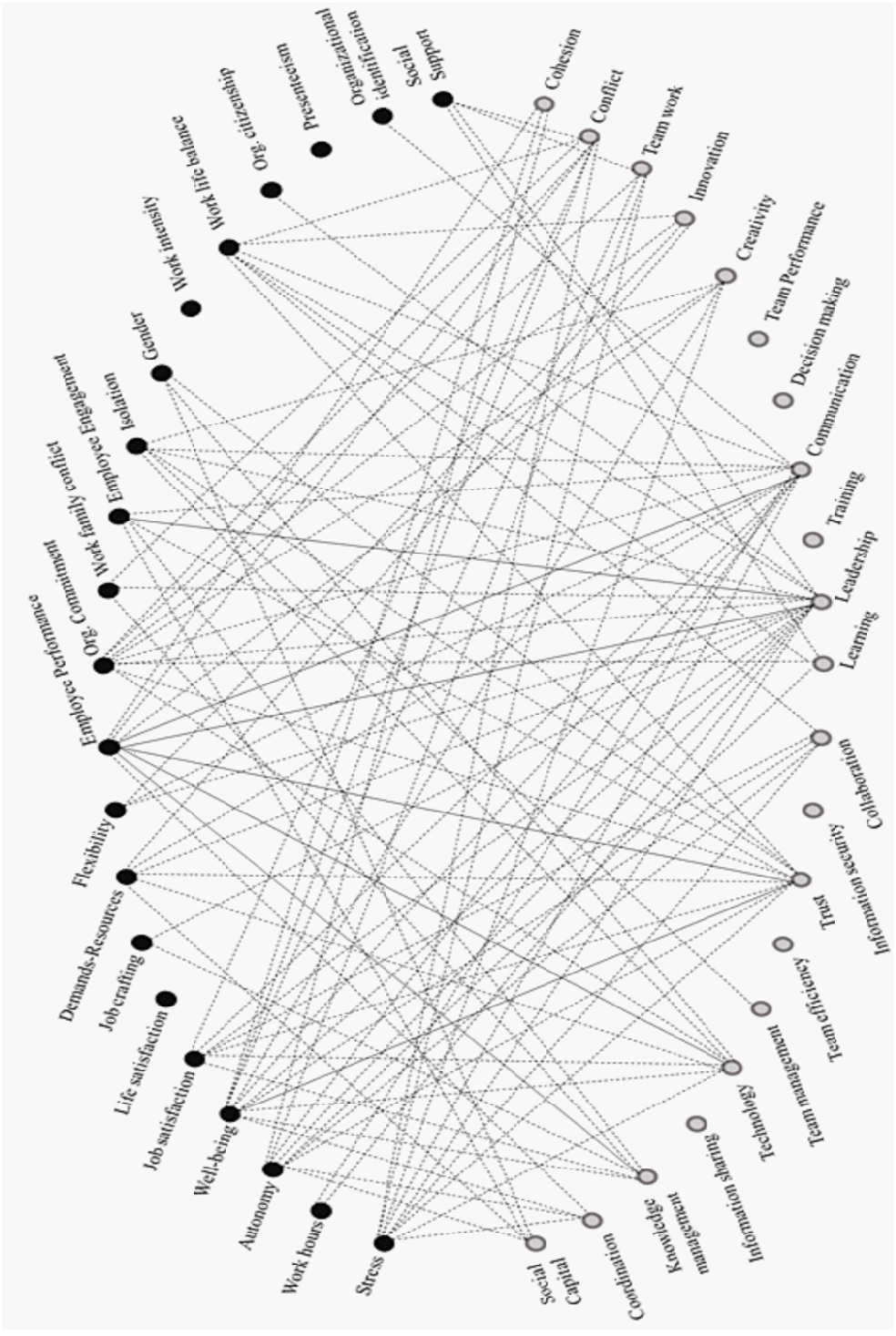


Fig. 7 Micro – MesoLinkages

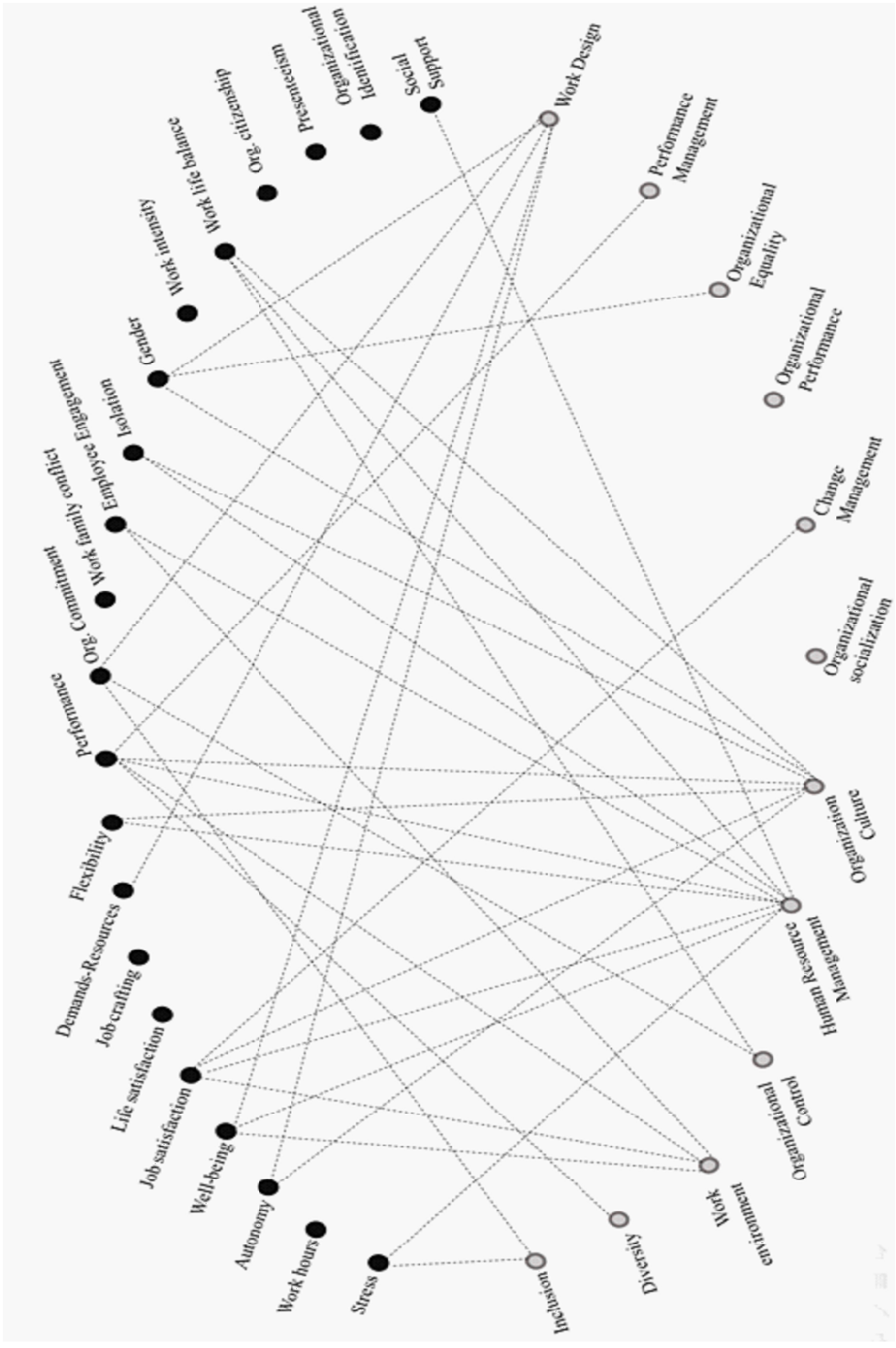


Fig. 8 Micro – Macro linkages

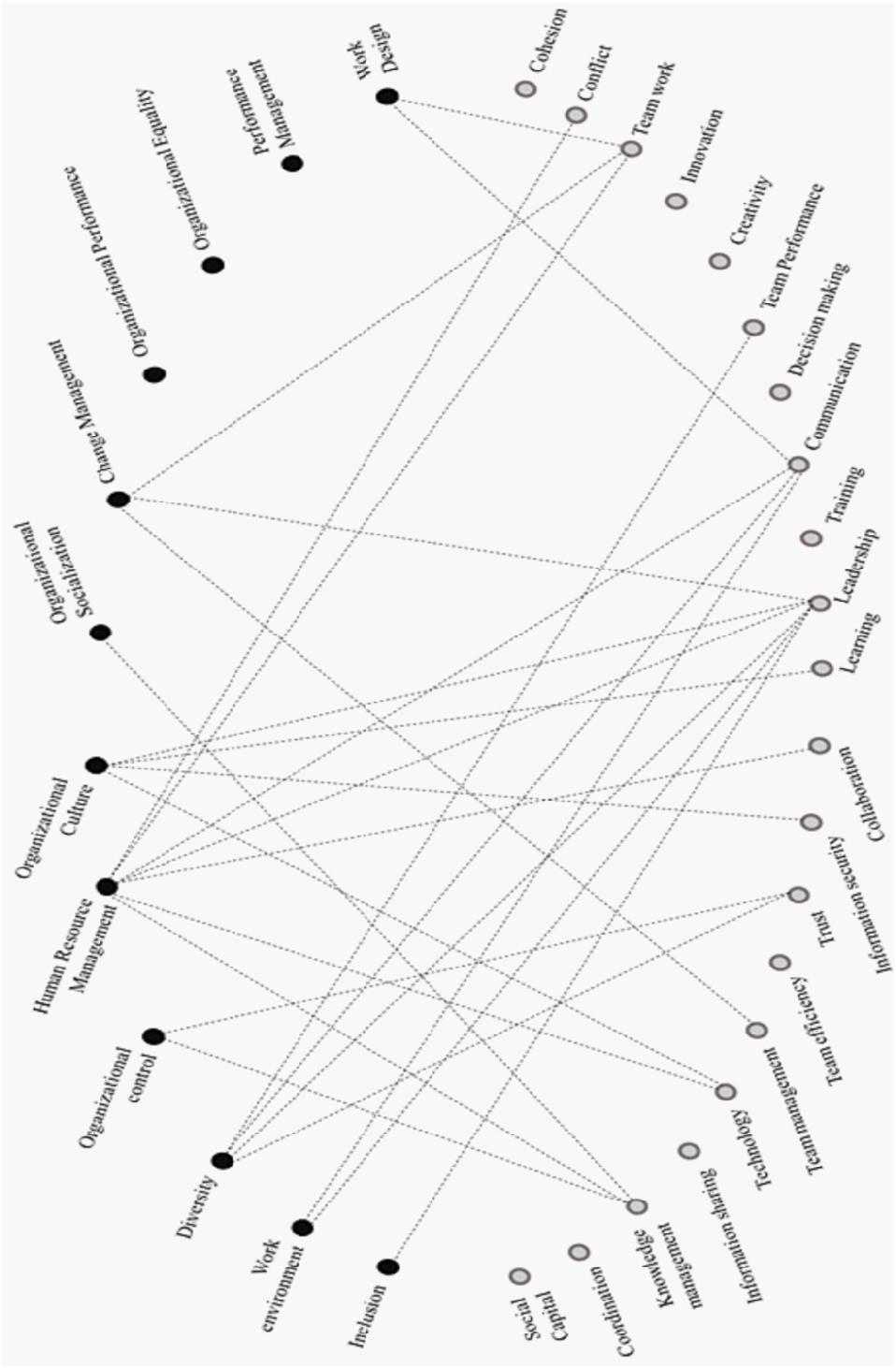


Fig. 9 Meso – Macro linkages

Majority of research has concentrated on exploring relationships between constructs within the same level.

remain under-explored. At the micro level, areas like organizational identification, organizational citizenship behavior, and job crafting have received relatively less attention. Similarly, at the group level, topics such as training and learning within virtual teams have also been under-researched.The linkage maps (figs. 4 & 5) highlight that the majority of research has concentrated on exploring relationships between constructs within the same level. Specifically, micro-level constructs have predominantly been studied in relation to other micro constructs (e.g. wellbeing – stres wellbeing-performance, job satisfaction-commitment, etc.) while meso-level constructs have often been examined alongside other meso constructs (e.g. leadership–communication, collaboration-communication, etc.). However, there has been limited research examining the relationship between constructs at different levels, particularly between micro-macro and meso-macro constructs (figs. 8 & 9).This underscores a gap in the literature that needs to be addressed, as it is crucial to understand how the effects of virtual work at the organizational level (a macro construct) can, in turn, influence constructs at the group or individual levels, and vice versa.

Discussion

The linkage maps highlight several relationships that have not been thoroughly explored yet. Through this study, we focus on a couple of them. We pick four under researched constructs in the context of virtual work, Organizational Identification& Organizational Citizenship Behavior at micro level, and Organizational Control and Organizational Culture at macro level, and explore their linkages with other micro-meso-macro level constructs. By establishing connections, we outline potential future research directions related to these constructs in the context of virtual work through the propositions discussed below.

Linking Organizational Socio-Ideological Controls(Macro Construct) with Individual Performance (Micro)

The physical distance from office, lack of direct observation and limited face to face communication due to virtual work raise questions about how virtual workers should be controlled. Research indicates that virtual work tends to increase technocratic control (e.g. output measures/performance indicators, management by objectives) as well as behavioral controls (e.g. rules and procedures). Moreover, monitoring is heightened through use of ICT tools such as instant messaging, video conferencing, and collaborative software (Bathini& Kandathil, 2020). While these controls assist in managing remote workforce, they also lead to an increase in pressure, anxiety, and stress experienced by virtual employees

(Biron & Van Veldhoven, 2016). Additionally, they tend to reduce collaboration among colleagues, as workers become more focused on individual goals, diminishing the collective aspect of work (Kurland & Egan, 1999). The increased reliance on online communication through calls, instant messaging, and virtual meetings may also be seen as restrictive and a sign of the organization's lack of trust in employees (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021). Furthermore, studies have highlighted a rise in bureaucratic control, with more stringent reporting requirements and the need for employees to document actions that previously didnot need to be reported, which can create a sense of mistrust from managers (Iannuzzi & Campolongo, 2023).

Future studies can explore the role socio-ideological controls can play in the context of virtual work.

To address these challenges, future studies can explore the role socio-ideological controls can play in the context of virtual work. Socio-ideological controls target employee mindsets through norms, emotions, beliefs, and values and are intended to affect behavior indirectly (Kraus et al., 2017). They are based on shared meanings that justify some actions, while discourage others whereby the organizations delegate the employees to control his or her own work and that of colleagues with whom he or she shares a set of values. Coupling these with technocratic controls can compensate for the negative impacts of heightened technocratic control. However, caution should be given when combining these two as they may conflict. For example, building socio-ideological controls that emphasize trust will not be productive if they are coupled with intensive monitoring and heightened reporting resulting in employees' feeling that their managers do not trust them. Therefore, for virtual and hybrid workers, technocratic and socio-ideological controls should be linked in a manner that they support and complement each other. This balance of controls will enhance employee performance more than only one form of control taking dominance. Thus,

Proposition 1 (Micro-Micro linkage): Technocratic controls, when coupled with socio-ideological controls in a manner that they complement each other, will positively affect the virtual employee's performance.

Linking Organizational Socio-Ideological Control (Macro Construct) with Team Performance (Meso)

The role socio-ideological controls can play should also be explored in the context of virtual teams. Clan controls (socio-ideological controls) aim to maximize goal congruence by focusing on shared values and norms followed by the group members. In this form of control, desired behaviors are reinforced through a common set of values, norms, and expectations, which, when complied with by individual members, result in them being rewarded as accepted members of the group (Kirsch et al., 2010). The feeling of affiliation that comes with being part of a clan

enables reciprocal relationships and helping behavior through knowledge sharing, which in turn promotes team performance (Radtke et al., 2023). Earlier studies have observed that clan control together with in-team monitoring was positively associated with team performance via knowledge sharing (Radtke et al., 2023). Such findings emphasize that when used together, clan controls can have additive powers that may improve the effectiveness of formal controls (Zhang et al., 2007). Formal controls that focus on specified rules and performance targets, along with clan control that focus on influencing behavior through shared norms and values, will favor conflict resolution and knowledge sharing, thereby enhancing the virtual team's performance. Thus,

Proposition 2 (Micro-Meso linkage): Combining socio-ideological controls such as clan control along with technocratic controls will reduce conflicts and enhance knowledge sharing and virtual team performance.

Linking Organizational Identification (Micro) and Organizational Socialization (Macro)

Being physically away from the organization and its members influences how remote workers identify with their organizations (Bartel et al., 2012). Organizational identification is defined as a feeling of oneness with a group of persons and stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group, the salience of outgroups, and the factors associated with group formation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).Though studies indicate that professional isolation can impact how employees identify with their organization, there is limited research on why this occurs and how identification can be fostered among virtual workers. One critical factor in developing organizational identification is organizational socialization. Organizational socialization refers to the process through which new employees learn about the organization's culture, policies, and members, helping them define themselves in relation to the organization (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). It encompasses interactions with the organization, the team, and the employee's tasks. When socialization is successful, employees internalize the organization's values and experience a stronger sense of belonging (Raghuram, 2011). Future research should further investigate how organizational socialization practices for virtual employees influence their identification and identify strategies to enhance the development of such identification.

Proposition 3 (Micro-Macro linkage): Establishing affective socialization activities that acquaint virtual employees with their tasks, teams, and the broader organization will contribute to fostering a stronger sense of organizational identification.

Linking Inclusive Leadership (Meso) and Organizational Identification (Micro)

The organizational identification literature cites that leaders who seek inputs from their team members, accept

employees' opinions as worthy of consideration, and involve them in decision-making help in building their organizational identification by developing a sense of belongingness and safety (Carmeli et al., 2010). Inclusive leadership encompasses all these behaviors and focuses on understanding, valuing, and utilizing differences and encouraging a shared identity and collaboration. It focuses on enhancing a sense of belonging by recognizing that each team member is unique. By encouraging involvement and seeking employees' opinion, such leaders can ensure that virtual workers do not feel 'forgotten about' and feel included within their groups and organization (Qin, 2024). Thus,

Proposition 4 (Meso – Micro linkage): Practicing inclusive leadership behaviors by team and organizational leaders will help in building a stronger sense of organizational identification among virtual employees

Linking inclusive leadership with virtual employee organizational citizenship behavior

The literature on inclusive leadership emphasizes a positive connection with organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB). Inclusive leaders, through their supportive actions and careful consideration of employees' needs and interests, are perceived by employees as treating them fairly, which in turn motivates them to exhibit desired behaviors (Akgerman et al., 2024). However, in the context of virtual work, OCB remains a relatively underexplored area. Existing research suggests that virtual work may alter the way OCB manifests and potentially have a negative impact on it (Smith et al., 2020; Rico et al., 2011). Moreover, the reduced visibility and lack of face-to-face interactions in virtual settings can result in employees' OCB going unrecognized. Future studies could investigate the link between inclusive leadership and OCB in virtual environments. By embracing inclusive leadership, supervisors can foster psychological safety and encourage open communication, ensuring that all team members feel comfortable sharing their opinions and ideas without fear of judgment, regardless of where they work. This enhanced psychological safety could, in turn, promote OCB among virtual employees.Therefore,

Proposition 5 (Meso-Micro linkage): When practiced by virtual managers, inclusive leadership can boost psychological safety thereby enhancing virtual workers' organizational citizenship behavior.

Linking Leadership (Meso) and Organizational Culture (Macro)

Organizational Culture in the context of virtual work is a lesser researched area. Some studies, highlight that virtual work can disrupt the uniform dissemination of an organization's culture (Asatiani & Penttinen, 2018). Arena et al., 2023 in their study on culture in hybrid work, observed that culture is not evenly distributed across an organization; instead, it evolves in pockets within the network. A particular cultural value may be emphasized and practiced in one team, whereas another can

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appear prominent in a different team. In organizations that practice a high degree of virtual work, employees may require a very long time to feel that they are a part of the organization and may instead feel more like freelancers (Asatiani & Penttinen, 2018). Leaders can play an important role in diffusion of organizational culture. By modeling, leaders can reinforce the cultural behaviors, values, and symbols and demonstrate the universality and integrity of vision, mission, or value statements (Willcoxson & Millett, 2000). When working with such supervisors, virtual team members can observe these behaviors, learn and practice, and acquire them over time. Thus, leaders can effectively communicate and diffuse organizational culture by displaying values through behavior and sharing value stories through interaction with virtual team members (Gibson et al., 2023). Additionally, leaders can actively involve virtual team members in decision-making and development activities. They can encourage virtual workers to participate in everyday conversations with their peers via commuter-mediated communication (instant messages, chatrooms). These interactions can be around planning, discussing expectations, and getting to know one another, thus building valuable relationships over time. By virtually compensating for the lack of physical work-based interaction, virtual team members can, over time, build shared language, communication norms, and a sense of community and belongingness (Plavin-Masterman, 2015). Thus,

Proposition 6 (Macro – Meso linkage): By modeling, involving and encouraging meaningful interactions within team members, virtual leaders can positively influence the diffusion of organizational culture.

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Implications

Our level-wise analysis on virtual work identifies research gaps both at a high level (highlighting macro level as an under researched area) as well as in greater detail by establishing linkages across different levels. Our propositions offer future research avenues that can advance the understanding of how various constructs at different levels interact and influence one another in the context of virtual work.While we have presented six propositions, there are several other linkages that can be explored further. These can be identified using the linkage maps we have created (Fig. 4 to 9). For example, future studies can explore the relationship between increased control, autonomy, and innovation and creativity of virtual teams. The lack of direct observation due to virtual work can lead to height-

ened standardization of processes which in turn may limit employees' discretion, thus affecting their autonomy which in turn is an essential feature that promotes creativity and innovation. Similarly, further research can also investigate the linkage between individual employees' boundary management and interpersonal trust within virtual teams, as well as the relationships between information sharing and informal learning in such teams.Hence, linkage maps can be utilized to identify various relationships that, when investigated, can contribute to the theory and provide valuable insights for professionals.

Conclusion

Our study has a limitation. It is based only on co-word analysis to synthesize the research that has happened to date. Further analysis can also be conducted by adopting co-citation and bibliographic coupling techniques. This will ensure an end-to-end understanding of the research landscape by studying the consequences of virtual work. Nonetheless, the co-word analysis provides the foundation for enhanced theorizing and sufficiently addresses the objectives of our study.

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