

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Organizational Ambidexterity and Resilience: Moderating Effect of Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

Businesses are still learning how to cope with system stress that overwhelmed the whole world during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2007-2008, COVID-19 pandemics in 2020, and other crises. Thereby, enterprises will be able not only to deal with uncertainty, that is becoming a “new standard”, but to benefit from it. As a result, the focus of the leaders has shifted from short-term, operational continuity to resilience. Earlier research suggested organizational ambidexterity as one of its antecedents and key factors for firms’ long-term survival and prosperity. However, little is known about the leadership role in ambidexterity literature. Most of the previous research were conducted in developed countries and placed emphasis on conceptual studies. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to statistically examine the moderating effect of transformational leadership in the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and resilience using a sample of 323 usable questionnaires gathered from more than 80 Kazakhstani firms. The results of regression analysis statistically confirmed that organizational ambidexterity positively and significantly correlated with resilience. Further, results revealed the moderating role of transformational leadership in the linkage above. The study came up with an unexpected finding that transformational leadership directly and significantly influences resilience. The primary practical implication of this study is that leaders realize the feasibility of their investments in developing ambidextrous capabilities in their organizations and, particularly, senior management, since it was statistically proven in this research that it leads to higher resilience.

Keywords: Organizational Ambidexterity, Business, Resilience, Transformational Leadership, Emerging Economies, Enterprise

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today's dynamic business environment requires an organization to adapt quickly to changes is a key success factor. Flexibility includes the ability to innovate, respond effectively to market changes, and make decisions in an uncertain environment. In the context of constantly changing economic and social conditions, resilience becomes not only a desirable characteristic, but also a necessity for long-term survival and development. Half of the companies on the Fortune 500 in the millennium left off the list in just two decades (Grobys et al., 2023). This has been true for Kazakhstan, the largest economy in Central Asia. The year after the COVID-19 pandemic, every fourth legal entity registered in the republic suspended its activities. In 2022, this figure increased by another 15.5% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). The preceding evidence demonstrates that in times of exponential change, it is not the quantity or profitability that is important but resilience.

Resilience in the business context is defined as the organizational capability to foresee, plan for, react to, and adjust to gradual change and unexpected interruptions to survive and thrive (Douglas, 2021). Thus, the concept of resilience is not only about "bounce back" or defensive resilience when an organization is trying to respond to disruptions. It is also about "bounce forward" or progressive resilience when, despite challenging circumstances, the organization takes advantage of possibilities and implements sustainable performance (Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022).

In 1991, March stated that the primary factor in an enterprise's long-term survival and prosperity is the balance between two dimensions of organizational ambidexterity: exploration of new possibilities and exploitation of old certainties (March 1991). Since March's seminal research, the emerging interest in the topic has spawned a range of conceptual and empirical studies. Research data indicates that following an ambidextrous strategy leads organizations to increase overall profitability (Zu et al., 2022), innovations (Farzaneh et al., 2022), sales growth (Chakma et al., 2021), and firm survival of both SMEs and large organizations (Colberg, 2022, Iborra et al., 2020).

In addition, it was empirically supported that organizational ambidexterity is more valuable under conditions of market and technological uncertainty (Gayed & Ebrashi, 2022). Given the age of volatility in which most businesses operate nowadays, ambidexterity is becoming a heated topic. The relevance of this issue to Kazakhstan is determined by uncertainty in the country's transition economic environment.

This research contributes to the extant literature by filling two apparent gaps. First, despite many studies on the consequences of organizational ambidexterity, this concept of resilience has not been investigated to a great extent. To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore this relationship in Kazakhstan. Second, previous studies focused on the direct effect of leadership practices on the success of exploration and exploitation, while the "role of senior team and leadership behaviors remains less clear" (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013, p.18). Third, there has been a lack of clarity around what factors affect the strength or direction of the relationship between ambidexterity and resilience, especially a lack of empirical studies among developing countries.

The current research attempts to address these gaps by answering:

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between organizational ambidexterity and resilience?

RQ2: Does transformational leadership moderate the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and resilience?

Thus, the study focuses on the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and resilience and investigates the possible moderating effect of transformational leadership in this influence process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Relationship between organizational ambidexterity and resilience*

Over the last few decades, we have been living in times of tremendous system stress, from the global financial crisis of 2007-2009 to the COVID-19 financial crisis of 2020 and the war in Ukraine. In this regard, there has been significant interest in the topic of organizational resilience (Do et al., 2022). Leaders around the world brought the focus of their attention on strengthening the resilience of their organizations, highlighting the importance of resilience over ensuring short-term, operational continuity during crises. Practitioner journals or daily newspapers, including Harvard Business Review, The Economist, and the New York Times, provide methods for enhancing an organization's resilience (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). Recently, this idea has garnered fresh traction in reputable business publications, with studies by Clement and Rivera (2017), Khan and colleagues (2018), and Su and Jung (2023) as examples. The above-mentioned scientific research, both in academia and industry, has abundantly proven that resilience is especially vital nowadays due to the more dynamic and uncertain nature of the corporate environment (Reeves et al., 2022)

There is, however, still little research, mainly empirical, on antecedents and moderators, measurement, and operationalization of organizational resilience (Linnenluecke, 2017; Simsek, 2018). In other words, leaders are convinced of the need to develop resilience. However, they do not know how. Recent studies are proposing organizational ambidexterity to ensure resilience during the period of incremental changes (Stokes et al., 2019; Iborra et al., 2020). The capability of an organization to simultaneously investigate and use its internal and external resources to fulfill current business demands and be flexible enough to adjust to changes in the market in the future is known as organizational ambidexterity (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Cao et al., 2009; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

The topic gained momentum in the academic literature after March's seminal article on exploration and exploitation as two means of ambidexterity, and critical elements in organization survival and prosperity. Scholars have driven the further development of the concept and investigated that ambidexterity positively affects resilience (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; He & Wong, 2004; Lubatkin et al., 2006).

While some researchers believe that exploration and exploitation are competing activities that demand distinct structures, processes, and cultures, others state that they may and ought to complement one another (Chen & Katila, 2008). The latter are supporting their arguments with empirical studies of Ford, Hewlett-Packard, USA Today, and other giants in different industries that managed exploitation-exploration trade-offs through different approaches to ambidexterity and are demonstrating increased resilience (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

Consequently, comprehensive research on antecedents, moderators, and mediators was developed. Scholars have discussed the effect that economic uncertainty and leadership might have on ambidexterity. Although there are many studies on firm performance as an outcome of organizational ambidexterity, the research on the ambidexterity-resilience linkage remains limited. In today's turbulent environment, the ability of firms to "bounce back and forward" is as vital as performance.

2.2. *The moderating role of leadership in the organizational ambidexterity – resilience link*

Previous studies have emphasized that leaders are playing an important role in fostering organizational ambidexterity. According to Tushman and O'Reilly (1997) ambidexterity internal procedures of senior management team promote ambidexterity. The same authors extended their

investigations in further study of ambidextrous leadership, concentrating on thirty-five endeavors by fifteen company units across nine distinct industries to introduce groundbreaking innovations. Over 90% of ambidextrous businesses in this research met their objectives and were effective at both taking advantage of the present and looking toward the future. All those organizations had one common characteristic: they created a division between their new, experimental units and their old, exploitative ones, enabling the existence of distinct cultures, institutions, and procedures. This is yet another piece of evidence that suggests the importance of leadership in operationalizing ambidexterity.

Several studies have identified leadership as a helpful component for integrating contextual and structural ambidexterity. For instance, Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004) highlighted the “important role played by senior executives in making an organization context effective and developing ambidexterity”. Similarly, Smith and Tushman (2005) examined the integrative processes that leadership teams may use to effectively handle the conflicts that result from structural division in ambidextrous firms.

It is generally accepted in the literature that the selection of transformational leadership style is best suitable in circumstances where a change in the status quo is necessary (Jansen et al., 2009), which also applies to ambidexterity that is more appropriate in dynamic markets where conditions are changing (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Yu et al., 2023).

In contemporary literature, the most widely researched established leadership theory of recent years, transformational leadership, has been linked to phases of organizational genesis (Mathende & Yousefi, 2021; Wei & He, 2022), decline and renewal (Al-Murshidi et al., 2023), as well as chaotic and uncertain circumstances and generally low organizational performance (Garad et al., 2022). Meanwhile, predictable and stable surroundings, as well as mature companies with sufficient performance, are more suited for transactional leadership (Arikan, 2023).

Although some research suggests that ambidexterity is encouraged by transformational leadership traits (Kozcu & Ozmen, 2021), there has been virtually no empirical research on the moderating role of transformational leadership in the ambidexterity-resilience linkage in developing countries, one of the most volatile and rapidly growing markets in the world.

Thus, this paper aims to explore further how leaders may enhance the effect of organizational ambidexterity on resilience and to what extent these actions connect to a transformational leadership approach. The research framework is presented in the following Figure 1.

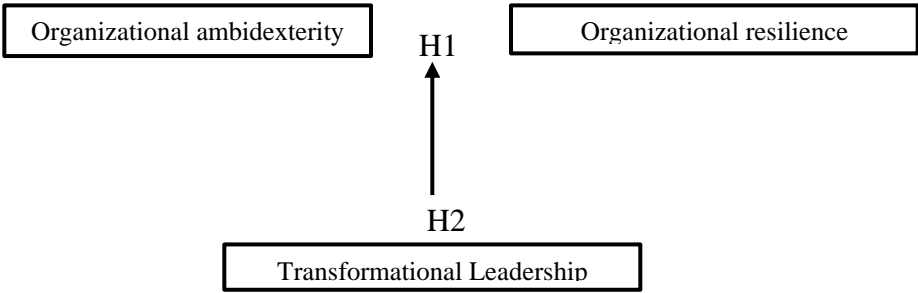


FIGURE 1. Research framework

Note: compiled by author

According to Figure 1, research framework above the study investigates the influence of organizational ambidexterity on organizational resilience and the possible moderating effects of leadership in the influence process.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the research was to empirically assess the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and resilience, and the moderating effect of transformational leadership in this linkage.

Based on the analysis of the literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1 = There is a significant relationship between organizational ambidexterity and organizational resilience.

H2 = There is a moderation effect of transformational leadership in the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and organizational resilience.

The study follows a quantitative method. The author employed multi-item survey data collected from 323 employees in more than 80 organizations in Kazakhstan during March - November 2020. Collecting materials for this research at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, enabled us to test the hypothesis using the strategic data from the highly turbulent times. This is especially valuable since, as previously discussed, the level of environment dynamism and uncertainty is a boundary condition for organizational ambidexterity (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008).

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed. After having discarded the respondents who have not replied to all the questions, responses with missing data, and outliers, our study continued 323 respondents' feedback.

The author used measurement tools from prior studies, which were subjective measures to collect responses and published them in English. From the ideation of Brislin (1970), the author translated them in the Kazakhstan context using a back-translation method. The back-translation procedure attests to generating an accurate response because it is purported to contextualize the measures in a specific context (Brislin, 1970). In this method, the survey questionnaires the author translated into Kazakh and retranslated into English by a panel of bilingual experts. The retranslation was then checked to observe if there were any significant differences from the original. This retranslation process was continued till no significant difference was observed between the original language and the native language (Fan et al., 2019).

Table 1 below presents eight items that were used for measuring ambidexterity.

TABLE 1. Survey questions on organizational ambidexterity

No.	Survey questions
1	Our organization accepts consumer demand changes that go beyond our existing products and services
2	Our organization often uses new opportunities in new markets
3	Our organization regularly explores new technologies
4	Our organization is actively attracting new customers from new target groups
5	Our organization is constantly working to improve the efficiency of products and services production.
6	Our organization constantly improves the quality of existing products and services.
7	Our organization regularly raises the level of automation of its operational processes
8	Our organization regularly examines and takes action to meet the existing needs of its customers.

Note: compiled by author

Organizational ambidexterity was measured using exploration and exploitation variables. To operationalize ambidexterity exploration and exploitation were multiplied. To mitigate the potential for multicollinearity the author mean centered the exploration and exploitation variables before obtaining their product. This measurement is adapted from He and Wong (2004), Gibson

and Birkinshaw (2004), and Cao et al. (2009) and is in line with generally accepted measures in ambidexterity literature.

Table 2 below presents items that were used for measuring four organizational resilience dimensions.

TABLE 2. Survey questions on organizational resilience

No.	Survey questions
1	Our organization can successfully overcome the consequences of unforeseen events
2	Our organization can withstand and resist external pressure
3	Our organization can withstand stressful situations, while not losing the focus on priority (core) goals and needs of the company.
4	Our organization does not refuse to follow its strategic course in case of difficulties and is able to preserve its positions.
5	Our organization adapts quickly to changing circumstances.
6	Our organization responds promptly to the destructive factors causing disruptions in the work of the organization
7	Our organization restore services quickly during unexpected events
8	Our organization can promptly develop and apply alternative scenarios to benefit from any negative circumstances.
9	Our organization can use other facilities when its own facilities cannot be used
10	Our organization employ alternative options to sustain operations during unexpected events
11	Our organization can re-allocate resources (human, financial, etc.) within the company
12	Our organization has a copy of company's most important files through backing up the database
13	Our organization can prioritize the tasks in case of unexpected events. (RS)
14	Our organization is capable of sustaining operations with limited funding.
15	Our organization can mobilize internal resources in case of unforeseen situations.
16	Our organization has sufficient reserve resources to support the company's operations during unforeseen situations.
<i>Note:</i> compiled by author	

The author created a set of measuring items for robustness, redundancy, resourcefulness, and rapidity since there were none available for the four organizational resilience characteristics proposed by Bruneau et al. (2003) (Table 2. Survey questions on resilience). Bruneau et al. (2003) supplied an operational definition for each dimension, which was used to produce the items.

Table 3 below presents items that were used for measuring transformational leadership.

TABLE 3. Survey questions on transformational leadership

No.	Survey questions
1	Managers in our organization puts the good of the company before his/herself
2	Managers in our organization are trying to increase the level of enthusiasm of employees and get the necessary amount of work done from them without any threat or pressure.
3	Managers in our organization treat each employee as individuals with different needs, abilities, and aspirations
4	Managers in our organization encourage followers to try new approaches, and their ideas are not criticized because they differ from the managers' ideas
<i>Note:</i> compiled by author	

The transformational leadership section of the survey was modified from the seminal multi-factor leadership questionnaire (Bass 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1997). This measure is one of the most preferred among leadership scholars and shows a strong validity result and reliability (Bass et al., 2003).

All the items in the survey questionnaire were measured using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). To test the hypothesis, a set of models was developed and tested with multiple hierarchical linear regression analyses. Model 1 includes dependent variables (resilience) and independent variables (ambidexterity and transformational leadership).

In addition, an interaction term must be created between the independent and moderator variables, which was called INT and stands for multiplication between the independent variable “ambidexterity” (AMB) and moderator variable “transformational leadership” (TRL). Model 2 includes the interaction effect along with the independent variables.

Statistical analysis was performed by using the IBM SPSS Statistics v29 software. After importing the data into SPSS, the standardized value of independent variables was computed, i.e. ambidexterity and transformational leadership, to avoid possible multicollinearity issues down the road. To calculate the interaction, effect the author computed the product between independent (ambidexterity) and moderator variable (transformational leadership). Finally, the author regressed the dependent variable on the independent variable, moderator, and interaction effect in two blocks. Results are shown and discussed further in the next section.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Linear regression analysis was conducted to assess whether transformational leadership does moderate the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and resilience. Table 4 below represents the Model Summary.

TABLE 4. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std.Error of the Estimates
1	,647a	,418	,415	169,70353
2	,654b	,427	,422	168,62009

a. Predictors: (Constant), TRL, AMB
b. Predictors: (Constant), TRL, AMB, INT
TRL – transformational leadership; AMB – ambidexterity;
INT – interaction term;
RES – resilience
Sample size: 323
Note: compiled by author using the IBM SPSS Statistics v29

As explained before, by transferring the interaction term (Model 2) it is possible to test if the addition of the interaction term to the existing regression model (Model 1) improves the prediction of resilience (RES). This allows to determine whether the interaction term is statistically significant. This regression model with all three variables included in the equation – ambidexterity, transformational leadership and interaction term called Model 2 in the results generated by this procedure. Therefore, the effect of the addition of the interaction term will be the difference between Model 1 and Model 2. Model 1 R Square is 0.418, the same statistical measure for Model 2 equals 0,427, meaning that the independent variables and intersection explain almost 42 and 43 percent consequently of the variation in the dependent variable. This difference in R squares shows the increase in variation explained by the addition of the interaction

term. Thereby, the model summary proves that transformational leadership does moderate the relationship between ambidexterity and resilience.

To determine the statistical significance of this difference, the one-way ANOVA was used. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 5 below.

TABLE 5. ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df.	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	6624906,231	2	3312453,11	115,019	<,001b
	Residual	9215772,14	320	28799,28		
	Total	15840678,37	320			
2	Regression	6770636,41	3	2256878,803	79,376	<,001c
	Residual	9070041,964	319	28432,733		
	Total	15840678,374	322			
a. Dependent Variables: RES						
b. Predictors: (Constant), TRL, AMB						
c. Predictors: (Constant), TRL, AMB, INT						
TRL – transformational leadership; AMB – ambidexterity; INT – interaction term; RES – resilience						
Sample size: 323						
<i>Note:</i> compiled by author using the IBM SPSS Statistics v29						

The one-way ANOVA examines the means of the groups in question and evaluates whether any of them are statistically significantly different from one another. In this case, the one-way ANOVA shows significance (Sig. <,001).

Table 6 exhibited a strong causal effect between the independent variable Ambidexterity and the dependent variable Resilience (P-value <,001).

TABLE 6. Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	356,162	56,555		6,298	<,001
	AMB	14,882	1,714	,400	8,685	<,001
	TRL	105,977	12,875	,379	8,231	<,001
2	(Constant)	354,138	56,201		6,301	<,001
	AMB	14,698	1,705	,395	8,623	<,001
	TRL	104,801	12,804	,375	8,185	<,001
	INT	19,464	8,598	,096	2,264	,024
a. Dependent Variable: RES						
TRL – transformational leadership; AMB – ambidexterity; INT – interaction term; RES – resilience						
Sample size: 323						
<i>Note:</i> compiled by author using the IBM SPSS Statistics v29						

Since the P-value is $P\text{-value} \leq 0.05$, the relationship between the Ambidexterity and Resilience variables is significant. Thus, summing up the results of the statistical analysis reported in Table 4 and Table 5, it could be concluded that Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Table 6 and Table 7 reported that the interaction term (INT) has a P-value of 0.024. Since the P-value is lower than 0.05, it could be considered that the moderator variable Transformational leadership affects the relationship between the independent variable Ambidexterity and the dependent variable Resilience. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is also supported.

Finally, the moderation effect results were checked and presented in Table 7 below.

TABLE 7. Excluded Variables

Model	Beta In	T	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Collinearity Statistics
					Tolerance
1	INT	,096b	2,264	,024	,126
a. Dependent Variable: RES b. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), TRL, AMBspss TRL – transformational leadership; AMB – ambidexterity; INT – interaction term; RES – resilience Sample size: 323					
<i>Note:</i> compiled by author using the IBM SPSS Statistics v29					

This research was aimed at investigating whether pursuing exploratory and exploitative activities simultaneously results in higher levels of resilience. To enable such an examination, the empirical research has not only explored organizational ambidexterity-resilience linkage but has also examined the moderating role of transformational leadership.

The results of the conducted experiments show that organizational resilience could be strongly influenced by the ability to balance exploration and exploitation activities, or being ambidextrous, thus supporting Hypothesis 1.

A similar conclusion was reached by Iborra, Safon and Dolz (2020), who stated empirically that ambidexterity is one of the antecedents of organizational resilience. Researchers investigated 2765 Spanish SMEs that faced the recent global economic and financial crisis. In this connection, it must be noted that these results are also consistent with our assumption that ambidexterity is more valuable during economic uncertainty, or, as in the case of Iborra et al. (2020) study, just after a threatening and stressful external event.

Interestingly, Table 6 reported that transformational leadership has not only a significant moderating effect in ambidexterity-resilience linkage but also directly significantly influences organizational resilience. The present results are consistent with Valero et al. (2015) and Trudel et al. (2022) works that deal with the direct effect of transformational leadership on resilience. Despite the similarity between our results and those of colleagues, there are some important differences between both the data and the methods used in the investigations. Data in these studies were collected among public and non-profit organizations.

Data for Odeh et al. (2023) research was also collected at times of COVID-19 and pointed out the strengthening relationship between transformational leadership and resilience during turbulent times, which is perfectly in line with our findings.

Vakilzadeh and Haase's (2020) study went beyond our findings providing a more specific explanation of the nature of leadership-resilience linkage. The author divided organizational resilience into three main stages: anticipating, coping, and adapting to the crisis situation. The findings of their research pointed out that the role of leadership is particularly important during the first two stages.

When comparing our results to those of older studies, it must be pointed out that, even though some of the articles have not used resilience as a term, its operational definition was mentioned, i.e. long-term survival, ability to survive and prosper. Thus, overall, our findings are in accordance with findings reported by Hill and Birkinshaw (2014), He and Wong (2004), O'Reilly and Tushman (2008).

In summary, research findings contribute to a growing body of evidence demonstrating that being ambidextrous is one of the key factors for building resilient organizations, and transformational leadership moderates this linkage, explaining the significance of the leadership role.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The primary outcomes of the regression analysis run confirmed that there is a strong causal effect between organizational ambidexterity and resilience, and the moderator variable transformational leadership influences this linkage. Surprisingly, the data revealed the direct significant impact of transformational leadership on resilience.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, capabilities that enable resilience were investigated, the topic that researchers recommended focusing on. Second, our study contributes to the critical gap in the resilience literature, such as empirical studies. One reason for the scarce quantitative evidence for resilience being a consequence of ambidexterity is the difficulty of measuring this construct. Third, our paper brings new evidence to existing literature that the role of the leader in the ambidexterity and long-term survival linkage is more complex and demands further investigation. Fourth, most studies on the outcomes of ambidexterity were focused on performance rather than long-term influence. This paper provided evidence that investing in developing ambidextrous competencies increases resilience, i.e., has a long-lasting effect. Despite the increasing interest of scholars in the ambidexterity-resilience linkage, there were few investigations of developing countries, one of the fast-growing economies in the world, that deserve more significant consideration from scholars.

The primary practical implication of this study is that leaders realize the feasibility of their investments in developing ambidextrous capabilities in their organizations since it was statistically proven in this research that it leads to higher resilience. This is especially important given the practitioner's perception of resilience that the corresponding management costs are high and that it entails additional bureaucratic procedures.

Finally, although the findings statistically support the ambidexterity-resilience relationship and the moderating role of transformational leadership in this linkage, its most important contribution may be that it raises various intriguing questions for future study.

In interpreting the findings, several limitations should be considered. First, this study relies solely on quantitative research; thus, qualitative research could be done to explore the topic further. Second, two cities of Kazakhstan were involved in the analysis, namely Almaty and Astana. To increase the generalizability of the results, it is recommended to include other cities or other developing countries for a more in-depth study. Despite these limitations, the present research has enhanced our understanding of the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and resilience and the role of transformational leadership in this link. There is hope that the current research will stimulate further investigation of this critical area. In terms of future studies, in addition to those mentioned above, it would be helpful to extend the current findings by examining the possible effect of other leadership styles and moderators and exploring ambidextrous leadership concepts.

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