Developing an Interpretive Structural Model of Factors Affecting Human Resource Participation Avoidance in Governmental Organizations

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop an interpretive structural model of the factors influencing human resource participation avoidance in governmental organizations. This research is conducted using a mixed exploratory (qualitative–quantitative sequential) approach. In the qualitative phase, through semi-structured exploratory interviews with experts and thematic analysis of the extracted data, the influential dimensions and components were identified. In the quantitative phase, based on the identified dimensions and components, a researcher-made questionnaire was developed, and data were analyzed using the interpretive structural modeling (ISM) method to determine the hierarchical levels of comprehensive themes related to human resource participation avoidance in governmental organizations. The participants in the qualitative phase included faculty members specializing in management and experienced human resource managers working in governmental organizations. A non-probability purposive sampling method was applied, and sample selection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The statistical population in the quantitative phase consisted of university faculty members in management with at least an assistant professorship rank, as well as executive experts, including senior and middle managers in the human resource departments of governmental organizations in the country, each with a minimum of five years of professional experience. In this phase, purposive non-probability sampling was also used. Data analysis in the qualitative phase employed thematic analysis, while data analysis and hypothesis testing in the quantitative phase were conducted using interpretive structural modeling (ISM). The findings demonstrated that the dimension “lack of attention to the requirements of guidance and leadership” was positioned at the highest level (Level 1) of the hierarchical model. “Lack of organizational attention to the requirements for optimal utilization of human resources” and “lack of organizational attention to the requirements of creating a culture of criticism acceptance and empathy” were placed at Level 2, “lack of organizational attention to support and backing” at Level 3, and “lack of organizational attention to cooperation and interactions” as well as “lack of attention to employees’ psychological requirements” at Level 4, representing the lowest level of the model. Additionally, the analysis of driving power and dependence indicated that “lack of attention to the requirements of guidance and leadership,” “lack of organizational attention to the requirements for optimal utilization of human resources,” and “lack of organizational attention to the requirements of creating a culture of criticism acceptance and empathy” exhibited high driving power and low dependence, identifying them as key factors.

Keywords: *Human Resource Participation Avoidance, Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM), Influential Factors, Governmental Organizations.*

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1. Introduction

In contemporary organizational environments, the engagement, participation, and psychological well-being of employees are increasingly recognized as pivotal determinants of institutional effectiveness and sustainability. Yet, the phenomenon of organizational silence—the intentional withholding of ideas, opinions, or concerns by

employees—remains one of the most complex barriers to organizational learning, innovation, and participatory governance [1]. Silence among employees often results not from apathy but from a confluence of structural, psychological, and cultural factors that discourage open communication. Such silence undermines human resource utilization, obstructs knowledge sharing, and diminishes organizational agility, particularly in governmental institutions where bureaucratic hierarchies and formal control systems are dominant [2].

Within the Iranian public sector, low levels of employee participation and entrenched patterns of participation avoidance represent critical organizational challenges. Governmental organizations, due to their administrative rigidity, centralized decision-making, and limited feedback systems, frequently foster conditions under which employees refrain from expressing constructive criticism or innovative suggestions [3]. Studies in this field indicate that such patterns of avoidance behavior and silence are associated with diminished organizational trust, reduced engagement, and weakened performance outcomes [4, 5]. Despite growing awareness of these challenges, empirical studies on the determinants and structural dynamics of employee participation avoidance in the Iranian context remain limited. This underscores the necessity for developing integrative models that explain the underlying causes and hierarchical relationships among these determinants.

From a theoretical standpoint, the concept of organizational silence can be traced to the broader literature on employee voice and engagement. The absence of voice within organizations limits the flow of critical information necessary for adaptive decision-making and problem-solving [6]. In contrast, environments that promote voice and engagement empower employees to contribute proactively to organizational improvement, enhancing both morale and productivity [7]. However, when fear, mistrust, or cultural constraints suppress this communicative behavior, silence becomes a defensive mechanism that preserves psychological safety at the expense of organizational progress [8].

Cross-cultural evidence highlights how fear-based climates can reinforce organizational silence. For example, Confucian cultural contexts characterized by hierarchical respect and social fear tend to inhibit employees from challenging authority or sharing dissenting opinions [9]. Similarly, fear management in financial institutions has been shown to play a decisive role in shaping employees' communicative behavior, where an overemphasis on compliance and control diminishes openness [10]. In such settings, silence is not merely a behavioral choice but a systemic outcome shaped by organizational norms and leadership styles.

In Iran's governmental organizations, fear of reprisal, ambiguous accountability structures, and a lack of participatory culture reinforce similar dynamics [2]. When employees perceive that speaking up may lead to negative repercussions, such as conflict with superiors or threats to job security, they are more likely to engage in defensive silence—a pattern well documented in recent Iranian research [11]. The defensive silence model proposed by Khosravi et al. emphasizes that silence can emerge as a rational coping strategy when employees anticipate punitive consequences for voicing concerns. Such patterns of fear-based avoidance represent significant obstacles to organizational innovation, adaptability, and strategic learning.

Moreover, studies indicate that the psychological climate of the workplace—including factors such as burnout, stress, and perceived organizational support—strongly influences participation behaviors. Prolonged exposure to workplace stress and emotional exhaustion has been shown to reduce employees' sense of belonging and willingness to engage collaboratively [12, 13]. During and after crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional strain and fear of uncertainty have deepened the psychological barriers to open communication within public institutions [13]. Therefore, any comprehensive model of participation avoidance must integrate psychological as well as structural and cultural determinants.

Recent developments in organizational behavior research emphasize the interplay between leadership style, psychological empowerment, and knowledge sharing as critical elements influencing participation. Authoritarian leadership, for instance, has been found to suppress employee creativity by fostering fear and defensive silence [8]. Conversely, leadership styles that promote psychological empowerment and functional flexibility enhance innovative work behaviors by fostering an environment of mutual trust [14]. Such empowerment-based leadership reduces the perceived risks of participation, thereby encouraging employees to voice their insights and concerns.

However, in hierarchical and bureaucratic systems such as those characterizing many governmental organizations, communication tends to be unidirectional, and top-down

decision-making discourages employee input [3]. As a result, employees may feel their contributions are neither valued nor impactful, leading to organizational disengagement and reduced morale. Rajaei et al. [15] describe this phenomenon as "responsibility avoidance," wherein employees consciously withdraw from proactive engagement in order to avoid blame or criticism. This behavioral pattern often overlaps with participation avoidance, suggesting a complex psychological and structural interplay between individual motivation and organizational culture.

The culture of blame and lack of empathy further exacerbate participation avoidance. In organizations where errors are stigmatized and criticism is poorly received, employees are less likely to express dissenting perspectives or share innovative ideas. The inability of management to foster an empathetic and criticism-tolerant culture constrains learning and adaptability [15]. Conversely, studies have demonstrated that promoting a culture of open dialogue and emotional support enhances employee engagement and collaboration [7]. Such findings underscore the need for cultural transformation in the public sector to enable genuine participation and co-responsibility.

Another key dimension influencing participation avoidance is the psychological needs of employees, including self-esteem, recognition, and perceived fairness. When these needs are neglected, employees may resort to passive behaviors and withdraw from collective decision-making processes [16]. Workplace ostracism and the absence of social inclusion diminish organization-based self-esteem, indirectly increasing silence behaviors. Therefore, organizational policies must not only focus on procedural structures but also address the human and emotional dimensions of participation [4].

In the context of knowledge management, organizational silence acts as a significant barrier to knowledge sharing, a crucial driver of innovation and institutional learning [17]. When employees refrain from sharing knowledge, organizational memory deteriorates, and the ability to respond to complex challenges declines. Powell [1] notes that silence in organizational settings can mask systemic inefficiencies and ethical failures by preventing early detection of problems. Similarly, Zhang [18] highlights that organizational silence among nurses negatively influences professional identity and job satisfaction, mediated by psychological regulatory focus. These findings collectively suggest that silence not only limits individual performance but also undermines professional cohesion and institutional resilience.

The growing body of evidence suggests that organizational silence and participation avoidance are multidimensional phenomena influenced by structural, psychological, and cultural factors. Hence, developing a comprehensive model that delineates the relationships among these factors is essential for understanding and mitigating participation avoidance, particularly in public-sector contexts. Afkhami et al. [2] developed an integrated model of organizational participation for Iranian governmental organizations, emphasizing the necessity of structural reform and empowerment strategies. Yet, there remains a need to identify the specific organizational, psychological, and cultural determinants that lead to avoidance of participation, as well as their hierarchical interconnections.

To address this gap, the present study employs a mixed-method exploratory design, combining qualitative interviews with experts and quantitative structural modeling, to develop a model explaining the avoidance of participation among human resources in Iranian governmental organizations. This approach enables the identification of key dimensions—such as lack of attention to leadership and guidance, insufficient psychological support, weak cooperation mechanisms, and deficient organizational empathy—that contribute to the persistence of participation avoidance. The model also seeks to classify these dimensions based on their driving power and dependence, thereby elucidating their causal interrelations and relative importance within the organizational system.

The theoretical foundation of this study is built on prior works emphasizing the importance of participatory engagement and the consequences of its absence. For instance, Ullah et al. [12] underscore the relationship between workplace stress, organizational factors, and employees' psychological well-being, while Yasir et al. [14] demonstrate the mediating role of knowledge sharing and psychological empowerment in enhancing innovative work behaviors. Similarly, Khosravi et al. [11] propose mechanisms for breaking defensive silence among creative employees, suggesting that empowerment, trust, and supportive leadership are essential for fostering openness and participation. Collectively, these studies provide an empirical and conceptual basis for the present research.

In summary, participation avoidance within governmental organizations represents a complex, systemic challenge encompassing elements of organizational

structure, leadership behavior, psychological safety, and cultural norms. It undermines the optimal use of human capital and limits the organization's adaptive capacity in an increasingly dynamic environment. The present study aims to construct and validate a comprehensive interpretive structural model that identifies and ranks the determinants of participation avoidance in Iranian governmental organizations. By doing so, it contributes to both theoretical advancement and practical policymaking, offering actionable insights for enhancing participation, trust, and communication in public administration.

Ultimately, by integrating perspectives from prior studies on organizational silence [1, 4, 5, 18], employee voice [6], fear management [10], and knowledge sharing [14, 17], this research seeks to bridge conceptual and empirical gaps in understanding the dynamics of human resource disengagement.

2. Methodology

The present study is applied in purpose, as it seeks to present a theoretical model within the studied sample (Iranian governmental organizations). The research follows an inductive–deductive reasoning approach and employs a mixed-method design that combines qualitative and quantitative methods using an exploratory sequential strategy. In the exploratory mixed design, qualitative data are first collected and analyzed, followed by the collection and analysis of quantitative data to determine the types of relationships among the variables.

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured exploratory interviews were conducted with experts, and the extracted data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method to identify the effective dimensions and components. In the quantitative phase, a researcher-made questionnaire was developed based on the identified dimensions and components, and data were analyzed using the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method to determine the hierarchical levels of the comprehensive themes related to the model of human resource participation avoidance in governmental organizations.

The participants in the qualitative phase included university faculty members specializing in management and experienced managers in the field of human resources within governmental organizations. Demographically, among the interviewees, 11 held doctoral degrees and 4 held master's degrees. In terms of gender, 7 were male and 4 were female. Regarding academic specialization, 8 held degrees in public management, 2 in educational management, 1 in industrial management, 2 in financial management, and 2 in business management. All interviewees had over 10 years of professional experience. The sampling method in this phase was non-probability and purposive, and sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Ultimately, the researcher conducted 17 interviews with experts. The interviews lasted between 40 and 50 minutes and were held in person at the participants' workplaces after prior coordination. During the interviews, the following questions were asked:

1. In your opinion, what factors influence the emergence of human resource participation avoidance in governmental organizations?
2. In your view, what are the consequences and implications of human resource participation avoidance for the organization?
3. In your opinion, how can governmental organizations address the phenomenon of human resource participation avoidance? What solutions would you suggest?
4. What additional opinions do you have regarding the topic under discussion?

The statistical population in the quantitative phase consisted of university faculty members in management with at least an assistant professorship rank and over five years of experience, as well as executive experts, including senior and middle managers active in the human resource departments of governmental organizations, each with at least five years of management experience. In this phase, purposive non-probability sampling was also used, and the selected sample size was 15 individuals.

In the quantitative phase, data were collected using a field–survey method. The researcher used a self-developed questionnaire (based on the dimensions and components identified in the qualitative phase) to collect the required data. The interpretive structural questionnaire was designed to evaluate the relative importance and interrelationships among criteria and indicators. Respondents were asked to determine the effect of one variable on another (one-way or two-way) or the absence of a relationship based on the following scale:

Table 1. The Scale Used in the Interpretive Structural Questionnaire

Variable *i* affects variable *j*	Variable *j* affects variable *i*	Bidirectional relationship	No relationship

V A X O

After designing the questionnaire, expert opinions were obtained regarding its content validity, and their suggestions were implemented. Content validity was confirmed through a pilot test in which two experts reviewed the questionnaire, and their feedback was incorporated to enhance validity. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a reliability value of 0.79 for all items. Since this value exceeded the 0.70 threshold, the questionnaire's reliability was confirmed.

In the present study, qualitative data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is a systematic technique for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. For the analysis and testing of quantitative data, the researcher employed the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method. The steps followed for implementing this method were as follows:

1. Construction of the Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM).
2. Formation of the initial reachability matrix (obtained by converting the SSIM into a binary 0–1 matrix).
3. Development of the final reachability matrix (by incorporating the transitivity principle, ensuring the consistency of the matrix).
4. Determination of relationships and hierarchical levels among dimensions using the sets of outputs, inputs, and their intersections for each criterion.
5. Drawing the final hierarchical model of the dimensions.
6. Conducting driving power and dependency analysis for each dimension within the final reachability matrix.

3. Findings and Results

In this section, based on the analysis of data obtained from 17 expert interviews, the comprehensive and organizing themes of the model of human resource participation avoidance in governmental organizations were identified. Using the thematic analysis method, the identified codes derived from the interviews were grouped by similarity (organizing themes), and the final main themes (comprehensive themes) were extracted, as shown in Tables 2 and 3. It should be noted that, due to the large volume of extracted comments, the opinions of four interviewees were randomly selected and presented in the table below.

Table 2. Sample of Basic Themes Extracted from Four Random Interviews

Basic Themes Extracted from Interviews	Interviewee	Basic Themes Extracted from Interviews	Interviewee
Lack of appointment and retention of competent senior managers who support employee participation	Participant 11	Lack of managerial respect toward diverse and contradictory opinions	Participant 5
Lack of organizational attention to potential conflicts		Lack of organizational attention to the expression of individual ideas and opinions	
Lack of employee motivation		Weak delegation of authority to employees	
Lack of suitable conditions for greater employee participation		Feeling of threat from participatory individuals within the organization	
Lack of employee belief in the organizational participation system		Absence of operational freedom within the organization	
Lack of attention to the importance of training for better participation		Lack of proper and sufficient rewards	
Lack of collective trust		Lack of organizational attention to employee recognition and appreciation	
Lack of participation culture development within the organization		Inequality of employment opportunities in the organization	
Insufficient budget for group meetings, team building, and brainstorming rooms		Lack of organizational attention to providing advancement opportunities	
Lack of criticism acceptance and tolerance of conflict among organizational managers		Absence of effective communication channels	
Managerial conservatism		Lack of informing employees about organizational performance and structure	
Low job motivation	Participant 17	Lack of flexibility on the part of management	Participant 8
Decline in employee job enthusiasm		Lack of access to training and development opportunities	
Decrease in organizational decision-making quality		Lack of career growth opportunities	

Job burnout	Lack of organizational attention to expressing individual ideas
Avoidance of communication and interaction among employees	Lack of managerial attention to promoting team spirit
Delays in reward payments	Lack of use of employee opinions
Inadequate financial incentive tools	Lack of fair and transparent performance-based rewards
Ambiguous organizational goals	Lack of recognition and rewarding of employee participation
Absence of promotional and motivational mechanisms in the organization	Lack of managerial trust in employees' decision-making
Lack of meritocracy	Absence of clear and achievable organizational goals
Lack of diversity in rewards	Lack of awareness of employee feedback and opinions

Subsequently, through the aggregation of the basic themes, the organizing and comprehensive themes were developed and presented as the components and dimensions of the research model.

Table 3. Aggregation of Thematic Codes and Formation of Organizing and Comprehensive Themes

Comprehensive Themes (Dimensions)	Organizing Themes (Components)	No.
Lack of organizational attention to the requirements for optimal utilization of human resources	Lack of sufficient autonomy and freedom for participation	1
	Lack of timely feedback to employees	2
	Lack of use of employees' opinions and perspectives	3
	Lack of career growth opportunities for employees	4
	Managerial inattention to employee personal and professional development	5
	Lack of understanding of employee expectations and needs	6
Lack of organizational attention to cooperation and interaction requirements	Weak and non-transparent internal communication	7
	Inability of the organization to gain employee trust	8
	Weak team building and networking	9
Lack of organizational attention to support and backing	Lack of organizational support for employees	10
	Lack of timely and adequate rewards	11
	Lack of appreciation and recognition of employee performance	12
	Lack of proper platform for employee participation	13
Lack of organizational attention to creating a culture of criticism acceptance and empathy	Lack of collaboration and empathy in the organizational environment	14
	Absence of a creative and criticism-accepting atmosphere	15
Lack of attention to employees' psychological requirements	Lack of employee belonging and attachment to the organization	16
	Employee perception of injustice and neglect within the organization	17
	Lack of work motivation among employees	18
	Lack of enthusiasm for participation	19
	Feelings of insecurity and fear among employees	20
Lack of attention to leadership and guidance requirements	Centralized and bureaucratic organizational structures	21
	Lack of transparency in organizational procedures and processes	22
	Managerial inflexibility	23
	Lack of meritocracy	24
	Absence of positive managerial attitudes toward employees	25
	Existence of discrimination and selective treatment of employees	26

Based on the findings in the above table, six main dimensions (comprehensive themes) and twenty-six components (organizing themes) were identified.

After identifying the comprehensive themes in the qualitative phase, this section addresses the main research question: *What is the hierarchical structure of comprehensive themes in the model of human resource participation avoidance in governmental organizations?* For this purpose, the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method was used to establish the hierarchy among the six dimensions through the following steps:

1. Formation of the Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM)

In this matrix, the relationships between variables are expressed using the following notations:

V: Variable *i* influences variable *j*;

A: Variable *j* influences variable *i*;

X: Bidirectional relationship;

O: No relationship.

Table 4. Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) of Dimensions

Dimension No.	Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements for optimal utilization of human resources	X	X	V	O	O	O
2	Lack of organizational attention to cooperation and interaction requirements	O	X	O	O	V	O
3	Lack of organizational attention to support and backing	V	V	X	V	V	V
4	Lack of organizational attention to creating a culture of criticism acceptance and empathy	O	O	V	X	V	O
5	Lack of attention to employees' psychological requirements	O	A	O	O	X	O
6	Lack of attention to leadership and guidance requirements	V	V	A	V	V	X

2. Initial Reachability Matrix

Based on the output of the Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM), the initial reachability matrix is obtained by converting the SSIM into a binary (0–1) matrix.

Table 5. Initial Reachability Matrix of Dimensions

Dimension No.	Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements for optimal utilization of human resources	1	1	1	0	0	0
2	Lack of organizational attention to cooperation and interaction requirements	0	1	0	0	1	0
3	Lack of organizational attention to support and backing	0	0	1	0	1	1
4	Lack of organizational attention to creating a culture of criticism acceptance and empathy	0	0	1	1	1	0
5	Lack of attention to employees' psychological requirements	0	1	0	0	1	0
6	Lack of attention to leadership and guidance requirements	1	1	1	1	1	1

3. Final Reachability Matrix

Subsequently, the final reachability matrix is obtained by considering the transitivity relationship, meaning that the initial reachability matrix is adjusted for consistency. This matrix is formed by applying transitive relationships among the variables. In this matrix, secondary relationships among the indicators are controlled. The secondary relationship is defined such that if dimension *i* leads to dimension *j*, and dimension *j* leads to dimension *k*, then dimension *i* will also lead to dimension *k*. If this condition is not met in the reachability matrix, the matrix must be corrected and the omitted relationships should be added. Consequently, some of the zero elements are converted into one, denoted as $1*$. By identifying the secondary relationships and adjusting the obtained matrix, the final matrix is derived. The findings from this matrix are presented below:

Table 6. Final Reachability Matrix

Dimension No.	Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5	6	Driving Power
1	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of optimal utilization of human resources	1	1	1	0	$1*$	0	4
2	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of cooperation and interaction	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
3	Lack of organizational attention to support and backup	0	$1*$	1	0	1	1	4
4	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of establishing a culture of empathy and criticism acceptance	0	$1*$	1	1	1	0	4
5	Lack of attention to employees' psychological requirements	0	1	0	0	1	$1*$	3
6	Lack of attention to leadership and guidance requirements	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Dependence		2	6	4	2	6	3	

In this table, the row sum of each element in the final reachability matrix represents the *driving power*, while the column sum indicates the *dependence* level.

4. Determining Relationships and Level Partitioning of Dimensions

To determine the relationships and hierarchical levels of the criteria, the sets of outputs and inputs for each criterion are extracted from the final reachability matrix. The output set includes the criterion itself and the criteria that it influences. The input set includes the criterion itself and the

criteria that influence it. Then, the mutual relationships among the criteria are identified.

In this table, for each variable C_i, the *reachability set* (outputs or influencing factors) includes variables that can be reached through C_i, while the *antecedent set* (inputs or influenced factors) includes variables through which C_i can be reached. After determining the reachability and antecedent sets, their intersection is calculated. The first variable for which the intersection of the two sets equals the reachability set (inputs) is assigned to the first level. Therefore, the first-level elements have the highest degree of influence in the model.

After determining the first level, the variable whose level has been defined is removed from all sets, and new reachability and antecedent sets are recalculated to identify the next level. The results of level determination in the interpretive structural hierarchy are presented as follows:

Table 7. First Iteration of Level Determination in Interpretive Structural Hierarchy

Dimension No.	Dimensions	Antecedent Set (Inputs)	Reachability Set (Outputs)	Intersection	Level
1	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of optimal utilization of human resources	16	1235	1	
2	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of cooperation and interaction	123456	25	25	
3	Lack of organizational attention to support and backup	1346	2356	36	
4	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of establishing a culture of empathy and criticism acceptance	46	2345	4	
5	Lack of attention to employees' psychological requirements	123456	256	256	
6	Lack of attention to leadership and guidance requirements	346	123456	346	First

Table 8. Second Iteration of Level Determination in Interpretive Structural Hierarchy

Dimension No.	Dimensions	Antecedent Set (Inputs)	Reachability Set (Outputs)	Intersection	Level
1	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of optimal utilization of human resources	1	1235	1	Second
2	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of cooperation and interaction	12345	25	25	
3	Lack of organizational attention to support and backup	134	235	3	
4	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of establishing a culture of empathy and criticism acceptance	4	2345	4	Second
5	Lack of attention to employees' psychological requirements	12345	25	25	

Table 9. Third Iteration of Level Determination in Interpretive Structural Hierarchy

Dimension No.	Dimensions	Antecedent Set (Inputs)	Reachability Set (Outputs)	Intersection	Level
2	Lack of organizational attention to the requirements of cooperation and interaction	235	25	25	Fourth
3	Lack of organizational attention to support and backup	3	235	3	Third
5	Lack of attention to employees' psychological requirements	235	25	25	Fourth

Based on the output of the level-determination computations in the interpretive structural hierarchy, the final structured and leveled model of the dimensions is illustrated below. This model consists of four hierarchical levels.

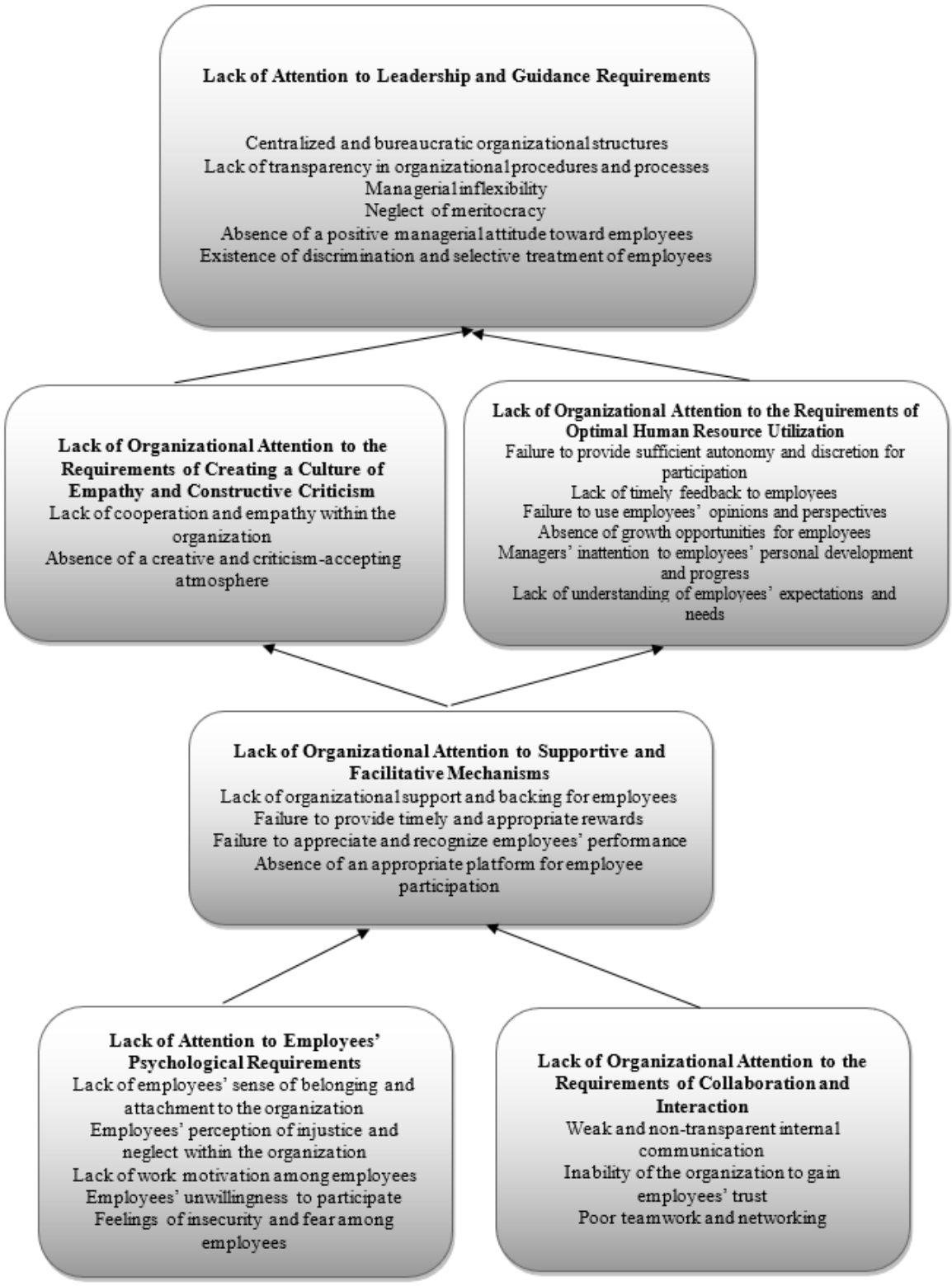

Figure 1. Policy Model of Participatory Governance in Iran's Telecommunications Industry

5. Analysis of Driving and Dependence Power

Based on the calculated driving and dependence power of each dimension in the final reachability matrix, four categories of elements can be identified: autonomous, dependent, linkage, and independent factors.

The first group, **autonomous factors**, exhibit weak driving and dependence power and are relatively detached from other factors (shown in the lower left quadrant of the diagram below).

The second group, **dependent factors**, have low driving power but high dependence (located in the lower right quadrant of the diagram below).

The third group includes **linkage factors**, which possess both high driving and dependence power; in other words, any action on these factors leads to changes in other factors (represented in the upper right quadrant of the diagram below).

The fourth group, independent factors, are characterized by high driving power and low dependence and are referred to as key factors. These key factors fall within either the independent or linkage category (shown in the upper left quadrant of the diagram below).

Based on the identified driving and dependence power in the final reachability matrix, the dimensions are categorized into four variables: independent, linkage, autonomous, and dependent, as shown in the diagram below.

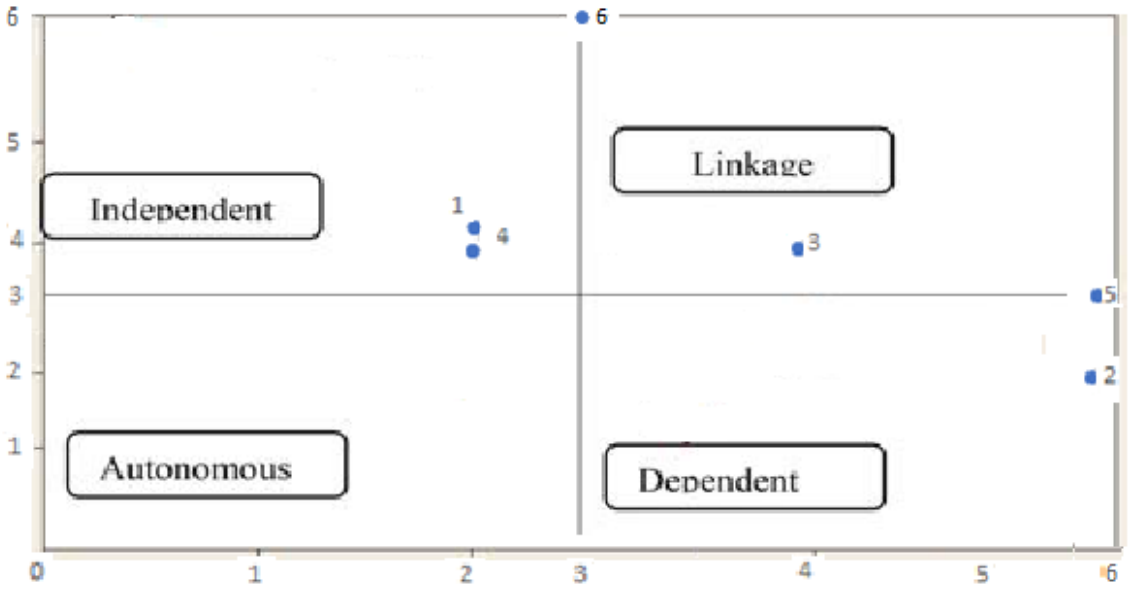

Figure 2. Categorization of Dimensions into Four Quadrants

This diagram demonstrates that, respectively, dimension 6 (*lack of attention to leadership and guidance requirements*), dimension 1 (*lack of organizational attention to the requirements of optimal utilization of human resources*), and dimension 4 (*lack of organizational attention to the requirements of establishing a culture of empathy and criticism acceptance*) possess high driving power and low dependence levels, and are therefore considered key factors in the model.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study sought to identify and structure the key factors influencing *participation avoidance* among human resources in governmental organizations. The qualitative phase revealed six overarching dimensions and twenty-six organizing themes explaining the roots of participation avoidance. These six dimensions included: lack of organizational attention to (1) the optimal utilization requirements of human resources, (2) collaboration and interaction requirements, (3) supportive and facilitative mechanisms, (4) the establishment of a culture of empathy and constructive criticism, (5) the psychological needs of employees, and (6) guidance and leadership imperatives. The subsequent quantitative analysis using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) provided a hierarchical representation of these factors, highlighting that the *lack of attention to guidance and leadership* emerged as the highest-level factor, while lack of attention to collaboration, interaction, and psychological needs occupied the lowest level. These findings underscore the systemic and multi-layered nature of participation avoidance and suggest that leadership, culture, and organizational support mechanisms

play pivotal roles in shaping employees' willingness to engage actively within governmental systems.

The most influential finding—that the neglect of leadership and guidance requirements constitutes the top level in the structural model—aligns with previous research emphasizing the decisive role of leadership in shaping employee voice, silence, and participation behaviors [8, 11]. Effective leaders foster psychological safety and provide an environment that legitimizes employees' participation in decision-making. Conversely, the absence of visionary and empowering leadership creates uncertainty, role ambiguity, and emotional disconnection, thereby discouraging employee engagement. This pattern resonates with the interpretive structural model proposed by [3], which showed that communication avoidance and leadership deficiencies form the root cause of disengagement in governmental organizations. Similarly, [18] emphasized that organizational silence often arises when leadership neglects professional identity and regulatory focus among employees—leading to low identification with institutional goals and, consequently, withdrawal from participatory activities.

Moreover, the findings related to the lower-level dimensions—particularly the lack of attention to collaboration and psychological needs—reaffirm that participation avoidance is not solely a leadership problem but also a product of deficient interpersonal and organizational climates [7, 16]. When employees perceive limited opportunities for constructive interaction or feel psychologically unsafe, they resort to silence and disengagement to preserve their self-esteem and avoid potential conflict. The mediating role of organizational silence identified in the literature between workplace ostracism and knowledge-sharing avoidance [16] further supports the idea that interpersonal disconnect and low social trust are central mechanisms of participation avoidance. In other words, employees' reluctance to contribute stems not only from top-down leadership styles but also from peer-level alienation and the absence of emotionally intelligent management practices.

The identified dimension of *organizational inattention to supportive and facilitative mechanisms* corresponds closely with the concept of perceived organizational support (POS). When organizations fail to provide emotional and instrumental support, employees often perceive participation as risky or futile [12]. This aligns with findings that organizational stress, burnout, and lack of supportive climate significantly undermine psychological well-being at work, subsequently reducing participation and initiative-taking [12, 13]. Governmental institutions, characterized by hierarchical rigidity and procedural formalism, often lack flexible structures that encourage support, mentoring, and collective learning. Hence, the absence of such support structures fosters a defensive orientation among employees, consistent with the concept of "defensive silence" articulated by [8] and elaborated further by [11] in their model for breaking defensive silence among creative employees.

Another notable finding concerns the dimension related to *the lack of a culture of empathy and constructive criticism*. The study revealed that when organizations disregard the need to cultivate open, empathetic, and critique-accepting environments, employees become apprehensive about expressing opinions or offering innovative ideas. This aligns with prior evidence that organizational silence is deeply rooted in cultural and psychological factors rather than merely structural constraints [1, 9]. For instance, [9] showed that social fear derived from cultural values such as face-saving and hierarchical respect contributes to silence and knowledge hoarding. Similarly, [1] argued that in healthcare and public institutions, systemic denial of employee voices fosters ethical and procedural failures—illustrating how cultural silence perpetuates organizational dysfunction.

The psychological underpinnings of participation avoidance are equally critical. The present study found that when employees' psychological needs for recognition, security, and autonomy are overlooked, they display a higher tendency toward disengagement and avoidance behaviors. This finding resonates with research emphasizing the psychological dimensions of voice and silence. For example, [15] reported that employees' perceptions of responsibility avoidance are shaped by their internal sense of fear, lack of control, and reduced organizational belonging. Similarly, [10] constructed a model of fear management for employees in financial organizations, highlighting that unmanaged fear leads to communication barriers, diminished participation, and an overall climate of avoidance. These findings collectively support the interpretation that addressing psychological and emotional safety is a prerequisite for fostering engagement in governmental settings.

Additionally, the results support the perspective that participation avoidance is an outcome of multifaceted antecedents that interact across structural, cultural, and individual levels. [2] proposed an integrated model of organizational participation in Iranian governmental organizations, identifying structural barriers, bureaucratic rigidity, and cultural inertia as critical inhibitors of

participation. The alignment between these barriers and the current study's identified dimensions reinforces the argument that systemic reform must accompany individual-level interventions. Likewise, [17] demonstrated that knowledge non-sharing—a behavior similar in function to participation avoidance—is influenced by trust deficits, inequitable reward systems, and fear of exploitation, which mirror the themes revealed in this study.

An additional contribution of this study lies in mapping the relative influence and dependency among the identified dimensions. The ISM results showed that leadership inattention exerts strong influence while demonstrating low dependency, categorizing it as a *key driver*. This structural insight corresponds with the theoretical frameworks of hierarchical causation within organizational behavior, wherein top-level leadership variables cascade downward to shape motivational and cultural outcomes [4, 6]. Specifically, [6] illustrated that employee engagement and voice behaviors are highly contingent on leadership's responsiveness to employee inputs. Similarly, [4] revealed that failures in communication flow and leadership support constitute the root causes of organizational silence. The identification of leadership as a high-impact, low-dependency factor reinforces the necessity of leadership reform as a starting point for breaking the cycle of disengagement.

Furthermore, the identification of collaboration and psychological inattention as low-level factors suggests that while these dimensions are outcomes of higher-order deficiencies (e.g., leadership and culture), they represent the most visible manifestations of participation avoidance. In other words, when employees refrain from collaboration or express emotional withdrawal, these behaviors often signal deeper systemic failures rather than isolated attitudinal issues. This interpretation is consistent with [14], who integrated knowledge sharing and psychological empowerment into a model of innovative behavior, demonstrating that empowerment deficits stem primarily from organizational systems rather than individual unwillingness.

The hierarchical relationships identified in this study thus paint a dynamic picture of participation avoidance as both a symptom and a process—originating in leadership deficiencies, reinforced by unsupportive structures, and manifesting in psychological withdrawal and communicative silence. These results collectively contribute to advancing the understanding of disengagement phenomena within the public sector, offering a structural interpretation that integrates cultural, psychological, and managerial perspectives.

This study, while comprehensive in scope, faces several limitations. First, its qualitative findings were derived from semi-structured interviews with a limited number of experts and practitioners in governmental organizations, which may constrain the generalizability of the identified themes. Although theoretical saturation was achieved, the diversity of governmental contexts and hierarchical layers could entail unobserved factors influencing participation avoidance. Second, the study employed Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) as its primary quantitative analytical technique. While ISM effectively identifies hierarchical relationships, it does not measure the strength or statistical significance of relationships among variables. Consequently, future studies may complement this approach with structural equation modeling (SEM) or partial least squares (PLS) analysis to validate the interrelationships empirically. Third, the study relied on self-reported and perceptual data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or recall limitations. Finally, cultural and political nuances specific to Iranian governmental institutions might restrict the transferability of findings to other national contexts with different administrative systems.

Future research could extend this work by exploring the causal mechanisms underlying participation avoidance through longitudinal or experimental designs. For instance, studies may examine how specific leadership development interventions alter participation behaviors over time. Moreover, future inquiries should investigate the moderating effects of organizational justice, digital communication tools, and generational differences on participation dynamics. Comparative cross-cultural studies would also enrich the literature by examining how cultural values, power distance, and institutional trust influence participation avoidance across various administrative systems. Another promising direction involves the use of mixed methods combining quantitative surveys with ethnographic observation to capture the lived experiences of employees within hierarchical bureaucracies. Finally, researchers could develop and validate psychometric instruments for measuring participation avoidance and its subdimensions—enabling large-scale empirical testing and policy evaluation.

Practically, the findings underscore the necessity for governmental organizations to invest in leadership development programs emphasizing participatory management, emotional intelligence, and psychological safety. Organizational reforms should focus on creating

communication channels that allow constructive criticism without fear of reprisal. Building supportive and empathetic cultures requires embedding participation as a performance criterion within managerial evaluation systems. Additionally, promoting interdepartmental collaboration, establishing mentoring systems, and addressing employees' psychological needs can reduce avoidance tendencies. Finally, policymakers should institutionalize participation frameworks that encourage shared decision-making, transparency, and accountability—ensuring that public organizations evolve from rigid bureaucracies into learning-oriented, inclusive systems that value the collective voice of their human capital.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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