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Exploring the limits of mindfulness during the COVID-19 pandemic: qualitative evidence from African context

Obinna Alo
Sunderland Business School, University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK
Ahmad Arslan
Department of Marketing, Management and International Business, Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland
Anna Yumiao Tian
Department of Strategic Management and Organisation, International Business School Suzhou (IBSS), Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, China, and
Vijay Pereira
NEOMA Business School, Mont-Saint-Aignan, France

Abstract

Purpose – This paper is one of the first studies to examine specificities, including limits of mindfulness at work in an African organisational context, whilst dealing with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It specifically addresses the role of organisational and managerial support systems in restoring employee wellbeing, social connectedness and attachment to their organisations, in order to overcome the exclusion caused by the ongoing pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses a qualitative research methodology that includes interviews as the main data source. The sample comprises of 20 entrepreneurs (organisational leaders) from Ghana and Nigeria.

Findings – The authors found that COVID-19-induced worries restricted the practice of mindfulness, and this was prevalent at the peak of the pandemic, particularly due to very tough economic conditions caused by reduction in salaries, and intensified by pre-existing general economic and social insecurities, and institutional voids in Africa. This aspect further resulted in lack of engagement and lack of commitment, which affected overall team performance and restricted employees' mindfulness at work. Hence, quietness by employees even though can be linked to mindfulness was linked to larger psychological stress that they were facing. The authors also found leaders/manager's emotional intelligence, social skills and organisational support systems to be helpful in such circumstances. However, their effectiveness varied among the cases.

Originality/value – This paper is one of the first studies to establish a link between the COVID-19 pandemic and mindfulness limitations. Moreover, it is a pioneering study specifically highlighting the damaging impact of COVID-19-induced concerns on leader–member exchange (LMX) and team–member exchange (TMX) relationships, particularly in the African context. It further brings in a unique discussion on the mitigating mechanisms of such COVID-19-induced concerns in organisations and highlights the roles of manager's/leader's emotional intelligence, social skills and supportive intervention patterns. Finally, the authors offer an

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in-depth assessment of the effectiveness of organisational interventions and supportive relational systems in restoring social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by COVID-19-induced worries.

Keywords Africa, COVID-19, Emotional intelligence, Leader, LMX/TMX, Mindfulness, Organisational support systems, Relational support systems

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

This study explores how mindfulness at work has been restricted in emerging market firms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using qualitative empirical data from twenty entrepreneurial firms that have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana and Nigeria, we also examine the effectiveness of organisational and managerial support systems in restoring employee wellbeing, social connectedness and attachment to their organisations due to a social exclusion caused by the pandemic. Mindfulness is an individual's receptive attention to and awareness of present events (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Haun *et al.*, 2018; Hülsheger *et al.*, 2018). Mindfulness is knowing where you are in the moment, but also being aware of (but not being stuck in) where you have been (reflection) and where you are going (anticipating) (Hasson, 2015). Yet, there remain limited scholarly insights on whether and how the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has affected employees' ability to engage in mindfulness practice. We view this as a significant omission in the theoretical development of the mindfulness literature.

A burgeoning body of literature links mindfulness to a broad range of constructs and key workplace outcomes, such as improved attention, performance, relationships, wellbeing (Good *et al.*, 2016), employee's attachment to their workplace, team functioning (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018) and improved quality of organisational life (Ehrhardt and Ragins, 2019). As a moment of truthfulness (Nwankpa and Roumani, 2014; North, 2009), concentration (Hyland *et al.*, 2015) and directed knowing (Glomb *et al.*, 2011), mindfulness is executed through mediation (Cheung, 2016), and thus fostering our ways of thinking and doing (Ehrhardt and Ragins, 2019; Hasson, 2015). By minimising absent-mindedness while fostering individual concentration on their jobs (Pratscher *et al.*, 2019), mindfulness has also been linked to an enhanced employees' ability to survive perfectly in every situation (Schwager *et al.,* 2016). Yet, researchers have found that frustration, stress and anxiety (which typify the COVID-19 era) can stop an individual from noticing what is actually going on within/around them (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2021; Hagedorn *et al.*, 2022; Muñoz-Fernández and Rodríguez-Meirinhos, 2021). This highlights the need for more research examining the effects of the pandemic on employees' ability to manage their work and/or engage in the practice of mindfulness.

Although mindfulness fosters employees' ability to manage work-related stress (Montani *et al.*, 2020), the realisation of the damaging effect of the pandemic on employees' welfare, as typified by the recent increase in work-related stress since the pandemic calls for a critical reassessment of this earlier simple belief. Specifically, research has found the damaging effect of the pandemic on employees' wellbeing (Bailey and Breslin, 2021; Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Haque, 2021), individuals' connections, networks and attachments to team and the organisation (Kahn *et al.*, 2013), and ultimately an increase in employees' stress level. Despite such a burgeoning body of mindfulness literature, research examining whether mindfulness practice is same across all cultures, or if there are contextual/cultural influences on it, is, at best, limited, as the mainstream mindfulness literature has so far focused on East Asian and Western contexts. Yet, research examining mindfulness in African context can provide us with a more robust understanding of the antecedents, processes and consequences of (both individual and collective) mindfulness. This will enrich our understanding of mindfulness and its benefits in practice (Sutcliffe *et al.*, 2016), especially in a crisis situation.

Furthermore, although the literature has traced the origin of mindfulness back to an ancient Eastern Buddhist culture (Cassaniti, 2018; Kirmayer, 2015), researchers examining

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how mindfulness has transferred to modern Western society have compared the ancient Buddhist version with its modern expressions found in the Western world, especially amid emerging cultures (e.g. Schmidt, 2011). Examining the universality of the five-factor model of mindfulness in sixteen countries, Karl *et al.* (2020) found that mindfulness practice is higher in more individualistic and less tight cultures. Likewise, research examining the links between employee mindfulness and employee creativity among frontline service employees from the Philippines, Turkey and the United States shows conflicting results, thus suggesting that mindfulness and creativity may be culturally contextual (Gip *et al.*, 2022). It has been viewed as a culturally shaped habit of mind (Chinn, 2015) and culturally relativist meaning-system (Karl *et al.*, 2022). Organisational mindfulness has further been linked to safety culture and varying degrees of risk-awareness among employees (Hopkins, 2002). Yet, there is still a paucity of research examining mindfulness practice in cultural and/or marginalised backgrounds (Fuchs *et al.*, 2013), such as Africa, and which is a significant omission in the theoretical development of the mindfulness literature.

Moreover, the literature linking mindfulness with culturally embedded ethical practices also provides us with some critical interpretive perspectives. Due to its strong ethical and moral dimensions, mindfulness has been found to promote positive mental health, psychological wellbeing, adaptation and reduced human suffering, although the results vary significantly in different cultural contexts (Kirmayer, 2015). Additionally, influenced by culturally patterned mentality (e.g. egocentrism, consumption orientation, warrior culture, etc.), cultural values have also been found to significantly influence both mindfulness training and its practice, as well as their associated outcomes (Cook and Cassaniti, 2022). Consequently, a relational approach to mindfulness has been proposed, and which views mindfulness practice as a socially contingent resource for individuals and communities to cultivate a critically distant stance towards society, through a culturally embedded public social practice (Stanley, 2012, p. 631).

Given that the social contexts in which mindfulness has originated may change the nature and effects of its practice (Kirmayer, 2015), research examining mindfulness practice in Africa will provide further insights that will enrich both mindfulness theory and practice (Karl *et al.*, 2022), especially, as the region has been previously ignored in the conceptualisations of mindfulness in the mainstream literature. Yet, research examining mindfulness practice in the African context will also foster an integration of cultural relativist and cognitive-functional positions of organisational mindfulness, which will not only provide new insights into the ongoing debate on cultural and contextual views of mindfulness but will boost the growing prevalent cross-cultural interactions in business settings (Thomas, 2006).

Using five theoretical lenses – mindfulness, emotional intelligence, leader–member exchange/team–member exchange (LMX/TMX), managerial psychology and organisational support system – our study explores the limits of mindfulness in African organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also examines how organisational interventions and supportive relational systems (e.g. cohesion, flexibility and communication) can foster social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by the pandemic. Specifically, using our empirical data from 20 business leaders from Ghana and Nigeria, we examine the effectiveness of organisational and managerial support systems in reviving the practice of mindfulness, by fostering employees' wellbeing, flexibility, engagement, communication, cohesion and organisational identification, damaged by the prolonged aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific research questions addressed by this paper are:

RQ1. How is mindfulness at work limited during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what factors are responsible for such a decrease in mindfulness within emerging market firms?

RQ2. How has the pandemic influenced LMX and TMX relationship qualities?

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RQ3. How can a managers/leader's emotional intelligence, social skills and supportive intervention patterns mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on LMX and TMX relationships?

RQ4. How effective are organisational interventions and supportive relational systems (e.g. cohesion, flexibility and communication) in fostering social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by the pandemic?

Our paper offers four distinctive contributions to the extant mindfulness and managerial psychology literature streams. First, we refer to the limits of mindfulness during the pandemic, i.e. we specifically established a link between the COVID-19 pandemic and a decrease in mindfulness among employees. Secondly, our paper is a pioneering study specifically highlighting the damaging impact of COVID-19-induced worries on LMX and TMX relationships, particularly in African context. Thirdly, the paper is one of the first studies depicting how managers/leader's emotional intelligence, social skills and supportive intervention patterns play a role in restoring the damaged employee's wellbeing due the pandemic. Finally, an in-depth assessment of the effectiveness of organisational interventions and supportive relational systems (e.g. cohesion, flexibility and communication) in fostering social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by mindfulness, further strengthens the contributions of our paper.

The rest of this paper is structured as follow. The next section reviews the relevant literature. Section three presents the methodology and justifies the choices made. Section four presents and analyses the findings. The last section presents the discussion, conclusion and implications, along with future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1 LMX/TMX as work relationships in an organisation

Work relationships are considered as a foundation for organisational life and powerful sources of connections, engagement and vitality (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008; Dutton and Ragins, 2007; Kahn, 2007; Stephens *et al.*, 2012). Organisational researchers argue that positive work relationships not only attract employees to their workplace but also improve quality of organisational life (Ehrhardt and Ragins, 2019). LMX is one of the core concepts in work relationship studies, referring to interpersonal relationship quality between high level individuals and related subordinates (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Scholars have explored LMX/TMX in various aspects, for example, Kahn (2007) suggests that individuals become more connected with leaders if their work relationships are positive within an organisation. Individuals in a team have needs and expectations to obtain social interactions via work relations (Ehrhardt and Ragins, 2019). Via social interactions, relational attachment at work is established between individual, leaders, teams and organisation. Thereafter, a psychological bond is constructed. Kahn (2007) also predicts that people are more likely to have this kind of experience when teams and organisations are able to provide chances to meet their expectations.

Scholars of LMX and TMX are aware of importance of the relational quality between individuals and leader/teams. Sluss and Ashforth (2007) argue that positive experiences and feelings of the team can be transferred to their organisations. Several empirical studies bring out evidence to support this proposition and suggest constructs towards the positive effect of LMX and TMX relationships within organisations, for instance, performance rating (Carson *et al.*, 2004), team mindfulness (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018), feedback-seeking (Wu, 2018), relational attachment (Ehrhardt and Ragins, 2019), voicing (Li *et al.*, 2018), political climate (Park *et al.*, 2022) and leader–follower dyads (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Given these contributive aspects, explorations are all of quantitative approaches.

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Good *et al.* (2016) suggest psychological experience of team are beneficial to mindfulness and outcomes of team performance (Nieves and Osorio, 2017). Positive psychological process amongst team members allows individuals to establish successful procedures and identify opportunities for improvement (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018); and impose intervention between high job demands and low job resources (Molina and O'Shea, 2020). Shen *et al.* (2019) argue that supportive relationships from team leader within organisations very much impact psychological feelings. This is because team level resources, such as team potency, mental models, team capacity to improvise and psychological safety, interlock routines relative to team members (Stoverink *et al.*, 2018; Degbey and Einola, 2020).

Having reviewed studies with quantitative scales, there is a need to investigate how the psychological connections and relationships are built up between team/leader and individuals. In particular, previous studies do take a quantitative approach to see how team/leader and individuals fit each other and leave a gap for us to research mental or psychological process from a qualitative perspective of mindfulness as following.

2.2 Mindfulness in organisational effectiveness

Mindfulness has been an important feature of Buddhist mental training for a long time. Mindfulness research and activity are surging in recent years (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Leroy *et al.*, 2013). Particularly within organisational science, scholars recognise its broad and positive impacts on human functioning from psychology, neuroscience and medicine perspectives (Olano *et al.*, 2015; Black, 2015). Mindfulness is an experiential process, involving attention to the internal, such as thought or emotion, or external stimulus itself in a registering of the information that an individual observes (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Dane and Brummel, 2014). It is used to connect with emotional regulation as a mindful state of consciousness which is aimed to facilitate the awareness and observation of emotions without personal judgement (Molina and O'Shea, 2020; Glomb *et al.*, 2011; Reb *et al.*, 2015). Scholars attempt to discover featured aspects of mindfulness despite challenges from its internal state, which is difficult to be observed and described (Good *et al.*, 2016). In this research, we follow a definition proposed by Brown *et al.* (2007) that mindfulness is "receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience" (p. 212). We take it as this definition reflects a commonly accepted understanding and has considerable ambiguity of how mindfulness intersects with workplace functioning.

Mindfulness is mostly considered as an individual quality. Empirical evidence suggests that it affects interpersonal behaviour and quality of dyadic and workgroup relationships (Good *et al.*, 2016). For instance, Reb *et al.* (2014) find that leaders' dispositional mindfulness was associated with attitudes and behaviours of more favourable subordinates via improved relationship quality. Much broader literature outside of management contexts also evidences the positive effects of mindfulness on individual relationship quality in such as greater attention to others, better communication, reduced conflict, reduced emotional reactivity and greater expression of other-directed emotions (e.g. compassion and empathy). Carson and colleagues find that individuals who participated in mindfulness practice tend to show improvements, compared to controls, in relationship management, including satisfaction, relatedness, closeness and acceptance of the partner (Carson *et al.*, 2004). Mindfulness, therefore, is believed to improve interactive relationships via sustained attentions, leading to improved communication and emotional information capacity (Wachs and Cordova, 2007).

Researchers also find that mindfulness positively affects inter-relationships between individuals and organisations. Mindfulness practices are to build up better work relationships in terms of attention, cognition, emotions, behaviour and physiology (Glomb *et al.*, 2011) in organisational performance (Dane, 2011), innovation (Vogus and Welbourne, 2003), turnover (Dane and Brummel, 2014), decisions (Hafenbrack *et al.*, 2013), and quality and safety (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2007). For instance, researchers find that outcomes of team

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meetings have been improved to more active listening, more patient-focused discussion and collaboration, and much greater respect for each other in an experiment of mindfulness-based interventions in multidisciplinary therapeutic treatment (Singh *et al.*, 2006). In another study, team performance is found to be more cohesive and collective after a short mindfulness induction to individual participants without formal leadership in teams (Cleirigh and Greaney, 2014).

Dark side of mindfulness is also a concern, despite positive impact of mindfulness by researchers as it runs to risk of misappropriation of instrumental ends at organisation levels (Burton and Vu, 2021). Donald *et al.* (2019) argue that mindfulness practices often have a chance of diverting moral and ethical individual behaviour and paying more attention on sense of self and ego of individuals. This could eventually lead to social liabilities (Inkpen and Tsang, 2016). In Westernised and developed societies, such as Europe and North America, mindfulness has been emphasised decontextualisation due to its original liberating and transformative purpose (Purser and Loy, 2013). As such, mindfulness is taken as a means of therapeutic and self-help technique rather than a process to awaken individuals from the "unwholesome roots of greed" (Burton and Vu, 2021, p. 144). Therefore, ignorance of differences of transferring individual mindfulness to organisational levels could be inclined to emphasise instrumentality and subsumes its authenticity associated with the economic purpose of organisations (Vu *et al.*, 2018; Vu and Gill, 2018; Glomb *et al.*, 2011).

2.3 Team mindfulness and TMX/LMX

It has been widely recognised that mindfulness may be helpful in team building, buffering against tensions, and ultimately uniting team members to improve team performance (Montani *et al.*, 2020). Contrasting to individual mindfulness, team mindfulness is an organisational property emerging from team experience and relationships between members (Carter *et al.*, 2018; Ni *et al.*, 2022), not an aggregation of each individual's mindfulness (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018). It is considered as "a shared belief among team members that team interactions are characterised by awareness and attention to present events, and by experiential, non-judgmental processing of within-team experiences" (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018, p. 326). With shared cognitive states in team, members develop collectively through various experience in the team (Marks *et al.*, 2001; Selart *et al.*, 2020). Emergent states and processes are integrated and become outcomes of team interactions (Somech *et al.*, 2009; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, in the context of team working, mindfulness is an interpersonal and collective cognition process alongside interactions among different members (e.g. Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012; Vogus *et al.*, 2022). As teams interact, members observe, experience and learn how to approach to common tasks, as well as what actions are admissible (e.g. Bettenhausen and Murnighan, 1991; Sinha *et al.*, 2021). Shared interaction experience exerts team-level impact on perceptions, which encourages the emergence of team mindfulness (van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2013).

Scholars find that teams with high levels of mindfulness often present "greater focused attention and experiential, non-judgmental processing in subsequent interactions" (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018, p. 327). Mindful interaction and emergent state mindfulness lead to reinforce virtue cycles in teamwork (van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2013). Whereas negative interactions and relationships between team members usually bring out low levels of mindfulness of team, such as abusive supervision (Shen *et al.*, 2019). This is because negative relationships have a relatively strong effect on individual psychological experience, which is rare, but its surprising nature tends to amplify severe impact on human individuals (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2018; Lian *et al.*, 2012). Thus, researchers suggest that members of high LMX team have less chances to face negative relationships as their leaders more focus on employee worth and performance and provide emotional and instrumental support when they have difficulties

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(Maslyn *et al.*, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2018). Conversely, members of low LMX do not expect recognition from leaders, neither trust nor respect to support task completion within the team.

Despite these emerging outcomes on LMX and mindfulness, management scholars still have not yet managed to undertake the challenge of the process that mindfulness affects teamwork (Good *et al.*, 2016, p. 15; see also Hülsheger, 2015). Modern firms are very much team-based, which indicates the importance of understanding how mindfulness operates in team works and value of the mindfulness concept itself. More importantly, we are in an era facing challenges from COVID-19 continuous impacts of far-reaching implications for family life, work and their interaction. Indirect social contact and regular restrictions and suspensions reduce positive aspects of work life. When individuals have to adapt to the pandemic-influenced life, understanding of mindfulness operation process could be an effective approach to guide what team members and leaders already put into action in teams (Glomb *et al.*, 2011; Sutcliffe *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, we are developing and constructing a mindfulness conceptualisation module to advance both theoretical and practical knowledge on this.

2.4 Mindfulness and organisational support (systems) during COVID-19

Prior literature has established that mindfulness is a beneficial psychological resource in workplace settings, especially in the context of change readiness in organisations (e.g. Gartner, 2013) and dealing with unforeseen events (e.g. Kutsch and Hall, 2020). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is such an unforeseen event, resulting in significant sudden adjustments in both employees' and leaders' routines and work approaches (Kramer and Kramer, 2020; Collings *et al.*, 2021). This unexpected event also brings a series of impacts from social exclusion due to the intended reduction of physical contact. In this event, social exclusion significantly influences individuals' behaviour (Wang and Lalwani, 2019). Social exclusion itself deteriorates self-regulation (Baumeister and DeWall, 2005), highlights lethargy (Twenge *et al.*, 2003) as it makes individuals have feelings of sadness, anger or distress (Leary and Leder, 2009).

A key element of mindfulness relates to reducing or avoiding abrupt reactions to sudden changes (external stimuli) by such individuals, which ultimately is helpful in the development of a measured response (Andrews *et al.*, 2014; Byrne and Thatchenkery, 2019). Also, mindful individuals are expected to evaluate whether their actions or strategies are subject to biases based on prior experiences (Gartner, 2013; Hulsheger, 2015), as well as show a greater level of flexibility in their attitudes compared to the individuals who react rather abruptly (e.g. Good *et al.*, 2016). Hence, there is evidence in prior research that mindful individuals' flexibility helps them cope with changes including unexpected events (e.g. Dane and Brummel, 2014; Hulsheger, 2015) without becoming demotivated. It has further been argued that mindful individuals are able to identify counterproductive thinking patterns and therefore deal with unexpected circumstances better due to self-regulation (Avey *et al.*, 2008; Gartner, 2013) and avoid stressful behaviour (Gondo *et al.*, 2013). In a recent study specifically focusing on the role of mindfulness while dealing with changes due to COVID-19, Roemer *et al.* (2021, p. 919) refer to mindful individuals as "observational, descriptive, non-judgemental, non-reactional and aware of their feelings, thoughts and actions, has the potential to enhance readiness for change". Their findings supported the notion that mindfulness plays a major role in helping organisational employees dealing with sudden changes and shocks associated with COVID-19.

In their study, Lusiantoro *et al.* (2022) stressed the importance of mindfulness at the organisational level, including both leaders and employees in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic particularly for the small businesses. This study specifically highlighted the important element of social learning emanating from the mindfulness, and the role played by these in exploiting business opportunities during the uncertain and risky COVID-19 times.

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Finally, another recent study by Chen and Eyoun (2021) focused on job insecurity and emotional exhaustion in front line hospitality sector employees during COVID-19 pandemic. They found mindfulness to play an important role for these employees during these tough times, along with another important aspect of organisational support.

Organisational support (systems) is an important depiction of the extent to which an employer (organisational leader) values the contributions of the employees and addresses the concerns regarding wellbeing (e.g. Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; Nazir *et al.*, 2019). Such support systems have been found in the prior studies to enhance job satisfaction and contribute to the employees' sense of organisational belongingness and obligation to reciprocate (e.g. Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Liang *et al.*, 2019). Organisational support systems are also found to enhance intrinsic motivation, positive affectivity and self-efficacy, which will in turn lead to positive psychological and organisational outcomes such as reduced emotional exhaustion (Michel *et al.*, 2013). Since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, several studies have been undertaken to establish that organisational support systems play an important role in helping employees deal with changes, shocks and insecurities associated with it. However, the direct linkage between organisational support systems and mindfulness during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are relatively rarely researched. The literature review reveals only two studies Chen and Eyoun (2021) and Vogus *et al.* (2022), where organisational support systems (or mechanisms) have been found to contribute to the development of mindfulness in employees either directly or indirectly. However, this is an essential aspect, which we have also tried to explore in our empirical research in African context, as explained in the later sections.

3. Research methodology

We have adopted a qualitative method and our research design is exploratory, with an interpretive philosophy. To demonstrate the validity (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; O'Reilly *et al.*, 2012) and the level of rigour involved (Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010) in our research, this section discusses and justifies the research activities involved in our data collection and data analysis processes. Initially, 40 participants – 24 from Nigeria and 16 from Ghana – were targeted. But data collection ceased after the 20th participant was interviewed, as data saturation was reached at this point. Therefore, our research participants were 20 entrepreneurs – 14 from Nigeria and 6 from Ghana – who admitted that their workers have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Bearing in mind the focus of this study – the limits of mindfulness during COVID-19 pandemic – we picked firms that admitted that the pandemic has restricted the practice of mindfulness, and in a manner that has affected subsequent relational systems (e.g. LMX and TMX relationships), positive work behaviours and employee thriving. Our sampling method was purposive. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the purpose of sampling (Saunders *et al.*, 2019) and the characteristics of the target participants (White *et al.*, 2018) are distinctive.

3.1 Data collection

The data collection is consistent with Liu and Rong's (2015) suggestion on allowing interview participants enough time to respond to each question without being interrupted. We adopted a semi-structured interview, which focused on our four research questions. The focus of the interview include: (1) to find out how mindfulness at work was limited during the COVID-19 pandemic and what factors were responsible for such decrease in mindfulness in each firm, (2) to determine how the pandemic (coupled with such decrease in mindfulness) might have influenced LMX and TMX relationship qualities in each firm, (3) to examines how a manager's/leader's emotional intelligence, social skills and supportive intervention patterns

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can mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on LMX and TMX relationships, and (4) to assess the effectiveness of organisational interventions and supportive relational systems (e.g. cohesion, flexibility and communication) in fostering social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by mindfulness. The data was collected between August 2021 and December 2021 and due to COVID-related-restrictions, the interviews were held through video conferencing. Each interview lasted approximately 40 min. Before the interview, each participant's consent was sought via email exchanges with the researchers. Although participants chose their preferred date and time, these were changed on many occasions, and, in some instances, based on participants' availability, interviews were done in parts. Participants were all SMEs selected from a wide range of sectors – tourism and hospitality, event management, transportation/haulage, logistics, retail supermarkets (groceries), real estate, construction, importation and distribution, the exportation of locally made products, and oil and gas. To provide further information about our participants, Table 1 below offers information on our interviewees' background and firm characteristics. Specifically, the table below illustrates the participants' gender, their age categories, their number of years of previous experiences, their sectors and the length of each interview.

Table 2 below shows our data collection process, including the steps involved and the activities we accomplished.

3.2 Ethical issues

As a general principle, we have taken the necessary steps to minimise the level of risk to the barest minimum. For instance, none of our research participants were vulnerable adults or below the age of 18, the research topic is not dealing with any sensitive issues, the interview was conducted in secured environments and the participants' consent was

S/N	Participant gender	Age	No of years of relevant experience	Firm characteristics	Interview duration
1	M	41	9	Export	43
2	M	50	15	Real Estate	44
3	F	54	12	Groceries	41
4	M	46	16	Transportation	46
5	F	58	11	Import and Dist	40
6	M	42	10	Construction	49
7	F	40	7	Logistics	46
8	M	56	14	Transportation	51
9	F	50	17	Import and Dist	42
10	F	51	15	Construction	45
11	M	39	10	Export	43
12	M	52	12	Oil and Gas	47
13	M	44	14	Real Estate	41
14	M	58	19	Groceries	54
15	F	49	12	Logistics	43
16	M	47	10	Oil and Gas	46
17	M	45	15	Construction	42
18	F	54	20	Event Mgt	42
19	M	40	13	Groceries	40
20	M	59	15	Tourism and Hospitality	43
Total = 20 participants					Total = 888 min

Table 1. Participant information

Source(s): Authors' own creation

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Steps	Activities
Step 1	Establish the focus and scope of the research
Step 2	Develop the research questions
Step 3	Decide the individual firms to include in the research
Step 4	Decide the appropriate research instruments and protocols, e.g. the appropriate qualitative data gathering techniques: in this case, the semi-structured interview
Step 5	Determine the 'suitable' participants: a vertical and horizontal slice of the participants to ensure each prospective participant is an entrepreneur/owner-manager
Step 6	Data collection period – Ghana (August 2021–September 2021)
Step 7	Data collection period – Nigeria (September 2021–December 2021)
Step 8	Data analysis (See below for the steps involved)
Step 9	Dissemination: report and article development

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 2.
Data collection process

sought prior to the interview. Also, they were aware that they have the right to withdraw from the interview or to choose that we do not use any (or all) of their responses. Therefore, the project is deemed as low risk (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

3.3 Data analysis

3.3.1 The Eisenhardt method. Given the theoretical argument required to explain the damaging effects of COVID-19-induced concerns on mindfulness practice and the effectiveness of organisational and managerial support systems in restoring employee wellbeing, social connectedness and attachment to their organisations, we needed an iterative method of incessant comparison of data and theory. Accordingly, our data analysis has drawn from "Eisenhardt Method" (Eisenhardt, 2021; Eisenhardt, 1989a, b), from Yin's (1984) work on cases (and replication logic), and Strauss and Corbin (2008) ground-breaking methods of theoretical sampling and saturation.

3.4 Justifications for adopting the "Eisenhardt Method"

This section shows our justification for choosing the "Eisenhardt Method". First, our research is the first empirical research that examines the damaging effects of COVID-19-induced concerns on mindfulness practice and the effectiveness of organisational and managerial support systems in minimising social exclusion caused by COVID-19-induced worries. By connecting COVID-19, mindfulness, LMX and TMX relationships, we have discovered and examined an unexplored phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989b). Third, due to the scarcity of prior research examining the limits of mindfulness during the pandemic, there are high possibilities that our results will produce a variety of opportunities for building new theories (Eisenhardt, 2021), or for improving a prevailing empirical focus (Eisenhardt, 2021; Hallen and Eisenhardt, 2012; Kirtley and O'Mahony, 2023).

Additionally, our research questions explore a new phenomenon in an exclusive setting (Eisenhardt, 2021) – limitations on mindfulness due to COVID-19-induced-concerns in emerging market firms. Through theoretical sampling, it is therefore easier to eliminate those firms that are not of our theoretical interests, i.e. those that lack the necessary characteristics (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). By selecting cases of same focal phenomenon and from two culturally distinct countries (Bingham and Eisenhardt, 2011), our result can boost transferability (i.e. generalisability) of the emergent theory across different settings (Eisenhardt, 2021).

Given the level of rigour required in inductive research (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), the data analysis must aim to achieve a fit between the dominant theory and the data collected

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(Eisenhardt, 2021). To achieve such a *fit,* Yin (1984) has suggested a repetition of logic, while Strauss and Corbin (2008) recommend the incessant comparison of data. We have also utilised a reiterative sorting, grouping, and regrouping of our raw data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) while creating more abstract concepts (Walsh *et al.*, 2015), repeatedly. These have also helped us justify why certain relationships amongst constructs must hold (Eisenhardt, 2021), and thus strengthening the theoretical arguments (Eisenhardt, 2021, 1989a). Finally, given the similarities in our data sets from multiple cases (Bechky and Okhuysen, 2011) and the level of logic required in building solid theoretical arguments (Eisenhardt, 2021) as discussed above, our data analysis has drawn on Alo (2020) and Braun and Clarke (2006) recommendations on the six-stage-sequence of the qualitative data analysis process.

3.5 The six-stage data analysis process

3.5.1 Data familiarisation. We commenced our data analysis process by listening to our recorded interview a few times. Listening to each of the files several times has helped us become familiar with their contents. This was followed by data transcription – converting all the audio files into written ones. For a thorough transcription, we cross-checked all the written texts against their original audio files. While no differences were found, for ease of display (Alo, 2020), we had to amend a few quotes.

3.5.2 Generating the initial codes. With the data transcription completed, the next stage was the coding of the interview transcripts. The aim of our data coding was to ensure that all data with similar meanings are unified under one category. This was achieved by sorting and putting the transcribed data in unifying categories. To help with identification, each data group was assigned a conceptual tag. This process was incessant until adequate unique categories were developed, which has distinguished the various data groups (Eisenhardt, 1989a; Strauss and Corbin, 2008). This comprehensive coding method has facilitated an alignment between the identified themes and their corresponding raw interview data (Goulding, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 2008). Although there were separate categories distinguishing each data group, a few mix-ups were noticed. This required that the raw interview data were revisited on a few occasions to amend and recode them, before they were reassigned to their corresponding themes. This has helped to enhance validity (Alo, 2020). Table 3 below shows the categories, subcategories and themes.

3.5.3 Searching for themes. The next step was to create a more meaningful expression for each data group. This required writing four unique statements that address our four research questions, i.e. one for each. These statements were derived from our four categories of data set (in Table 1 above) and served as the themes for the data analysis process. These themes have helped us examine how COVID-19-induced worries have caused restrictions on mindfulness at work, and the effectiveness of organisational and managerial support systems in minimising social exclusion caused by COVID-19-induced concerns. See our data analysis section for an understanding of how these corresponding themes relate with our interview quotes and their interpretation.

3.5.4 Reviewing the themes. This fourth step required examining the whole data analysis process by a team of three well-experienced qualitative researchers. These research experts acted as both critical friends (Kember *et al.*, 1997) and research auditors (Filho and Rettig, 2016). Some peer debriefing meetings took place and each meeting was followed by constructive feedback. There were instances that required that a few data units were recoded and regrouped.

3.5.5 Redefinition and renaming of themes. Based on the recommendations of our critical fiends, for clarity, we redefined and renamed a few of the regrouped data sets, and which helped to maximise each theme. By maximising the identified themes (Alo, 2020), this will enhance the readers' understanding of the important relationship between several constructs involved in the study, and thus strengthening the study's validity.

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Categories	Subcategories	Themes
Covid-19-induced concerns	* Many employees were sacked * The survivors were placed on half/reduced salaries * A resultant increase in financial/personal challenges, and economic hardship * Survivors showing sympathy for their colleagues who have been laid off	*Evidence of Restricted mindfulness practice* * At work, employees became overly conscious of these Covid-19-induced challenges, at the expense of other events in their workplaces *(N = 15)*
Social exclusion caused by Covid-19-induced worries	* Employees began to show signs of withdrawal, lack of additional discretionary efforts, lack of engagement and lack of commitment, and, (sometimes) recalcitrant behaviour at work	*Low LMX and TMX relationships qualities* * Evidence of damaged manager-subordinate and employee-employee relationships owing to the psychological distress caused by lock down and social distancing *(N = 14)*
The managers/leaders adopting various intervention patterns to mitigate the negative impact of Covid-19 on LMX and TMX relationships	* Managers spot signs of Covid-19-induced concerns and invite affected employees for meetings * Managers provide financial aid, either as soft loans, salary advance, and cash donations to affected employees	*Manager's/leader's emotional intelligence, social skills and supportive intervention patterns* * Employees began to show signs of recovery *(N = 12)*
Renewed cohesion, flexibility and communication through organisational interventions	* Employees were allowed to work from home and/or to work compressed hours * Employees were provided the opportunities to work part time elsewhere * Employees were helped to achieve work life balance * Improved communication patterns and support systems in the organisations	*Effectiveness of Organisational interventions and supportive relational systems* * Minimised the economic hardship, improved LMX and TMX relationships *(N = 12)* * Employee engagement and commitments improved *(N = 14)*

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 3.
Categories, subcategories, and themes

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3.5.6 Report writing. A thorough report writing is needed to further interpret and clarify the results. Thus, report writing is at the heart of a good research paper (Alo, 2020). Through an in-depth examination of the data to further unpack the link between the interview quotes and their corresponding extant literature, our discussion section further clarifies the important relationship between the raw data and their corresponding literature. To achieve this, we have followed Liu and Rong (2015) recommendations to constantly move back and forth, the findings and the dominant theory, while continuously making strong comparisons and connections between the raw data and the corresponding literature.

4. Findings

This section will utilise the interview responses to examine how COVID-19-induced worries have restricted mindfulness practice in emerging market firms, and the effectiveness of organisational and managerial support systems in minimising the social exclusion caused by COVID-19-induced concerns in these firms. This will offer fresh insights into the limits of mindfulness. To achieve the four objectives listed above, we selected our participants from two countries, as we expected that contextual/cultural influences (e.g. the entrepreneurial environment, individual organisational contexts, governmental response to COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) could vary the impact of the pandemic on mindfulness in each country. In contrast, our participants followed a common pattern in their responses, as we could not identify any noticeable differences on how COVID-19 has impacted mindfulness practice in these organisations. A common pattern in the data shows that workers were worried about the financial and personal challenges caused by the prolonged period of COVID-19 lock down. Consequently, signs of withdrawal, lack of commitment, a limit on mindfulness at work and, sometimes, recalcitrant behaviour were noticed. Also, as we reviewed the interview responses, we found that these organisations utilise the same managerial interventions and supportive relational systems (e.g. cohesion, flexibility and communication) to foster social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by the pandemic. In terms of managerial interventions and supportive relational systems adopted, managers who were quick to spot these signs (of restricted mindfulness) early enough would invite employees for meeting, and, subsequently, provide some support. Given these similarities in the data collected from both countries, we realised that doing a comparative study between these two countries would be senseless. We, therefore, decided that combining the data from both countries would be sensible. To help us make sense of the data, four themes which were deduced from the literature review section are used to analyse the data as below.

4.1 Linking COVID-19 pandemic and a restriction on mindfulness practice among employees in African firms

Although mindfulness enables mindful individuals cope with unexpected changes/events (Dane and Brummel, 2014; Hulsheger, 2015), the shocks associated with the pandemic (e.g. COVID-19-induced economic hardship and psychological distress) have restricted mindfulness practice in these organisations. For instance, our participants revealed that due to the economic hardship caused by a prolonged period of COVID-19-induced lockdown, many employees were sacked, while the survivors were placed on half/reduced salaries. This resulted in an increased financial and personal challenges, especially, inability to pay their rents or to provide stable foods for their families. Such concerns overly occupied their minds, and thus restricting mindfulness at work:

> . . . my workers are really struggling to make both ends meet . . . especially since the pandemic, I have noticed from their timelines that there is always something wrong in their lives (Ghanaian participant 1).

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> . . . When I approach them, they have always said they are afraid of losing their jobs, as most companies are laying off staff (Nigerian participant 11).
>
> . . . He then opened up to me that he was having an accommodation issue (Nigerian participant 13).

Given that mindfulness is a critical psychological resource at work, especially in changing (Gartner, 2013) or unexpected situations (Kutsch and Hall, 2020), organisational priority is to restore mindfulness of employees. Yet, this was very difficult to achieve due to the severity of the crisis faced by these organisations. This is due to emotional and psychological exhaustion (Twenge *et al.*, 2003), resultant feelings of sadness, anger, or distress (Leary and Leder, 2009) and economic crisis caused by the pandemic. These challenges affected both individual's and teams' ability to practice mindfulness at work, especially, during the lockdown:

> . . . especially at the peak of the lock down most times my staff have complained about lack of food for their family due to their low income (Nigerian participant 3).
>
> . . . social distancing was also more difficult for them to bear as there were only a few people on site due to the downsizing (Nigerian participant 12).

As a psychological process, mindfulness involves paying attention to internal challenges, thought, or emotion and external stimulus observed by an individual (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Teasdale, 1999). Unfortunately, these were difficult to realise during our data collection period, as employees' ability to concentrate at work in these organisations was restricted. Furthermore, as a state of emotional consciousness, mindfulness also epitomises personal observation of emotions without personal judgement (Molina and O'Shea, 2020; Glomb *et al.*, 2011; Reb *et al.*, 2015). These suggest that the right (and stable) state of mind is required for mindfulness to flourish. Yet, our next set of quotes reveals that, due to a team's awareness and attention to present events and team's experiences [of the COVID-19 pandemic] (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018, p. 326), such a shared belief triggered a shared cognitive state in the team (Marks *et al.*, 2001), restricting mindfulness of team (Morgeson and Hofmann, 1999; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2013):

> They lost the zeal to work due to fear of the unknown (Nigerian participant 14).
>
> One of them [i.e. his staff] has once approached me to show their sympathy for their colleagues who have been laid off, asking me where those people can get a job in this hard time? (Nigerian participant 8).
>
> . . . having laid off some of their colleagues, my staff have not been feeling any better, as I have noticed that they have been moody sometimes (Ghanaian participant 3).

Given the prevalent food-deficit (Mothobi and Grzybowski, 2017), the very low disposable income (Porter, 2016) and stagnant incomes in most of the African population, many households are already heavily indebted (IMF, 2016). While these poor economic situations are linked to the institutional void (Atiase *et al.*, 2018) and corruption (Sassi and Ben Ali, 2017) in the continent, the prolonged COVID-19 lock down has exacerbated the economic hardships and regulated the mind of an average African. Consequently, employees were thinking about the deteriorated economic hardship and the shock brought about by the pandemic, at the expense of mindfulness practice at work. Mindfulness is a critical factor in developing a measured response to a shock such as the pandemic, or in avoiding a hasty reaction to such sudden changes (Andrews *et al.*, 2014; Byrne and Thatchenkery, 2019), as mindful individuals can cope with changes and unforeseen events (Dane and Brummel, 2014; Hulsheger, 2015) due to their self-regulation (Avey *et al.*, 2008; Gartner, 2013) and their ability to avoid stressful behaviour (Gondo *et al.*, 2013). Researchers also argue that agile

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organisations respond well to a crisis/changing situation through flexibility in their workplace routine (Kramer and Kramer, 2020; Collings *et al.*, 2021), and yet the severity of the pandemic can affect the abilities of leaders and followers to self-regulate (Baumeister and DeWall, 2005) and vary their work routines. Furthermore, apart from the pandemic-induced concerns, our participants were facing additional burden caused by the institutional void in the region. This was evident in the above quotes, and the next set of quotes shows how these concerns can affect LMX and TMX relationship qualities, and thus team mindfulness.

4.2 Linking COVID-19-induced concerns, low LMX and TMX relationships qualities and team mindfulness in African firms

As a product of relational and collective thought process and team interactions (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012; Vogus *et al.*, 2022), team mindfulness can rekindle the damaged relationship and foster a team (re)building process (Montani *et al.*, 2020). This can be crucial in minimising the tensions caused by the pandemic. Recent studies (e.g. Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018, p. 326) also found the impact of a collective thought process and team interactions on team (re)building process, and thus on team mindfulness. Developed through their shared cognition (Marks *et al.*, 2001; Selart *et al.*, 2020) and awareness of the damaging impact of the pandemic, our participants revealed that their teams began to show abrupt signs of quietness. This can restrict (or be mistaken as) mindfulness at work:

> Recently, some of my staff have been so quiet and seem to have lost focus on the job. I have been noticing more of such changes in their behaviours recently (Ghanaian participant 4).

> . . . some people that we had to layoff initially was because of the dull moment we observed in them. There is no dull moment in the logistics sector . . . there is no hiding place for you in this industry (Nigerian participant 1).

Although employees' positive work-related experiences and team interactions can create psychological bond and relational attachment to their teams and organisation (Kahn, 2007), thus minimising the pandemic's impact, the above quotes reveal that COVID-19-induced concerns can negatively impact this relational attachment. Similarly, the next quotes also reveal that affected employees began to show signs of withdrawal, lack of additional discretionary efforts, lack of engagement and lack of commitment, and, sometimes, recalcitrant behaviour at work. Such negative attitudes not only damage interpersonal relationships in teams, but team mindfulness:

> . . . because when one person is not sending out the positive message through facial expressions, it could dampen team's morale and cohesion . . . if you are talking to your staff and they are not giving you the energy and enthusiasm you expect, as a manager, you won't like to reach out to that staff next time (Ghanaian participant 6).

> . . . he might sigh, and when somebody sighs, it sends a bad message to whoever they are communicating with. So, it was probably beginning to affect the whole team (Nigerian participant 2).

Research has found that members of high LMX relationship are less likely to experience such negative relationships (cited above), as their leaders are more likely to provide emotional and instrumental support when followers encounter difficulties (Maslyn *et al.*, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2018). Yet, personal challenges [caused by crisis situations] can severely affect individual psychological experience (Hobman *et al.*, 2009; Lian *et al.*, 2012), as well as a leader's ability to sustain a high LMX relationship quality, especially, as the leader is also affected by similar pandemic-induced concerns. This will not only harm subsequent LMX/TMX relationship qualities, but on team mindfulness. Defined as "a shared belief among team members that team interactions are characterised by awareness and attention to present events, and by experiential, non-judgmental processing of within-team experiences"

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(Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018, p. 326), team mindfulness is an organisational property which results from team experience and relationships between members (Carter *et al.*, 2018; Ni *et al.*, 2022), and not an aggregation of each individual mindfulness (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018). Accordingly, our next set of quotes illustrates that, at the expense of experiential, non-judgmental processing of within-team experiences, individuals have various personal (and pandemic-induced) challenges, which do not reflect a collective experience in the team (Marks *et al.*, 2001; Selart *et al.*, 2020), and thus are not helpful for developing team mindfulness:

> People in this part of the world have been experiencing so many challenges due to poor economic situations, and Covid-19 has made their situations even worse. Since the pandemic, on daily basis, staff have been informing me about their various personal and family challenges, such as their sick parents or family members or lack of stable food, and I have been helping them the much I can (Nigerian participant 1).

Such personal challenges cited above can restrict an opportunity to develop/practice mindfulness in teams, due to lack of team interaction and shared experiences on new approaches to everyday problems (e.g. Bettenhausen and Murnighan, 1991; Sinha *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, negative interactions and weak relationships between team members usually reveal low levels of mindfulness of team (Shen *et al.*, 2019). This is because negative relationships have a relatively strong effect on individual psychological experience, which is rare, but its surprising nature tends to amplify severe impact on individuals (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2018; Lian *et al.*, 2012), as well as their teams. Consequently, when a manager fails to observe or respond to a subordinate's personal concerns, the person can take it out on their colleagues and managers, as they can easily get angry on things they normally would not. This is evident in our next set of interview quotes, as employees normally come to work with various pandemic-induced concerns which they reflect on whilst at work, and sometimes they began to show signs of withdrawal, or even taking it out on those they work with:

> Indeed, employees engage in such calmness more during the Covid-19 pandemic than the pre-Covid-19 era (Ghanian participant 5).

> The lock down made most staff, including the most active staff to become quieter . . ., they expressed their anger over being restricted to staying at home for two months. One particular staff was influencing his colleagues negatively. This caused problem between the manager and the employee (Nigerian participant 12).

> . . . for those who engage in such sudden calmness or quietness, I have noticed that they will normally have grumbles or sometimes even accidents if I do not respond to their situations (Ghanaian participant 4).

The above quotes are consistent with prior empirical evidence that links mindfulness with interpersonal behaviour and the quality of dyadic and workgroup relationships (Good *et al.*, 2016). Likewise, Chen and Eyoun (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic has negative impacts on job insecurity, and thus a resultant emotional exhaustion for employees and their teams. We argue that these pandemic-induced challenges can restrict mindfulness practice at work. Low levels of mindfulness of team have also been linked to negative interactions and low-level relationships between team members (Shen *et al.*, 2019), due to the strong impact of individual psychological experience on both LMX and TMX relationships qualities (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2018; Lian *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, since team interactions are influenced by set of circumstances surrounding the team (Somech *et al.*, 2009; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2013), including the level of interactions, team mindfulness, is, therefore, a product of relational and shared cognition process among different members (e.g. Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012; Vogus *et al.*, 2022). This is because, as teams interact, members observe, experience and learn how to approach their everyday tasks, familiarise with the team's norms, as they understand what

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actions are acceptable (e.g. Bettenhausen and Murnighan, 1991; Sinha *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, shared experience of interaction wields team-level impact on members' mindsets, which encourages the development of team mindfulness (van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2013). Compared to a virtue cycle, a correlation between team work, mindful interactions at work and the level of mindfulness in a team has been emphasised (e.g. Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018, p. 327). Despite such growing evidence linking LMX and TMX relationship qualities and team mindfulness, there is a paucity of empirical research examining the relationships between mindfulness and teamwork (Good *et al.*, 2016; Hülsheger, 2015). Given the importance of teamwork in modern organisational life, especially in a post pandemic era where positive work experiences, social interactions and team work have all been restricted, we call for more research examining how mindfulness at work has been affected, and the role of effective manager's emotional intelligence, their social skills and supportive intervention patterns in mitigating the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the dyadic relationships, and thus restoring mindfulness of team.

4.3 The effectiveness of a manager's/leader's emotional intelligence, social skills and supportive intervention patterns in mitigating the negative impact of COVID-19 on LMX and TMX relationships in African firms

Given that work relationships are powerful sources of connections, engagement, vitality and is thus the foundations for organisational life (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008; Dutton and Ragins, 2007; Kahn, 2007; Stephens *et al.*, 2012), organisational researchers have argued the role of managerial and organisational support systems in sustaining positive work relationships. Effective support systems not only attract employees to the workplace, but also foster high quality LMX relationship, and thus help to improve the quality of organisational life (Ehrhardt and Ragins, 2019). As such, effective support systems are crucial in helping an organisation to navigate through a crisis situation. We utilise the below quotes to show how some managers who were quick to spot signs of COVID-19-induced concerns early enough in employees invited affected employees for meetings. As employees revealed the difficulties they faced, these managers provided financial aid, either as soft loans or salary advance (but of not more than the employee's two months' salary) and, in a few instances, cash donations to affected employees:

> I had to invite the worker, have a chat with them to understand what the problem is, and sometimes I had to go extra miles, e.g. giving them cash gift of 200USD to solve their problem (Ghanaian participant 1).

> . . . sometimes, I have given free cash to my key staff to help them cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic (Nigerian participant 6).

Viewed as interpersonal relationship quality between high level individuals and related subordinates (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), LMX is at the foundation of work-relationship research. A research stream (e.g. Kahn, 2007), therefore, argue positive work relationship as not only the foundation for high quality LMX/TMX, but as key to employee attachment to the organisation. Argued as both a need (Maslow, 1943) and an expectation (Ehrhardt and Ragins, 2019), positive work relationship can be achieved via social interactions in teams (Kahn (2007), hence the need for understanding how manager's emotional intelligence, their social skills and supportive intervention patterns can foster positive experiences and feelings of team (and individuals), and how this can be transferred to their organisations. The next set of quotes reveal how managerial support can mitigate the challenges facing employees in a crisis situation, and thus fostering positive experiences at work:

> So, they have had a range of issues ranging from paying their children's school fees, house rent, cost of food and family upkeep, which demanded that I keep providing them with financial aid from time

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> to time. Otherwise, they won't be motivated enough and it could affect the quality of their performance (Ghanaian participant 5).
>
> . . . one of my staff rang me and said he wasn't going to turn up for work the next day, that he needed to go and look for money elsewhere as he was facing some financial hardship at home, and that the family does not have any food to eat. I told him that I can give you your salary in advance (Nigerian participant 9).

The above quotes are consistent with LMX and TMX research stream on organisational awareness of the importance of high-quality dyadic relationship, as members are likely to reciprocate and transfer both positive and negative experiences and feelings to their teams and their entire organisations (e.g. Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Consequently, through their support systems, organisations provide opportunities for employees to meet their life-expectations, even in crises. Yet, the next set of quotes shows that, at some point, in their attempt at fulfilling their responsibilities in the dyadic relationship and caring for their subordinates, managers were overwhelmed by these COVID-19 induced worries:

> At a point, I decided to stop asking them because I already know what the problem is . . . (Nigerian participant 11).
>
> I feel it was pointless to listen to their problems without providing a solution to them. But sometimes, I have given free cash to my key staff to help them cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic (Ghanaian participant 3).
>
> No, there isn't much I can do . . ., they know how difficult things have been and if something changes, they will know (Nigerian participant 6).

The role of team leaders in fostering a positive psychological experience by providing supportive relationships (Shen *et al.*, 2019) and team level resources (Stoverink *et al.*, 2018; Degbey and Einola, 2020) in a dyadic relationship has been emphasised. The role of a team's psychological experience in shaping team performance (Nieves and Osorio, 2017) and team mindfulness (Good *et al.*, 2016) has been emphasised. Positive psychological experience [and team level resources] is the foundation for performance improvement (Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018). Yet, positive psychological experience and team level resources were already restricted in these organisations by a range of issues. For instance, the housing crisis in African mega cities such as Accra and Lagos (where most of our participating firms are located) also contributes to the hardship faced by these employees, whose high percentage of their disposable income is already devoted to staple foods (Mothobi and Grzybowski, 2017).

4.4 The effectiveness of organisational interventions and supportive relational systems (e.g. cohesion, flexibility and communication) in fostering social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by COVID-19-induced worries

This section examines effective organisational interventions and supportive relational systems as strategic tools for rebuilding the bonds between employees and the team/organisation, following a social exclusion caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Effective support system is not only crucial for attracting and retaining talents, but is a key employer branding strategy. In a crisis situation, effective organisational interventions and supportive relational systems can serve as effective strategies for reassuring employees and stakeholders that an organisation cares for them, even in hard times. The below quotes show how managers allow employees to work from home and/or to work compressed/reduced hours during the COVID-19 pandemic, without affecting their wages. By helping to achieve work life balance and by providing employees with the opportunities to do part time jobs elsewhere, managers have utilised these measures to improve employees' wellbeing, minimise their economic

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hardship, improve their engagement and commitments, and thus fostering mindfulness practice at work:

> Since the pandemic the cost of transportation skyrocketed, so I have asked those who can work from home to do so, but in agreement with me to know what days they can be in the office (Nigerian participant 12).

> Apart from working remotely for most days of the weeks, for the two days we are on site [i.e. Mondays and Thursdays], we start at 9am, instead of 8am, and finish at 4pm, instead of 6pm (Ghanaian participant 5).

> What we do to support employees who are undergoing a Covid-19-induced challenge is that we bring in extra staff (mainly part time workers) to help reduce their workloads . . ., leaving them with only 25 percent of their original assignment (Nigerian participant 13).

Prior studies have recognised the link between organisations' support system and employees' wellbeing (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; Nazir *et al.*, 2019), high performance (Michel *et al.*, 2013), job satisfaction and psychological contract (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Liang *et al.*, 2019). Organisational support system is also argued a strategic option for minimising the impact of COVID-19 induced concerns – the shocks, health-related concerns, economic hardship and job insecurities. Therefore, effective organisational support system significantly correlates with mindfulness practice (Chen and Eyoun, 2021; Vogus *et al.*, 2022). However, some interventions are tailored to enhance organisational productivity, instead of employee wellbeing:

> Sometimes I give bonus or cash gift to my key staff to help them cope with the difficulties caused by the pandemic. This helps to reduce the rate of complains or [work related] accidents that the staff would normally involve in. Also, I have noticed that when you give them such perks, it increases their willingness . . . (Nigerian participant 7).

> When employees suddenly start becoming quieter, I always give them more assignments and duties to perform. I also send them to more courses or training (Nigerian participant 12).

Since mindfulness is a critical experiential process for fostering employee's attention, emotions, awareness, thought processes and response to stimulus (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Dane and Brummel, 2014), it is thus a key to mitigating the uncertainties that characterise the COVID-19 era. This highlights the need for effective organisational interventions and supportive relational systems, as a delayed or a lack of organisational intervention or unsupportive relational systems can have far-reaching consequences on employee's wellbeing, health and safety, organisational harmony, team spirit, productivity, and thus on mindfulness practice, especially, in a crisis situation. Participants emphasised the negative effect of a perceived failure to act swiftly or a delayed communication:

> . . . recently, an employee grumbled over their children's school fees and family upkeep allowance, and as they probably thought I was not going to do anything to support them they took it out on the members of their team, including co-workers and managers. They started complaining about every little thing, having arguments with managers and co-workers, being moody a times, and not wanting to go the extra miles (Ghanaian participant 3).

> Because of the level of risk involved in our type of business [i.e. haulage business], you will always like to act as quickly as you can if the staff [who is experiencing the challenge] is a haulage driver for instance. Otherwise, there will be many accidents, breakages and breakdowns recorded after each trip made by such driver (Nigerian participant 2).

Effective interventions and supportive relational systems have also been linked to improved LMX quality, leader's dispositional mindfulness and a resultant positive attitudes and behaviours of subordinates (Reb *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, mindfulness practice facilitates

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attention to the dyadic partner, better communication, reduced conflict, reduced emotional reactivity, improved communication, improved relationship management, job satisfaction, relatedness, closeness and acceptance of the partner (Carson *et al.*, 2004), and thus mindfulness of team. Based on their assessment of the wide-ranging and positive impacts of mindfulness on human functioning, scholars have found that the effectiveness of organisational support system – managerial and organisational interventions and supportive relational systems – depend on different orientations about life, managerial mindset and personality, as well as the size of the team (Olano *et al.*, 2015; Black, 2015). The findings of these prior researches resonate with our next set of quotes:

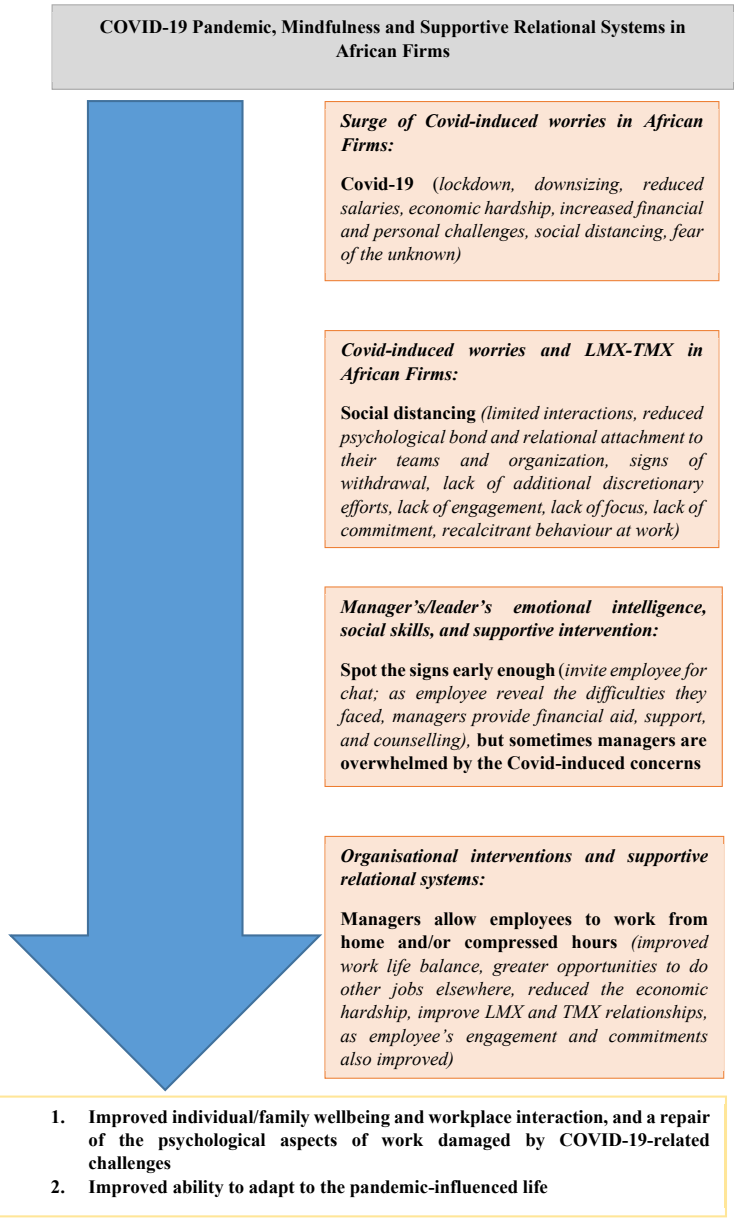
> It takes those that have the heart to give and those that have the fear of God (Nigerian participant 7).
>
> With a team of say 3,000 workers, it will be more difficult to look at each person's face on a day-to-day basis (Nigerian participant 9).
>
> I don't think I need to adjust the way I relate with a staff who is undergoing a Covid-19-related challenge, otherwise, I will keep on making the same adjustments, as it won't be long before another staff is found undergoing the same (Ghanaian participant 4).

Overall, the above quotes are consistent with previous research on mindfulness practice. Our interview data show how COVID-19-induced concerns have restricted mindfulness practice in these organisations and the role of timely leadership intervention and effective organisational support system in fostering mindfulness of team. Prior research has found that mindfulness positively affects the inter-relationships between employees and their organisation, their work relationships with others, their behaviours, their emotions, psychological wellbeing (Dane, 2011), decision making (Hafenbrack *et al.*, 2013), turnover-intents (Dane and Brummel, 2014), innovation (Vogus and Welbourne, 2003), safety, work and life quality (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2007) and organisational performance (Cleirigh and Greaney, 2014). We have shown how effective organisational interventions and supportive relational systems can restore employee's wellbeing, the bond between an employee and their organisation, their work relationships with others, their behaviours, their positive emotions, psychological wellbeing, decision making, retention, innovation, safety, work and life quality, and thus mindfulness of team and individual. Specifically, our data analysis section has revealed that, while COVID-19-related challenges has restricted mindfulness practice, timely managerial interventions and supportive relational systems can help to restore employee's engagement, attention and commitment to their jobs, and thus mindfulness practice. The following Figure 1 summarises the key findings of our study. Figure 1 shows the key challenges faced by our participants and their staffs because of COVID-19 outbreak. The diagram also reveals how such challenges have minimised the practice of mindfulness in these organisations and how organisational and managerial support systems have helped mitigate the pandemic's negative impacts on managers and their teams. Figure 1 also uncovers the outcome of effective managerial and organisational support systems in this instance. These include (1) improved individual and family wellbeing, workplace interaction and a repair of the psychological aspects of work damaged by COVID-19-related challenges; (2) improved ability to adapt to the pandemic-influenced life.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to analyse how employees' mindfulness at work was restricted during the pandemic in emerging market firms. Our study also investigated the effectiveness of organisational and managerial support systems in restoring employee wellbeing, social connectedness, LMX-TMX relationships and employees' attachment to their organisations, due to a social exclusion caused by the pandemic. Based on qualitative assessment of 20 cases

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Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 1.
Study findings

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from Ghana and Nigeria, we found that the practice of mindfulness among employees has decreased since the COVID-19 pandemic, and which is due to a range of COVID-19-induced concerns, particularly, very tough economic conditions caused by – reduction in salaries, general economic and social insecurity and institutional voids in that context. Specifically, our participants revealed that constant worry over these concerns has stopped employees from noticing other events happening within/around them. Our findings also reveal that such COVID-19-induced concerns have increased work-related stress, frustration and anxiety, resulting in a range of negative outcomes – decreased attention, reduced performance, strained relationships and poor team functioning. Consequently, it negatively impacts employees' well-being and attachment to their workplace. Another interesting finding of our paper is that it highlights the limitations of concepts (constructs) like mindfulness in emerging economy contexts (particularly Africa). Hence, quietness by employees even though can be linked to mindfulness was rather linked to larger psychological stress that they were facing due to the pandemic. This aspect was found to further result in lack of engagement and commitment, which also influenced overall team performance. We further found that leader's/manager's emotional intelligence and social skills played an important role in mitigating some of the negative influences of COVID-19-induced concerns in the case organisations. Also, organisational and managerial support systems were found to be helpful in such circumstances, though their effectiveness varied among the cases and was rather limited.

Despite prior arguments that mindful individuals' flexibility helps them cope with changes including unexpected events without becoming demotivated (e.g. Dane and Brummel, 2014; Hulsheger, 2015), our findings disclose the contrary. For instance, our participants reveal that mindfulness practice was restricted in their organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus highlighting a variance between our research findings and prior mindfulness research. There are two possible explanations for this variance. First, such previous research on mindfulness was done before the COVID-19 pandemic, and when the researchers could not have foreseen the level of the fatality accompanying a global epidemic like the COVID-19 pandemic and the likely impacts on employee's mindfulness at work. Secondly, these previous authors (and their research) were based in the developed countries of the Western world, and where sophisticated infrastructures and advanced support systems can help mindful individuals to thrive during a crisis. On the contrary, our research is based in Africa – a marginalised background (Fuchs *et al.*, 2013) – where the established general economic and social insecurities, and institutional voids in the continent have exacerbated the worries brought by the pandemic. This limits the ability of mindful individuals in Africa to cope with a crisis, thus limiting their mindfulness at work. Finally, bearing in mind that our research was conducted in two collectivist countries, our findings is consistent with prior research (e.g. Karl *et al.*, 2020) which found that mindfulness practice is higher in more individualistic cultures. Besides, as cultural values can significantly influence mindfulness practice, including the associated outcomes (Cook and Cassaniti, 2022), our findings will make a significant contribution to the theoretical development of the mindfulness literature and which will enrich both mindfulness theory and practice (Karl *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, we have linked mindfulness with a broad range of constructs and key workplace outcomes – improved attention, performance, relationships, wellbeing, employee's attachment to their workplace, team functioning and improved quality of organisational life. We also linked mindfulness to improved concentration, directed knowing, minimised absent-mindedness, which can combine to foster our ways of thinking and doing, and ultimately aid employees' ability to survive perfectly in every situation. Yet, our findings have revealed that the practice of mindfulness was restricted in emerging market firms (of Africa) during COVID-19 pandemic, which was specifically due a range of COVID-19-induced concerns (e.g. very tough economic conditions caused by reduction in salaries) and

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worsened by the pre-existing general economic and social insecurity and institutional voids, which occupied the minds of most employees in this context. Our findings also show the effectiveness of manager's/leader's emotional intelligence, social skills and supportive intervention patterns, as well as the role of organisational interventions and supportive relational systems (e.g. cohesion, flexibility and communication) in fostering social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by COVID-19-induced worries. We also offer theoretical and managerial implications, limitations of our study as well as avenues for further studies.

6. Theoretical and managerial implications

Our findings in the unique and relatively under-researched African context offer both theoretical and managerial implications. A key theoretical implication relates to linking mindfulness research more specifically to the context of organisational operations. Despite all the positive attributes associated with mindfulness, for employees in organisations operating in emerging economies with high insecurity, especially in crisis situations, perceptions of and outcomes associated with mindfulness can differ (or rather be confusing) greatly compared to other contexts. Our findings depicted the critical role of manager's/leader's emotional intelligence, social skills and supportive intervention to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19-induced concerns on LMX and TMX relationships. Hence, these particular factors should be given more attention in theorisations of both mindfulness and LMX-TMX relationships. Furthermore, by being among the pioneering research that specifically focuses on the contextual/cultural influences on mindfulness in an African context, we contribute to our understanding of mindfulness in an emerging economies context of Africa. Specifically, we found that, in addition to pandemic-induced concerns, institutional voids (e.g. economic hardship) can also produce quiet moments in employees, and which can be mistaken as a mindfulness practice. We also found that such moments are even more in a crisis situation. This contributes to our understanding of the antecedents of mindfulness in a cross-cultural context.

We also have several managerial implications suggested from our findings. Firstly, we believe promotions of mindfulness in emerging markets would be a significantly important agenda for SMEs. Facing the restrictions on mindfulness due to COVID-19 induced worries in these business environments, employees in emerging market firms would have to gain strength and power to overcome such inherent challenges. Mindfulness of thinking and practices could assist mental health and individual perseverance in markets with turbulence and uncertainties. Secondly, leadership training could include a necessary component of balancing skills between encouragement for employees and expected commitments from employees. This would help whole team to achieve a healthy work-life balance from the dynamics of severe environment. Thirdly, we suggest it would be necessary for SMEs to engage every single employee and give them opportunities to develop soft skills and capabilities that would help in managing personal mental health, especially in crisis situation. This would be a future trend for firms in emerging markets to improve organisational performance, especially due to the inherent turbulence and uncertainties in their environment. Another managerial implication of our research is that, with acute resource constraints and institutional voids in Africa, any amount of financial assistance from their employers relatively minimises the hardship, restores employees' loyalty and commitment, and thus fostering their positive psychological experiences and attachment to team and the organisation, which can help to restore mindfulness practice. Therefore, emerging market firms can capitalise on this *"advantage"*, i.e. by investing managerial training and improving their organisational support systems to rebuild high-quality LMX and TMX relationships and restore the social connectedness following a social exclusion caused by COVID-19-induced worries.

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7. Limitations of our study and suggestions for further studies

Our paper does have limitations like any other academic study. It is based on a limited number of case studies from Ghana and Nigeria. Hence, the study findings cannot be generalised easily. Despite this limitation, this paper is one of the pioneering studies highlighting the potential impact of COVID-19-induced worries on mindfulness in African context; thereby opening several avenues for future researchers. Using a mixed-method approach, future research on COVID-19 induced worries can examine the effectiveness of managerial and organisational support systems in minimising the negative impacts of COVID-19 induced worries in the public sector in Africa or other continents. This will provide the much-needed data for comparing the negative impacts of COVID-19 induced concerns in various settings, and the effectiveness of managerial and organisational support systems in restoring individual and family wellbeing, workplace interaction and the psychological aspects of work influenced by sudden changes such as the pandemic.

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Corresponding author
Ahmad Arslan can be contacted at: ahmad.arslan@oulu.fi

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