Iranian Evolutionary Educational Psychology Journal
IEEPJ
University of Hormozgan
Online ISSN: 2588 - 4395
Homepage: https://ieepj.hormozgan.ac.ir

A Sociological Analysis of the Reflection of Urban Social Crises on the Social Capital of Employees in the Ahvaz Oil Industry

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received 11 Jul. 2024
Received in revised form 15 Aug. 2025
Accepted 12 Sep. 2025
Published online 01 Dec. 2025

Keywords:
Urban Social Crises,
Social Capital,
Organizational Employees,
Ahvaz Oil Industry,
Social Trust

ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aims to analyze the sociological effects of urban social crises on the level of social capital among employees of the Ahvaz oil industry. Given the strategic importance of the oil sector and the complex social conditions of Ahvaz as a metropolitan city facing multiple urban crises, this research seeks to examine how such crises influence social trust, social participation, and organizational cohesion among employees.

Methods: This study adopts a quantitative research design using a survey method. The statistical population consists of employees working in the Ahvaz oil industry. A sample was selected using stratified random sampling. Data were collected through a standardized questionnaire measuring urban social crises and dimensions of social capital, including social trust, social participation, social networks, and institutional cohesion. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software, employing descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multivariate regression techniques.

Results: The findings indicate a significant negative relationship between urban social crises and social capital among employees of the Ahvaz oil industry. Higher levels of perceived urban social crises—such as social insecurity, environmental degradation, unemployment, and declining public services—were associated with lower levels of social trust, reduced social participation, and weakened organizational relationships. Regression analysis showed that urban social crises significantly predict changes in employees' social capital, with social trust being the most affected dimension.

Conclusions: The results suggest that urban social crises play a crucial role in shaping the social capital of organizational employees, particularly in strategic industries such as oil. Addressing urban social challenges and improving social stability can contribute to strengthening social capital, enhancing organizational commitment, and improving employee well-being. Policymakers and organizational managers are encouraged to consider urban social conditions as a key factor in human resource and organizational development strategies.

Cite this article: Mirkalantar, V., Navabakhsh, M. & Ghadimi, B. (2025). A sociological analysis of the reflection of urban social crises on the social capital of employees in the Ahvaz oil industry. *Iranian Evolutionary Educational Psychology Journal*, 7 (4), 1-16.
DOI: https//doi.org/ 10.22034/7.4.1

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Publisher: University of Hormozgan.
DOI: https// doi.org/ 10.22034/7.4.1

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Introduction

In recent decades, rapid social, economic, and cultural transformations have increasingly exposed large industrial cities to multiple and overlapping social crises. Rooted in structural inequalities, economic pressures, institutional inefficiencies, demographic changes, and the expansion of new media, these crises not only challenge social order and stability but also profoundly affect the quality of social relations, levels of public trust, and patterns of social participation (Habermas, 1987; Giddens, 1991). From a sociological perspective, social crises should not be understood as isolated or temporary events; rather, they represent dynamic and multidimensional processes capable of undermining social solidarity and institutional cohesion, thereby creating conditions for social fragmentation (Durkheim, 1997).

Within this context, social capital emerges as one of the most critical intangible resources of contemporary societies. Comprising elements such as mutual trust, norms of cooperation, social networks, and a sense of belonging, social capital plays a central role in strengthening social cohesion, enhancing collective resilience, and facilitating coordinated action, particularly under crisis conditions (Putnam, 2000). However, these very components are often the first to erode during periods of prolonged social instability. Previous research has demonstrated that declining social capital within organizations is associated with reduced participation, weakened institutional trust, increased intra-organizational conflict, and diminished workforce effectiveness (Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995). Accordingly, employees of large and strategic organizations—especially those operating within core industries—are uniquely vulnerable, as they are simultaneously embedded in organizational structures and broader urban social contexts affected by crisis dynamics.

From the standpoint of organizational sociology, organizations do not function independently of their surrounding social environments; rather, they are deeply shaped by external social conditions and crises (Scott, 2014). Social crises can permeate organizational settings through mechanisms such as heightened uncertainty, erosion of institutional trust, increased psychological pressure, and diminished job security. These processes may gradually weaken employees' social capital across its structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions, leading to lower levels of cooperation, participation, and organizational cohesion (Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 2011). Despite this, much of the existing literature has either examined social crises at the macro-societal level or analyzed

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social capital primarily within managerial or organizational frameworks, often neglecting the broader urban crisis context in which organizations and employees are situated.

The city of Ahvaz, as one of Iran's major industrial and oil-producing metropolitan areas, provides a particularly salient context for examining these dynamics. The city's historical, economic, and symbolic dependence on the oil industry has placed oil sector employees at the center of persistent social, economic, and environmental tensions (Bahraini et al., 2004). Ongoing challenges such as economic instability, environmental degradation, social inequality, job insecurity, and declining public trust have the potential to directly affect employees' social networks, levels of trust, and patterns of participation, thereby placing their social capital under sustained pressure. In such a context, social capital among oil industry employees is not merely an individual or organizational attribute but a strategic resource with broader implications for organizational performance, workforce stability, and urban social resilience.

Despite the importance of this issue, empirical sociological studies that systematically investigate the relationship between urban social crises and employees' social capital in strategic industries, particularly within the Iranian context, remain limited. This gap highlights the need for research that integrates theories of social crisis and social capital to explore how urban-level crises are reflected within organizational settings and experienced by employees. Accordingly, the present study seeks to examine how social crises in the city of Ahvaz influence the social capital of oil industry employees, and through which social and organizational mechanisms these effects are produced. By addressing this question, the study aims to contribute to the sociological literature on crisis and organization, while also providing evidence-based insights to inform social and organizational policymaking aimed at strengthening employee resilience and sustaining social capital under conditions of prolonged urban instability.

Material and Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach and is explanatory–exploratory in purpose, employing a sequential exploratory design. The selection of this design is grounded in the multidimensional nature of urban social crises and the conceptual complexity of social capital. Accordingly, the research was conducted in two consecutive phases: first, a qualitative phase aimed at identifying and conceptualizing the dimensions of urban social crises from the

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perspectives of social actors; and second, a quantitative phase designed to assess the relationships between these crises and employees' social capital at a broader organizational level (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Qualitative Phase

In the qualitative phase, an inductive thematic analysis approach was employed. The study population consisted of experienced employees, experts, and middle-level managers in the Ahvaz oil industry who had direct lived experiences of urban social crises. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews, with interview questions focusing on participants' perceptions of urban social crises and their perceived impacts on trust, participation, workplace relationships, and social networks. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using MAXQDA software. The analytic process involved initial coding, followed by the extraction and refinement of core themes. This process ultimately led to the identification of key types of urban social crises and the mechanisms through which they influence various dimensions of employees' social capital. To enhance the credibility of the qualitative findings, member checking and concurrent data review were employed.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase was conducted using a descriptive–analytical design with a correlational approach. The statistical population comprised all employees of the Ahvaz oil industry across different organizational levels. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, and participants were selected through stratified random sampling proportional to employment type and organizational unit.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire, which was designed based on the findings of the qualitative phase and the theoretical literature on social capital. The questionnaire included items measuring perceptions of urban social crises and key dimensions of social capital, including social trust, social participation, social networks, and norms of cooperation. The instrument's validity was confirmed through face and content validity, while its reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

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Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarize the data. Inferential analyses included Pearson correlation tests and exploratory factor analysis to examine the relationships between urban social crises and employees' social capital. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout all stages of the study, ethical research principles were strictly observed. These included obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the data, and using the collected information exclusively for scientific and research purposes.

Results

Qualitative Findings

The findings derived from the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with experienced employees of the Ahvaz oil industry indicate that perceived urban social crises are multidimensional and processual in nature. These crises influence various dimensions of employees' social capital through multiple and interrelated mechanisms. Qualitative data analysis led to the identification of four core categories of urban social crises, each of which affects social trust, social participation, communication networks, and norms of cooperation in distinct yet overlapping ways.

First, economic and livelihood crises emerged as the most pervasive and frequently cited theme, accounting for the greatest share in the erosion of employees' social capital. According to participants, rising inflation, economic fluctuations, declining purchasing power, and uncertainty regarding future employment have significantly undermined trust in organizational institutions and weakened the sense of social security. These conditions have noticeably reduced employees' motivation for voluntary participation, cooperation beyond formal job requirements, and collective action, gradually shifting trust-based relationships toward more cautious, minimal, and instrumental interactions.

Second, environmental and urban crises, including environmental pollution, infrastructural deficiencies, and unfavorable climatic conditions, were identified as influential factors affecting employees' quality of life and mental well-being. The findings suggest that these crises intensify

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psychological pressure and social exhaustion, leading to reduced social interactions, constrained communication networks, and the emergence of interpersonal tensions within the workplace. In this respect, environmental crises have indirectly but persistently weakened employees' social cohesion.

Third, media and information crises, as an emerging phenomenon, were found to play a significant role in shaping employees' perceptions of social and organizational realities. The expansion of social media, the circulation of unofficial news and rumors, and the lack of information transparency have contributed to heightened anxiety, mistrust, and skepticism toward managerial decisions. Participants emphasized that these dynamics have eroded institutional trust and diminished empathetic and participatory interactions in the work environment.

Fourth, institutional and structural crises, characterized by inefficiencies in decision-making mechanisms, weak organizational transparency, and employees' perceived powerlessness within formal processes, were identified as a determining factor in the erosion of social capital. Qualitative findings indicate that perceptions of institutional inefficiency have led to declining organizational trust, reduced participation, weakened norms of cooperation, and the emergence of a social distance between employees and formal organizational structures.

Overall, the qualitative findings demonstrate that urban social crises contribute to the gradual erosion of social capital among Ahvaz oil industry employees by weakening trust, restricting communication networks, reducing social participation, and reshaping norms of cooperation.

Table 1. Categories and Themes of Urban Social Crises from the Perspective of Ahvaz Oil Industry Employees

Core Category	Main Theme	Brief Description of Theme	Frequency
Economic Crises	Livelihood Insecurity	Inflation, reduced purchasing power, economic instability	30
	Job Insecurity	Concerns about future employment and income	25
Environmental Crises	Environmental Pollution and Hazards	Air pollution, climatic problems	21
Media Crises	Information Mistrust	Rumors, inaccurate and unofficial news	29
Institutional Crises	Organizational Inefficiency	Weak transparency, low participation	26

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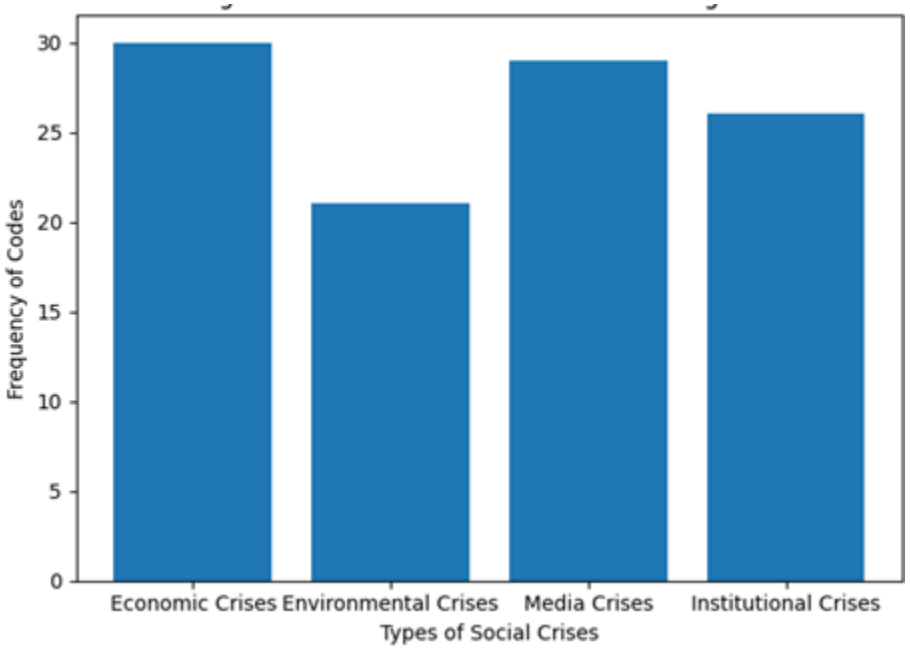

Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of Urban Social Crisis Categories

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency distribution of the main categories of urban social crises as perceived by employees of the Ahvaz oil industry. As shown in the figure, economic crises account for the highest frequency of coded references, positioning them as the most salient form of social crisis in participants' lived experiences. This finding indicates that livelihood insecurity, economic volatility, and job instability are more prominently present than other crises and are perceived as primary sources of disruption in social and organizational relations.

Media and information crises rank second, with a high frequency reflecting the influential role of social media, informal information flows, and rumors in shaping employees' attitudes and perceptions of social and organizational conditions. This result suggests that the media environment not only reflects existing crises but also functions as an active mechanism in the production and intensification of social crises, thereby challenging both social and institutional trust.

Institutional and structural crises follow closely in third place. The substantial frequency of this category highlights the significant role of perceived institutional inefficiencies, weak organizational transparency, and employees' sense of ineffectiveness in decision-making

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processes. These factors contribute meaningfully to the perception of social crises and create conditions conducive to the erosion of social capital through declining trust and participation.

In contrast, environmental and urban crises, although exhibiting the lowest frequency among the categories, maintain a meaningful presence in the data. This finding indicates that environmental and infrastructural issues remain an integral part of employees' crisis experiences. The impact of these crises appears to be more indirect and gradual, operating primarily through their effects on mental health and quality of life, which in turn undermine social interactions and communication networks.

In sum, the frequency distribution pattern suggests that, from the perspective of Ahvaz oil industry employees, urban social crises are predominantly economic–institutional in origin and are reproduced through media mechanisms. This pattern underscores the pivotal role of economic and media crises in accelerating the erosion of social capital and weakening employees' trust, participation, and social cohesion.

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Assessment of Employees' Social Capital: The results of the descriptive analysis indicate that the overall level of social capital among Ahvaz oil industry employees is moderate to relatively low. The mean score of total social capital was evaluated as being below the reference (optimal) value, suggesting a relative fragility of social relations and organizational trust among employees.

An examination of the dimensions of social capital revealed the following patterns:

Social trust, with a mean score of 3.20, reflects a relative decline in mutual trust among employees as well as trust in organizational institutions.

Social and organizational participation, with a mean score of 3.10, indicates a reduction in voluntary participation and a diminished willingness to cooperate beyond formal job requirements.

Communication networks, with a mean score of 3.30, suggest a contraction in the scope and depth of employees' professional and social relationships.

Norms of cooperation and solidarity, with a mean score of 3.00, point to weakened adherence to informal norms of cooperation and a reduced sense of organizational belonging.

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The results of the one-sample t-test further confirmed that the mean level of employees' social capital was significantly lower than the desirable benchmark value ($p < 0.001$), underscoring the vulnerability of social capital within the organizational context of the Ahvaz oil industry.

Hypothesis Testing and Relationships Between Variables

The results of Pearson correlation analyses demonstrated a significant and negative relationship between urban social crises and the various dimensions of employees' social capital. Economic, environmental, media-related, and institutional crises were all associated with lower levels of social trust, social participation, communication networks, and norms of cooperation.

More specifically, economic and institutional crises exhibited the strongest negative correlations with social trust ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$) and norms of cooperation ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, media-related and economic crises showed significant negative relationships with social participation ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that heightened media uncertainty and economic pressure reduce employees' willingness to engage in collective and voluntary activities.

Furthermore, environmental crises exerted a comparatively stronger effect on employees' communication networks, significantly constraining social interactions and professional ties ($r = -0.36$, $p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that environmental stressors primarily undermine social capital through their impact on everyday interactions and relational continuity.

Differences in Social Capital by Individual and Occupational Characteristics

The results of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences in employees' social capital across selected individual and occupational characteristics. Employees with more than 15 years of service experience exhibited significantly higher levels of social trust and social participation compared to less experienced employees ($p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Social Capital and Its Dimensions among Ahvaz Oil Industry Employees

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Total Social Capital	380	6.71	1.43
Social Trust	380	3.20	0.59
Social Participation	380	3.10	0.81
Communication Networks	380	3.30	0.64
Norms of Cooperation	380	3.00	0.63

In addition, permanent employees reported higher levels of social capital than contract-based employees, particularly in terms of institutional trust and organizational participation ($p < 0.05$).

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These findings highlight the role of employment security and organizational embeddedness in sustaining social capital under conditions of social crisis.

Table 3. One-Sample t-Test Results for Total Social Capital

Variable	Test Value	t	df	Sig.
Total Social Capital	7	−3.91	379	0.000

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Urban Social Crises and Dimensions of Social Capital

Type of Crisis	Trust	Participation	Networks	Norms
Economic	−0.42**	−0.38*	−0.36*	−0.41**
Environmental	−0.39**	−0.31*	−0.36*	−0.33*
Media	−0.35*	−0.38*	−0.29*	−0.32*
Institutional	−0.41**	−0.34*	−0.30*	−0.40**

*p < 0.05 *$p < 0.01$*

Table 5. ANOVA Results for Social Capital by Individual–Occupational Characteristics

Independent Variable	F	Sig.
Years of Service	5.12	0.021
Employment Type	4.78	0.030
Education Level	30.29	0.000
Age Group	23.18	0.000

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Effects of Social Crises on Social Capital

Figure 2 presents a conceptual model illustrating the pathways through which urban social crises affect the social capital of oil industry employees. In this model, social crises are conceptualized as exogenous variables that influence the level and quality of social capital through structural, institutional, and interactional mechanisms. The unidirectional orientation of the pathways indicates that social crises operate not merely as outcomes of broader social transformations, but as active and determining forces in the erosion of social capital.

The model is grounded in the theoretical assumption that social crises generate uncertainty, weaken institutional trust, intensify psychological pressures, and disrupt everyday social interactions. Through these mechanisms, crises reduce mutual trust, diminish social participation, and constrain communication networks. In other words, by undermining predictability and weakening norms of cooperation, social crises destabilize the foundations of social capital at both individual and organizational levels.

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The simplicity and minimalism of the model reflect the study's focus on the primary causal relationship between urban social crises and employees' social capital. Rather than proposing a complex structural model, the purpose of the pathway diagram is to emphasize the general and empirically testable direction of influence, while avoiding conceptual conflation with mediating or moderating variables at this stage. This approach facilitates a clear empirical examination of the study's main hypothesis and strengthens the analytical coherence between the qualitative insights and quantitative results.

Integrative Analytical Summary of Findings

The convergence of qualitative and quantitative findings demonstrates that urban social crises in Ahvaz have significantly contributed to the erosion of social capital among oil industry employees. This effect is not uniform; rather, its intensity and mechanisms vary depending on the type of crisis and employees' individual and organizational positions. Economic and media-related crises play the most substantial role in undermining trust and participation, while environmental crises primarily restrict communication networks and social interactions. The findings also underscore the moderating role of organizational characteristics, particularly employment type and length of service, in either reproducing or mitigating the erosion of social capital.

Discussion

This study aimed to sociologically analyze the impact of urban social crises on the social capital of employees in the Ahvaz oil industry. The integrated findings from the qualitative and quantitative phases provide robust evidence that urban social crises significantly erode the core dimensions of employee social capital—trust, participation, communication networks, and cooperative norms.

1. Addressing the Main Research Question

Urban social crises directly and indirectly weaken the social capital of Ahvaz oil industry employees. Quantitative analysis confirmed significant negative correlations between all four crisis types (economic, environmental, media, and institutional) and each dimension of social capital. Qualitative insights further elucidated the underlying mechanisms: crises diminish motivation for participation, generate anxiety, spread distrust, and expose structural inefficiencies, thereby degrading social capital. This conclusion aligns with established theories of social capital

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(Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988) and organizational sociology (Scott, 2014), which posit that external socio-environmental stressors can disrupt the relational fabric essential for organizational cohesion.

2. Addressing the Sub-Research Questions

Sub-question 1 (Key Crisis Types): The most salient urban social crises identified were economic/livelihood, environmental/urban, media/informational, and institutional/structural. Economic and media crises exerted the strongest negative impact on trust and participation, while environmental crises most severely constrained communication networks.

Sub-question 2 (Level of Social Capital): The overall level of social capital among the sampled employees was moderate to low. The mean scores for its dimensions were: Social Trust (3.20), Social and Organizational Participation (3.10), Communication Networks (3.30), and Norms of Cooperation and Solidarity (3.00).

Sub-question 3 (Relationship between Crises and Social Capital): Correlation analyses and hypothesis testing confirmed a statistically significant negative relationship ($p < 0.05$) between all urban social crises and every dimension of social capital.

Sub-question 4 (Role of Individual and Occupational Characteristics): Individual and occupational characteristics function as moderating factors. Employees with over 15 years of service and those with permanent (formal) employment status exhibited significantly higher levels of social capital compared to their less experienced or contract-based counterparts. This underscores the protective role of job tenure and employment security in preserving social capital.

3. Testing the Hypotheses

Main Hypothesis: Confirmed. Urban social crises have a significant impact on the social capital of Ahvaz oil industry employees.

Sub-hypotheses:

Urban social crises have a significant negative impact on employees' social trust. → Confirmed.

Urban social crises have a significant negative impact on employees' social participation. → Confirmed.

Urban social crises have a significant negative impact on employees' communication networks. → Confirmed.

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Urban social crises have a significant negative impact on organizational norms of cooperation and solidarity. → Confirmed.

Employees' social capital differs significantly based on individual and occupational characteristics. → Confirmed.

4. Theoretical Synthesis and Implications

The findings reveal that urban social crises exert multifaceted and complex effects on social capital, with different crisis types targeting distinct dimensions. Economic and media crises most severely undermine trust and participation, whereas environmental crises primarily restrict communication networks. Individual and occupational characteristics act as crucial moderators, potentially buffering the intensity of crisis impacts and enhancing the resilience of employee social capital.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study, through the lens of crisis sociology and organizational theory, demonstrates that employee social capital is not merely an individual resource but a strategic organizational and social asset. It plays a pivotal role in maintaining organizational resilience and social sustainability in crisis-prone industrial cities. The erosion of this capital can lead to decreased organizational efficiency, heightened internal conflicts, and a diminished capacity to respond to urban challenges.

5. Recommendations

For Organizational Management: Strengthen employee trust and participation by enhancing policy transparency, improving job security, and implementing programs that empower internal communication networks.

For Urban Policymaking: Mitigate the impact of economic and environmental crises on employees through targeted social support, welfare programs, and integrated urban risk management strategies.

For Future Research: Investigate the mediating and moderating roles of individual, cultural, and institutional factors in the relationship between social crises and social capital. Extend this line of inquiry to other strategic industries in major urban centers to enhance generalizability.

This restructured discussion presents the findings in a cohesive, argument-driven format suitable for an academic journal, moving away from a thesis-like question-and-answer structure to a fluid narrative that interprets results, links them to theory, and outlines implications.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Funding

The authors did (not) receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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