






UPSKILLING STRATEGIES FOR SME EMPLOYEES IN THE DIGITAL AGE ** Muhammad Ismail ^(a)  Muhammad Zohaib ^(b)  Muhammad Yasir Tahir ^(c)  Hashim Hussain ^(d)  Fariha Tazin ^(e)**^(a)Adjunct Faculty, Member of the Project and Operation Management Department, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan; E-mail: ismailghari14@gmail.com^(b)Lecturer, Superior Group of Colleges, Pakistan Institute of Southern Punjab, Multan, Pakistan; E-mail: muhhammadzohaib7481@gmail.com^(c)Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Commerce, Bahauddin Zakriya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan; E-mail: muhammadyasirtahir@gmail.com^(d)Ph.D. Scholar, Business Management Department, Putra Business School University, Putra, Malaysia; E-mail: pbs21104123@grad.putrabs.edu.my^(e)Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, The Millennium University, Bangladesh; E-mail: farihatazin@gmail.com**ARTICLE INFO****Article History:**Received: 25th July 2024Reviewed & Revised: 25th July to 12th November 2024Accepted: 19th November 2024Published: 24th December 2024**Keywords:**

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ABSTRACT

The domineering demand for upskilling employees in a Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) for being competitive has brought to light by the growing demand for skilled workers in the digital age. The contemporary age's growing demand for skilled workers shines through the human capital theory, thereby asserts that investment in staff training is imperative, developments of an organization. Insufficient research delays effective upskilling ingenuities in Pakistan. This study explores at how employees of Small and Medium Enterprises can advance their skills in the digital age, with a focus on technology tools, training techniques, financial and managerial skills. This study employed the qualitative methods for research by 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire survey to 411 employees from an event management company in Lahore, Pakistan. 'Correlation' (r) and 'Regression' (r2) analysis also shown positive values, which more supports our study hypothesis. Reliability shown that Cronbach's alpha (α) 0.81, it revealed that SME employees want to improve their skills in the digital transformation. The results show that respondents strongly agreed with the value of upskilling in improving their performance and the effectiveness of the Small and Medium Enterprises. The results indicate a noteworthy positive correlation between employee performance and upskilling, with 95.6% of respondents recognizing the value of upskilling and 71.5% strongly agreeing that it is necessary to improve their job serving work, which is proven by their understanding the benefits of technology and digital change. The findings of the study shed light on the advantages and maneuvers for upskilling SME employees in the digital age.

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INTRODUCTION

Small and medium businesses (SMEs) now urgently need to invest in their employees' upskilling due to the tremendous speed at which technology is developing in the digital age. SME failure to adapt puts them at danger of falling behind as technological advancements continue to change the business landscape (Berniak-Woźny et al., 2023). SME workers can improve productivity, foster creativity, and acquire the skills needed to thrive in this new environment with the aid of upskilling techniques. Notwithstanding the apparent significance of upskilling, this is a paucity of research on upskilling strategies that work for SME workers in the digital age, which makes this study an important and timely addition to the body of literature (Olanrewaju, 2024; Safrudin, 2024). In light of the growing significance of upskilling through the digital age, it is imperative to investigate the theoretical structures that support this idea. One such theory that offers important insights into how employee development contributes to organizational success is known as the Human Capital Theory (HCT). In the modern digital age (2024) the employee's 'upskilling' concept also linked with the 'Human Capital Theory' (HCT), it strongly suits and fit with the 'upskilling approaches for SME employees in digital age'. The 'Human Capital

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Theory' (HCT) basically focusing on the investing in employee's betterment and their knowledge to improve their working capacity and productivity, which ultimately beneficiary for the 'Small Medium Enterprises (Griffen, 2024). The Human Capital Theory offers a good starting point for comprehending the significance of upskilling, but it is also critical to look at the current research gaps in this field. Research on upskilling practices from the employee's point of view is scarce, even though the human capital theory's belief in the value of funding staff education and training in order to improve enterprise efficiency and rivalry (Becker, 1962). Prior research has mostly examined the employer's point of view, looking at the advantages and difficulties of adopting upskilling programs for the business. But little research has been done on how employees see upskilling tactics. In order to fill this gap in understanding, this study examines upskilling tactics for Pakistani SME workers from the perspective of the workers themselves, offering insights into the variables affecting workers' upskilling requirements, preferences, and results. Upskilling has a positive correlation with the 'HCT' (Human Capital Theory) for the improvement of human resource quality for the achievement of long-term SME (Small Medium Enterprises) growth (Aslam et al., 2024; Zafar & Mustafa, 2017). This study intends to fill this research vacuum by examining the upskilling needs and methods of SME workers in the digital age. Using the human capital theory as a foundation, this study filled the particular competencies and abilities that SME workers must acquire to be effective in the age of technology. In order to accomplish the research goals, this study uses a case study design and a qualitative research methodology. A questionnaire survey was used to gather information from 411 workers of an event management company in Lahore, Pakistan. A five-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire's design to collect information on the employee's experiences, approaches, and difficulties with upskilling within the digital age. This study intends to contribute to the existing body literature from human capital theory in regard to SMEs by investigating the upskilling practices and specifications of SME employees using a qualitative approach. This will help to design and implement successful upskilling attempts that can improve the efficacy and competition regarding SMEs in the digital age. The study's results underline the prominence of upskilling approaches for Pakistani SME workers, focusing on the necessity for a comprehensive strategy that incorporate digital and technological transformation, marketing and social media skills, strategy and organizational assistance. Remarkably, this study revealed that these factors significantly and positively influence upskilling procedures, which enhances job performance and career prospects for Pakistani SME workers (Yose, 2023).

By investigating the obstacles to efficient upskilling and suggesting strategies to overcome them, this study seeks to close that gap. The study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to offer a thorough examination of upskilling programs in Lahore. This study advances our knowledge of how SMEs might prosper in the quickly changing digital economy by incorporating the viewpoints of managers and staff.

This current research is emphasizing the need for the 'upskilling SME employees' in Lahore, Pakistan to improve their growth as well as the competitiveness in the digital age. Human Capital Theory also supporting it. Research hypotheses are developed as a result of the literature review's analysis of the body of literature, which highlights its shortcomings, advantages, and problems. A five-point Likert scale was used in a cross-sectional survey to gauge the opinions of targeted event management SME employees regarding upskilling and digital age. Reliability, correlation, and regression tests were used to analyze the data and found that upskilling significantly improved employee performance. The results emphasize how it enhances professional development and job happiness. In the end, the study comes to the conclusion that upskilling tactics are essential for increasing employee capacities, encouraging the expansion of SMEs, and advancing Pakistan's economy in the rapidly changing digital age.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An upskilling among the employees of SME's became a modern currency, which promote the organizational motive with the competitive advantage. The current literature review comprehensively presents the result and outcome of the previous studies with the state-of-the-art field along with the systematic approach of research. In this digital age the SMEs should continuously improve themselves by investing on their workforce to meet the new challenges and prepare them to meet the standards for competitive market (Muchiri, 2022). The human capital theory also indicating about the upskilling and developing the employees and it emphasized that the organization should invest on the skills and development on them, (Becker, 1964). An energetically participation of employees in skills development with learning of educational things, training modules with consistent performance applicability, then execution and proper feedback from employees can make the training sessions more reliable and authentic to meet the challenging market opportunities *Leitch review of skills., 2007* (Dinku et al., 2024) . By following the upskilling strategies, the 'human capital theory' (Becker, 1962, 1964; Goldin, 2024), also indicating that the organization should heavily invest on the development of their employees. They will contribute this digital skill not only on themselves while they will also apply these skills in their work to performed better and then organization automatically will gain the more turnover in the market (Hossain, 2023; Rahimi & Mosalli, 2024). Literature also explained after studding the upskilling strategies impact in the England, and found the various frameworks and situations. A) Clear goal and task can, give the explicit direction to the employee of SME to perform his/her assignment is a smooth way (Cinar & Bilodeau, 2022). B) An understood nature of task: comes from the proper environment, where contemporaries getting and exchanging their ideas with each other (Nachmias & Hubschmid-Vierheilg, 2021). C) Clear goals influenced by the social norms and values of the SME's culture and other colleagues' and contemporaries' behavior(Allmann & Blank, 2021; Omar et al., 2022). The Human Capital Theory', (1960) also indicating that the organization should heavily invest on the development of their employees. They will contribute this digital skill not only on themselves while they Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) employees played a vital role in the development of the SME's organization especially in the digital age of modern market. SMEs are more limited in terms of resources than large corporations and so their personnel are required to be flexible with diversified skills. But, as a result of smaller financial availability and training facilities, the workers of SMEs struggle to get formal skills improvement opportunities as in larger

business setups (Kuratko & Morris, 2018; Trenerry et al., 2021). In Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), employees tend to perform diverse roles, undertaking a variety of different responsibilities such as handling administration, making sales, and attending to customers, and are therefore expected to wear many hats (Manshor & Saad, 2023). Consequently, these workers need to take the initiative in learning additional competencies, more so digital skills, to keep up with the organization's competitiveness. As cited in the article, digital skills have become necessary for small and medium enterprises as they implement digital transformation which has changed the ways of working, communication and interaction with the customers (Valdez-Juárez et al., 2024). Likewise, employees in SMEs face barriers in their adjustment towards technological changes. Because of the absence of formal training programs and structured learning paths, most of those employees depend on informal learning or self-directed training (Pingali et al., 2023). Nonetheless, some studies illustrate that SMEs' workers who get chances for digital upskilling tend to be more productive, innovative, and satisfied with their jobs (Pasca et al., 2024). The ever-widening scope of digital transformation in the operations of SMEs means that employees are required to acquire both technical skills and soft skills. Employees are expected to possess a mix of digital literacy, critical thinking and interpretation, problem-solving as well as adaptability to fit into a highly technologically-advanced workplace (Javed, 2021; Zahidi, 2020). With technology evolving at astonishing rates, it is imperative for SMEs to consider the need for investing in employee upskilling strategies, (Arini & Respatiningsih, 2024). The terminology of 'digital age' specifically refers in the 'digital technologies', mostly used in the internet, cloud computing (CC), Big data (BD), and artificial intelligence (AI) etc. This digital transformation has marvelous kind of reshaping effects on the personal development of employees and workforce as well as professional development on the SMEs, (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Few of them (employees) welcomed it, but rest of them still facing the challenges and problems to adopt it (Omar et al., 2022). Now a days the digitally equipped SMEs are on the better positioned to meet and compete the rivalry market in the whole world by providing demanding products and services to the users (Bessen, 2018; Watters et al., 2016). But most of the SMEs are still struggling in the developing countries to meet the challenges and adopting of modern age digital tools. The core challenge for these SMEs to find the skilled employees (Melewar et al., 2021), who have digital skills which are necessary to handle the modern age digital tools which necessary in services industry of SMEs (Lang, 2023). Existing research retrospect that the SMEs has face the main challenges of financial issue, lack of resources and un-availability of an expertise during organizing the upskilling programs for the employees. It also been studied and seen that those SMEs, which heavily invest on their employee's training and digital development, they got prosperity growth and progress rapidly in this digital age competition (Intaratat, 2021). Upskilling process for the employees of the SMEs can also be elevated with the collaboration of educational institutes and digital training providers (Dondi et al., 2021), will also apply these skills in their work to performed better and then organization automatically will gain the more turnover in the market, the said researcher also studied it (Goldin, 2024).

We have emphasized on the investigating of obstacles to efficient upskilling employees of SMEs and suggesting strategies to overcome them in the digital age, to meet the rivalry market competition economy by incorporating the viewpoints of managers and staff. We have formulated the following hypothesis for our research article study

- H₁: Upskilling workforce for betterment has a positive impact on SME Employee's (Performance)*
- H₂: Digital and technological transformation have a positive impact on SME Employee's (Performance)*
- H₃: Marketing and social media Skills have a positive impact on SME Employee's (Performance)*
- H₄: Strategy and organizational assistance have a positive impact on SME Employee's (Performance)*
- H₅: Upskilling influence on employees have a positive impact on SME Employee's (Performance)*
- H₆: Forthcoming viewpoint have a positive impact on SME Employee's (Performance)*
- H₇: Financial and Managerial Skills for the Managers have a positive impact on SME Employee's (Performance)*

By emphasizing the importance of digital transformation, marketing expertise, and organizational support in improving performance and fostering SME growth in the digital age, this study fills important knowledge gaps on the relationship between upskilling strategies and SME employee performance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative research, based on the 'cross sectional data'. Data was collected with the help of questionnaire with survey from the respondents of one organization. We have used 'five-point Likert Scale' from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree' in qualitative (primary data) to fill it. We have selected SMEs for our targeted sampling. It was an 'event management organization', from the 'city of love' 'Lahore'. An 'event management organization' having 411 employees, situated in Lahore Pakistan, operating in the city and also covering the rural areas. This organization have team of 411 workforce (employees). This catering organization was operating and organizing on multiple places simultaneously, with their traditional methods. This organization is offering catering, confectioneries and an event organizing services to the community of Lahore. The 'five points Likert-Scale' questionnaire based on the following theme. This question based on an 'experience', 'strategies', 'challenges' which faced during the operationalizing the services. Further, this is case-study approach research. The 'Human Capital Theory' (HCT) also indicating about this methodology to upskilling the employees of an organization 'Small Medium Enterprises' (SMEs).

RESULTS

Table 1. Response of SME employees and their results interpretation as “upskilling workforce for betterment (Performance)”

Response of the respondents collectively shown in this table.							
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Valid	Upskilling workforce for betterment (Performance)						
	1. Does training approach should be adopted for the employee’s progress?	0	1	11	165	234	411
	2. Do the skills require for employee’s development in this digital age?	0	4	12	69	326	411
	3. Does profession related education/diploma is necessary for this job?	1	16	195	92	107	411
	4. Do you want to apply for any upskilling plans for yourselves?	8	40	107	135	121	411
	5. Have you faced hurdles during training programs?	264	99	34	11	3	411

The above table interpret the result of the questions 1 to 5, which examine the employee’s opinion on upskilling workforce. Question # (1). As shown in the above table, that the training should be necessary for the progress of employees. Yes, most of the employees of SMEs were strongly agree after observing the results of training. And 40% were agree that trainings should be adopted for development. Question # (2). In next ‘Does skills require for employee’s development in this digital age?’ here 79% employees were strongly agreeing and 16.7% were agree, only 0.009% were disagree about that, may be just because of their age and qualification factor. Because after a specific age and without qualification, few skills difficult to understand. Question # (3). This question related to ‘profession related education necessary for this job’. A surprising fact received in this section. Only 26% were strongly agree, 22% agree and surprisingly 47% were remain neutral in this regard, and 0.039% were disagree. Its retrospect that employees of the SMEs think that the related education and diploma etc. is not necessary in Pakistani context. But somehow, it’s not compulsory in many SMEs in Pakistan. Question # (4). Here we asked from them ‘are they making any plan for upskilling?’. Surprisingly only 29% were strongly agree, while 31% were agree, 0.26% were remain neutral and even 0.097% (0.1%) were disagree for making any plan. Might be due to lack of finance or time or domestic issues. It could be the future research. Question # (5). In this question we have discussed ‘about hurdles during training program’ most of the (64%) employees were strongly disagreed. 24% were disagree, 0.082 % were remain neutral 0.026% agree and only 0.007 % were strongly agree. This is retrospection that most of the employees of the SMEs were happy. They did not face any hurdle during the training program.

Table 2. Response of SME employees and their results interpretation as “digital and technological transformation”

Digital and technological transformation	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
6. Does the current serving table system have any effect on your performance?	2	5	11	162	231	411
7. Mobile app devices will help you during your customer serving job?	7	95	208	55	46	411
8. Do you think, you are ready to adopt the digital training?	1	4	10	166	230	411
9. Do you require Scheduling tools for the customer’s core date and events?	11	19	64	189	149	411
10. Do you need any favor/financial assistance, for technological training for yourself?	2	4	15	61	329	411
11. Will the online booking and delivery system increase your commission and salary?	64	60	158	73	56	411

The following table presented the result of the questions 6 to 11, which investigated employee’s perspective on digital and technological transformation. Question # (6). According to our result and posit in the above table, the comparatively high number of respondents who concur (39.4%) indicates that a sizable segment of the populace thinks that technical and digital revolution, as exemplified by the current serving table arrangement, improves their performance. This finding aligns with the increasing trend of digitalization and technological adoption across multiple industries in Pakistan. In contrast, some people may still be uncertain about how the digital and technological transition will affect their performance, as seen by the 11 respondents’ (2.7%) neutral reaction. There are a number of reasons for this, including inadequate infrastructure, a lack of management support, or a lack of training. Question # (7). According to research, a significant portion of respondents (50.6%) gave neutral reactions, and nearly a quarter of the respondents (23.1%) explicitly disagree which could imply that they are not sure how helpful mobile app devices are for their customer serving work. The findings indicate that a number of factors, including limited access to digital infrastructure, concerns regarding the security and dependability of mobile app devices, and a lack of training or exposure to mobile app devices, may be responsible for the high percentage of neutral and disagree responses. However, the comparatively low number of agree replies (13.4%) would suggest that a few participants have benefited from using mobile app devices to improve customer serving or have had favorable experiences with them. This percentage, however, is somewhat low, indicating that more work has to be done to increase awareness and encourage the use of mobile app devices in customer serving positions in emerging market like

Pakistan. Question # (8). Based on our study results, most respondents in Pakistan are excited about implementing digital training, as seen by the high percentage of strongly agree responses (56.0%). This result is in line with Pakistan's increasing digitization trend, where a large number of businesses are spending money on digital tools to boost productivity and competitiveness. It appears that relatively few respondents are apprehensive or unwilling to embrace digital training, as indicated by the low percentage of disagree responses (1.0%). Question # (9). The data show that, a sizable portion of respondents in Pakistan highly realize the value of digital technologies in managing customer interactions, as seen by the high percentage of strongly agree replies (36.3%). In similar vein, the significant proportion of "agree" replies (46.0%) also indicates that over half of Pakistani respondents acknowledge the value of digital solutions for customer's core date and events. Most respondents appear to have a strong opinion on the subject, either agreeing with the statement or disagreeing with it, as indicated by the very low number of neutral responses (15.6%). In stark contrast, the small number of respondents who disagreed (2.1% of the entire population) indicates that relatively few people do not understand how important digital tools are for maintaining scheduling tools for the customer's core date and events? Question # (10). The results reveals that a large majority of respondents in Pakistan highly concur that obtaining technological skills requires favors or financial support, as seen by the high percentage of strongly agree replies (80.0%). Many people in Pakistan, where digital and technical transformation is happening quickly, might feel that they need to learn new skills in order to stay competitive in the employment market. But they can need favors or financial support to pursue technology training since they don't have enough money or can't attend good training programs. (3.6%), the majority of respondents either disagree with the assertion or recognize the necessity for favors or financial aid. Almost none of the respondents disagree with the necessity of financial aid or favors to learn technology skills, as indicated by the extremely low number of strongly disagree responses (0.5%). Question # (11). According to findings of our study highlights that less than one-fifth of respondents expect their commission and income to rise as a result of the online booking and delivery system, as indicated by the comparatively low proportion of agree replies (17.8%). The significant proportion of neutral answers (38.4%) would suggest that many participants are unclear about how online booking and delivery platforms affect their bottom line. As opposed, high fraction of disagree and strongly disagree answers (30.2% combined) indicates that a sizable portion of respondents do not think their commission and pay will rise as a result of the online booking and delivery system. Numerous variables, including worries about job stability, a lack of faith in digital technology, or bad experiences with online booking and delivery systems, could be to blame for this.

Table 3. Response of SME employees and their results interpretation as “Marketing and social media Skills”

Marketing and social media Skills	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
12. Social apps (FB, WhatsApp-groups) will more involve you in your job performance	4	29	52	85	241	411
13. Content creation will help you to take and upload pics of your food, catering etc.	31	62	105	92	121	411
14. Will the 'Event planner' software helps you for properly organizing an event?	3	17	25	98	143	411

The results of the survey, which are shown below, look into how marketing and social media skills affect employees' job performance. A thorough grasp of employees' opinions regarding the importance of media and marketing skills can be gained from the answers to questions 12–14. Question # (12). This research reflects that, the large proportion of strongly agree replies (58.6%) indicates that over half of Pakistani respondents think social media will improve their involvement in their work performance. This might be because social media is so widely used in Pakistan, especially by younger people, who are more inclined to use it for both work and personal reasons. With regard small proportion of disagree replies (7.1%) reveals that few respondents do not think social media will improve their engagement in their work. A lack of social media expertise, a lack of knowledge about how social media can be utilized professionally, or worries about the possible distractions or detrimental effects of social media on job performance are some of the possible causes of this. Question # (13). The results confirms that nearly one-third of Pakistani respondents think that content creation will help them take and upload pictures of their cuisine, catering, etc., as indicated by the comparatively high percentage of strongly agree replies (29.4%). This can be because visual content is becoming more and more important in Pakistani food and catering marketing and promotion. Meanwhile, the comparatively high number of ambivalent answers (25.5%) would suggest that many participants are unclear about the value of content production in advertising and promoting catering and food services. This ambiguity could result from a number of things, including insufficient knowledge of how to use content creation for marketing and promotion, a lack of experience creating content, or doubts regarding the efficacy and quality of content creation. The study discloses, a considerable number of respondents do not think that content creation will assist them capture and upload pictures of their cuisine, catering, etc., as indicated by the comparatively high percentage of disagree and strongly disagree replies (22.6% combined). This could be because they are not interested in creating content, they do not have easy access to the tools and resources they need, or they are worried about how creating content can affect their reputation or business. Question # (14). The results imply that almost one-third of Pakistani respondents think that event planning software will enable them to properly organize events, as indicated by the high percentage of strongly agree replies (34.8%). This could be because event planning is becoming more and more significant in Pakistan's hospitality and tourist sector. Although, the comparatively small number of disagree replies (4.1%) proves that few respondents do not think that event planning software will assist them in effectively organizing events. This could be the result of a number of things, including a lack of software experience, a lack of knowledge about how to utilize event planning software, or doubts regarding the dependability and efficiency of event planning software.

Table 4. Response of SME employees and their results interpretation as “Strategy and organizational assistance”

Strategy and organizational assistance	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
15. Will you adopt any supportive program offer by state or any private organization?	2	6	64	125	214	411
16. Does the policy maker can play a changing role in the betterment of SMEs employees?	215	133	26	31	6	411

This section presents the questionnaire survey results, which analyze the function of organizational support and strategy. The answers to questions 15–16 shed light on how state-owned or private enterprises could affect SME employees. Question # (15). This above table illustrate that, a large percentage of respondents in Pakistan are eager to accept supportive programs provided by the government or private organizations, as indicated by the high number of strongly agree replies (52.1%). This might be because more people are realizing how crucial supportive initiatives are to fostering entrepreneurship and Pakistan's economic growth. In summary, many respondents in Pakistan are willing to adopt supportive programs. Subsequently, the extremely low proportion of respondents who disagreed (1.9%) implies that relatively few people are unaware of the advantages of supportive programs. Question # (16). This research notion that fewer people are willing to implement supporting programs is further supported by the comparatively low percentage of agree replies (7.5%). In relation to the large majority of respondents appear to be unwilling to embrace supportive programs, as indicated by the high number of disagree and strongly disagree replies (84.7% combined). This could be the result of a number of things, including a lack of knowledge about the advantages of supporting programs, difficulty finding information about them, or worries about the possible drawbacks or hazards of implementing supportive programs.

Table 5. Response of SME employees and their results interpretation as “Upskilling influence on employees”

Upskilling influence on employees	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
17. Do the upskilling employees give any benefit to your SME (organization)?	0	0	17	136	268	411
18. Upskilling can elevate you and your performance in your SME (organization)?	0	4	42	122	243	411
19. Does the upskilled colleague is a beneficial for you during job assignments in SME?	0	4	2	136	269	411

The results of questions 17–19, which investigated how employees perceived the effect of upskilling on their performance, are analyzed in the table above. The answers to questions 17–19 provide a thorough grasp of how workers see the contribution of upskilling to improving their performance. Question # (17) the survey's findings indicate that a resounding majority of participants (404 out of 411) agreed with by 136 respondents (33.1%) and strongly agreed by 268 respondents (65.2%). Just 17 respondents, or 4.1%, are indifferent. Upskilling employees may have had measurable benefits for Pakistani SMEs, such as increased productivity, increased innovation, or better employee retention, as evidenced by the fact that more respondents strongly agree (65.2%) than simply agree (33.1%). Question # (18). The results show that while 29.7% of respondents agree with the statement, 59.1% strongly believe that upskilling can improve performance. 10.2% of respondents, however, express no opinion. According to these findings, Pakistani workers are aware of how important upskilling is to developing their careers and doing well at work. The large proportion of respondents who strongly agree or agree with the notion highlights the significance of upskilling in the Pakistani context. Question # (19). The results exhibit that while 33.1% of respondents agree with the statement, 65.5% strongly agree that possessing an upskilled colleague benefits them. Just 1.0% of respondents, however, disagree with the contention. The findings indicate that upskilling is a highly regarded notion in the Pakistani SME sector and that workers are more likely to experience increased productivity and job assignments when they collaborate with upskilled colleagues.

Table 6. Response of SME employees and their results interpretation as “Forthcoming viewpoint”

Forthcoming viewpoint	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
20. Does the 'bar-code' & IT skills are necessary in future for your customer's serving job?	4	19	102	154	132	411
21. Can you adopt any strategy to cop-up the skill's gap?	1	3	9	167	231	411
22. Does the future training programs necessary for your serving job?	46	53	87	106	119	411

The questionnaire results presented below investigate the forthcoming viewpoint, and their serving job. Question # (20). According to the results, 37.5% of respondents agree with this perspective, and 32.1% strongly agree that "bar-code" and IT abilities will be required in the future. Nonetheless, 24.8% of those surveyed are impartial. The findings imply that workers will be more capable of meeting the evolving demands of their jobs and maintaining their competitiveness in the customer's serving job if they acquire these abilities. Question # (21). The result implies that, 40.6% of the respondents agree with the statement, and 56.2% strongly agree that they can implement methods to close the skills gap. Notably, 0.7% of those surveyed said they disagreed with this proposition. The findings of this study illustrate that, workers who are

proactive and self-assured in their capacity to learn new skills have a higher chance of succeeding in the quickly evolving Job serving. Question # (22). According to the results, 19.7% of respondents agree with the statement, while 78.7% strongly believe that further training programs are required for their current position. The findings imply that workers are more likely to thrive in their careers and support the expansion and advancement of their companies if they understand the value of lifelong learning and professional development.

Table 7. Response of SME employees and their results interpretation as “Financial and Managerial Skills for the Managers/Supervisors”

Financial and Managerial Skills for the Managers/Supervisors	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
23. Familiarity with Accounts software’s like ‘QuickBooks’ and ‘Xero’ will make your task easy?	0	0	7	81	323	411
24. Grip on MS-Office (Word, Excel & PPT) will comfort you to make reporting?	0	0	51	99	261	411
25. Online cash transactions will easy your labor work to go to field and banks?	5	46	53	158	149	411
26. Skills to operate CCTV is necessary to avoid the physical appearance on the floor?	61	83	86	84	97	411

The result reported in this above table shows the association of Financial and Managerial Skills for the Managers/Supervisors with several objectives. The result is interpreted of each questions step by step: Question # (23). The study demonstrates that, 19.7% of respondents agree with the statement, while 78.6% strongly agree that becoming familiar with accounting software will make their tasks easier. Question # (24). According to the results, 24.1% of the respondents agree with the statement, while 63.5% strongly believe that being able to use Microsoft Office will make creating reports more comfortable. The 12.4% of respondents who gave a neutral response might indicate that some managers and supervisors are unclear about the advantages of MS-Office skills for reporting, or they may not have had enough experience with the program to have an opinion. Question # (25). In response to the indicate that 38.4% of respondents agree with this notion, and 36.3% strongly believe that doing cash transactions online would make their jobs easier and 11.2% of respondents disagree with the statement, while 12.9%. The findings imply that workers are more likely to appreciate the advantages of online cash transactions and be more effective in their positions if they are familiar with them. However, the 11.2% of respondents who disagreed would suggest that some managers and supervisors are dubious about the advantages of online cash transactions or might favor more conventional cash transaction methods. Question # (26). Survey results disclose that 20.4% of respondents agree with the statement, while 23.6% strongly agree that abilities to operate CCTV are required. However, 35% of respondents disagree with the statement (20.2% disagree and 14.8% strongly disagree), while 20.9% of respondents are neutral. Research results imply that workers who value CCTV operation abilities are more likely to take the initiative to learn them, whereas workers who do not think these skills are essential might need further education and awareness campaigns.

RESULTS

Table 8. Results of Cronbach’s Alpha (α)

Independent Variables	Cronbach’s alpha (α) Coefficient
Upskilling workforce for betterment	0.813
Digital and technological transformation	0.842
Marketing and social media Skills	0.791
Strategy and organizational assistance	0.825
Upskilling influence on employees	0.836
Forthcoming viewpoint	0.894
Financial and Managerial Skills for the Managers/Supervisors	0.737
Cronbach’s alpha	0.81 (α)

Source: Generated by authors

The above table is retrospections that the ‘Cronbach’s alpha (α) values are > greater than 0.8 which is mostly presented as a ‘good reliability’ and strongly acceptable except the only two variable’s values like ‘Marketing and social media skills’ its value is (0.791) and last one ‘Financial and managerial skills for the managers/supervisor, its value is (0.737) both values are also representing the acceptable reliability. So, we can say that ‘Up-skilling strategies’ have a positive and strongly reliable with the performance of the SME employees in this digital age.

Table 9. Correlation Analysis

Correlation between SME Employees performance and Upskilling strategies	r value	p value
Upskilling workforce for betterment	0.71	0.00
Digital and technological transformation	0.64	0.01
Marketing and social media Skills	0.64	0.02
Strategy and organizational assistance	0.75	0.00
Upskilling influence on employees	0.82	0.00
Forthcoming viewpoint	0.75	0.00
Financial and Managerial Skills for the Managers/Supervisors	0.63	0.02

Source: Generated by authors

The above table showing the collective values of the Pearson ‘r’ values and on the parallel side showing the sigma (2-tailed) ‘p’ values. These are the ‘correlation coefficient’ (r) values which measures the strength and as well as the directions of a linear relationship between Upskilling strategies and SME employee’s performance in the digital age. So, we can say that the ‘r’ values (which range should be -1 to +1) are > greater than 0.63 and the other side ‘p-value’ (2-tailed) values are mostly 0.00 (which should be < less than 0.05, that is the standard benchmark for statistical significance), here it is slightly increasing in only three variables like ‘digital and technological transformation’, ‘Marketing and social media skills’ and in ‘Financial and managerial skills for the managers/supervisors’ that is retrospect that there is a positive and strong relationship among the ‘Up-skilling strategies and SME employees in the modern digital age’.

Table 10. Regression Analysis

Collective Summary of Regression Analysis				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.71	.5041	.5044	0.0348
1	0.64	.4094	.4096	0.0379
1	0.64	.4094	.4096	0.0379
1	0.75	.5625	.5619	0.0327
1	0.82	.6724	.6724	0.0296
1	0.75	.5625	.5619	0.0327
1	0.63	.3969	.3985	0.0384

Source: Created by authors

The above ‘Regression Summary table’ is representing about the upskilling strategies appear to have a good correlation with the outcomes of SME employees, according to the moderate R value. The next R² values show that the dependent variables can be explained by the upskilling strategies used by SMEs. This emphasizes how crucial upskilling is as a major predictor. The model's validity is supported by adjusted R², which demonstrates that adding numerous variables like digital transformation and financial management adds significant explanatory power without overfitting the model. The "Std. Error of the Estimate" (SEE value) indicates that the regression model predicts SME employees’ outcomes based on the upskilling techniques with little error and fits the data well. ‘Upskilling Workforce for Betterment’ the ability of employees to perform better in their roles is strongly impacted (0.71) and (0.5044) AR² by upskilling activities, as indicated by a positive coefficient for this variable. ‘Digital technological transformation’ is essential for enhancing the competencies of SME employees in the digital age workplace, according to a substantial positive coefficient (0.64) but somewhat week with (0.4096) AR² for this variable. ‘Marketing and social media Skills’ has a significant positive coefficient, but it is slightly weak, suggesting that employees’ increased job performance and career advancement can result from their ability to use digital marketing and social media platforms effectively. ‘Strategy And Organizational Assistance’ (0.75) as indicated by a significant coefficient (.5619) AR² for SMEs employees. According to the ‘Upskilling Influence on Employees’ SMEs have a Very strong significant (0.82) and positive response. (0.5619) AR². ‘Forthcoming viewpoint’ implies a strong, positive (0.75) and significant impact (0.5619) AR². ‘Manager/Supervisor Financial and Managerial Skills’ have positive but slightly week (0.63) just because of only related to the managerial level, not for every employee of the SME, but (0.3985) with AR².

DISCUSSIONS

The existing research have comprehensively discussed the Upskilling strategies of SME employees, an organization based in Lahore Pakistan, the employees are strongly willing to adopt the upskilling strategies for their betterment. We gave an important theoretical and practical advance and elaborate on our results. The results of the study emphasize how crucial upskilling programs are for Pakistani SME employees. As demonstrated by the large number of participants who agreed that upskilling is crucial for their advancement and that it enhances their job effectiveness, professional prospects, and job satisfaction, SME workers in Pakistan seem eager to acquire new skills and expertise in order to remain viable in the digital age. According to earlier research, this finding bolsters the notion that upskilling is essential for staff development and Small and Medium sized businesses in the digital age. The findings also highlight the importance of social media and marketing expertise, financial and administrative abilities, and digital and technological transformation. Pakistani SMEs may close the skills gap, boost productivity, and become more competitive by incorporating these skills into their upskilling strategies. This would help the country's economy thrive and prosper. According to the statistical findings, there are noteworthy positive correlations between the main components of upskilling programs and the intended results of professional growth, job effectiveness, and job satisfaction. Employee performance and happiness are directly impacted by workforce development investments, as seen by the substantial correlation between the variables "Upskilling workforce for betterment" (r = 0.71) and "Upskilling influence on employees" (r = 0.82), which is most high score. The relevance of this link is further supported by the regression analysis, which shows a somewhat positive association between the ‘Digital and technological transformation’ is (r = 0.64), and the employees’ ‘Marketing and social media Skills (r = 0.64) its slightly week but remain positive in SME job performance, job satisfaction, and professional development (R = 0.63). The R² value of 0.3969 indicates that the upskilling strategies used by the SMEs account for around 40% of the variation in these results. When taking into consideration several predictors, such as "Digital and technological transformation," "Strategy and organizational assistance," and "Marketing and social media skills," the model is still robust, as indicated by the Adjusted R² value of 0.3985. Skills in social media, marketing, and digital and technology change have become essential for improving job effectiveness and competitiveness. The significance of strategic planning and organizational support in promoting a successful upskilling process is demonstrated by the substantial correlation between these variables and "Strategy and organizational assistance" (r = 0.74). This confirms the findings of organizational assistance in helping SMEs make the

transition to digitalization. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that managers' and supervisors' managerial and financial abilities are essential to the effective execution of upskilling initiatives. According to the correlation between these skills and the "Forthcoming viewpoint" ($r = 0.72$), SMEs with robust managerial and financial capacities are better equipped to make long-term plans and incorporate successful upskilling initiatives. The regression model's comparatively low degree of error is further supported by the Error of the Estimate (SEE) of 0.0384, which indicates that the upskilling techniques evaluated in the study closely match the results that were observed. This gives assurance on the efficacy of upskilling as a workforce competency enhancement method in SMEs. All things considered, these results offer significant theoretical and applied insights. The analysis supports the theoretical idea that SMEs must implement upskilling tactics in order to be competitive in the digital era. As part of a complete upskilling plan, SMEs should prioritize developing their managerial abilities, social media knowledge, and digital transformation, according to the research. Furthermore, creating an atmosphere that is favorable to learning and development requires strong organizational support. SMEs in Pakistan can improve employee performance, close the digital skills gap, and eventually support the country's overall economic growth by implementing these components into their strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

The core purpose of this research study was to explore the importance of 'upskilling SME employees' in the modern digital age and its impact on enhancing their performance and the overall growth of SMEs in Pakistan. Upskilling the employees of the SMEs (Small Medium Enterprises) is the requirement of the modern time in this digital age that was our core purpose to explore. Small and Medium Enterprises are playing a vital role in emerging economy like Pakistan, SMEs are contributing almost 40% of the total GDP in the Pakistan's economy. Among the total exports of the Pakistan the 30% belongs to the SME's production. It relates from the goods and services sector. In Pakistan, the most of the commercial activities are running under the umbrella of the SMEs. It estimated figure 1 is around 90% in the emerging and developing economy of Pakistan. Any SME can accelerate its business turnover by providing the training and skills to its employee. The upskilled employees of the SMEs not only enhance their own skills, they will also put their learned experience in the SME's output. Most of the research focused on the SMEs that they should give the proper training and skills sessions and webinars to their employees for their betterment. The Human Capital Theory (HCT) is used to emphasize it the investment on the employees in form of education is also a key part of the business investment. As a result, our finding was very tremendous that the 'r value' of all variables were > more than 0.05, and 'p-values' were < less than 0.01 except only 3 variables, which retrospection that our research study have a strong and positive correlation with each other. The skilled and an educated employee of the SME will boost the business of the SME. This study is also indicating that work related education and skills are necessary for the employees. In Pakistan the SMEs have many challenges and problems like lack of finances and time management and untrained employees. But now it's the duty of the government they make a collaboration with the different NGOs who are designed and focusing on the training and development, they should give the proper training to the employees of the SMEs. Government also introduces the proper vocational schools and colleges upgrade the syllabus of the curriculum for the proper training, because the SMEs are contributing a spectacular part in the economy. The present digital age having several challenges for the employees to upgrade their skills and filling the gaps in the different aspects. Definitely it will increase the job opportunities and also elevate the turnover of the SMEs along with the acceleration of state's economy. A successful SME have many challenges in the competitive market to meet the rivalry in the digital age to meet the targets. Researchers focused and suggested that the employer of the SME should transform the organization with digital system, it will self-motivate the employees to upskill themselves for better adjustment in the job place. Employers and SMEs' supervisors/managers can gain by funding reskilling and upskilling initiatives to improve workers' abilities, particularly in fields like marketing, financial management, and digital literacy. Prioritizing staff engagement and retention, creating strategic alliances, and cultivating a culture of ongoing learning are also essential. Employers of SMEs and supervisors/managers can set up their companies for success in the fast-paced, quickly evolving business world of today by putting these methods into practice. Policymakers and government agencies are essential in fostering the expansion and advancement of SMEs. The government may help SMEs by lowering taxes and offering financial support, which would allow them to engage in digital and upskilling initiatives for their workforce and promote a strong economy. A proficient generation that can support the digital economy can also be produced by integrating digital learning initiatives and developing courses in schools and institutions. Additionally, providing firms and employees with affordable subsidies for training in digital skills can increase their chances of gaining these abilities, which will ultimately help SMEs overall the country.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Definition of Variables

Upskilling workforce for betterment	The process of acquiring novel skills and knowledge to improve worker growth, job efficiency, & job prospects through education, training, and professional advancement is known as "upskilling the workforce for betterment."
Digital and technological transformation	The term digital and technological transformation describes how digital technologies like smartphone apps, online platforms, online booking and delivery system, and digital training affect customer service, employee productivity, and business operations.
Marketing and social media Skills	Marketing and social media Skills are the capacity to use social media platforms (FB, WhatsApp-groups), content production, and event planning software to improve customer engagement, job performance, and event planning in the food and catering sector.
Strategy and organizational assistance	The term strategy and organizational assistance describes the resources and support that outside organizations, such as government initiatives or private groups and policy makers, offer to help SME personnel grow and develop.

Upskilling influence on employees	The term upskilling influence on employees describes how upskilling improves worker performance, organizational advantages, and productive teamwork.
Forthcoming viewpoint	The term forthcoming viewpoint describes the expectation and anticipation of future requirements for the training, skills, and technology needed for a customer serving job, includes the adoption of barcode technology and IT know-how.
Financial and Managerial Skills for the Managers/Supervisors	For managers and supervisors, financial & managerial abilities refer to the ability to use a variety of digital resources, applications, and technology, including accounting software, Microsoft Office programs, internet-based transactions, & CCTV functions, to simplify managing duties and obligations.

Appendix B: Research Questionnaires

(Questionnaire placed here, as a part of an appendix for ease of reader and others.)

Upskilling workforce for betterment

1. Does training approach should be adopted for the employee’s progress?
2. Do the skills require for employee’s development in this digital age?
3. Does profession related education/diploma is necessary for this job?
4. Do you want to apply for any upskilling plans for yourselves?
5. Have you faced hurdles during training programs?

Digital and technological transformation

6. Does the current serving table system have any effect on your performance?
7. Mobile app devices will help you during your customer serving job?
8. Do you think, you are ready to adopt the digital training?
9. Do you require Scheduling tools for the customer’s core date and events?
10. Do you need any favor/financial assistance, for technological training for yourself?
11. Will the online booking and delivery system increase your commission and salary?

Marketing and Social Media Skills

12. Social apps (FB, WhatsApp-groups) will more involve you in your job performance
13. Contant creation will help you to take and upload pics of your food, catering etc.
14. Will the ‘Event planner’ software helps you for properly organizing an event?

Strategy and organizational assistance

15. Will you adopt any supportive program offer by state or any private organization?
16. Does the policy maker can play a changing role in the betterment of SMEs employees?

Upskilling influence on employees

17. Do the upskilling employees give any benefit to SME (organization)?
18. Upskilling can elevate you and your performance in your SME (organization)?
19. Does the upskilled colleague is a beneficial for you during job assignments in SME?

Forthcoming viewpoint

20. Does the ‘bar-code’ & IT skills are necessary in future for your customer’s serving job?
21. Can you adopt any strategy to cop-up the skill’s gap?
22. Does the future training programs necessary for your serving job?

Financial and Managerial Skills for the Managers/Supervisors

23. Familiarity with Accounts software’s like ‘QuickBooks’ and ‘Xero’ will make your task easy?
24. Grip on MS-Office (Word, Excel & PPT) will comfort you to make reporting?
25. Online cash transactions will easy your labor work to go to field and banks?
26. Skills to operate CCTV is necessary to avoid the physical appearance on the floor?

We have spent almost more than two months around (68) days for conducting an in-dept interview for this in different shifts, as their ease and convenient times and schedules of the above said SME employees.

- We have observed their day-to-day operations.
- Analyzing their culture norms and values and environmental changes.
- Individual assignments V/S team work of employees (workforce) effects.

The above said questions encouraged them to boost their employees (workforce) for the more betterment of SME. They gave the proper response and felt better for the upskilling improvement in this digital age. ‘Human Capital Theory’ (HCT) (1964) also indicating this methodology. We have applied this theory in this context because the ‘**Theodore Schults**’ and as well as ‘**Gary Becker**’ encouraged the researchers to investigate the outcomes after putting values in education, health and training on the development and elevate the productivity of an employees for the digital age, in their ‘Human Capital Theory’ (HCT) presented in “*Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*” (1964).

Appendix C. Supplementary Data

Graphical representation of the Asian country’s contribution in the SMEs & employment.

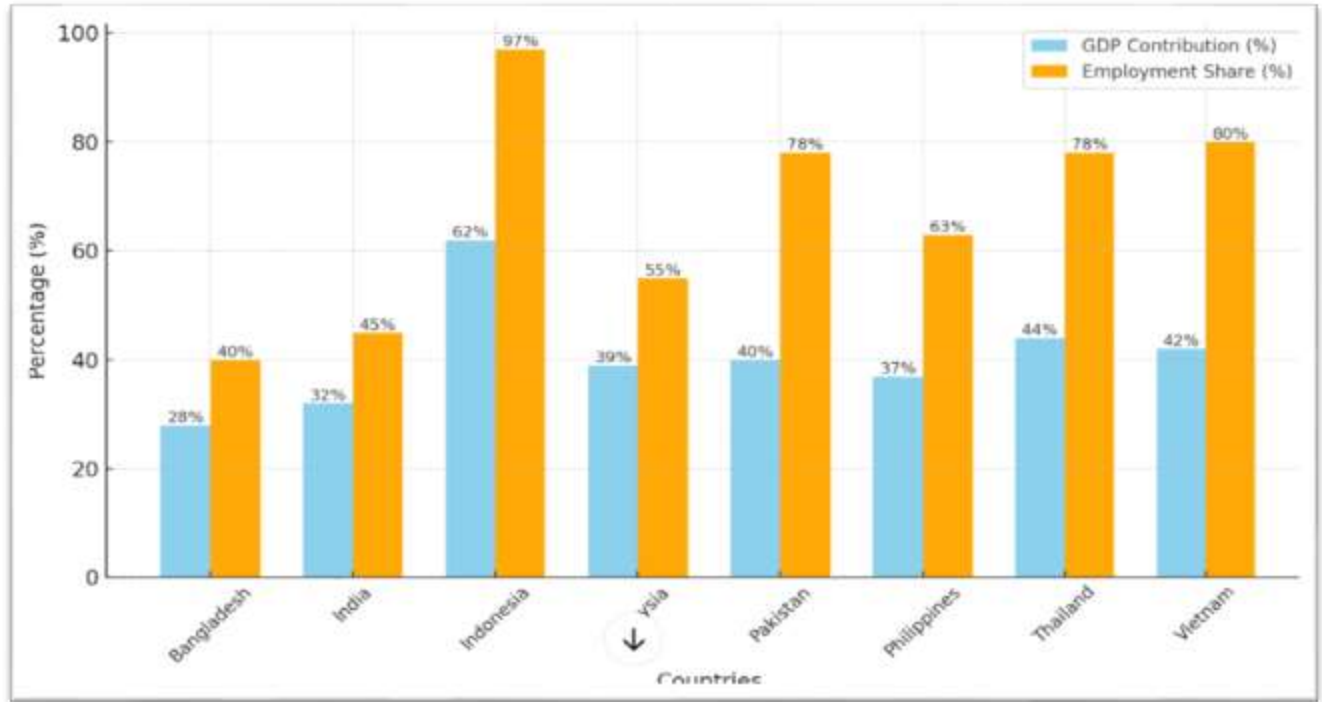


Figure 1. GDP & an employment contribution in Asian countries

The above bar graph is representing the ratio of the Asian countries, for the production of ‘Gross Domestic Products’ (GDP) and an ‘Employment Share’ (ES) in the SMEs. Blue color bar is showing the GDP contribution and an orange color bar is showing the employment contribution in their respective countries.

Appendix C1.

Present growth, consequences and challenges of SMEs in Pakistan:

Table 11. Present growth, consequences and challenges of SMEs in Pakistan

Indicators	Data	Sources
Number of SMEs	5.2 million (52) Laks SMEs in Pakistan	Pakistan Today*, The Diplomat**. (PROFIT BY PAKISTAN TODAY) *www.profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2024/01/11/ **www.propakistani.pk/2024/07/03/
Contribution to GDP in Pakistan	40% of total GDP in Pakistan	Pakistan Today*, The Diplomat**. *www.profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2024/01/11/ **www.propakistani.pk/2024/07/03/
Export contribution	30% of Pakistani exports	The Diplomat (Pro-Pakistani)*. *www.propakistani.pk/2024/07/03/
Employment	>80% of others from agriculture labor	The Diplomat (Pro-Pakistani)*. *www.propakistani.pk/2024/07/03/
Regional Distribution	64% SMEs situated in Punjab	Pakistan Today*. *https://propakistani.pk
Challenges	Financial and technical issues, regulatory & governance problems	The Diplomat (THEDIPLOMATE)* *https://thediplomat.com

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.I., M.Z., M.Y.T., H.H. and F.T.; Methodology, M.I.; Software, M.I.; Validation, M.I.; Formal Analysis, M.I.; Investigation, M.I.; Resources, M.I.; Data Curation, M.I.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, M.I., M.Z., M.Y.T., H.H. and F.T.; Writing – Review & Editing, M.I., M.Z., M.Y.T., H.H. and F.T.; Visualization, M.I.; Supervision, M.I.; Project Administration, M.I.; Funding Acquisition, F.T. Author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

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