



Relational gatekeeper behaviour of HR managers in the Middle East: the role of informal networks

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ABSTRACT

Wasta, the informal network context omnipresent in the Middle East, is widespread in human resource management (HRM) practices. Yet, its influence on the behaviour of HR managers has not been explored. Utilizing relational gatekeeping theory and the informal network perspective in conjunction with in-depth expert interviews with HR managers, we seek to explore whether and how informal networks (wasta) influence and shape their role in an Arab Middle Eastern context. Our findings indicate that the level of wasta penetration in organizations is reliant on the relational gatekeeping behaviours of HR managers. Furthermore, we show how HR managers compensate for structural deficiencies by leveraging their wasta-derived power to amplify their voices. Nevertheless, the findings also emphasize the significance of power sharing in reducing the expansion of culturally derived power associated with wasta, thereby limiting power dynamics and authority to that derived from the formal organizational hierarchy. These insights advance knowledge on gatekeeping behaviour in the Arab Middle Eastern context and contribute new knowledge regarding the operational modes of informal networks within organizations. Our findings underscore the pivotal role that HR managers play in shaping the organizational culture. From a practical perspective, we offer actionable solutions, such as power sharing through committee work, to enhance the effectiveness of the HR function.

KEYWORDS

HRM; HR managers; institutional complexity; informal networks; power dynamics; leadership; relational gatekeeping; wasta; Jordan; Middle East; emerging markets

Introduction

Wasta is a complex, informal tie, and network construct that is omnipresent in the Middle East region (Ali & Weir, 2020). It refers to an implicit social contract, typically within a tribal group, which obliges

those within the group to provide assistance (favorable treatment) to others within the group. Members of the group have a largely unqualified obligation to provide assistance when asked, and those who ask for assistance have no obligation to provide direct compensation for assistance provided (Barnett et al., 2013, p. 41).

In the human resource management (HRM) domain, the term refers to, for instance, HR executives or C-suite managers who help individuals obtain jobs, rapid promotions, better compensation, or good performance appraisals, often paying secondary attention to their competence and at the expense of other qualified counterparts by offering them preferential treatment during the recruitment or evaluation process. This behavior emphasizes the negative side of *wasta*, which is in creating a generalized sense of injustice between individuals at the workplace and a feeling of a lack of fairness and inequality (Barnett et al., 2013) when *wasta* affects hiring, promotion, and retention decisions of individuals in organizations (Alsarhan, 2021, 2022). Individuals who lack *wasta* may suffer from anger and frustration (Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011). On the other hand, looking on the bright side, *wasta* can help individuals protect and enforce their rights (Loewe et al., 2007), especially when used to circumvent protracted or unfair procedures (Barnett et al., 2013). It can also enhance one's social status and sense of belonging when used as a means to help others (Al-Ramahi, 2008; Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993).

Wasta remains to be considered as the key to understanding decision-making processes and generally a way of life for people in the region (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). It is essential due to its considerable role in the social, economic, and political spheres (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). Certainly, *wasta* is deeply ingrained in daily life to the extent that it is widely acknowledged as a defining, even normative, characteristic of Middle Eastern societies (Weir et al., 2019). As management systems in the Middle East underscore the importance of being attuned to local cultural norms like *wasta* (Al Jawali et al., 2022; Tlaiss & Al Waqfi, 2022; Clarke et al., 2022; Glaister et al., 2021; Budhwar & Mellahi, 2007, 2016), comprehending its processes and dynamics has emerged as a significant challenge for both managers and researchers (Iles et al., 2012).

This work is focused on the country of Jordan, a relatively secure Middle Eastern emerging market. Due to its unique institutional features and the potential impact of the latter on human capital development, the country presents an interesting case for studying the role of HRM managers and practices and how they are influenced by some contextual factors (e.g. Darwish et al., 2024). While existing HRM literature in Jordan and the wider Middle East region is relatively scarce, it underscores the significance of distinct local institutional arrangements, such as informal

networks (i.e. *wasta*), communitarianism, cultural customs, and traditions, in shaping the role of HR managers and promoting and sustaining national and firm-specific HR practices (Abualigah et al., 2024; Brandstaetter et al., 2016; Darwish et al., 2016; Al Bastaki et al., 2021). Moreover, these unique and fluid institutional arrangements could have far-reaching implications for the socio-economic context and the national development of human resources, including unemployment rates, job security, talent retention, and migration patterns. As a result, it is essential to explore HRM in such contexts to determine how it is influenced by the institutional realities and distinct features of the region and to what extent they shape the role of HRM managers and practices. Existing literature holds that institutions in emerging markets are less closely coupled, enforcement of regulations is inconsistent, and informal networks can make up for structural deficiencies (Darwish et al., 2024; Horak et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2020; Webster & Wood, 2005). In the Middle East, these networks are referred to as '*wasta*', and prior work indicates that they are especially prevalent in the context of Jordan (Darwish et al., 2016). Hence, given such systemic institutional shortfalls and their potential impact on how institutions work, we seek to understand the potential impact of such informal networks on shaping the role of HR managers and their leadership approach in Jordan and the wider Middle East region.

With our focus on the HR manager's relational gatekeeping behavior (Allen, 1977), we emphasize the individual level of *wasta*. The latter would normally center around the HR manager's position as a hinge between the organizational external and internal context. This is a rather novel perspective as *wasta* is conventionally discussed at the macro level by adopting an institutionalist perspective (Hutchings & Weir, 2006a; Sidani & Thornberry, 2013). Hence, our study explores the hinge-role that HR managers play in relational (*wasta*) gatekeeping at the intersection of the socio-cultural (external) and organization-internal context and contributes to existing knowledge on the relational gatekeeping function of the informal networking of HR managers in this unique institutional context (Gao et al., 2014). Gatekeepers are in contact with organization-external actors (Allen, 1977). They understand how organizational outsiders equal and differ compared to their own organizational colleagues and who can mediate between these two dimensions.

Despite the established knowledge and associated progress in theory development on the role of gatekeeping in the organizational literature (Gao et al., 2014), it is yet unknown how the role of HR managers is shaped in such contexts, where the institutional ground is highly fluid, with much of its legitimacy undermined by the informal institution of *wasta*. While previous studies on relational gatekeeping have been conducted in the context of Chinese informal networks (*guanxi*), to the best

of our knowledge, there has been no previous work conducted on relational gatekeeping in the context of *wasta*. Nevertheless, studies on *wasta* conducted in an organizational context, although few, point towards the role power plays when utilizing *wasta* for management purposes (Abosag & Ghauri, 2022; Ali & Weir, 2019). Hence, we formulate research questions in an explorative way to guide the development of a basic understanding of how HR managers gain and use influence in their respective organizations through *wasta*. We set out to explore the first research question (RQ) as follows:

RQ1: How do HR managers gain and use power in the context of *wasta*?

A thorough understanding of the latter enables us to explore a further knowledge gap in the literature related to the way informal networks challenge the legitimacy of formal institutions. In the Arab Middle East, scholars point out a deficiency in effective formal institutions, leading to a predominant reliance on informal, autocratic, and authoritarian practices for social exchanges, as highlighted by Haak-Saheem and Darwish (2021). Additionally, the micro foundations of *wasta* remain weakly understood thus far (Ali & Weir, 2020), so the operational modes of *wasta* usage, exemplified by the HR manager's role in this context, remain largely unknown (Stefanidis et al., 2023). To fill this knowledge gap, we aim to answer the following research question (RQ):

RQ2: How do HR managers perform and control relational gatekeeping in their organization to either expand/perpetuate or curtail *wasta*?

While research has defined and conceptualized *wasta*, it has not been empirically investigated, nor have solutions to *wasta*-related challenges been derived from empirical data. *Wasta* usage in organizations has often been linked to favoritism, nepotism, unfairness, or lack of transparency (e.g., Cunningham et al., 1994; Sidani & Thornberry, 2013). Negative outcomes of *wasta* usage are observed in reduced organizational productivity, decreased diversity and inclusion, and an increase in inequality in organizations and society at large (Loewe et al., 2007). Up until now, there has been a limited understanding of how *wasta* can be effectively reduced. Therefore, we are exploring initiatives that can enhance the leadership strategies employed by HR managers to mitigate *wasta*, which is reflected in our third research theme.

RQ3: What leadership approaches of HR managers can curtail *wasta*?

By employing a blend of relational gatekeeping theory and social network theory, this study addresses three essential research questions (RQs), shedding light on the functioning and prosperity of specific informal networks within an organizational context, exemplified by *wasta*. This

contribution is significant in several respects and contributes to the advancement of both theory and practice. Firstly, this research offers valuable insights to enhance the effectiveness of the HR function in Arab organizations. By emphasizing a problem-solving approach centered on skills and competence rather than favoritism and power dynamics, this knowledge can significantly benefit the overall functioning of these firms (DiTomaso & Bian, 2018; Gu et al., 2020). Secondly, the findings have the potential to inspire organizations in the region to transition towards a fairer, more inclusive, and performance-oriented model (Arya et al., 2023; Aycan, 2005). This shift can foster a more conducive and equitable work environment, thereby increasing overall employee satisfaction and productivity (Elbaz et al., 2018; Laker & Williams, 2003). Thirdly, the insights derived from this study can serve as a guide for international businesses operating or planning to venture into the Arab Middle Eastern markets. Recognizing the critical contextual factors, such as the role of *wasta* and informal networks, is essential for success in this distinct business environment (Alhussan & AL-Husan, 2022). Understanding and adapting to these nuances can enable foreign enterprises to establish more effective strategies, partnerships, and relationships in the region, ultimately facilitating their business endeavors (Ghemawat & Reiche, 2016; Lee et al., 2022; Ramady, 2010).

In summary, this research, drawing on relational gatekeeping theory and social network theory, not only contributes to our understanding of informal networks within organizational settings (comp. Minbaeva et al., 2023) but also holds the potential to foster more effective HR practices, inspire fairer and performance-oriented organizations, and equip international businesses with the insights necessary to navigate the unique dynamics of the Arab Middle Eastern markets.

In what follows, we have divided this study into four sections. The first section offers a theoretical framework for our study. We present the research methods in the second section followed by the findings. The third section discusses the theoretical and practical implications of our findings and addresses the main limitations of our work. The final section provides the conclusion of our study.

Theoretical framework

Relational gatekeeping theory

According to relational gatekeeping theory (Allen, 1977), gatekeepers are seen as ‘individuals who maintain consistent, ongoing contact outside their organizations’ (Allen, 1977, p. 703). Gatekeepers are network actors who facilitate outsiders of a closed network circle to gain access to resources such as information, favours, opportunities, reciprocal exchanges,

and building trust. Relational gatekeeping in business relationships is well documented (Gao et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2014). Gatekeepers typically occupy a critical position within or between organizational networks (Burt, 2000). According to Gao et al. (2014), key roles of relational gatekeepers are reciprocal, adaptive, and symbolic gatekeeping, and their functions are buffering and connecting (Gao et al., 2018), as well as offering guidance (Burt, 1992). *Reciprocal gatekeeping* refers to the implicit norm of reciprocal arrangements between informal network members inside and outside of the organization. The reciprocity norm is conventionally honoured when there is a trust base between both, which is a further feature of a social tie in a network context. The latter assures insiders that their support of outsiders will be reciprocated in the future, and vice versa. *Adaptive gatekeeping* refers to the practice of gatekeepers skillfully transforming or modifying a favour request in such a way that it can be accepted by the recipient without any discomfort or the sense that they are being coerced into an action that goes against their moral principles or legal obligations. In essence, it involves the gatekeeper using their expertise to make a favour request more palatable and aligned with the recipient's beliefs and moral standards, ensuring that it does not breach corporate policies, moral standards, or legal regulations. *Symbolic gatekeeping* involves using symbolic language and social actions to foster meaningful connections between individuals. Further, it involves the use of symbolic actions, language, and cultural cues to create a comfortable and meaningful interaction between organizational insiders and outsiders. Gatekeepers may employ symbolic terms like 'good friends', 'good brothers', or even familial references like 'father' or 'children' to convey a sense of trust and closeness. Additionally, gatekeepers may engage in symbolic acts to signal they possess influential connections, which reduces the likelihood of opportunistic behaviour and facilitates smoother interactions between insiders and outsiders.

Social networking and the informal network perspective

Although the boundary spanning function of social ties is conventionally considered a topic framed by social network theory, some fundamental aspects differ when looking at the category of informal networks (e.g., *wasta*, *guanxi*, or *yongo*, etc.; comp. Horak & Paik, 2023; Horak et al., 2019; Minbaeva et al., 2023). Due to these differences, which we will further elaborate on, we will utilize social network theory as a macro frame to advance knowledge on informal networks. Informal network theorizing is currently evolving (Horak et al., 2020; Minbaeva et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021) and since it exclusively focuses on informal networks, such as *wasta*, it enables accessibility to study the micro

foundations of informal networks, thus enabling a better understanding of how informal networks operate in their respective cultural environments. Since social network theory is helpful at the macro level, in guiding research interest in general network characteristics, structural features or network density, the informal network perspective explicitly considers cultural characteristics that influence how informal networks function and why actors behave the way they do.

While social network theory conventionally regards weak ties as most valuable, in many non-Western countries, especially those in East Asia and the Middle East, weak ties are often not relied upon per se for meaningful transactions (Horak & Taube, 2016). Relatively strong ties are usually those that, in many countries, fulfil the function that weak ties are said to fulfil in social network theory. This is explained simply through cultural differences in the form of societal structures distinguishing, typically, ingroups from outgroups. Further, there is often a stronger reliance on personal relationships than on contracts and formal mechanisms to coordinate business transactions. While conventionally weak ties are seen to be instrumental in the acquisition of information and other benefits, Du et al. (2019) and Horak and Taube (2016) suggest that contrary to social network theory, in informal networks the underlying assumptions differ as weak institutional effectiveness (e.g. the enforcement of contracts) drives people to rely more on informal networks coming attached with a higher pronunciation of particularistic trust. *Wasta* is a prototypical example of the latter mechanism (Du et al., 2019; Horak & Taube, 2016).

Further, while social networking is generally regarded as a positive and, especially in business, an important activity, informal networks are morally ambiguous in two regards. The way they are instrumentalized is defined by the constraints of the respective context (Minbaeva et al., 2023). For example, 'an official cannot remain a good bureaucrat and a good brother at the same time, so informal networks enable and channel ways of navigating the constraints to help the brother while still keeping the bureaucratic job' (Horak et al., 2020, p. 518). This quote refers to the multiplexity of informal network ties, which often results in an ethical dilemma for gatekeepers with positional power, who know that it is unfair when, for example, hiring family members, as this does not go well with the need for being partial (Horak et al., 2022). Hence, the dual utility of informal networks makes them difficult to categorize as clearly ethical or unethical, as this depends on context and perspective.

Informal network research extends social network research by highlighting the key features of informal networks that are, amongst others, rather closed and socially exclusive and culturally embedded (Horak et al., 2020; Minbaeva et al., 2023). While informal networks describe

on the one hand a structure, i.e. a connection between people at the dyadic and network level, at the same time informal networks are intertwined with local values and behavioural ethics that guide common social practices that foster and intensify the connection. Both are embedded in the respective culture. In line with the latter conceptualization, Minbaeva et al. (2023, p. 560) define informal networks as ‘culturally embedded channels formed by informal dyadic ties between individual actors (...)’. To distinguish formal from informal networks Minbaeva et al. (2023, p. 560) regard informal networks as ‘biographical by-products rather than intentionally accumulated capital, that channel non-market relationships into the markets’. Exploring *wasta* usage among HR managers utilizing the suggested theoretical frame will help to understand the role contextual factors play in relational gatekeeping theory and at the same time it will extend knowledge on the working mechanisms of informal networks.

Literature review

Relation gatekeeping in business

Despite the importance of the role of HR managers, there is a lack of empirical research that focuses on their own behaviours and actions, as opposed to the HR system that they establish and sustain with their stakeholders (top management, labour unions, etc.). The influence of HR managers on an ethical and positive organization culture is substantial as the latter is largely based on their assumptions about what values should prevail in an organization and what behaviour is desirable (e.g. Aycan, 2005). The informal network context influences decisions made in the HR domain, such as recruitment, selection, or promotion (Alsarhan & Valax, 2021; Horak & Yang, 2019). Further, extant research has pointed out the cultural embeddedness of informal networks (Ali & Weir, 2020; Yang et al., 2018), which leads in an organizational context to questions of whether and how the informal network context may collide with the organizational culture. The role HR managers play in this context, however, especially in a non-Western context, has been largely neglected thus far. While studies on relational gatekeeping have been conducted in the Chinese informal network (i.e. *guanxi*) context (see Du et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2012; Gao et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2018), none have been conducted using the *wasta* context to develop deeper knowledge on HR manager’s relational gatekeeping behaviours. Nevertheless, recent and neighboring studies in the HR field contribute to understanding the common and influential nature of gatekeeping within an informal network context.

Research on gatekeeping in the Arab Middle Eastern context (Baranik et al., 2023; Brandstaetter et al., 2016), for instance, recognizes the

influential gatekeeping function of *wasta*—for example, achieving career success, resolving conflicts, or gaining access to resources. Close friends and family members, rather than through formal means, are instrumental in achieving these. Baranik et al. in their recent study confirm that having a *wasta* ties to a gatekeeper is critical to career success and ‘a lack of access to these gatekeepers can prevent individuals from succeeding’ (2023, p. 841). Utilizing *wasta* provides actors with access to a gatekeeper who, following norms of *wasta* exchange, provides them with resources, such as sponsorship or any information needed to advance careers.

Utilizing the informal network context of China (i.e. *guanxi*), Ma and Zhang (2022) investigate the impact of relational gatekeepers in the business-to-business (B2B) sales process on sales performance. Additionally, the study seeks to uncover how gatekeeper–salesperson *guanxi* and gatekeeper–buyer *guanxi* may moderate the relationship between both and sales performance. The results of the study show that using *guanxi* in the B2B sales process leads to the development of stronger relationships between sales managers and purchasing managers, which consequentially contributes to significantly better sales performance. The study identifies two critical moderating factors. First, the affective commitment involved in *guanxi* ties of the gatekeeper to their relationship with the sales manager enhances the effectiveness of the sales gatekeeping strategy. Second, the gatekeeper’s relational power over the purchasing manager strengthens the strategy’s impact on sales performance. Ma and Zhang (2022) study highlights the importance of *guanxi* in relational gatekeeping and provides insights for gatekeepers in B2B sales functions on how to use *guanxi* effectively to achieve their sales objectives.

Gao et al. (2014) explore the functions of relational gatekeepers in Chinese–Western business relationships by focusing on the role of relational gatekeepers in fostering relationships between individuals from both cultural backgrounds in an intercultural business environment. While Gao et al. (2014) define three roles of relational gatekeeping as described above (i.e. reciprocal, adaptive, and symbolic), the authors develop the concept of *guanxi* gatekeeping, a gatekeeping style that is deeply embedded in the informal network context of China. *Guanxi* gatekeeping expedites negotiation processes and decreases monitoring costs, leading to apparent economic advantages. What sets *guanxi* gatekeepers apart from other gatekeeper roles is that they have access to closely knit networks and loyal actors. *Guanxi* gatekeeping relies on the assured reciprocity facilitated by perceptions of obligations, expected economic benefits, and future exchanges. Assured reciprocity may be influenced by the level of influence a *guanxi* gatekeeper has. In this regard, Du et al. (2019) point towards the role social bases (e.g. family, relative,

friends) play on the influence a *guanxi* gatekeeper has. Social bases and influence level are interdependent. The latter depends on the former and the specific context of interactions.

Comparing relational gatekeeping behavior in the Arab Middle East and China, we recognize differences, especially at the level of how it is practiced (Minbaeva et al., 2023). First, regarding *guanxi* as the central informal networking approach to relational gatekeeping, it is a construct shaped by Chinese cultural norms and values. On the contrary, *wasta*-based gatekeeping is shaped by cultural norms and values shared by the entire Arab world. Second, informal institutions and culture influence relational gatekeeping practices to develop and maintain networks. While China and the Middle East share a culture of collectivism (Hofstede, 2003), influential informal institutions differ. Specifically for the Middle East, there is the embeddedness of *wasta* culture into the heritage of tribalism, where members of the same tribe feel strongly related and obligated towards each other, bonded by high loyalty. What research on relational gatekeeping in business studies in general and in HR, specifically, have in common is the insight that the most influential factor in shaping organizational roles and practices within a particular nation is its national culture and the context in which it operates, particularly in emerging markets (e.g. Farndale et al., 2023; Kwon et al., 2016). As noted earlier, the pervasive cultural norm of *wasta* holds significant sway in the Middle Eastern region; the socio-cultural context of the Middle East is interwoven with local values and behavioural ethics. Hence, the focal subject of analysis in this research is how far and in what way the *wasta* context interferes with the role of the HR managers and how it shapes their relational gatekeeping behaviour.

Informal network context in the Arab Middle East: wasta

What is *wasta* and what role does it play in Middle Eastern societies? The emphasis on local cultural norms like *wasta* in management systems in the Middle East (Budhwar & Mellahi, 2007, 2016; Al Jawali et al., 2022) has made understanding its processes and dynamics a formidable challenge for managers and researchers alike (Iles et al., 2012). *Wasta*'s meaning and purposes have evolved over time. Historically, it was understood to be a mechanism of conflict resolution between groups or tribes, while nowadays it assists in achieving what is assumed to be otherwise unattainable by individuals in virtually all aspects of their personal and professional life (Cunningham et al., 1994; Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). It can also be understood as a form of intervention or an intercession on behalf of others to help them attain something that they cannot achieve alone (Brandstaetter et al., 2016). From a semantic perspective,

the term *wasta* designates both the action of *wasta* and the person who mediates or intercedes to achieve the gain (Alsarhan, 2021). The mechanism of *wasta* depends on the reciprocity of mutual benefits between individuals and groups (Sidani & Thornberry, 2013). This relational nature of the process explains its entrenchment and a construct in the social fabric of Middle Eastern societies (Alothmany et al., 2023), where connections and sociability prevail, and individuals are highly group-oriented and have a high need for affiliation (Hutchings & Weir, 2006a). For instance, individuals owe loyalty to these group institutions and must accept various social obligations toward them, but they can on the one hand expect solidarity from them in times of need (Ta'Amnha et al., 2016). This culture reflects the tribalistic nature of many Middle Eastern societies, which focus on collectivistic structures and values, such as solidarity and allegiance (Haak-Saheem & Darwish, 2021).

Wasta can be seen as part of the culture that creates cohesion in the countries within the Arab Middle East region (Alsarhan, 2022; Budhwar et al., 2019). Tribalistic social paradigms come with a set of normative codes that include the requirement of saving face (i.e. it is a cultural norm directly linked to *wasta* where individuals cannot say 'no' face to face to any help seekers, and they always give answers that others wish to hear), the value of a good reputation within one's immediate and distant environments, and stronger commitment and allegiance to the group and group identities (Whiteoak et al., 2006). Indeed, with its roots in tribal traditions, *wasta* inherits the dynamics of its collectivistic paradigms (Zhang et al., 2021). Nonetheless, individual experiences and existences in collectivistic societies are also concerned with how these large-scale phenomena tend to infiltrate to the individual level: having ties or adhering to groups is predetermined for individuals from birth onwards (Kropf & Newbury-Smith, 2016). Similar to other forms of informal networks, such as *guanxi* in China and *yongo* in South Korea, *wasta* is shaped by culturally grounded social norms (Zhang et al., 2021). *Wasta* not only derives strength from cultural codes but also employs tactics such as shaming and shunning those who resist its practice for their relatives. In doing so, it evolves into a self-sustaining enterprise capable of withstanding and adapting to change. (Alsarhan et al., 2021).¹ Having said that, it is worth noting that the dominant religion in the Middle East, Islam, emphasizes fairness, justice, and equal treatment for all individuals (Branine & Pollard, 2010; Haak-Saheem et al., 2017). While *wasta* contradicts these principles, it has persisted in societies due to complex historical, cultural, and social factors, rather than religion. It is important to note that the practice of *wasta* varies across different regions and communities, and not all individuals or communities in the Middle East engage in or endorse this practice.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach, which is best suited to capture the rich nuances of participants' experiences in order to understand better the context and constructs like *wasta* that are deeply connected to social factors (Creswell, 2009). Our research method features in-depth interviews that enable us to gain a deep understanding from our respondents' insights as well as to comprehend their individual and complex experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As for the institutional horizon of our study, we centre our research area on public organizations, which we held to be emblematic of organizations not only in Jordan but in the wider Middle East region, where the strong impact of *wasta* on public sector institutions challenges the effectiveness of HRM generally (Al Jawali et al., 2022; Budhwar et al., 2019). Furthermore, we can justify this choice by pointing out that *wasta* is the main route to employment in general for Jordanians (Aladwan et al., 2014), a fact that is especially pertinent in the public sector. Indeed, *wasta* is a necessity when aspiring to a position in the public sector, more so than in the private sector (Alsarhan & Al-Twal, 2024, 2023). This reality is moreover attested to by Jordanians themselves, of whom, according to the Family Status Report, 65% deem *wasta* to be a necessity for being hired (Azzeh, 2017). A different poll showed that 77% of public employees see *wasta* as playing an instrumental part in the recruitment and promotion processes within the public sector (Loewe et al., 2007). With such striking numbers, it becomes clear that the Jordanian public sector is the ultimate terrain of *wasta* and therefore the most favourable field of study in which to investigate it.

Sample

Applying purposive sampling (Saunders et al., 2007), 31 participants were carefully selected for this research to inform the understanding of the research problem in the study. All respondents were HR managers from different organizations. Having prioritized an in-depth understanding of lived experiences of *wasta*, rather than generalized and sweeping findings (Creswell, 2009), this sample was deemed optimal for achieving the purpose of our study. A respondent selection criterion was years of experience, which directed us to professionals with a prolonged career that ensured their exposure to *wasta*. We were interested in varying the age groups of our respondents to observe the diachronic evolution of *wasta* practices between different generations. Our participants fell into three categories: over 60 years old; 40–60 years of age; and under 40 years of age (Table 1).

In terms of gender balance, to the best of our ability, we attempted to include professionals of both genders. We were able to conduct eight

Table 1. Overview: Sample demographics.

ID no.	Age-group [years]	Gender	Job-tenure [years]	Job-Location
R1	> 60	Male	> 25	Ministry
R2	< 40	Male	< 12	Ministry
R3	< 40	Male	< 12	State-owned Enterprise
R4	40–60	Male	12–25	Security Agency
R5	> 60	Male	> 25	State-owned Enterprise
R6	40–60	Female	> 25	State-owned Enterprise
R7	40–60	Male	12–25	Public University
R8	< 40	Male	< 12	Government Agency
R9	40–60	Male	12–25	Ministry
R10	> 60	Male	> 25	Government Agency
R11	< 40	Male	< 12	State-owned Enterprise
R12	40–60	Male	12–25	State-owned Enterprise
R13	40–60	Male	12–25	Ministry
R14	40–60	Male	> 25	Jordanian Army
R15	40–60	Male	12–25	Ministry
R16	< 40	Female	12–25	Ministry
R17	> 60	Male	> 25	State-owned Enterprise
R18	> 60	Male	> 25	State-owned Enterprise
R19	40–60	Male	12–25	Ministry
R20	< 40	Male	< 12	Ministry
R21	40–60	Female	12–25	Municipality
R22	40–60	Female	12–25	Government Agency
R23	< 40	Female	< 12	Ministry
R24	40–60	Female	< 12	Ministry
R25	< 40	Male	12–25	Ministry
R26	> 60	Male	> 25	State-owned Enterprise
R27	40–60	Female	12–25	Ministry
R28	40–60	Male	> 25	State-owned Enterprise
R29	< 40	Female	< 12	State-owned Enterprise
R30	< 40	Male	< 12	State-owned Enterprise
R31	40–60	Male	> 25	Ministry

interviews with female HR managers, while the remaining interviews were carried out with men. This gender disparity relates to issues of unequal gendered access to managerial positions in the region (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010). In Jordan, women are under-represented in management positions (Banihani, 2020).

Data collection and analysis

The data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews, conducted by the first author, who is bilingual in English and Arabic and familiar with the research context. The choice of semi-structured interviews stemmed from the need to capture diachronic accounts of the experiences and practices of our correspondents on a large chronological scale (Gioia et al., 2013) capable of providing a holistic understanding of the emergence and evolution of *wasta* in HRM practices. Likewise, this setting allowed us to guide the interviews while leaving the interviewees enough space to report potentially important details (Horak & Yang, 2019).

The prior living and working experience in Jordan of the researchers eased the access to interviewees. When no pre-existing relationship existed,

a mutual acquaintance, from the shared environment of the public sector, allowed the establishment of a connection. These direct and indirect relationships helped to establish more trust during the interviews between the researcher and the interviewees. The face-to-face interviews were carried out on different occasions between 2019 and 2022. They took place in the workplace of the interviewees to create a favourable setting for in-depth conversations. This also allowed the exchanges between the two parties to become more dynamic, with back-and-forth comments beyond the main questions. Since *wasta* is a sensitive issue, we assured our interviewees beforehand of full anonymity for both their names and those of their organization. This approach allowed them to dismiss any fear of repercussions and avoided potential auto-censorship, thus enabling them to express their opinions freely and with ease. This creation of an open atmosphere helps in developing trust between the interviewer and the interviewee, and that is an important factor for the control of the environment (Ryen, 2001). To preserve the valuable insights obtained from our interviewees, we recorded the interviews and subsequently produced transcripts based on the recordings, as language plays a crucial role in data collection and presentation, influencing the way people construct meaning. Van Nes et al. (2010) notes there is a risk of losing meaning during translation from the source to the target language. While we acknowledged that certain subtleties in respondents' expressions were lost in translation, the core meanings they conveyed remained intact. These subtleties often revolved around context-specific cultural references (jargons) for which there are no direct English equivalents and did not bear meaningful significance to the meaning participants were aiming to convey. It is important to note that the translation process was conducted by the first author, who is bilingual and is highly proficient in both Arabic and English. This expertise extended to a deep understanding of the cultural context underlying the interviews. Therefore, we took extensive measures to ensure the fidelity of the translation, which allowed us to maintain the essence and intent of the participants' voices (Van Nes et al., 2010).

The interview protocol tapped into a number of issues starting with the biographical information necessary to define the interviewees' experience in HRM practices and moving on to questions about their appreciation of *wasta*. The levels of questioning followed a gradual pattern to address contextual aspects before delving into the core of the issue of this paper. To do so, at the beginning of the interviews we discussed the HR management characteristics in an Arab context (questions (Qs) such as the following were asked: Can you describe the role played by HR managers in terms of organizing the practices and relationships between employees? How do HR managers use their power to achieve organizational goals? What are the common leadership styles that exist in HR

departments? What is the effect of the HR leadership style on achieving an organization's objectives? etc.). Then, we went deeper with our interviewees, and started exchanging about the HR manager's usage and gate-keeping practices in relation to *wasta* in the workplace (examples of Qs include: Based on your experience, do HR managers' leadership styles relate to the presence of *wasta* in the workplace? If so, why is it so and how is it practiced in detail? What is the source of *wasta* in the workplace—is it more prevalent in top management, HR management, mid-level management or staff level? How do you explain this? Do your subordinates, colleagues or future employees consider *wasta* to be a key element in achieving career goals or in gaining access to top management positions? How can your answer be explained in terms of the leadership style and the employee–manager relations? etc.). Finally, we tried to understand how HR manager's leadership styles influence *wasta* usage and whether certain leadership styles control *wasta* best. (Examples of the Qs asked: Can you describe how the different HR managers' leadership approaches influence the use of *wasta* in an organization? Can different HR managers' leadership styles promote or reduce the use of *wasta* in organizations? What are the necessary measures that can be taken by HR managers to curtail or replace the use of *wasta* in an organization? What are the procedures that HR management can put into practice to limit the use of *wasta* and its effects in HRM?)

A thematic analysis process approach was adopted in processing the collected data (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which consisted of three different stages: data reduction; data display; and data conclusion. We started to analyse the interviews with few to no preconceived themes as we wanted to allow these themes to flow from the data themselves. We chose to code our transcripts manually, line by line, to preserve important details. To assess the reliability of the translation in the coding process, we applied the test–retest method (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Furthermore, we performed the coding process twice, once after the translation of the transcripts into English and then by using the original transcripts in Arabic. As for the English transcripts, all authors have been involved in the coding process separately at different stages, to overcome any author biases. We then compared the key thematic areas as well as the main codes obtained from both coding processes; this resulted in negligible differences, which were resolved and reconciled through frequent meetings (e.g. Nadeem & Kayani, 2019). This coding process highlighted several themes that elucidate the dimensions relevant to our research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Our data collection was a continuous process, in which we continued to gather information from data collection in the field and compare it with emerging categories

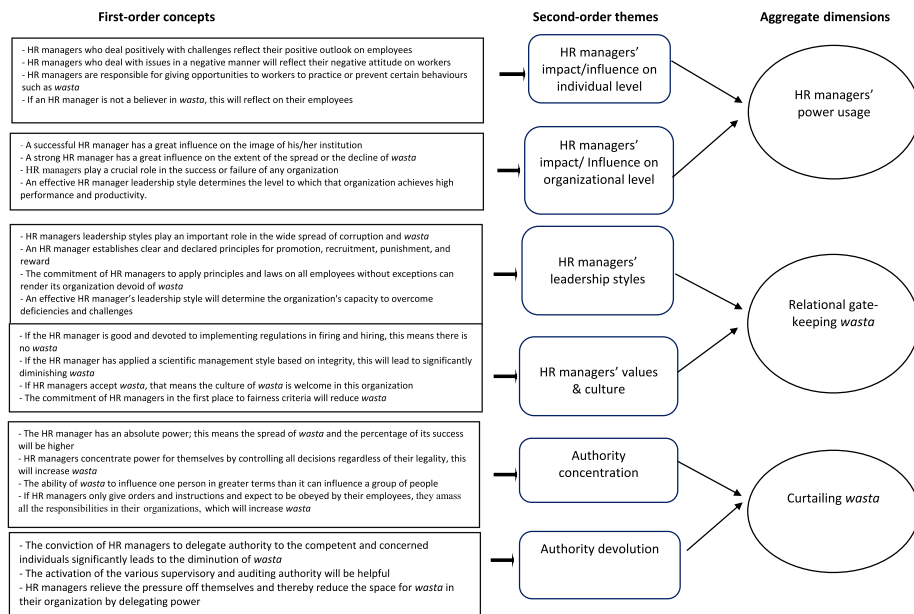


Figure 1. Data analysis structure.

during our categorical analysis, repeating this process until we arrived at the saturation point (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

To ensure qualitative rigour in our paper, we followed Gioia et al. (2013) methodological approach to represent our analysis process (see Figure 1). This approach involved two phases of analysis: the first-order analysis, which used informants' terms and codes; and the second-order analysis, in which we used our concepts and dimensions. We obtained our first-order categories as a result of both our initial 'line by line coding' and our focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), while, in our study of second-order categories, we began seeking similarities and differences among the first-order categories to obtain a more controllable number. Hence, the second-order categories were a synthesis of the first-order ones. To improve the validity, we triangulated the interview data with findings from published studies in this field, which helped in guiding the interpretation of the interview data.

Results

HR managers gain and use power in the context of wasta

The practice of leadership holds a distinct emphasis for HR managers (Holbeche, 2010). Regarding leadership in the Middle East, House et al. (2004) highlight that Jordanian employees commonly anticipate and embrace autocratic leadership as a norm. Sabri (2012) contends that Middle Eastern and Arab leaders tend to prioritize friendships and personal considerations

over organizational goals and performance. This inclination is particularly pronounced among HR managers, given the nature of their role, which involves direct contact with employees in a domain where interpersonal relations and struggles are paramount. As one respondent puts it:

HR managers have an important influence on the internal order, task distribution and cohesion between employees in any organization. How could they not? when it is they who, unsurprisingly, have the power...(R26)

The large extent of the influence that HR leadership and decisions have on the employee corps (namely through recruitment, promotions, deployment, firing, etc.,) does not escape the HR managers themselves, who might then develop tendencies for power grasps and creating internal loyalties and lobbies among employees. As one respondent puts it:

Under *wasta*, loyalties are prioritized over qualifications, and employees become mere followers and devotees of this leader or that, whose orders and directions they cannot escape, even if those go against the interest and the direction of the institution. Employees' main preoccupation becomes the sustainment of their professional benefits through pleasing HR managers who they see as the gatekeepers of their privileges within the organization. In this configuration where loyalty to HR managers is prioritized over that to the organization, the individual, collective, and institutional performance will undoubtedly decline. In addition, resentment will arise among employees, especially those who were unable to secure the 'satisfaction' of the leader, and who feel wronged and therefore bitter. The organization as a whole as well as its employee performance become centred around the person of the HR manager. (R28)

Here lies an essential gateway for the propagation of *wasta*, which presents an invaluable tool for HR managers in search of power and influence over employees (Alsarhan, 2021); one of our interviewees explained how this process works:

HR managers generally tend to be concerned with the upkeep of *wasta* inside their organizations. Their efforts to keep *wasta* going under their leadership stem from their desire to create an image of their leadership as a powerful one. In other words, they continuously seek to let others know that their leadership is a strong one, and that consequently no procedures can take place in the organization without the interference of a strong and powerful *wasta*, which they must approve of first. This kind of power gives the leader the impression that he benefits from a prominent position and value in the eyes of his peers. (R5)

HR managers' search for power plays out through the actual process of *wasta*, in which the interceding party has to appeal to the HR manager for the latter to grant him/her the favour of ratifying his/her *wasta*, thus satisfying their ego and reaffirming his/her grasp on the employee corps. In addition, because of the status and power inherent to their positions, some leaders tend to guard their distance from their

subordinates through the use of authoritarian control to ensure the subordinates' compliance (Liden, 2012). This results in an increasing need for a *wasta* intermediary, preferably an influential and powerful one, between HR managers and the subordinate. *Wasta* seems to act here as an affirmative power tool that gives the HR managers personalized prestige, which can be used for positional as well as non-positional actions.

HR managers perform and control relational gatekeeping to either perpetuate or curtail wasta

As previously mentioned, the nature of the prerogatives and responsibilities of HR managers in all issues pertaining to the employee corps might put them in a particularly influential position when it comes to the presence and use of informal networks in the organization. Once more, HR managers and their leadership approach are regarded as culture builders, actively contributing to the establishment of organizational cultures. Put differently, the professional persona of HR managers and their personal work culture exert a substantial influence on their leadership style, ultimately shaping the organizational culture that permeates down to employees (Koo & Park, 2018).

The dynamics of the role of HR managers and their leadership approach are bound and determined by a number of variables that differ from one cultural setting to another. Hence, contextual differences and local institutional arrangements affect the way in which the role of HR managers and their leadership is manifested (Koo & Park, 2018). In the case of informal networks in Middle Eastern organizations, HR managers seem to play a determining role in allowing for, or cutting off, the channels of *wasta*, through their culture-building influence on employees. Our informants explained that, by tolerating the use of *wasta*, HR managers openly or indirectly welcome its culture into their organization, encouraging their subordinates to do the same. Similarly, our interviewees indicated that when HR managers disapprove of *wasta*, they automatically make it less accessible to their employees, thus creating resistance to this culture. As one respondent put it:

We believe in the fact that if there is an HR manager who is not a believer in *wasta*, this will reflect on their employees where they will avoid *wasta* in the workplace as much as possible for fear of being sanctioned by their managers. And alternatively, if an HR manager is a great believer in *wasta* and therefore practises it inside their organization, their subordinates will follow in their leader's footsteps and implement *wasta* in whichever management level they work, even if they personally disapprove *wasta*. Knowing that it is the way to go, they develop a sense of having no other choice but to follow their leader's approach. (R18)

By functioning as custodians of values and culture, as well as behavioural role models capable of influencing the thinking of others (Holbeche, 2010),

HR managers can therefore be seen as gatekeeping agents for *wasta*, depending on their attitude and approach towards this practice. Furthermore, according to the perspectives shared by our interviewees, HR managers in the Middle East, especially those keen on harnessing more power and authority within the organization, tend to put more effort into channelling *wasta* networks to their favour. One respondent affirmed:

Through his leadership and decision-making capacities in issues of recruitment, promotions and firing, an HR manager can position himself as a gatekeeper of the practice of *wasta*, in order to solidify his own power and leadership position within the organization. (R29)

HR managers seem to invest the influence their position inherently has in order to centre the informal networks that run through the organization around their authority. This might be to compensate for structural deficiencies and institutional weaknesses, and further strengthen their role, power, and presence within their institutions. In the words of another participant:

An HR manager's decisions in terms of recruitment, promotions or firings, are directly influenced by his desire to create a network of allies, which increases his power and allows him to manipulate internal systems and regulations...The bigger the network of employees who fall under the 'wasta' obtained through the HR manager, the easier it is for the HR manager to recommend benefits or gains for this specific group of employees, at the expense of others, regardless of performance. This in turn will guarantee loyalty from the benefitting group towards the HR manager. (R31)

In essence, an HR manager possesses the ability to strategically select and enhance *wasta* networks that align with their interests, while simultaneously eliminating competing or rival *wasta* networks through decisions related to hiring, promoting, and terminating employees. In doing so, they solidify their authority as a *wasta* gatekeeper. When confronted with pressure from the *wasta* networks of rival managers, an HR manager may leverage the prerogatives of their position to mitigate the influence of their competitors' networks:

The HR manager plays a pivotal role in managerial work. He has the utmost capacity to develop standards for recruitment and allocation of promotions as well as firing... In case internal or external pressures become too intense, the HR manager is capable of applying the fixed standards in terms of decision-making when it comes to recruitment, promotions. (R15)

Abiding by fair and clear recruitment or promotion standards acts here both as a pretext that allows HR managers to save face (see Hutchings & Weir, 2006b; Whiteoak et al., 2006) as well as an antidote to the competing *wasta* that the HR managers wish to weaken. This selective attitude reaffirms the different dimensions of an HR manager's potential as a *wasta* gatekeeper. This double attitude transpired perfectly from the testimony of one of our

respondents, who clearly indicated that although she disapproves of all forms of corruption or favouritism in general, she was willing to make exceptions when it came to hiring members of her kin:

I am personally against *wasta*, but to be honest, I have mediated in favour of a relative of mine who needed a job in order to support his family. (R16)

This apparent contradiction reflects the nature of the gatekeeping role HR managers play in the Middle East, as well as the underlying dynamics, motives, and justifications for gatekeeping *wasta*:

Social and family norms have a huge impact on these decisions, to the point where they determine the respectability of any HR manager who provides services to his relatives, who responds to these social and familial pressures by offering selective preferential treatment...Our society's culture is that any leader has to serve his 'people'. If he refuses this obligation, he risks becoming an outcast within his family and community. (R27)

Relational gatekeeping *wasta* allows HR managers to respond to societal pressures and norms by favouring their kinship and allowing them access to different opportunities they hold the keys to. Through their role as gatekeepers, they engage in selective attitudes towards the use of *wasta*, which they ratify or decline when needed. This can only result in consolidating HR managers' power within the organization.

Leadership approaches of HR managers to curtail *wasta*

As noted earlier, the Middle East context lacks advanced formal institutions, and organizational social exchanges are based on informality, autocracy, and managerial authoritarianism (Haak-Saheem & Darwish, 2021). As is typical in the Middle East and Arab world, HR managers follow an authoritative leadership style in their organizations (e.g. House et al., 2004). According to Hofstede (2003), in this region a culture has emerged that combines high-power distance and uncertainty avoidance, in which leaders and HR managers alike have absolute power and authority, with all rules and regulations designed to concentrate such authority in their hands only. That leadership style has contributed significantly to cultivating and nourishing the spread of *wasta*. According to one of our interviewees, this is due to the following fact:

In this kind of leadership, there will be a total absence of any kind of transparency in the decision-making process which in turn diminishes the presence of auditing and accountability. (R8)

HR managers play an important role in the spread of *wasta* in the organizations that they run, depending on their leadership approaches. If HR managers show a preference to implement an autocratic leadership style, in

which leader authoritarianism is an essential component of paternalistic leadership (Wang et al., 2020) and is more exploitative in nature (Ayca, 2006), the spread of *wasta* can subsequently be expected to increase in that specific workplace, as we concluded from our interviewees' points of view.

A strong and successful HR manager has a great influence on the image of his institution, consequently also on the extent of the spread or the decline of *wasta* too [...]. As long as the HR manager in any organization has an absolute power, the spread of *wasta* will be higher. (R6)

Although *wasta* emphasizes the paternalistic nature of leadership in Middle Eastern organizations (e.g. Haak-Saheem & Darwish, 2021; House et al., 2004), we nevertheless discussed with our respondents the potential role that a reformed, less vertical, and less paternalistic leadership style can play in curtailing *wasta*. Interestingly, there was a consensus among our interviewees regarding the way in which this can take place, and that is the delegation of power:

In order to eliminate *wasta* from an organization, we must have a firm conviction in and a strong inclination to devolve responsibilities and delegate powers, as well as sharing responsibilities. Indeed, when HR managers delegate their power, they subsequently relieve the pressure off themselves and thereby reduce the space for *wasta* in their organization. (R13)

The conviction of HR managers and decision-makers to delegate authority to the competent and concerned individuals significantly leads to the demise of *wasta*, provided the activation of the various supervisory and auditing authorities. (R3)

In simpler terms, based on the aforementioned arguments, if HR managers implement a more consultative or participative style through group decision formats, committees, and so on, it will significantly reduce *wasta* in their organization. This can be understood from the following ideas:

The format of committees allows for decision-making to become a collective process which goes through more than one stage in a gradual manner. (R20)

Through delegating my authority, I diminish the role of my own power in making decisions and running procedures, which in turn causes the laws and regulations of my organization to be more and more respected, thereby reducing the space possible for the interference of *wasta* in those procedures. (R22)

Delegation will make decision-making processes more bound to rules and regulations as it passes through many individuals on different management levels, all of whom provide their opinion and feedback. Though this process may add complexity and may slow down decision-making time, the gains may exceed the losses. Delegation will make it easier for employees involved to detect the presence of *wasta* in a certain sequence in the chain, which in turn makes it easier to sanction the error in the procedure; hence, the impact of *wasta* will be diminished. As our informants explained:

[HR] leadership that establishes clear principles for promotion, incentives, recruitment, punishment, reward, etc., and is committed to applying these principles to all employees without exceptions or discrimination, can render its organization devoid of *wasta*. (R4)

If we apply a management style based on the criteria of efficiency, integrity and fairness, and we are committed in the first place to these criteria, this will lead to significantly diminished *wasta* in our organization. (R16)

By increasing employees' own self-esteem and their sense of self-worth as equal members of the staff, participative horizontal leadership can indeed eliminate those employees' need to seek help or refuge in a third party to secure their position and role in the organization. Consequently, the links that employees create will shift from operating within the clandestine realm of *wasta* to operating in the professional, productive, and fertile realm of collegiality. Simply put, *wasta* is substituted by organized, clearly drafted, and multidimensional professional links between managers and employees. The major insights on HR managers and their leadership approach on *wasta* relational gatekeeping are summarized in Figure 2.

Discussion

RQ1: how do HR managers gain and use power in the context of wasta?

An important theoretical implication of our findings is related to how HR managers employ informal networks to strengthen their role and power in such contexts where embedded cultural norm is deeply infused in organisational practices, particularly in the Middle East (e.g.

The role of HR managers and <i>wasta</i> context		
Power usage (RQ1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilizing paternalism and autocratic leadership styles Prioritizing loyalty and personal ties over competence and performance Exercising authoritarian control 	Factors of <i>wasta</i> outgrowth
Relational gate-keeping (RQ2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilizing positional power and authority (e.g. recruitment, promotion) to cultivate <i>wasta</i> Tolerating <i>wasta</i> usage in the organization Decision-making to reinforce personal <i>wasta</i>, then to benefit performance objectives Channelling <i>wasta</i> towards personal benefit 	
Curtailing <i>wasta</i> (RQ3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delegation of tasks Committee creation Leadership development styles: Experiment with participative leadership style approaches Decentralize authority 	Factors of <i>wasta</i> containment

Figure 2. Summary of major insights on *wasta* relational gatekeeping.

Haak-Saheem & Darwish, 2021; Yahiaoui et al., 2021). Our findings demonstrate how some actors (i.e. HR managers) compensate on structural deficiencies and institutional weaknesses and mobilize the power they derive from their *wasta* to strengthen their power and create a platform for their voices to be heard. But why is this the case? Whilst existing literature mostly discusses the strategic nature and shift of the role of HR managers and their involvement in board meetings and strategic decisions in organizations, the case of the Middle East and the majority of emerging markets may look very different. Extant research in this area focusing on China (Law et al., 2000; Yang & Yang, 2020) and especially on Pakistan (Nadeem & Kayani, 2019) observes identical trends. For instance, Singh et al. (2012) argue that HR managers in Jordan are mainly looking after day-to-day routine HR functions with little evidence of their involvement in strategic matters with long-term importance. Hence, this explains the reason why HR managers may invoke the local cultural and material *wasta* script, which helps them in reshaping their role and strengthening their power. In this sense, HRM practices may evolve into a form of social capital informally exchanged to reciprocate social favors for network nodes (i.e. influential HR managers). Our findings corroborate with those of Nadeem and Kayani (2019), who pointed out that *sifarish* in Pakistan reflects the value system of Pakistan and is deeply ingrained in local culture. Hiring based on *sifarish* provides the recruiter with power that can be used to increase influence both inside the organization and in external contexts, quasi as a payback for hiring a candidate.

RQ2: how do HR managers perform and control relational gatekeeping in their organization to either expand/perpetuate or curtail wasta?

Based on the findings of our study we extend relational gatekeeping theory (Allen, 1977; Du et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2018) by conceptualizing the relational gatekeeping behaviour of HR managers in an informal network context according to four dimensions, as shown in Figure 3a.

Cultivating wasta

In line with other studies on relational gatekeeping behavior in emerging markets (Nadeem & Kayani, 2019; Gao et al., 2018), our data showed that the cultivation of *wasta* is a crucial aspect of relational gatekeeping behaviour. HR managers engage in cultivating *wasta* by leveraging their positional power and authority. This is evident in their practices related to recruitment and promotions, where personal affiliations and

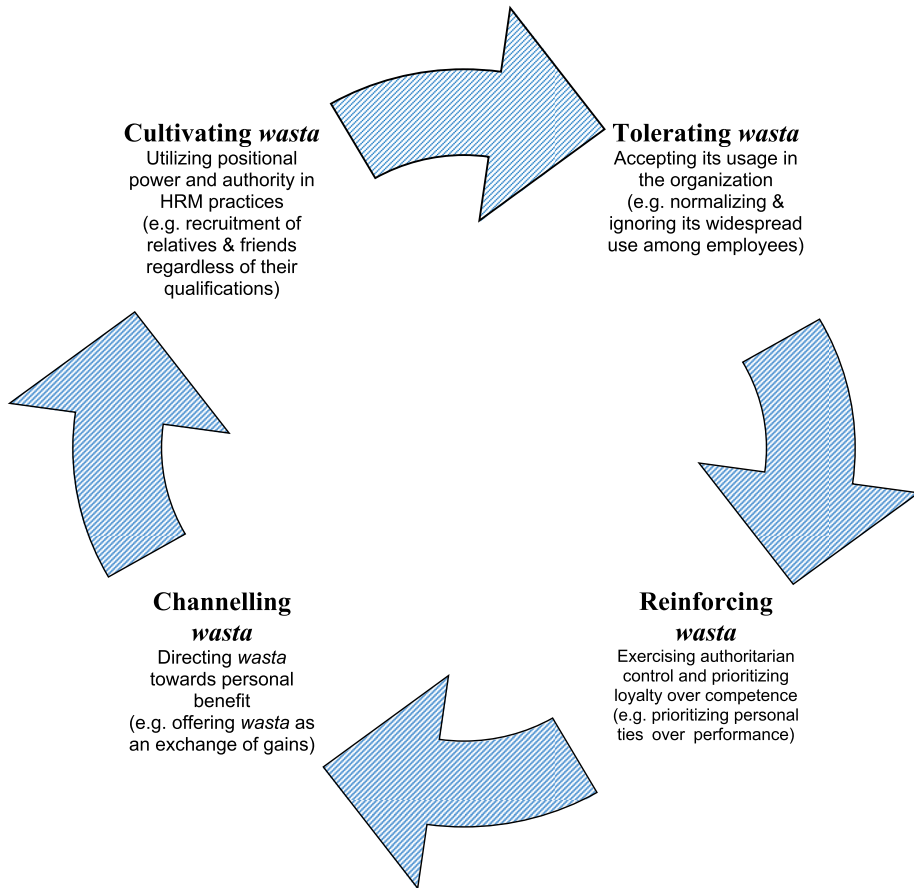


Figure 3. (a) Four dimensions of relational gatekeeping behaviour of HR manager in a *wasta* context. (b) Summary on the dynamics of curtailing *wasta*.

connections often hold sway. Additionally, we found that the utilization of paternalism and autocratic leadership styles also plays a significant role in the cultivation of *wasta*. In essence, the first dimension suggests that HR managers are not passive participants in the informal network context but apply relational gatekeeping behaviours as active cultivators of *wasta* through various HRM practices and leadership approaches.

Tolerating *wasta*

Wasta is deeply ingrained in the societal structure of the Arab Middle East (Alsarhan & Al-Twal, 2023; Zhang et al., 2021), and our study shows that it is widely tolerated within organizations. The acceptance of *wasta* as a common characteristic reflects a broader cultural and societal acceptance of personal connections and influence in decision-making processes. This dimension underscores the idea that HR managers, along with other organizational stakeholders, do not merely accept but often

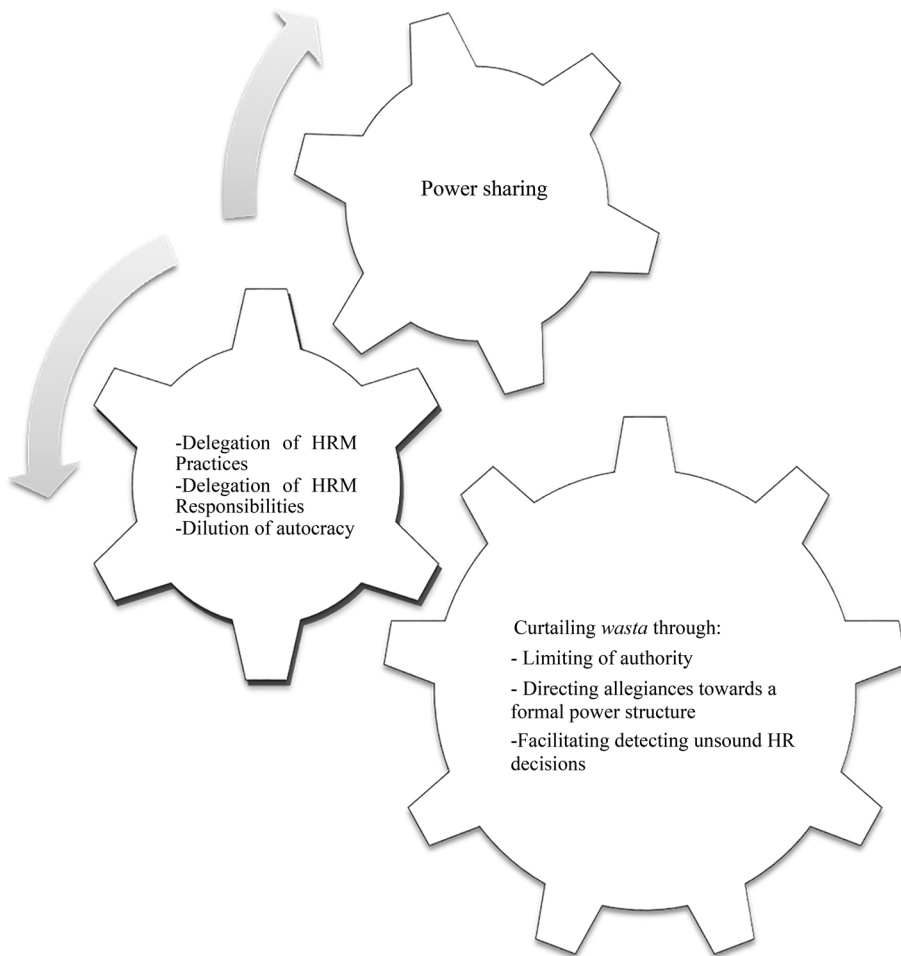


Figure 3. Continued.

embrace the use of *wasta* within their organizations. This dimension highlights that HR managers operate within an environment where the prevalence of *wasta* is not only acknowledged but also normalized.

Reinforcing wasta

Relational gatekeepers, especially those occupying influential positions, play a pivotal role in reinforcing *wasta*. Our research has shown that these gatekeepers often exercise authoritarian control over key HR decisions and prioritize loyalty and personal connections over competence and performance. This not only perpetuates the use of *wasta* but also strengthens its influence within the organization. Influential gatekeepers ensure that the informal network continues to be a key channel for advancing personal and professional interests.

Channelling *wasta*

This dimension brings to light the strategic nature of *wasta* usage, where HR managers harness their relational gatekeeping behaviours to further their personal and professional interests, be it career advancement or the pursuit of specific organizational goals. The notion of channelling *wasta* underscores the idea that these gatekeepers are not passive beneficiaries but are actively involved in leveraging personal connections for their own benefit.

RQ3: what leadership approaches of HR managers can curtail *wasta*?

As most studies on relational gatekeeping behavior have focused on individuals at a similar hierarchical level (e.g., Du et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2018), our current understanding is limited to the informal power dynamics among individuals, especially beyond the focus on elite actors. Nevertheless, our study emphasizes the significance of power sharing; our findings demonstrate that delegating HRM practices and other HR-related responsibilities, which function as a form of power sharing, has contributed significantly to reducing *wasta* (or prevalent local cultural norms) within organizations. By extension, this further reduces the expansion of culturally derived power that is associated with *wasta* and somehow limits power dynamics and authority to that derived from formal organizational hierarchy. By having an equal piece in the power pie, delegation of responsibilities and power sharing among different actors widens the distance between informal network nodes as well as the bridging function between them. Thus, it creates an ambiguous power structure that can be used to engineer allegiances toward more clearly defined power structures, such as formal roles, rules, and regulations (Casson, 1991). Moreover, as indicated in the findings, the dilution of autocracy through power sharing and delegation places *wasta* in plain sight, preventing *wasta*-related decisions from remaining concealed. Consequently, it makes it easier for organizational members to detect and deter decision-making errors among actors, since they have relatively equal power to veto decisions. Furthermore, as *wasta*-related actions become subject to scrutiny with power sharing, informally connected individuals become inclined to save face in such a collectivist context by taking decisions aligned with elements that do not bring shame to those leveraging it (Buckley et al., 2010; Yahiaoui et al., 2021). Therefore, we show how delegating HRM responsibilities and power sharing among actors allows formal HRM practices and strategies to regain their significance in authoritarian contexts. The dynamics on how HR managers can curtail *wasta* is summarized in Figure 3b.

Implications for theory

Our results contribute to advancing the current state of theorizing, specifically to the further development of knowledge in the following domains: Firstly, our insights extend the advancement of relational gatekeeping theory by providing a framework that explicitly considers the informal network context, representing the multifaceted dimensions of *wasta* within the HRM. While Gao et al. (2014) extend relational gatekeeping theory in emerging markets by suggesting typical roles of relational gatekeepers, our framework offers a deeper understanding of how HR managers both shape and are shaped by the dynamics of relational gatekeeping in the context of the Middle East.

Secondly, we integrate informal network research into relational gatekeeping theory. Relational gatekeeping is dependent on the network context of the respective cultural environment. Similarly, informal networks, culture, and informal institutions have not been explicitly recognized by and integrated into relational gatekeeping theory. Our results extend relational gatekeeping theory by developing a four-stage process model of relational gatekeeping, taking the informal network context as an integral component of relational gatekeeping explicitly into account. Compared to typology extensions of relational gatekeeping theory (e.g., reciprocal, adaptive, symbolic gatekeeping, cf. Gao et al., 2014), our process model, consisting of four dimensions (cultivating, tolerating, channeling, and reinforcing informal networks for relational gatekeeping), adds four time-related dimensions to theory and illuminates the interplay between power, influence, and personal connections in HRM practices.

Thirdly, given the fact that the development of informal networks theory is still in an early and evolving stage (Horak et al., 2020; Horak & Paik, 2023; Horak et al., 2023; Minbaeva et al., 2023), this study adds knowledge to the limited literature on informal networks by exploring the interplay between informal networks on one side and the relational gatekeeping literature on the other side (Du et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2012; Gao et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2018; Baranik et al., 2023; Brandstaetter et al., 2016).

Fourthly, our research advances knowledge on informal networks and networking in several ways. It illustrates the persistence and strengths as well as the embeddedness of informal networks in business and society. Informal network practices can be described as being activated by culture (e.g., collectivism) and prevailing informal institutions (e.g., loyalty, tribal particularism, honor, duty). Furthermore, our results speak towards network duality, integral to informal network theory (cf. Horak et al., 2020; Minbaeva et al., 2023). Network duality can be illustrated like the yin-yang symbol. Informal networks have a positive and a negative side that are hard to divide. On the positive side, informal networks

contribute to efficient and effective actions *via* informal channels, both at the heart of the management discipline; on the negative side, they stand for favoritism, exclusion, and discrimination, among others. Network duality describes the morally ambiguous nature of informal networks.

Fifthly, the unique contribution of this research lies in its endeavor to address the role of HR managers and their leadership approach in an under-researched Middle Eastern context, where national cultural scripts and informal networks compensate for structural deficiencies and institutional weaknesses (Darwish et al., 2024). This paper contributes to a better understanding of the context of HRM in the Middle East and the ambivalent role that *wasta* plays in shaping the role of HR managers. Consequently, it leads to a better understanding of the characteristics and role informal networks play in HRM practices. Furthermore, the role of HR managers and their leadership approach should not only be viewed as culturally embedded but also as being network-embedded (e.g., Horak & Paik, 2023). Therefore, advancing theory in this domain necessitates a nuanced understanding of the context-dependency of networks, both within and beyond the organizational boundaries. External factors such as the pervasive influence of *wasta* informal networks can permeate HR culture, with HR managers serving as relational gatekeepers. The enduring presence of these informal networks (Minbaeva et al., 2023) poses a formidable challenge to change management endeavors aimed at cultivating a robust HR leadership culture within organizations.

Finally, our findings advance our understanding of the reciprocal nature of influence between *wasta* and autocratic leadership, since it is presented not only as the diagnosis of a problematic phenomenon but also as a gateway for finding practical solutions that can both mitigate the impact of *wasta* and cultivate more contemporary models of HR leadership styles in the Middle Eastern organizations.

Implication for practice

Practical measures can be derived from the results of this research, which can be directly utilized by both local and multinational corporations operating in the Middle East. The suggested practical measures are aimed at enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of management and are expected to lead to improved organizational performance. First and foremost, our study underlines the key role of committees in mitigating the influence of *wasta*. Decision-making processes facilitated through committees ensure diverse input, reducing the likelihood of individual misuse of power. This approach holds particular relevance across Middle Eastern contexts, where the prevalence of *wasta* can undermine organizational

integrity and meritocracy. It is worth noting that in the Middle East, countries primarily share deep-rooted cultural ties, evidenced by powerful informal social structures and shared socio-political norms (see, for example, Haak-Saheem & Darwish, 2021). Additionally, a majority of these states demonstrate similar economic development and outlooks (Darwish et al., 2024), fostering a sense of regional unity and collective aspirations for progress. Hence, by implementing committee-based decision-making structures, organizations not only in Jordan but across the region can fortify their governance mechanisms and promote transparency and accountability.

Secondly, forward-thinking organizations may explore the implementation of participative leadership approaches to enhance psychological, interpersonal, and professional conditions for employees. Consequently, this initiative can help impede the spread of *wasta*. On this point, thirdly, the role of HR leadership training programs is pivotal, along with their potential ability to foster participative leaders, to move away from the ambivalent combination of vertical leadership and *wasta* culture. This emphasis on participative leadership development resonates strongly within the Middle Eastern region, where such leadership approach is central to crossing complex socio-cultural dynamics. In the Middle East, where hierarchical structures and informal networks heavily influence organizational operations, leadership approaches must adapt to the unique cultural fabric. The prevalent influence of *wasta* stresses the importance of advancing leadership practices that prioritize inclusivity, collaboration, and transparency. Leaders in the region must skillfully handle the delicate balance between traditional authority structures and the need for involving others in decision-making. They should recognize how personal relationships and networks could potentially impact on various organizational outcomes.

Fourth, it is imperative for HR managers to implement rigorous policies and sanctions against individuals involved in *wasta* practices. This should be coupled with the enforcement of fair and transparent HR procedures, including unbiased performance appraisals and recruitment based solely on qualifications and merit. These practices need to be firmly embraced within Middle Eastern organizations. It is worth noting that the adoption of such practices is not merely a matter of organizational policy, but a collective responsibility shared by all stakeholders within the region. Adopting fair and transparent HR procedures nurtures trust among employees, investors, and the wider community, enhancing the reputation and competitiveness of Middle Eastern organizations on the global stage. Moreover, the lessons gleaned from successful implementation of these measures within individual organizations can serve as a blueprint for driving systemic change across the wider Middle Eastern

region. By sharing best practices and collaborating on initiatives aimed at combating the negative impact of *wasta* and promoting fair and transparent HR practices, organizations can collectively contribute to the advancement of business ethics and integrity throughout the region.

Finally, the insight generated by this research is not only relevant for organizations doing business in the Middle East region as it generates practical implications at the political level likewise. The Chinese approach in curtailing *guanxi* and related corrupt activities through new legislation and consequent implementation, were harsh but effective (Leung, 2015). As *guanxi* persists in China as strongly as ever (Bian, 2022), it has changed from outright corruption and bribery to subtle practices such as information and non-monetary favor exchange and rather subtle or hidden forms of favoritism (Barbalet, 2018; Shin & Lui, 2022). Arab Middle Eastern governments may consider implementing anti-*wasta* legislation (Alsarhan, 2022), and pursue the path China did successfully in curtailing the visible forms of corruption related to *guanxi*. Further, governments in the region may consider leading by example and transition from traditional authoritarian patriarchy towards a governance model that embraces (gender) diversity. This shift would pave the way for a more inclusive form of government, where leadership responsibilities are shared among several individuals. Such a transformation could significantly contribute to enhancing democratic processes and promoting a more equitable representation of women and other marginalized groups in leadership roles. This move not only aligns with global trends and inclusive governance but also positions the Middle East region as forward looking in fostering a governance culture that values diversity and collective leadership over traditional patriarchal norms. This will make the region more innovative, less risky and more attractive for international businesses to invest.

Limitations and future research directions

Though HRM in the private and public sector are said to becoming similar (Paauwe & Farndale, 2017), recent research by Knies et al. (2022) points towards persistent differences. Hence, transferability of our results to private sector firms must be treated with caution. A further limitation can be seen in the generalizability of our results across the Middle East region. While we believe that our insights represent the situation in Jordan as a representative Arab country well, it needs to be considered that *wasta* comes in different shades in the respective countries of the Arab world and the wider Middle East region.

Since informal networks exist in other emerging and industrialized economies alike (*guanxi* in China, *yongo* in South Korea, *jeitinho* in

Brazil, and *blat/svyazi* in Russia), further work may explore the links between informal networks and the HR managers' leadership styles. Those may differ from one country to another as formal and informal institutions differ likewise, making informal networks an important factor within the institutional configuration. Such studies can produce different thematic outcomes from our current research, which can shed light on novel themes that our research has not uncovered. In addition, while our study did not specifically examine the differences between male and female HR managers in the context of gatekeeping, we acknowledge the importance of considering gender-specific perspectives. Hence, future work could delve into this area to explore potential distinctions in gatekeeping behaviours and their implications based on the gender of HR managers. Finally, our study was limited in that it focused solely on HR managers as the main informants. It would be valuable for future research to explore how employees perceive their HR managers, specifically focusing on their relational gatekeeping behaviour.

Conclusion

We have explored the role *wasta* plays in HR managers in the Middle East region. We elaborated how HR managers contribute to promoting or rejecting the use of *wasta* in their organizations based on the adopted leadership style. We find that mutual influences between *wasta* and HR managers' leadership styles is furthermore deeply embedded in cultural determinism, which shapes both phenomena. The existence of the informal network (*wasta*) context leads to several insights that extend knowledge on relational gatekeeping and the HR management concept. We show, among others, that HR managers can use their positional power to cultivate *wasta* in their organization for personal reasons, to reinforce their leadership role, or to dominate competing *wasta* networks within the organization. By understanding the dynamics between HR managers' leadership style and *wasta*, we identified the challenges and solutions facing HRM practices in the Middle East. Essentially, we see the autocratic vertical leadership style practised in many Arabic organizations by HR managers encourages informal network usage in many ways. We suggest drawing on the positive features of networking by decentralizing the decision-making authority through the delegation of tasks and the creation of committees. This will lead to a higher level of transparency and less opportunities to seek personal benefit through *wasta* ties.

Note

1. In addition to the tribalism and collectivism origin of *wasta*, other explanations for its origin might also include economic factors (e.g.: high levels of unemploy-

ment and poverty (Alsarhan & Al-Twal, 2023; Loewe et al., 2007), legal factors (e.g. legislative gaps, complicated laws, a wide range of discretion in the texts of regulations, and absence of formal legal structures) (Berger et al., 2015); and political factors (e.g.: the nature of political systems, such as those that feature a patriarchal style, over-bureaucratization, and repression) (Al-Ramahi, 2008).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not provide written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Consequently, due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available.

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