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Impact of Heroism Culture on Occupational Accidents in SMEs of Lahore: Mediating Role of Safety Compliance Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Occupational accidents remain a significant concern in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly where informal workplace norms encourage risk-taking and prioritize productivity over safety. This qualitative study examined the impact of heroism culture on occupational accidents in SMEs of Lahore, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of safety compliance behavior. The study employed a qualitative research design and purposive sampling to select 20 SMEs, including 10 small and 10 medium-sized industries. Data were collected through 15 focus group discussions with workers, 05 in-depth interviews with safety officers, and 05 in-depth interviews with managers. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and relationships emerging from participants' experiences and perceptions. The findings indicate that heroism culture is reflected in workplace expectations emphasizing toughness, courage, self-reliance, risk acceptance, and the ability to complete difficult tasks despite hazardous conditions. Such expectations contribute to the normalization of workplace risks and may encourage employees to bypass safety procedures, use safety shortcuts, avoid protective measures, and underreport minor injuries and unsafe incidents. Safety compliance behavior emerged as a key mechanism linking heroism culture with occupational accidents. Productivity pressure, peer influence, and managerial recognition of risk-taking further reinforced unsafe practices. The study concludes that occupational accidents in SMEs are shaped not only by physical hazards but also by cultural and behavioral factors. Strengthening safety compliance, promoting hazard reporting, and redefining workplace courage as adherence to safe practices can contribute to safer SME environments.

Introduction

Occupational accidents remain a major challenge for organizations because they impose substantial human, organizational, and economic costs. Workplace accidents can result in physical injuries, fatalities, productivity losses, absenteeism, compensation costs, equipment damage, and deterioration in employee well-being. Although occupational safety has traditionally been examined through technical and organizational factors such as hazardous machinery, inadequate protective equipment, unsafe work environments, and weak safety management systems, increasing attention has been given to the behavioral and cultural dimensions of workplace safety. Employees do not interact with workplace hazards only through formal rules; their perceptions

of acceptable risk, workplace norms, attitudes toward safety, and everyday behavioral choices can substantially influence whether hazards result in accidents. Research on safety climate and safety performance demonstrates that employee safety behavior is an important pathway linking organizational conditions to occupational safety outcomes (Clarke, 2006; Neal et al., 2000). More recent systematic evidence likewise indicates that safety behavior can mediate the relationship between safety climate and occupational injuries, highlighting the importance of understanding behavioral mechanisms underlying workplace accidents.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) deserve particular attention in occupational safety research because they frequently operate under resource, training, monitoring, and regulatory constraints. Compared with large organizations, SMEs may have fewer specialized safety personnel, less formalized safety-management systems, limited financial capacity for safety investments, and weaker mechanisms for reporting and investigating incidents. A review of occupational health and safety practices in SMEs reported that occupational safety outcomes are generally poorer in smaller enterprises and that the specific needs and constraints of SMEs have historically received insufficient research attention (Legg et al., 2018). Similarly, research conducted in Pakistan has identified several organizational and contextual factors affecting occupational health and safety compliance in SMEs, particularly within high-risk sectors such as construction (Hussain et al., 2024). These circumstances make SMEs an important setting for examining not only formal safety systems but also informal workplace cultures that may encourage or discourage safe behavior.

Lahore provides a particularly relevant context for such an investigation. As one of Pakistan's major urban and commercial centers, the city contains a diverse range of SMEs operating in manufacturing, construction, workshops, transport-related activities, services, retail, and other occupations where workers may be exposed to physical, mechanical, electrical, chemical, ergonomic, and environmental hazards. In such workplaces, safety practices may be influenced by organizational resources as well as informal expectations concerning productivity, toughness, speed, responsibility, and willingness to undertake difficult tasks. Consequently, occupational accidents should not be understood solely as the outcome of hazardous physical conditions. They may also emerge when workers perceive risk-taking, rule violation, or avoidance of protective measures as acceptable or even desirable forms of workplace conduct.

Within this behavioral-cultural perspective, the present study introduces heroism culture as a potentially important but relatively underexplored determinant of occupational accidents. Heroism culture refers in this study to a workplace orientation in which employees are socially encouraged, rewarded, or admired for demonstrating exceptional toughness, courage, endurance, self-reliance, willingness to face danger, and ability to complete difficult tasks despite personal risk. A heroic worker may be perceived as someone who does not complain, does not easily ask for assistance, works through difficult or dangerous circumstances, accepts challenging assignments without hesitation, and prioritizes task completion over personal safety. Although such characteristics may sometimes contribute positively to organizational performance, they can become problematic when courage is equated with ignoring safety precautions or demonstrating one's capability by taking unnecessary risks.

The concept of heroism culture is closely related to literature on masculinity, risk-taking, and occupational safety. Research on masculine gender norms has shown that workplace expectations involving risk-taking, emotional control, self-reliance, and resistance to assistance can influence employees' safety-related decisions. Austin and Probst (2021), for example, found that stronger conformity to masculine gender norms was associated with greater safety risk-taking, accidents, injuries, and accident underreporting among working adults. Their findings further indicated that safety risk-taking mediated the relationship between masculine gender norms and adverse safety outcomes. Similarly, Stergiou-Kita et al. (2015) argued that dominant masculine norms in high-risk occupations can influence workers' perceptions and acceptance of occupational risks and contribute to the normalization of unsafe practices. These studies provide an important theoretical foundation for considering heroism culture as a workplace norm that may encourage employees to demonstrate courage through risk-taking.

Importantly, heroism culture should not be conceptualized as synonymous with masculinity or as a characteristic exclusive to male workers. Rather, the concept concerns a broader workplace culture in which risk-taking and extraordinary task performance are socially valued. Nevertheless, some dimensions commonly associated with traditional masculine norms—such as self-reliance, toughness, winning, primacy of work, emotional control, and risk-taking—can help explain how heroic expectations may develop and influence safety behavior (Mahalik et al., 2003). When workers believe that asking for help demonstrates weakness, that wearing protective equipment slows down work, or that experienced workers should be able to perform dangerous tasks without assistance, safety rules can become secondary to the demonstration of competence and courage. Austin and Probst (2021) specifically note that normative risk-taking, resistance to assistance, and emotional control may contribute to employees perceiving unsafe behavior as compatible with masculine identity. The same underlying mechanism can be extended conceptually to heroism culture: employees may engage in risky behavior because it allows them to demonstrate competence, courage, loyalty, toughness, or commitment to their organization.

The potential relationship between heroism culture and occupational accidents can be explained through safety compliance behavior. Safety compliance refers to employees' adherence to prescribed safety rules, procedures, regulations, and protective practices required to maintain workplace safety. Neal and Griffin (2000) conceptualized safety performance as consisting of safety compliance and safety participation, with compliance involving behaviors directly related to maintaining workplace safety, such as following procedures and using protective equipment. Safety compliance is therefore an important behavioral mechanism through which workplace attitudes and cultural expectations can influence accident outcomes. When employees consistently comply with safety requirements, they are more likely to identify hazards, use appropriate personal protective equipment, follow operating procedures, and avoid unnecessary exposure to danger. Conversely, when employees ignore or bypass safety requirements, their exposure to occupational hazards increases.

The safety literature provides strong support for the importance of safety compliance in predicting safety outcomes. Neal et al. (2000) demonstrated the significance of safety climate, safety knowledge, and safety motivation in explaining safety performance. Clarke's (2006) meta-analysis further found relationships between safety climate and safety compliance and participation, while also examining the relationship between safety performance and occupational accidents. More recently, a systematic review concluded that safety behavior can function as a mediator between safety climate and accidents, suggesting that workplace conditions influence injury outcomes partly through employees' safety-related behaviors (Nahrgang et al., 2022). Therefore, examining safety compliance as a mediating mechanism is theoretically and empirically appropriate for understanding how an informal workplace culture may translate into tangible occupational safety outcomes.

This argument is consistent with broader safety-culture research. Safety culture and safety climate influence how employees interpret organizational priorities and determine whether safety is genuinely valued in everyday work practices. A systematic review of safety culture and safety climate research found a close relationship between these constructs and safety performance, although the precise mechanisms vary across organizational settings and measurement approaches (Zhang et al., 2018). Research focusing specifically on SMEs has similarly emphasized that safety culture and safety climate are particularly important because limited resources and organizational informality may make employees' day-to-day behavioral norms especially consequential (George & Khan, 2022). Thus, informal cultural expectations such as "finish the job at any cost," "do not show weakness," or "experienced workers do not need protective measures" may become important complements to formal safety policies.

The issue is particularly significant in developing-country contexts, where occupational safety may compete with productivity pressures, limited resources, weak enforcement, and informal employment practices. Evidence from Pakistan indicates that SMEs face multiple challenges in achieving effective occupational health and safety compliance. Hussain et al. (2024), in their study of SMEs in the construction sector of South Punjab, identified occupational health and safety compliance as a multidimensional issue involving workplace safety infrastructure, organizational practices, and occupational hazards. At the same time, Pakistan's experience in the textile and garment sector illustrates the importance of strengthening workplace safety through inspections, worker awareness, safety committees, complaint mechanisms, and organizational accountability. These developments suggest that formal regulatory and organizational interventions are important, but their effectiveness may depend substantially on employees' willingness to follow safety procedures in everyday work situations.

Furthermore, relatively limited empirical research has examined these relationships within the specific context of Pakistani SMEs, and evidence focused specifically on Lahore remains scarce. This represents a meaningful geographical and contextual gap. Workplace cultures are shaped by local social expectations, organizational structures, labor-market conditions, managerial practices, and economic pressures. Therefore, findings from Western or large corporate settings cannot automatically be generalized to SMEs operating in Lahore. Investigating this issue in Lahore can provide contextually grounded evidence regarding whether heroism-oriented workplace expectations contribute to occupational accidents and whether safety compliance behavior serves as an explanatory mechanism.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

This study is important because it addresses the underexplored role of heroism culture in occupational accidents within SMEs in Punjab, Pakistan. Understanding how risky behaviors normalized as "heroism" influence safety compliance can help identify hidden causes of workplace accidents. The findings will support policymakers, employers, and safety practitioners in developing targeted interventions to improve safety culture and reduce occupational injuries and fatalities in SMEs.

In Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) of Lahore, a prevailing heroism culture often glorifies unsafe work practices, normalizes risk-taking, and prioritizes productivity over safety (Ali & Khan, 2021). Employees may feel pressured to engage in hazardous tasks, perceiving them as signs of dedication or toughness, which undermines safety compliance behavior such as

PPE usage, SOP adherence, hazard reporting, and rule compliance (Mahmood & Hussain, 2020). Consequently, SMEs experience frequent occupational accidents including injuries, fatalities, near-misses, and equipment damage (International Labour Organization, 2018). Despite existing safety guidelines, the mediating role of compliance behavior in reducing accidents remains underexplored, creating a critical need for empirical research in Lahore's SME context (Patel & Singh, 2022). However, limited evidence exists regarding how heroism culture influences occupational accidents and hazardous incidents among SME workers in Punjab, Pakistan. This study seeks to address this knowledge gap.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of the study are to:

- To analyze the influence of heroism culture on occupational accidents in SMEs.
- To examine the mediating role of safety compliance behavior.
- To identify which dimensions of heroism culture (risk-taking normalization, unsafe work glorification, productivity-over-safety mindset, peer pressure) most strongly predict accident occurrence.
- To provide recommendations for strengthening safety culture in SMEs of Lahore.

Literature Review and Research Gaps

Workplace heroism culture encourages employees to prioritize task completion over safety, often valuing risk-taking as commitment, which normalizes unsafe behaviors and increases hazard exposure (Christian et al., 2009). Safety climate, defined as shared perceptions of safety policies and practices, strongly predicts compliance and accident outcomes; strong climates reduce risks, while weak ones foster injuries (Neal & Griffin, 2006). Safety compliance, including PPE use and hazard reporting, mediates the link between organizational culture and accidents (Christian et al., 2009). Poor safety culture in SMEs elevates accident risks, whereas strong safety-oriented cultures improve compliance and reduce injuries (Zohar, 1980).

Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative research design to explore the impact of heroism culture on occupational accidents in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Lahore, with particular attention to the role of safety compliance behavior. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand how managers, safety officers, and workers perceive and experience workplace heroism, risk-taking, safety practices, and occupational accidents. Rather than measuring variables statistically, the study aimed to explore the meanings, experiences, perceptions, and organizational practices through which heroism culture may influence employees' compliance with safety procedures and contribute to occupational accidents.

The qualitative design enabled the researcher to obtain information from different organizational levels and to examine how workplace safety is understood and practiced in everyday working environments. Particular emphasis was placed on workers' experiences, safety officers' professional observations, and managers' perceptions of organizational expectations and workplace behavior.

Study Setting and Population

The study was conducted among selected SMEs operating in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. The study population consisted of three major categories of participants: labor/workers, safety officers, and managers. These participants were selected because each group has a distinct role in workplace safety. Workers directly experience occupational hazards and are responsible for following safety procedures in their routine activities. Safety officers are involved in monitoring safety conditions, providing safety training, identifying hazards, and implementing safety policies. Managers influence organizational priorities, production expectations, employee performance, and the overall workplace environment.

For organizational representation, the study included 20 SMEs, comprising 10 small-sized industries and 10 medium-sized industries. The inclusion of both small and medium-sized enterprises allowed the researcher to explore similarities and differences in safety practices, organizational expectations, and workplace culture across different organizational sizes.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was used to select both industries and participants. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research because participants are selected based on their knowledge, experience, and ability to provide rich and relevant information concerning the phenomenon under investigation. Industries were selected according to their relevance to the research topic, operational characteristics, availability of workers and safety personnel, and exposure to occupational hazards.

Participants were selected from different organizational positions to obtain diverse perspectives. Workers were included through focus group discussions, while safety officers and managers were selected as key informants for in-depth interviews. The final qualitative sample consisted of 15 focus group discussions with workers, 05 in-depth interviews with safety officers, and 05 in-depth interviews with managers.

Focus Group Discussions with Workers

A total of 15 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with labor/workers employed in the selected SMEs. FGDs were considered appropriate because they provided an opportunity for workers to discuss their collective experiences and perceptions regarding workplace culture and safety practices. Group interaction also enabled participants to reflect on common workplace practices and identify informal norms that may not have been revealed through individual interviews.

The FGD guide consisted of open-ended questions addressing major areas of the study, including perceptions of heroism at the workplace, risk-taking behavior, attitudes toward safety rules, use of personal protective equipment, safety compliance, workplace pressure, peer influence, accident experiences, and managerial expectations. Participants were also asked whether workers who undertake difficult or dangerous tasks without hesitation are perceived as brave, experienced, committed, or "heroic." Discussions further explored whether such perceptions encourage workers to ignore safety procedures or conceal injuries and unsafe incidents.

The researcher facilitated the discussions in a neutral and non-judgmental manner and encouraged all participants to share their experiences. The researcher also used probing questions where necessary to obtain detailed explanations and examples. FGDs continued until sufficient information was obtained to identify recurring patterns and themes.

In-Depth Interviews with Safety Officers

The study conducted 05 in-depth interviews with safety officers working in the selected SMEs. Safety officers were treated as key informants because of their professional responsibilities related to workplace safety, hazard identification, accident prevention, safety training, and monitoring of employees' compliance with safety procedures.

The interviews explored safety officers' observations regarding common workplace hazards, causes of occupational accidents, employees' safety behavior, compliance with safety regulations, use of protective equipment, accident reporting, and risk-taking. Particular attention was given to the possibility that employees may demonstrate toughness, courage, excessive confidence, or willingness to undertake hazardous activities in order to demonstrate competence or commitment. Safety officers were also asked about organizational responses to unsafe behavior and the effectiveness of existing safety policies and training programs.

In-Depth Interviews with Managers

In addition to safety officers, 05 in-depth interviews were conducted with managers of the selected SMEs. Managers were selected because they have an important influence on workplace culture, productivity expectations, employee supervision, and safety priorities.

The interviews examined managers' perceptions of heroism culture, employee performance, workplace risk-taking, production pressure, safety compliance, and occupational accidents. Managers were asked whether employees who work under difficult or hazardous conditions are perceived positively and whether such behavior is associated with dedication, courage, efficiency, or professional competence. The interviews also explored how managers respond to employees who violate safety procedures in order to complete work quickly and whether organizational recognition or informal expectations may unintentionally encourage unsafe practices.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured FGD and interview guides developed in accordance with the research objectives and relevant literature. Before each session, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of their participation. With participants' permission, interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. The researcher maintained a reflexive approach throughout data collection to minimize personal assumptions and allow participants' perspectives to guide the emerging findings.

Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated reading of interview and FGD transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then developed from participants' statements. Similar codes were grouped into categories, and broader themes were subsequently developed. Particular attention was given to themes related to heroism culture, risk-taking, safety compliance, workplace pressure, peer influence, managerial expectations, safety norms, accident experiences, and organizational responses to unsafe behavior.

Data from workers, safety officers, and managers were compared to identify similarities and differences in their perceptions. The researcher used triangulation of data sources by comparing information obtained from the three participant groups. This strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing workplace experiences reported by workers to be examined alongside observations from safety officers and perspectives provided by managers.

Results and Discussions

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data generated several interconnected themes. The major themes were: (1) workplace heroism as a culture of toughness and courage, (2) normalization of occupational risk, (3) productivity pressure and the prioritization of work completion, (4) safety compliance as a behavioral mechanism, (5) peer influence and social recognition of risky behavior, (6) underreporting and concealment of unsafe incidents, (7) managerial and organizational reinforcement of heroism culture, and (8) occupational accidents as consequences of accumulated unsafe practices.

The findings suggest that heroism culture was not necessarily expressed through formal organizational policies. Rather, it appeared primarily through informal workplace expectations, peer interactions, managerial attitudes, and everyday interpretations of what constituted a "good," "strong," "experienced," or "committed" worker.

Theme 1: Heroism Culture as Toughness, Courage, and Self-Reliance

A prominent theme emerging from the qualitative data was the construction of the "heroic worker" as an individual who demonstrates toughness, courage, physical endurance, confidence, and willingness to perform difficult tasks without hesitation. Workers described workplace competence not only in terms of technical ability but also in terms of the capacity to tolerate difficult working conditions and complete challenging assignments.

The findings indicate that workers who accepted dangerous or physically demanding tasks were sometimes perceived as more capable and experienced than those who were cautious or frequently sought assistance. Within this cultural context, refusing a hazardous task or requesting assistance could potentially be interpreted as a lack of confidence or experience. Consequently, some employees may feel pressure to demonstrate their capability by accepting risks.

The construction of heroism was particularly evident where employees were expected to demonstrate that they could work independently and overcome difficult situations. This suggests that heroism culture operates as an informal social standard through which workers evaluate themselves and their colleagues.

The theme can therefore be summarized as:

Heroism culture → toughness/courage → acceptance of difficult tasks → increased exposure to workplace hazards.

Theme 2: Normalization and Acceptance of Workplace Risk

A second major theme concerned the normalization of occupational risks. Workers and safety personnel indicated that certain hazardous activities may gradually become viewed as routine when employees repeatedly perform them without experiencing immediate negative consequences.

Repeated exposure to hazards can create a perception that particular risks are "normal" or "part of the job." When workers become accustomed to unsafe conditions, they may become less likely to perceive a hazardous activity as requiring additional precaution. This normalization is particularly problematic because the absence of an accident during previous exposure may create a false perception that the behavior is safe.

The qualitative findings suggest that heroism culture can reinforce this normalization process. When workers are praised for successfully completing dangerous tasks, the successful outcome may overshadow the associated safety risk. Consequently, risky behavior may become socially accepted and eventually incorporated into routine workplace practices.

This theme indicates that occupational accidents may not always result from a single dramatic act of negligence. Instead, accidents may emerge from the cumulative effect of repeatedly tolerated unsafe practices.

Theme 3: Productivity Pressure and "Getting the Job Done"

Another important theme was the tension between production requirements and safety compliance. Participants' accounts suggested that workplace performance was often evaluated in terms of completing assigned tasks within required time limits. Under production pressure, employees may perceive safety procedures as additional steps that slow down work.

Heroism culture can intensify this pressure by associating exceptional workers with the ability to complete difficult assignments quickly and under adverse conditions. In such circumstances, employees may be encouraged, explicitly or implicitly, to prioritize task completion over strict adherence to safety procedures.

This relationship can be represented conceptually as:

Production pressure → heroic expectations → safety shortcuts → reduced safety compliance → increased accident risk.

The findings therefore indicate that unsafe behavior should not necessarily be interpreted solely as an individual worker's failure. Organizational expectations and production demands may create conditions in which workers perceive risk-taking as necessary for successful job performance.

Theme 4: Safety Compliance as a Behavioral Mechanism

Safety compliance emerged as a central theme connecting workplace culture with occupational accident experiences. Participants discussed compliance in relation to the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), following standard operating procedures, observing machine-safety requirements, reporting hazards, maintaining safe working distances, and seeking assistance when performing hazardous tasks.

The findings indicate that safety compliance was influenced not only by employees' knowledge of safety procedures but also by their perceptions of workplace expectations. Workers who believed that speed, toughness, and independent task completion were highly valued could be more inclined to bypass safety procedures.

For example, a worker may know that protective equipment is required but decide not to use it because it is perceived as inconvenient, slows down the task, or creates an impression of weakness. Similarly, an experienced worker may believe that formal procedures are unnecessary because of familiarity with the task.

Thus, the qualitative findings suggest that knowledge of safety rules does not automatically guarantee safety compliance. Employees' actual behavior appears to be influenced by social expectations and the meanings attached to compliance and risk-taking.

Theme 5: Peer Pressure and Social Recognition

The findings further indicate that workplace peers play an important role in shaping safety-related behavior. Workers operate within social groups in which colleagues observe, evaluate, and respond to one another's behavior. Consequently, employees may modify their behavior according to what is socially valued within the group.

Where risk-taking is admired, workers may feel pressure to demonstrate similar behavior. Employees who willingly undertake difficult tasks may receive informal recognition as experienced, brave, hardworking, or reliable. Conversely, employees who are highly cautious may fear being perceived as less capable.

This suggests that heroism culture can become self-reinforcing. Once risk-taking receives social recognition, other workers may imitate the behavior to gain acceptance and status within the workplace.

The emerging process can be summarized as:

Risk-taking behavior → peer recognition → perceived status → behavioral imitation → normalization of unsafe practices.

Peer influence is therefore an important component of the cultural mechanism through which heroism may affect safety compliance.

Theme 6: Safety Shortcuts and Non-Compliance

A closely related theme involved the use of safety shortcuts. The qualitative accounts indicate that employees may sometimes modify or bypass prescribed procedures when they believe that doing so will allow them to complete a task more efficiently.

Safety shortcuts may include failure to use PPE, operating equipment without following all prescribed procedures, entering hazardous areas without adequate protection, ignoring warning signs, working despite fatigue, or attempting to resolve hazardous situations independently.

The findings suggest that such behaviors may become particularly common when workers have substantial experience with a particular task. Experience can increase confidence, but excessive confidence may also produce a perception that formal safety procedures are unnecessary.

Consequently, heroism culture may create a contradiction: the worker is considered "skilled" because he or she can handle difficult tasks independently, while the same confidence may encourage behaviors that reduce safety compliance.

Theme 7: Underreporting of Accidents and Unsafe Conditions

Another significant theme was underreporting or informal management of minor accidents, injuries, and unsafe incidents. Minor incidents may not always be considered sufficiently serious to require formal reporting. Workers may regard minor injuries as normal occupational experiences rather than warning signs requiring organizational intervention.

Heroism culture can potentially reinforce this behavior because reporting an injury or admitting difficulty may conflict with expectations of toughness and self-reliance. Workers who want to maintain an image of strength may prefer to continue working rather than report an injury or request assistance.

Underreporting is particularly important because it may prevent organizations from identifying recurring hazards. When minor incidents are not documented, management may not recognize the underlying safety problem, allowing the hazardous condition to continue until a more serious accident occurs.

The qualitative findings therefore suggest a potential cycle:

Minor incident → non-reporting → absence of corrective action → continued exposure → serious accident.

Theme 8: Role of Safety Officers in Controlling Unsafe Behavior

The interviews with safety officers provided an organizational perspective on the challenges associated with safety compliance. Safety officers emphasized the importance of safety training, monitoring, protective equipment, hazard identification, and enforcement of safety procedures.

However, the findings suggest that formal safety mechanisms may have limited effectiveness when informal workplace norms encourage risk-taking. A safety officer may provide training and establish procedures, but workers may continue unsafe practices if peer groups or production expectations reward speed and risk acceptance.

The safety officers' perspectives therefore highlight a distinction between formal safety culture and informal safety culture. Formal safety culture is reflected in written policies, training, procedures, and protective equipment, whereas informal safety culture is reflected in what workers actually do when supervisors or safety officers are not present.

This distinction is important because occupational safety ultimately depends on workers' everyday behavior rather than merely the existence of safety policies.

Theme 9: Managerial Expectations and Organizational Reinforcement

The interviews with managers indicated that managerial expectations can influence employees' interpretation of acceptable workplace behavior. Managers are responsible for balancing productivity, employee performance, and safety. Where production targets are emphasized strongly, workers may interpret successful task completion as the primary measure of performance.

The findings suggest that heroism culture can be unintentionally reinforced when employees who complete difficult assignments despite unsafe circumstances receive praise or recognition. Even without explicit encouragement to violate safety procedures, managerial appreciation for "getting the job done" may communicate that productivity is more important than strict safety compliance.

This does not necessarily imply that managers intentionally encourage unsafe behavior. Rather, the qualitative findings point toward an unintended organizational reinforcement mechanism, whereby productivity-oriented recognition may make risk-taking appear professionally desirable.

Theme 10: Occupational Accidents as the Outcome of Cumulative Unsafe Practices

The final major theme concerned the relationship between everyday workplace behavior and occupational accidents. Participants' experiences suggest that accidents should be viewed not simply as isolated events but as potential outcomes of accumulated unsafe conditions and behaviors.

Heroism culture may contribute to this process by encouraging employees to accept risk, while weak safety compliance allows unsafe practices to continue. Repeated exposure to hazardous conditions increases the opportunity for an accident to occur.

The qualitative findings consequently support the following conceptual pathway:

Heroism culture → normalization of risk → safety shortcuts/non-compliance → increased hazard exposure → occupational accidents.

Safety compliance behavior therefore appears to represent a critical behavioral pathway through which cultural expectations can influence workplace safety outcomes.

Comparative Findings Across Participant Groups

Comparison of the three participant groups revealed both convergence and differences in perceptions.

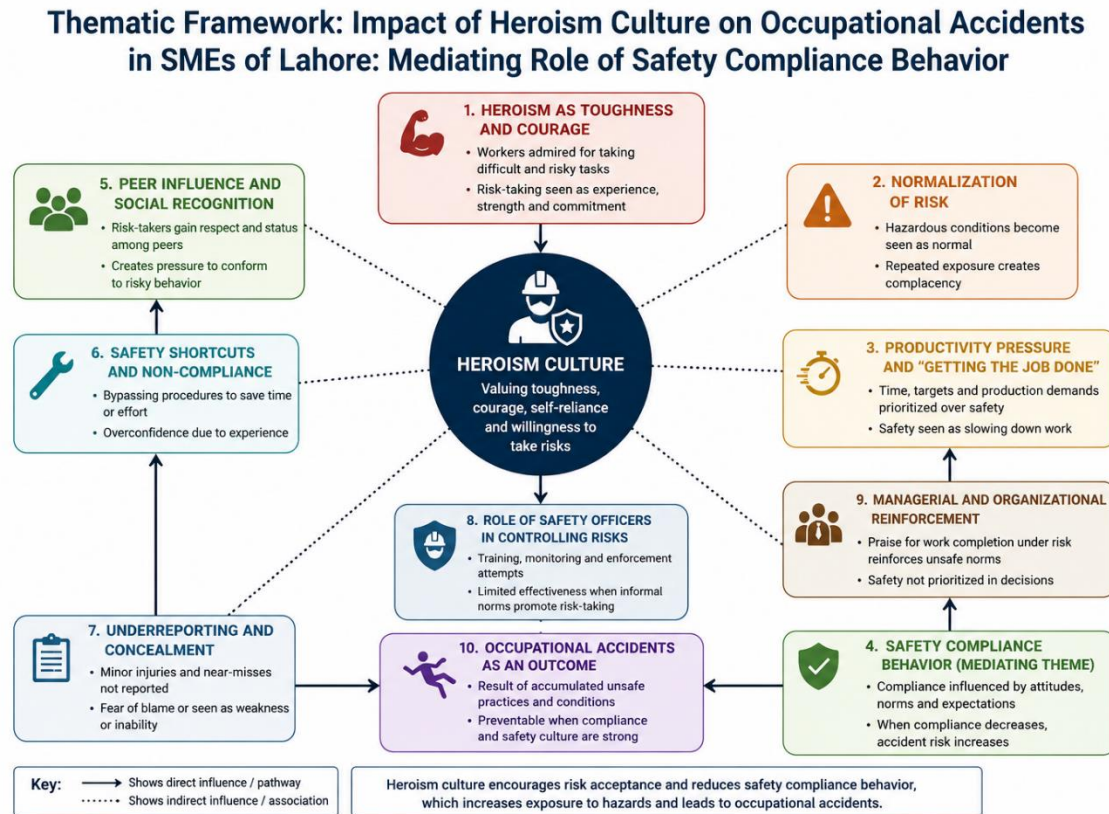
Workers primarily emphasized everyday experiences of workplace pressure, peer expectations, risk-taking, safety shortcuts, and the practical difficulties associated with following safety procedures while completing assigned tasks.

Safety officers focused more strongly on compliance, hazard identification, safety training, PPE use, monitoring, and the difficulties of enforcing safety procedures when workers become accustomed to risky practices.

Managers tended to emphasize productivity, employee competence, work completion, organizational performance, and the need to balance safety requirements with operational demands.

Despite these differences, an important area of convergence was the recognition that workplace behavior is influenced by informal norms. Across the participant groups, safety was not perceived as being determined exclusively by written policies. Rather, workers' attitudes, peer expectations, managerial behavior, production pressures, and organizational practices collectively shaped safety-related decisions.

The qualitative findings can therefore be summarized in the following model:



Conclusion

The present qualitative study concludes that heroism culture represents an important but relatively overlooked cultural dimension influencing occupational safety in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) of Lahore. The findings indicate that workplace heroism is commonly associated with toughness, courage, self-reliance, risk acceptance, and the willingness to complete difficult tasks despite hazardous working conditions. Although these characteristics may be positively interpreted as indicators of commitment, experience, and productivity, they can unintentionally encourage employees to tolerate or underestimate workplace risks. The study further demonstrates that heroism culture influences occupational accidents primarily through its effects on safety compliance behavior. When workers feel pressure to demonstrate courage or competence, they may bypass safety procedures, avoid personal protective equipment, take shortcuts, work under unsafe conditions, or hesitate to report injuries and near-miss incidents. Productivity pressures, peer expectations, and managerial recognition of employees who "get the job done" can further reinforce these behaviors. Safety compliance therefore emerges as a critical behavioral pathway connecting workplace culture with occupational accident experiences. The findings also suggest that occupational accidents should not be viewed solely as consequences of individual negligence or physical workplace hazards; rather, they may result from an interaction between organizational expectations, informal cultural norms, employee behavior, and safety-management practices. The study highlights the need for SME managers and safety officers to transform the meaning of workplace courage by recognizing safe decision-making, hazard reporting, use of protective equipment, assistance-seeking, and adherence to safety procedures as indicators of professionalism and competence. Regular safety training, effective monitoring, supportive reporting mechanisms, and positive managerial reinforcement can help reduce the normalization of risk-taking. Overall, creating a workplace culture in which employees are encouraged to protect themselves and their colleagues rather than prove their toughness through risk-taking is essential for reducing occupational accidents and promoting sustainable occupational safety in SMEs.

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