

The Role of the Semantic Relationship with the Environment in Creating Human Dignity According to the Participants of the Urban Public Space *

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ABSTRACT

Human dignity is a qualitative concept that has a significant effect on the urban public space. The value of a human being and his status, as a thinking being, is raised in this concept. Environmental meaning and relationship with that in the environment are among the concepts that are of great importance in the urban public space. It is necessary to study the influential factors on achieving human dignity by the semantic relationship with the environment. Discovering human dignity in a space used by the citizens is of significant importance. Thus, the current research aimed to study the subjective and interactive nature of this phenomenon and its resulted experience and perception in the actors, and recognize their perceptions and how to create the sense of human dignity. The current study was interpretivism research and emphasized the action and interaction of the researcher with the case study in terms of epistemology. The explicit inductive content analysis was applied as a research method to interpret the contextual data resulted from 13 in-depth unstructured interviews. The data were analyzed through systematic coding and to classify the concepts into three levels of abstraction. The participants were selected using the purposive sampling method and continued until reaching saturation to develop the concepts. The findings indicate that one of the concepts of the public perception of human dignity is the semantic relationship with the environment; it is a concept that becomes more meaningful by the warm feeling of the walls, attraction of the traditional texture, sensory richness, sense of belonging, and inner and subjective concentration. The interrelationship of these factors and their complicated relationship are considerable, leading to creating a sense of human dignity among people. One of the most significant results is to discover the relationship between the semantic relationship and the environment in creating the sense of human dignity.

Keywords: Human Dignity, Urban Public Space, Semantic Relationship with Environment, Discovery of the Subjective Phenomenon, Qualitative Research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant aspects of the urban public space is the environmental recognition in which the audiences' experience is constantly formed. It is an appropriate environment that can convey a sense of human dignity to its audiences. Human dignity is a fundamental basis originating from human nature. This concept refers to human prestige and status and pays attention to the excellent human status, and knows respecting this status as the essence of its meaning. Thus, the human enjoys respect, and the environment that provides this feeling will also be significant. Understanding which conditions and factors can be effective in creating the sense of dignity in the human can be influential in the quality of urban public spaces. The current research studied the semantic relationship with the environment as one of the influential concepts on human dignity. This concept is significant in a space that belongs to all citizens and is accessible; A space that can increase the opportunity for social interactions and improve the quality of the life of individuals and communities. Therefore, the present study tried to show people's perception of human dignity based on interpreting contextual data of the in-depth interviews, field observations and emphasizing action and interaction with the research case and minimum objective separation with research participants.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Human dignity is a qualitative concept, which is significant in urban spaces and has been neglected in the literature of urban public spaces. It is one of the fundamental concepts originating from human nature and essence and refers to the human status and prestige (Eftekhari & Asadi, 2013) and pays attention to the excellent human status that considers respect for this status as the main meaning. Therefore, human beings are respected because they are human beings (Amid Zanjani, 2017); Hence, an environment that will create such a sense will be significant. Understanding which terms and factors are influential in creating the sense of dignity in the human being can be significantly effective in the quality of the urban public spaces. The present study investigated the semantic relationship with the environment as one of the effective concepts on human dignity. The semantic relationship with the environment is the meaning conveyed via the environment to the audience and has been considered in numerous studies. Relph, in "Place and Placelessness", sought to understand quiddity and manner of the semantic relationship of the place for people based on a phenomenological perspective (Relph, 1976). He defines the place using three components, physical form, activity, and meaning. Relph believes that meaning is more important than the other two components and is achieved more difficult (Tuan, 1977). Simultaneously, Canter (1977) presented three-angled dimensions, including activities, imaginations,

and form. He believed that the effect of the physical and formal aspects on the psychological and praxeological perspectives is of more importance. However, Canter stresses that the perception of the space varies in different individuals, and thus, the personal aspects of the space perception are of great importance (Canter, 1977).

In "Theory of Good City Form", Lynch considers the semantic relationship with the environment as the result of the relationship between space elements and the mental structures of the viewers. In his definition, elements, and components of the space refer to the factors through which the physical environment is defined. In Lynch's definition, the mental patterns include all the concepts and values, such as culture, behavior, situation, experience, etc., of the space users. He defines the meaning of place as equivalent to the concept of identity and believes that "Identity is an extent that a person can recognize and understand a place as a distinct place than other places in a way that has a specific, unique, and particular personality" (Lynch, 2011, p. 168). Amos Rapaport believes that the role of the culture ruling society is of significant importance in the formation of the meaning of the environment. According to him, "People make environment meaningful by culture, i.e., a set of values, beliefs, world views, and common institutional systems" (Rapaport, 1982). On the semantic relationship with the environment, in addition to the personal feelings, Manzo (2006) stresses more on the collective feelings based on the community, politics, economy in the environment-human relationship, and subsequently, the formation of the environmental meaning. Accordingly, he classifies and separates the people's perception of the environment in terms of gender, race, culture, nationality, etc., and how a group behaves about the environment (Manzo, 2006).

Reviewing the aspects and nature of the semantic relationship with the environment from the ontological perspective stresses paying attention to the human needs, and various models have been presented to explain it among which is the Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), which has been significant in the development of the design literature. While emphasizing the human needs and motivations, Maslow considers them associated with the human since the birth and believes that human aims to meet his needs at different levels by interacting with the environment and changing its capabilities (Rezaei, 2018). According to environmental psychology, different semantic approaches of the human-environment relationship can be investigated from various aspects, such as cognitive (referring to the familiar places), social (places improving the social interactions), and emotional (places with an emotional-sensory sense of belonging) (Javab Forouzandeh & Motalebi, 2011).

Environmental psychologists have been studied the emotional relationship between the human and the place for several decades. Some scholars in this field

believe that the meaning is attributed to the place and is formed based on the emotional relationship between the people and places. Some consider this relationship the basis for the human's daily life and believe that this attitude is the basis for the phenomenology of the place. For Tuan (1977), a geographical place can have personality and soul referring to its natural features. The concept of the place becomes meaningful not by the positivist approach but the anthropological perspective; Because the abstraction and reduction of this concept to a symbolic meaning, which is important for some contemporary architects, prevent addressing the concept(s) that people experience in their lives. This experience is not merely visual but associates us to the place by using our all senses (Tuan, 1977). According to Altman and Low (1992), the place is a space, which becomes meaningful in a cultural, individual, and collective process (Altman & Low, 1992). Indeed, individuals give meaning to the place based on their experiences, social relations, emotions, and thoughts in the physical context of the space (Steadman, 2003). The previous studies investigated the factors that strengthen or weaken the semantic relationship with the environment. However, the current research seeks another conceptual relationship in the urban public space while emphasizing the found factors. Thus, the main research problem is to study how the sense of human dignity can be created in the urban public space from participants' opinions, the result of which was extracted as the semantic relationship with the environment and its effect on creating the sense of human dignity. The direct effect of the infrastructures and contexts of the semantic relationship with the environment on creating the sense of human dignity is one of the most significant results of this research obtained from the participants' opinions of the urban public spaces. Indeed, achieving human dignity as a result of the concept of the semantic relationship with the environment is one of the research results that could be significantly influential on the urban public spaces. The findings of the present paper indicate the semantic relationship with the environment. Previous studies investigated the semantic relationship with the place from a phenomenological perspective, defining the place as something beyond the abstract place and a set of the environmental characteristics that determine its identity. This identity is based on a type of knowledge and perception, and it introduces the places as rich and deep centers of human existence and believes that the meaning of the environment depends on its effectiveness on the people. Focusing on the concept of the semantic relationship with the environment on creating the sense of dignity in individuals has been neglected in most studies.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As previously mentioned, human dignity is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon, which

depends on the minds of this paper's actors, in addition to having objective aspects. Various concepts can be extracted from the actors' minds, providing the ground for creating a sense of human dignity in the public urban space. Given that the research question aims to find out that how the sense of human dignity can be created in the public space, the nature of the phenomenon under study and the ontological approach of this paper is the subjective and multiple facts and what have been perceived by various people. This paper was based on the interpretivism paradigm because, unlike the instrumental orientation of positivism, its practical orientation focuses on understanding the actors' experiences in the urban public space and the meaning of their experiences in this regard. The research approach was qualitative because it focused on the context and process. The context means the terms that cause a problem or the conditions to which people react by their actions, reactions, and emotions. Process refers to the current responses to the issues and conditions that originated from the context (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Explicit inductive content analysis was used as the research method. To interpret the contextual data obtained from the interviews and field observations, a systematic process of coding and determining the concepts was used (Drisko, 2016). Three levels of abstraction (conceptual classes) were analyzed in this process. Data collection was conducted using 13 unstructured in-depth interviews. An unstructured in-depth interview refers to interview, the questions of which are not pre-designed yet are related to the research problem or purpose. There is no pre-determined category to classify the answers in this method. Most interviews were directed by a set of questions required for that interview. The interviewee is free to talk about what matters to him, and there is often less intervention by the researcher in the interview. This type of interview is applied to seek the interpretations, meanings of the events and situations based on people's perspectives. The participants were selected using the purposive sampling method among four groups of people. The first group included the residents of the neighborhood who have the most and closest contact with the public space of the center of the neighborhood. The second group was the people who were not the neighborhood residents but came to the public space to spend time or any other reason. The third group consisted of employees and local businessmen who have increasingly close contact with the neighborhood clients due to their jobs and spend a great interactive time in the neighborhood. The last group included the environmental planners, who play a significant role in the construction and creation of a space, which can meet public space demands. Interactions of these actors and their effect on the function of the public space can determine the way to achieve the research purpose. First, given the research questions, the participants were selected through among those present in the

urban public space the open sampling method to create the maximum diversity of experiences. Snowball sampling method or chain-referral was also used to select the participants. Selecting the participants was continued until reaching saturation based on the needs and developing the concepts. The studied concept in the process of the interviews is an interactive process. That said, some of the considered concepts are only formed in the human dignity and cannot only be achieved through investigating the mindset and perception of the participants but also preparing the field notes by direct observation in the public space is one of the information collection methods. The

researcher has been present in the public space of the urban neighborhood as an observer for two years and recorded the conversations, behaviors, and activities as descriptive, personal, and reflective notes. Combining this method with the interview is significant because it can lead to achieving a more objective and precise meaning of the individuals' experiences of being present in the public space through observing their behavior and manners (Schwandt, 2007). The findings obtained from the observations were also coded like interviews and inputted into the analysis stage. Atlas Software Version 7 was utilized to manage the data.

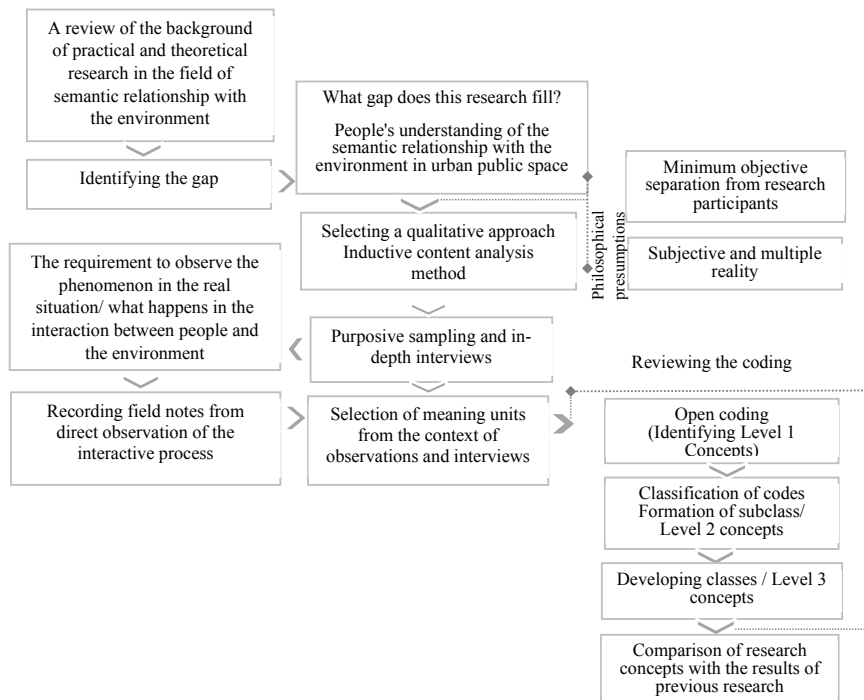


Fig. 1. Research Process

4. ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

The process in which the sense of human dignity occurs in the urban public space is discovering the actions and reactions taking place in the context of this process. Recognizing these complicated and sometimes latent processes that are currently happening in the urban public space and the concepts created in this process can pave the way to discover that how the sense of human dignity is created in the urban public space based on our current specifications.

Analyzing this process and research data, as finding the concepts that realize the sense of human dignity in the urban public spaces for the citizens, indicates the main concept of the semantic relationship with the environment. This concept could induce a feeling of dignity to the citizens. The concepts of level 1 were directly extracted from the interviews and then

classified based on conceptual similarity and proximity. Each of these classes received an appropriate meaning as the level 2 concepts to cover all their sub-concepts (level 1 concepts). These concepts are the warm feeling of the walls, the attraction of the traditional context, sensory richness, inner and subjective concentration, and a sense of belonging. All these concepts were the result of the participants' sensory experience in the public space of the urban neighborhood. Finally, all the level 2 concepts were placed as the sub-set of a new concept, as the level 3 concept, that could cover all the concepts semantically. This concept has been presented in Table 1 in detail for a better understanding, and its related concepts were introduced. In the following, the definition of these concepts and their examples were provided (the stated sentences in the interviews).

Table 1. The Factors Related to the Semantic Relationship with the Environment in Creating the Sense of Human Dignity in the Urban Public Space

Concepts of Level 1 (Code)	Concepts of Level 2 (Sub-category)	Concepts of Level 3 (Category)
Attractive traditional walls	The Warm Feeling of the Walls	
The sense of tranquility from the smell of the traditional materials		
The good sense of thatch		
Paying attention to the harmony between the wall and the texture		
The proportional and uniform shape of the houses	The Attraction of the Traditional Texture	
Accepting the traditional materials		
The stop and persistence in the old texture		
Creating nostalgic feeling by the old texture		
The sense of tranquility by being present in the traditional texture	Sensory Richness	The Semantic Relationship with the Environment
Satisfying the sense of touch by the pavement		
Satisfying the sense of smell by the smell of coffee		
Satisfying the sense of eyesight by lighting		
Satisfying the sense of hearing by the sound of church bell or Adhan	Subjective and Inner Concentration	
Having the sense of spirituality		
Having identity		
Being concentrated on itself and fostering imagination		
Being calm in the space	The Sense of Belonging	
Legibility by the space		
Being satisfied by interaction with the environment		
Having the third place		

4.1. Creating the Sense of Human Dignity in the Public Space Affecting the Semantic Relationship with the Environment

One of the main concepts manifested by reviewing the creation of human dignity in the urban public space is the semantic relationship with the environment. This main concept was explained by the warm feeling of the walls, the attraction of the traditional texture, sensory

richness, sense of belonging, and subjective and inner concentration. This concept mostly indicates the way of the semantic relationship with these factors and their role in creating a valuable sense of dignity in the participants. Figure 2 shows the interrelationship of these concepts. In the following, each concept was explained separately and was stated along with the semantic units extracted from the interviews.

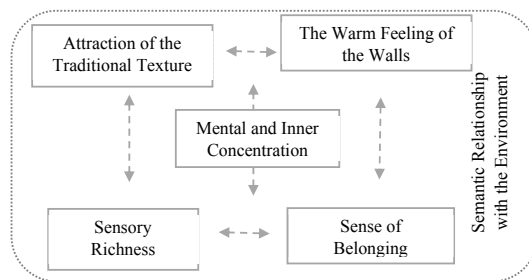


Fig. 2. The Relationships between the Level 2 Concepts Forming the Semantic Relationship with the Environment

4.1.1. The Warm Feeling of the Walls

The sense of sincerity and warmth conveyed by the walls of the neighborhood indicates the sense of familiarity and closeness to the environment for the residents. Using soil, the smell of which can increase the sense of environmental attraction could convey the sense of unity between the individuals and their living environment. This sense could create a sense of tranquility in the participants.

“These walls were thatch before and had better texture. There was a type of sincerity. It was warm. (P. 10:32)”

“Thatch, especially when water is splashed on that, has a smell one could read Sohrab Speheri Poems for that. (p. 9:9)”

“It is normal, you know! It is old! As you walk through, you feel peace. Its style is old. It is thatch. Thatch itself creates peace. Splash some water on this thatch and you will smell a pleasant smell in this neighborhood. (P. 6:2)”

4.1.2. Attraction of the Traditional Texture

This concept is related to the importance of the traditional texture and consists of other concepts, such as proportional and uniform shape of the houses, acceptance of the traditional materials that cause the stop and persistence in the texture and creates a sense of nostalgia in the people. These features will lead to creating sense of tranquility in the participants for being present in this space.

“For example, this arch and skylight here. if you walk on it, you will enjoy its ceiling! You will see, they have done a beautiful brickwork. so beautiful, so pleasant!” (P. 6:9)

“being close to an old neighborhood and a main street in which the shopping center is located, the connection of these two gives a better feeling. I mean, you have both old neighborhoods and you can go to the street on the other side for doing your shopping. Or you can go to a café, sit, and rest” (P. 10:27)

“A 50-years old woman who were in the greengrocery and was the residents of this neighborhood felt peaceful by being here. He liked the old place and said that the pleasant smell of the thatch attracts her” (O-3-2)

4.1.3. Sensory Richness

This concept shows an opportunity that can meet the human being's six senses. In an environment where there is such a response, the person perceives the unity with the space where he is present and establishes a complete inner relationship with the exterior environment. The individual receives an external response per inner need.

“The more the urban space can stimulate your five senses and meet them, the more the person can establish the same unity and relationship. Touch sense; pavement. Smell sense; there is a coffee smell; the clay might be responsive. Because it is material. The eyesight sense; the sense of taste; there might be solutions for that but

in the exterior environment. for example, ... I don't know sometimes people might give you something to eat and hearing sense; which can be again music or anything. The sixth sense; the memorability of the belongings and things that are mental. I think this that mental sense that helps (P. 13:19)”

“Look. ow there is Maryam (PBUH) Church Bell! This sound gives me peace. Like our Adhan that gives me tranquility (P. 6:4)

“Sometimes ago, there was an American who was smelling these adobes. He said: Phew. It smells good! (P. 11:6)”

“A big café attracts me the reason for which was the mellow music and piano that could be heard from outside. Also the sound of the church bell that echoes in the neighborhood and changes the atmosphere of the neighborhood (O. 1:13)”

4.1.4. Inner and Subjective Concentration

This concept shows the type of the relationship of the meta-physical factors and the environment could excel the human a step higher than the physical and crowd space and enter him in the semantic aspect. This space has the potential to approach the person to his inner self and enters him into the world of imagination. Such an environment helps the individual's formed concentration.

“We believe that this imagination is a divine aspect. This state is where we are in the dream and sometimes a place that makes you closer to the dream where we are. This is your dignified space. This provides the spatial satisfaction for your (P. 3:28)”

“When the square is empty, it can be easily seen that its environment takes the human to its inner self and concentrates him on his inner self. This is a state approaching the imagination and dream, and the takes the human away from the human's hectic life (O. 3:3)”

“This imagination is very important; that is, it is the origin of all creativities, all dignities, and everything that gives the positive energy to you. This is an imaginary world, which satisfies you while taking you away from the negative points that originate from the thought, which is totally metaphysical, and on the other hand, roots in the physics, which is totally structural and physical (P. 3:26)”

4.1.5. Sense of Belonging

One of the perceived concepts was the sense of belonging to the environment. This concept includes the sense of being read by the space, which was induced to the person and gives him a sense of tranquility in this space; He considers the environment as an insider and approaches towards a condition where he accepts it as a third place, regardless of the house and occupation. This is the space in which the person moves towards having a sense of belonging.

“There is a place that space attracts you to itself with any culture, economy, or any kind of feature. That said, it respects your being, not the money in your pocket or

your social status. It accepts you as you are. This is the space that I called a space with dignity (P. 3:16)".

"Well, they are retired people and they sit here. They come here from other neighborhoods too and go to a café or eat pizza. They wander here only for leisure (P. 11:1)".

"People usually gather in the urban public space to see and be seen or hear and be heard, understand and be understood. If this is the only aspect, then the space is away from the human pleasure and his status and prestige. In fact, the relationship of being seen is two-way" (P. 5:20).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current research was conducted considering the previous studies on the qualitative concepts of the urban public spaces and to present a model and a concept that contribute to achieving the sense of human dignity in the urban public space. It is a quality that belongs to the citizens in a space and having access to this space is easily possible. It is a space that can increase social interactions (Madanipour, 2008) and improve the quality of life of individuals and societies (Carmona, 1997). Thus, the present study attempted to draw an image of the people's perception of human dignity based on the interpretations of the contextual data obtained from the in-depth interviews and field observations and with an emphasis on the action and reaction of the case study and minimum objective separation from the participants.

The research findings indicate the concepts of the semantic relationship with the environment. In the previous studies, the concept of the relationship with the place was often investigated based on a phenomenological perspective, defining the place as something beyond an abstract place and a set of the environmental characters that determine its nature (Norberg Schulz, 1975, p. 431). It is a nature that defines the places as rich and profound places of the human being and is based on knowledge and perception (Relph, 1976). Some views also considered the semantic relationship with the environment as the concept of the sense of the place. Rapaport (1990) introduces the sense of the place as reality and nature of the place and points out the importance of the meanings and messages in the place. These are the meanings that people perceive and decode based on their roles, expectations, motivations, and other factors (Rapaport, 1990, p. 23). Alexander (1977) and Pallasmaa (2005) found out that the meaning of an environment depends on its effectiveness on the individuals. These studies investigated a factor called the place and its meaning based on environmental psychology. What has often been neglected in these studies is the focus on the concept of the semantic relationship with the environment on creating the sense of dignity in the people. In the present study, one or several main concepts extracted from the meaning of human dignity

based on the participants' points of view are associated with the concept of the semantic relationship in the urban public space. This concept conveys a more different meaning than what has been stated in the studies. It is a concept that Gustafson (2011) has studied precisely and introduced the way of its formation as an interactive approach between the person, environment, and others, as the meaning formation model. He considers three main stimuli in identifying the required motivations to achieve the semantic relationship with the environment, including the common collective stimuli to improve the quality of the public environment and share the good environmental feelings, the stimuli based on the personal interest and especially regarding the improvement of the personal status in the social and political environments, and finally, the stimuli of the professional and occupational competitions, that are different from other two stimuli (Gustafson & Hertting, 2016). Similarly, these concepts were also extracted in the current research. The participants' mindset points out the subjective and inner concentration as an important factor in creating the semantic relationship with the environment in the public space. This concept along with other concepts, such as sensory richness, sense of belonging, the warm feeling of the walls, and attraction of the traditional texture are the factors leading to the sense of human dignity and being valuable in the participant. Achieving the concept of the semantic relationship with the environment is a concern that an individual needs and considers in such spaces. According to the findings, providing the conditions of the semantic relationship with the environment in the urban public space leads to achieving the sense of being valuable in the individual, which was one of the main purposes of the research.

6. CONCLUSION

One of the main concepts extracted from the meaning of human dignity based on the participants' opinions is the concept of the semantic relationship in the urban public space in the current research. This concept conveys a more different meaning than what has been stated in the studies. Similarly, the participants' mindsets point out the subjective and inner concentration as a significant factor in creating the semantic relationship with the environment in the public space. This concept, along with other concepts, such as sensory richness, sense of belonging, the warm feeling of the walls, and attraction of the traditional texture are the factors leading to the sense of human dignity and being valuable in the participant. Achieving the concept of the semantic relationship with the environment is a concern that an individual needs and considers in such spaces. According to the findings, providing the conditions of the semantic relationship with the environment in the urban public space leads to achieving the sense of being valuable in the individual, which was one of the main purposes of the research.

Indeed, the environmental meaning and the resulted relationship with the participant can lead to another result, i.e., creating a sense of human dignity in the individuals. One of the answers that the participants pointed out on how to create the sense of human dignity was a space in which they can have a semantic relationship with the environment. This space can be effective in creating a sense of human dignity. In fact,

achieving the concept of human dignity is the result of the semantic relationship with the environment, and can be significantly effective in the quality of the urban public spaces. The results of this paper indicate that human dignity is an interactive process. Therefore, recognizing this process through using the grounded theory can be the subject for future studies.

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