



# A CONCEPTUAL EXAMINATION OF HOW SUPPORT, KNOWLEDGE SHARING, AND LEADERSHIP DRIVE ACADEMIC INNOVATION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL INNOVATION CAPABILITY

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**Abstract:** The management of higher education institutions should prioritize the cultivation of innovative work behaviour among academicians as a primary and crucial concern, since IWB has become pivotal in academia. Therefore, the main objective of this conceptual paper was to examine the interplay between perceived organizational support, knowledge sharing, and transformational leadership on innovative work behavior within Malaysia's higher education institutions (HEIs), highlighting the mediating role of individual innovation capability. Grounded by Social Exchange Theory and Social Cognitive Theory, the study suggests that while POS, KS and TL are pivotal drivers of IWB, their impact is substantially mediated by the enhancement of IIC. The study provides valuable insights into how individual innovation capabilities serve as a bridge between these organizational and psychological constructs among academics and knowledge workers within organizational contexts. The findings aim to inform and guide HEIs in promoting a culture of innovation and excellence in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Higher Education institutions, Innovative Work Behavior, Individual Innovation Capabilities, Knowledge Sharing and Transformational Leadership.



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#### Introduction

The urgency of research on innovative work behavior (IWB) among academics in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) cannot be overstated. As the country strives to become a regional education hub and meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0), fostering innovation among academic staff becomes imperative (Johari et al., 2021; Rahman Ahmad et al., 2020). Due to this, HEIs are increasingly pressured to adapt and innovate to remain competitive and relevant. Moreover, with the fast-paced changes in the labour market and digital transformation, academics are facing immense pressure to improve their teaching methods and instructional materials to keep up with students, particularly at universities (Atatsi et al., 2022). According to Mohammed Afandi and Mohd Effendi Ewan (2020) and Namono et al. (2021), academics must demonstrate IWB to better adapt to new situations and be an asset in making their institutions more competitive. Promoting this behaviour cultivates a culture in which people exchange and contribute to ideas, hence improving overall work performance and advancing organisational development (Srirahayu et al., 2023).

Thus, to ensure that the education system is always competitive, academics should have innovative attitudes or behaviours (Mohammed Afandi & Mohd Effendi Ewan, 2020). However, based on the literature, there is a lack of local studies on IWB specifically within the academic setting (Chen et al., 2024; Hashim et al., 2019; Ibus et al., 2020; Johari et al., 2021b). This indicates that research on IWB in the context of education in Malaysia has not been fully explored (Mohammed Afandi & Mohd Effendi Ewan, 2020). There is still a lot of space and opportunity for research to be done to better understand academics' IWB since it is not yet fully explored how innovative ways of academics can be improved (Mohammed Afandi & Mohd Effendi Ewan, 2020). In adherence to this phenomenon, this paper proposed to fill a knowledge gap and an empirical gap related to IWB in educational institutions who's responsible for designing and providing valuable and useful knowledge to students. Considering the success of innovation is based on a variety of individual and organizational elements, scholars have attempted to identify the forces that ignite and sustain employees' IWB (Muchiri et al., 2020).

An in-depth examination of the literature shows that knowledge sharing (KS) has a positive impact on IWB (Aldabbas et al., 2021; Alshahrani et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2022). Hence, there is limited research on KS in education settings, particularly among academics (Abdullah & Omar, 2020), thus providing an opportunity to further study in HEIs. Besides, Ebrahim et al., (2023) found that transformational leadership (TL) is the most prominent factor in IWB studies, with knowledge sharing being the second most influential. However, empirical evidence about the role of TL in supporting IWB is still scarce (Suhana et al., 2019). Besides, past research between TL and IWB also yielded mixed findings (Bin Saripin & Kassim, 2019; Contreras et al., 2020) Since there an insufficient and contradictory findings, Rahmah et al. (2020) suggest including mediating variables to strengthen the relationship. Since there an insufficient and contradictory findings, Rahmah et al. (2020) suggest including mediating variables to strengthen the relationship.

According to past research, individual innovation capabilities (IIC) play an important role as a mediator in understanding various organizational outcomes (Al Taweel & Al-Hawary, 2021; Alaskar, 2023; Nham et al., 2020). However, despite their significance, the exploration of how these capabilities interact with other organizational factors, such as knowledge sharing and leadership styles, to influence academic innovative behavior remains relatively uncharted



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territory within the Malaysian higher education context. Therefore, this conceptual paper seeks to bridge this gap by proposing a framework that elucidates the interplay between knowledge sharing, transformational leadership, and individual innovation capabilities in fostering academic IWB within Malaysian HEIs.

#### Literature Review

#### **Innovative Work Behaviour**

In recent decades, it has been evident that persistent competitive advantage among successful companies is largely attributed to their capacity to foster IWB (Blomkvist et al., 2025). As a result, scholars and organizational practitioners in the fields of management and innovation have been interested in employees' IWB. Janssen, (2000) define IWB as employees deliberately generating, proposing, and implementing new ideas at work, either individually or within a team or organization, to enhance performance. Similarly Jong & Hartog, (2007) describe IWB as individuals deliberately acting to introduce or implement new ideas, services, methods, or procedures within their job roles, departments, or organizations. While there is significant scholarly interest in studies on IWB, research specifically focused on IWB in higher education institutions (HEIs) remains limited (Ayoub et al., 2023; Messmann et al., 2018). HEIs undoubtedly contribute significantly to the performance of innovation (Ibus, Wahab, & Ismail, 2020). According to Hajar Mohd Roffeei et al. (2018), education is crucial since it serves as a reservoir of knowledge and helps shape people's attitudes and talents to become knowledge workers. Given that education is crucial for promoting creative and innovative thinking among students, academics' IWB is critical in the changing environment (Agi, 2019). This will aid academics in developing a creative attitude, reframing the role of the university in society, and assisting universities in transitioning from traditional to entrepreneurial universities (Farrukh et al., 2022).

#### **Perceived Organizational Support**

POS refers to the degree to which employees perceive their employer as attentive to their welfare and valuing their contributions to the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Peng et al., 2023). In the lens of SET, when organizations offer assistance to their employees regarding the specified criteria, it leads to a propensity for employees to demonstrate positive reciprocity towards the organization (Ekmekcioglu & Öner, 2023). While prior studies consistently link POS with enhanced innovative outcomes, scholars emphasize different mechanisms. For instance, Masyhuri et al. (2021) highlight that POS fosters a supportive climate that stimulates innovative solutions, whereas Ranihusna et al. (2021) argue that POS enhances employees' self-esteem, indirectly motivating creative problem-solving. Similarly, Al-Taie & Khattak (2024) found that employees who receive substantial support from their businesses are prepared to provide creative ideas, which may be crucial in providing a competitive advantage to organizations. Meanwhile, Peng et al. (2023) observed that excessive reliance on POS may weaken employees' intrinsic motivation for innovation, suggesting that support must be balanced with autonomy. Similarly, recent evidence indicates that while POS facilitates knowledge-sharing and risk-taking behaviors, its impact on innovation varies across organizational contexts (Hock-Doepgen et al., 2024; Park & Kim, 2022). Taken together, the literature suggests that POS is a critical, yet context-sensitive driver of innovation operating not only through direct encouragement but also through employees' perceptions of self-worth and reciprocity.



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#### **Knowledge Sharing**

KS is an extensively examined subject in organisational behaviour, as it benefits both employees and employers (Islam et al., 2022). It entails the reciprocal exchange of expertise, skills, and information among individuals (Mirzaee & Ghaffari, 2018). According to the literature, there are two parts to knowledge sharing: collecting and donating (Van Den Hooff & Ridder, 2004). Knowledge collection involves seeking insights from others regarding their expertise, whereas knowledge donation refers to the dissemination of one's knowledge to others through communication (De Vries et al., 2006; Islam et al., 2022). Empirical evidence strongly supports the link between KS and innovative work behavior (IWB). Studies confirm that exchanging diverse perspectives stimulates collective learning and fosters innovation (Elamin et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024). However, more recent findings reveal contextual variations. Mustika et al. (2020) and Ebrahim et al. (2025) report a positive association, but Usmanova et al., (2020) argue that KS does not directly associate with IWB. Therefore, Nugroho, (2023) indicated that inconsistencies remain in the relationship between KS and IWB, requiring further research.

#### **Transformational Leadership**

The idea of "transformation leadership," initially proposed by Burns (1978), pertains to leaders who possess the ability to boost the morale and motivation of their followers. According to Northouse (2018), transformational leadership is defined by leaders who have extensive knowledge and are skilled at guiding themselves and their followers in implementing organizational changes. Transformational leadership plays a key role in nurturing IWB (Bao, 2024; Ebrahim et al., 2023). This leadership approach is preferred for its capacity to inspire and empower employees, motivating them to exceed expectations. It cultivates a shared vision among team members, promotes a culture of creativity, and encourages a willingness to take risks (Afsar & Umrani, 2020; Helmy et al., 2023). Afsar & Umrani, (2020) found that when employees work in an environment that supports their ideas, they are more likely to initiate and implement those ideas. However, the relationship between TL and IWB is not uniformly positive. While many studies confirm its constructive role, others report contradictory results. For instance Ferdinan & Lindawati, (2021) and Sudibjo & Prameswari, (2021) found there is negative association between TL and IWB.Despite previous studies producing contradictory findings regarding the influence of TL on IWB, its effects remain little investigated (Pham et al., 2024).

#### **Individual Innovation Capabilities**

IIC is defined as the capacity of individuals to continuously integrate information, skills, and creativity into novel products or services (Iddris et al., 2022). Academic staff must be adaptable and innovative to survive in an unpredictable environment under IR 4.0 (Hussein et al., 2016). It is mainly because the ability of staff to innovate is a major factor in an organization's innovation (Zhao et al., 2020). An increased ability to innovate can help individuals overcome problems at work, resulting in improved quality and quantity of work (Fauziyah & Rahayunus, 2021). Academic IIC becomes a driver of business sustainability (Nugroho et al., 2021). Thus, IIC is considered a valuable asset for the firms to provide and sustain a competitive advantage in the implementation of the entire strategy. Currently, there is minimal research that has assessed IIC as a mediator when evaluating the IWB of individuals, although past studies have proven that IIC plays an essential role in mediating between various individual and organizational outcomes (Alaskar, 2023; Fauziyah & Rahayunus, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2020;





Nham et al., 2020; Pranowo et al., 2021; Zhang, 2022). Studies on IIC as a mediating role in strengthening IWB are also even more limited in the education field.

#### Perceived Organizational Support and Innovative Work Behaviour

According to SET, the foundation of healthy relationships is mutual support and giving (Blau, 1964). Similiarly, following the norm of SET, workers who feel appreciated by their employer are more likely to exhibit IWB and other good attitudes and behaviours because they know their employer values, supports, and cares about them (Al-Taie & Khattak, 2024). Past studies reported that when employees are more likely to take the initiative, seek out opportunities, solve current and future problems, and produce innovative results, their employers demonstrate care for them and give them honest feedback on their performance (Gregory et al., 2010; Masyhuri et al., 2021). Similiarly, many researchers found, there was a favourable and statistically significant relationship between POS and IWB (Al-Taie & Khattak, 2024; Aslan, 2019; Ekmekcioglu & Öner, 2023; Thompson et al., 2021). Thus, this research hypothesizes:

H<sub>1</sub>: Perceived Organizational Support has a positive effect on academic innovative work behaviour.

#### **Knowledge Sharing and Innovative Work Behaviour**

Organizational learning theory states that knowledge sharing successfully encourages innovative work behavior (Crossan, 1996). Employees who actively participate in KS initiatives have higher IWB at work (Kim et al., 2024; Udin, 2022; Wang, 2023). An in-depth examination of the literature shows that knowledge sharing has a positive impact on IWB (Aldabbas et al., 2021; Almulhim, 2020; Alshahrani et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2022; Munir, R., Beh, 2019; Usmanova et al., 2020). However, there is limited research on KS in education, particularly among academics (Abdullah & Omar, 2020). Nugroho, (2023) states that KS is crucial in enhancing the IWB of academics in HEIs by promoting a collaborative culture, facilitating knowledge and expertise sharing, inspiring innovative ideas, and aiding in the development of new knowledge and approaches. Hence, it is imperative to provide an environment that fosters and encourages innovative work behaviour, enabling all employees to generate, disseminate, and creatively use knowledge. Thus, this research hypothesizes:

H<sub>2</sub>: Knowledge sharing has a positive effect on academic innovative work behaviour.

#### Transformational Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour

Findings from a systematic literature review show that TL has been consistently associated with IWB (AlEssa & Durugbo, 2021). Several authors have offered various reasons that establish a connection between TL and the IWB of employees. Here are a few arguments: the leaders of an organisation greatly influence the creation of a favourable environment for IWB through their inspiring, motivating, and visionary actions (Gashema, 2021; Saif et al., 2024), Blau (1964, p.566), when a leader shows personalized care for their staff, it inspires them to be more imaginative and innovative. TL offers consideration and assistance to individuals within the organisation, which in turn fosters employee IWB (Alnajjar & Hashim, 2020). However, the relationship between TL and IWB has yielded mixed results in past research, with meta-analytic analyses revealing a wide range of results (Bin Saripin & Kassim, 2019; Contreras et al., 2020; Jun & Lee, 2023; Sudibjo & Prameswari, 2021). Thus, more research is needed to investigate the underlying mechanisms linking TL with IWB (Afsar & Umrani, 2020). Hence,



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this study aims to explore the influence of transformational leaders on employees' IWB. Thus, this research hypothesizes:

H<sub>3</sub>: Transformational Leadership has a positive effect on academic innovative work behaviour.

#### **Individual Innovation Capability and Innovative Work Behavior**

Lei et al. (2020) stated that the word "IIC" denotes the extent of effort and actions engaged by individuals to promote innovation. Grošelj et al. (2021) observed that to cultivate creativity among employees, they must have both the motivation and capability to participate in creative practices. Wu et al., (2022) stated that participating in IWB can improve employees' ability to innovate. Likewise, Axtell et al. (2000) found that people who have a strong IIC are better at seeing chances for innovation and putting new solutions into action, which are essential parts of IWB. Furthermore, IIC facilitates the recognition and implementation of ideas for enhancement or novel advances, hence catalyzing the emergence of innovative concepts (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). While IIC strongly influences IWB, there is a paucity of research examining the relationship between IWB and IIC, particularly within the setting of higher education institutions. Given the limited studies in this area, thus, this study hypothesizes:

H<sub>4</sub>: Individual Innovation capability has a positive effect on academic innovative work behaviour.

# Perceived Organizational Support and Individual Innovation Capabilities

SET posits that when individuals feel substantial organisational support, they are more inclined to reciprocate by enhancing and employing their strengths, particularly concerning innovation competencies (Abbas & Wu, 2019; Khaliq et al., 2024). Suifan et al., (2018) discovered that POS markedly improves individual learning and creativity, which are essential elements of IIC. Employees who feel their employers care about them are more engaged in their work, more productive, and more inclined to learn new skills and advance in their careers (Imran et al., 2020). Similiarly Bammens, (2016) state that employees are more likely to participate in IIC when they believe their employer supports them more. Thus, this research hypothesizes:

H<sub>5</sub>: Perceived Organizational Support has a positive effect on individual innovation capability.

#### **Knowledge Sharing and Individual Innovation Capability**

According to Fauziyah & Rahayunus, (2021) one of the most important ways to boost academics' IIC is to facilitate the sharing of relevant knowledge. Similiarly, Yuen & Lam, (2024) and Castaneda & Cuellar, (2020) highlighted in their research that KS catalyzes IIC. Ganguly et al., (2019) also, found that KS significantly impacts academics' capacity to produce novel ideas. It shows that participating in more knowledge-exchange events increases employees' eagerness to strengthen their critical thinking and creativity capacities. While previous studies have shown that KS greatly affects IIC, research in the educational sector is still scarce. Therefore, it is advised to keep investigating this connection, especially when studying the effects of KS specifically on the IIC. Consequently, it may be posited that:

H<sub>6</sub>: Knowledge Sharing has a positive effect on individual innovation capability.



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# Transformational Leadership and Individual Innovation Capability

Many notable organizational benefits, including increased innovation performance, human capital, and knowledge capital, have been associated with TL (Le & Lei, 2019). From the perspectives of SET and SCT, TLs act as exemplars who motivate, intellectually engage, and provide individualised support to their followers. TL significantly influences an individual's IIC by cultivating a conducive environment that promotes the enhancement of creative and innovative abilities and practices (Koednok, 2023). A study by Lei et al. (2020) also found a TL significantly influences IIC. Employees see a leader as valuable if they offer support, recognition, and chances for personal growth. This makes them more committed to their work and helps them to improve their IIC (Helmy et al., 2023). Thus, this research hypothesizes:

H<sub>7</sub>: Transformational leadership has a positive effect on individual innovation capability.

# Perceived Organizational Support, Individual Innovation Capabilities and Innovative Work Behavior

Previous research has indicated that POS is a significant factor believed to promote IWB (Muchiri et al., 2020; Mustika et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2023; Yang & Tseng, 2024). Although prior research has directly connected POS and IWB, it remains unclear whether POS is the primary predictor of IWB or if this relationship is mediated by underlying mechanisms. According to Melhem et al., (2018), a workplace environment that fosters happiness at work may catalyze individuals to harness and improve their built-in innovation potential. Further, Al-Ghazali (2021) and Al-Taie & Khattak, (2024) states that when employees sense a conducive environment for innovation in their current workplace context, they are likely to have elevated levels of enthusiasm and a willingness to participate in new activities, hence enhancing IWB. This study posits that adequate organisational support enhances employees' innovative capabilities, subsequently fostering good behaviours in response to such assistance. Thus, this research hypothesizes:

H<sub>8</sub>: Individual innovation capability positively mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support and innovative work behaviour.

# Knowledge Sharing, Individual Innovation Capabilities and Innovative Work Behaviour

Previous studies have shown that KS positively and significantly enhances employees' ability to innovate (Agistiawati et al., 2020; Nham et al., 2020; Yuen & Lam, 2024). However, previous research has not taken into account the potential mediating influence of IIC when examining the relationship between KS and IWB. A recent study has shown the significant and beneficial effect of KS on IIC (Olaleye et al., 2024). Thus, this study seeks to examine the impact of KS on IWB by investigating the mediating function of IIC. Past studies proved that when individuals have higher innovation capability, they are better able to use the knowledge they receive to initiate and carry out innovative tasks and projects (Nham et al., 2020; Ologbo et al., 2015). Through the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and best practices, individuals gain access to diverse perspectives and insights that can inspire creativity and innovation (Aulawi, 2018). When individuals have higher innovation capability, they are better able to use the knowledge they receive to initiate and carry out innovative tasks and projects that portray their IWB. Thus, this research hypothesizes:



H<sub>9</sub>: Individual innovation capability positively mediates the relationship between knowledge sharing and innovative work behaviour.

# Transformational Leadership, Individual Innovation Capabilities and Innovative **Work Behaviour**

Transformational leadership has a significant impact on IWB in academic settings, as leaders who exhibit transformational qualities inspire and motivate their teams to pursue creativity and innovation (Abdullatif & Jaleel, 2021; Bao, 2024). By promoting a vision for change, fostering trust, and encouraging followers to reach their potential, transformational leaders create an environment that supports IWB (Afsar et al., 2014; Lin, 2023; Saif et al., 2024). This relationship is mediated by IIC, which enhances the follower's ability to translate the leader's vision and guidance into concrete innovative outcomes. As individuals develop their innovation capability under TL, they are more likely to exhibit IWB, thereby advancing the overall innovative potential of the academic institution. According to Le & Lei (2019) TL significantly influences IIC by cultivating a supportive and collaborative environment that encourages the development of skills and behaviors essential for fostering creativity and innovation. Thus, this research hypothesizes:

H<sub>10</sub>: Individual innovation capability positively mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative work behaviour.

### **Proposed Research Framework**

The framework posits that within Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs), knowledge sharing and transformational leadership significantly influence academic IWB, mediated by IIC. POS provides a conducive, supportive environment for innovation. KS involves the exchange of information and ideas among faculty, administrators, and students, fostering a collaborative environment conducive to innovation. TL inspires and empowers individuals to embrace change and creativity, shaping the organizational culture to support innovation. Academic IWB encompasses proactive actions such as developing new teaching methodologies and conducting groundbreaking research. Individual innovation capabilities, including creativity and problem-solving skills, enable individuals to generate and implement innovative ideas effectively. Together, these components form a framework for understanding how POS, KS and TL drive academic innovation within Malaysian HEIs.

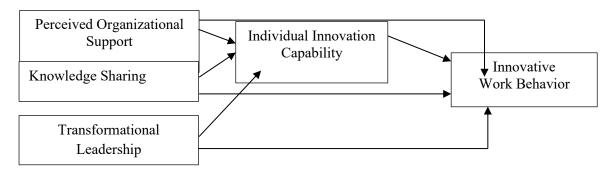


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



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### Research Methodology

This conceptual paper proposes a framework to examine the influence of POS, KS and TL on IWB with IIC as the mediating variable. The constructs were identified through a systematic review of prior literature and grounded in three established theories: Social Exchange Theory (SET), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). These theoretical lenses collectively justify the inclusion of POS, KS, and TL as independent variables, IIC as a mediator, and IWB as the dependent variable. The suggested framework will be examined using a quantitative, cross-sectional study methodology with a structured questionnaire to collect data. The target population consists of academics employed in Malaysian HEIs. The research used a purposive sampling method, focusing on academics that satisfy three distinct criteria: (i) currently engaged at Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), (ii) holding a permanent academic job, and (iii) possessing Malaysian citizenship. Measurement items for each construct will be adapted from validated scales widely used in past studies to ensure reliability and content validity. Data will be collected via a selfadministered online questionnaire distributed through official academic email accounts. The analysis will be conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0, which is appropriate for testing complex models with mediating effects and latent constructs.

#### **Conclusion**

Under the lens of social exchange theory and social cognitive theory, there exists a complex interaction between POS, KS, TL and academic IWB, mediated by IIC. By providing necessary resources, encouragement, and recognition, POS boosts competency, which in turn boosts confidence in one's ability to innovate. Concurrently, TL creates an atmosphere of trust and psychological safety, which promotes free communication and KS among academics. This collaborative atmosphere not only encourages the exchange of ideas and information but also reinforces individual cognitive and motivational resources, enhancing IIC. When academics possess a higher capacity for innovation, they are better equipped to translate the knowledge shared and organizational support into tangible IWB. Thus, the mediating role of IIC strengthens the positive impact of POS, KS and TL on IWB. This proposed model highlights the collaborative impact of supporting organisational systems, leadership, and knowledge processes in fostering academic innovation. It is recommended that future empirical studies validate this model and explore potential moderating variables, such as digital competency and innovation climate, while also assessing this model across different contexts.





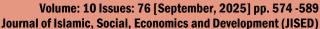
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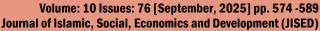








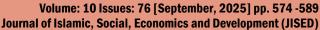
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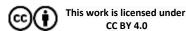
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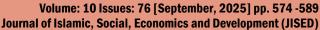






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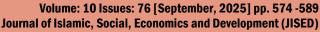
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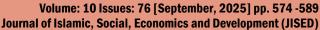








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