Original Research Article

Organizational Friendship as an Introduction to Enhancing Organizational Loyalty: In the Iraqi Education Sector

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the role of organizational friendship in enhancing organizational loyalty in the Iraqi education sector. The study relied on the descriptive analytical approach, where data were collected from 372 individuals working in leadership positions within the sector, using a questionnaire designed according to the five-point Likert scale, and the data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS programs to test the hypotheses and determine the relationship between the study variables. The results of the analysis showed that organizational friendship has a positive impact on organizational loyalty, as the estimate value reached 0.62, indicating a medium to strong impact. Based on these results, the study recommends adopting policies that enhance a cooperative work environment, such as enhancing organizational trust through transparent policies, and encouraging open communication channels between employees and management. These strategies contribute to increasing organizational loyalty and achieving a more stable and productive work environment.

Keywords: Organizational friendship, organizational loyalty, education sector.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational friendships play an important role in promoting employee well-being, organizational commitment, and overall workplace dynamics. These friendships foster mutual trust, emotional support, and a sense of belonging, which can lead to increased job satisfaction and organizational loyalty. The impact of workplace friendships is multifaceted, and can affect various aspects of organizational behavior and employee performance (Chen, 2024). Workplace friendships have been shown to positively impact organizational commitment, as employees who perceive a friendly work environment tend to exhibit higher levels of commitment. Workplace friendships also contribute to employee well-being by providing emotional support and reducing stress, which may mitigate negative effects such as emotional exhaustion (Badran & Khaled, 2024).

Organizational loyalty is a virtue when employees are willing to contribute or sacrifice their personal interests in order to further the goals of the organization. Business organizations suggest that the best form of loyalty is when both the company and its employees have mutual benefits. Companies with more loyal employees will enjoy greater competitive advantages, higher retention rates, and higher success rates than companies with fewer loyal employees. Additional benefits of building and maintaining employee loyalty are reduced costs, retaining loyal customers, and stabilizing company operations. Maintaining loyalty among employees, customers, and shareholders will bring more profits to companies. Therefore, companies can facilitate the implementation of their strategic plans if they develop and maintain loyal employees who are highly productive. However, employee loyalty is not something that can be easily obtained by administrative officials and managers because loyalty is not a one-time job, but rather requires employers to regularly build mutual relationships between managers, employees, and companies, so administrative officials and employers need to be more active and proactive in realizing the benefits of understanding, managing, and increasing employee loyalty (Vuong, *et al.*, 2021).

The relationship between organizational friendship and organizational loyalty includes elements of trust, engagement, and leadership. Organizational friendship characterized by mutual trust can significantly enhance employee engagement and loyalty. This relationship supports the idea that workplace friendships enhance a sense of belonging and cooperation, which in turn may lead to increased productivity and reduced turnover rates. The interaction between these factors is complex, as organizational loyalty is influenced by various antecedent factors such as trust, leadership, and cultural factors (Zhang & Salleh, 2024). In light of this, this study will explore the relationship between organizational friendship and organizational loyalty from a theoretical and statistical perspective, discuss the results, and provide recommendations.

Previous Studies and Hypotheses Development

Lynch, 2022 study "What is the benefit of friends?: The relationship between friendship in the workplace, employee loyalty, and organizational commitment" This study was conducted by designing a survey with a sample of 190 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The results indicate that friendship in the workplace is positively associated with employee loyalty, emotional and normative commitment, and this study helps us formulate the first hypothesis:
H1: There is a statistically significant moral influence relationship for organizational friendship on organizational loyalty.

Kazem, 2014 study the study aims to reveal the role of organizational trust in enhancing organizational loyalty, and the study used the questionnaire as a means of obtaining data, as employees were selected from five branches of Rafidain Bank in Najaf Governorate, and their number was (67) people. It concluded that organizational trust greatly affects organizational loyalty, and accordingly the second hypothesis will be:
H2: There is a statistically significant moral influence relationship for organizational trust on organizational loyalty.

Study (Bae & Kim, 2019) "The study aims to demonstrate the convergent effect of organizational commitment, organizational loyalty, and job burnout on the intention of job turnover among some administrative employees in medical institutions." 320 ASMI employees were randomly selected from 27 medical institutions. The results indicate that there are great efforts made to increase the impact of organizational commitment in achieving organizational loyalty and reducing job burnout. On this basis, we will be able to propose the third hypothesis:
H3: There is a statistically significant moral influence relationship between organizational commitment and organizational loyalty.

Study (Fettahlioglu, *et al.,* 2017) "A critical overview of organizational citizenship and organizational loyalty and an empirical study of two concepts", a survey was conducted with 283 people working in a public institution in Bitlis, and this survey was analyzed using SPSS program. According to the results, it was found that there is a relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and organizational loyalty, and from this standpoint the fourth hypothesis will be:
H4: There is a statistically significant relationship of organizational citizenship in organizational loyalty.

Theoretical Framework:
First: Organizational Friendship: (Ibrahim *et al.,* 2020) defines it as a voluntary and personal relationship that plays a major and important role in providing support and transferring information. It is also an important source of rewards. In addition, it contributes to accomplishing tasks and motivates individuals to cooperate to achieve goals. It also grows and develops in all types of organizations and at various organizational levels. As for (Kiyan & Teimouri, 2024), he defined organizational friendship as a set of relationships that arise within the work environment voluntarily between individuals, which affect the individual's productivity and performance within the organization. Among the most important dimensions of organizational friendship are (Abdul Zahra, 2021, 364):
1- **Organizational trust:** One of the needs of employees is to build trust between them and senior management, managers and their colleagues at work. The existence of a high level of trust in the organization is the reason for lower costs and other control mechanisms. Organizational trust is defined as the feeling of trust and support in employers, and the belief that employers will be clear and follow up on commitments (Mahmoud and Khalaf, 2019, 131).
2- **Organizational commitment:** Organizational commitment is related to improving the job performance of employees. Organizational commitment has been widely depicted in literature and organizational behavior. It has been defined as a management force that brings people together, and thus organizational members may come together because of their commitments to their organization. It is an important variable in understanding employee work behavior in organizations, and has an impact on employee satisfaction in the organization (Jassim, 2024).
3- **Organizational citizenship:** It has been defined as work-related activities that go beyond the scope of the job, the official contract, and employee incentives. However, these behaviors still increase organizational effectiveness for this reason. They are desirable behaviors by employees, as organizational citizenship includes many behaviors, including helping people, volunteering to perform additional tasks, and complying with rules and procedures in the workplace. It represents the added value of the employee, which is one of the forms of positive, constructive, and purposeful social behaviors (Mahmoud and Khalaf, 2019, 131).

Second: Organizational Loyalty: Ali (2017) defined it as the individual's positive evaluation of the organization in which he works and dedication to work in order to achieve the goals for which it was established. There are several dimensions of organizational loyalty, which are:

1- **Emotional loyalty:** This component determines the degree of the individual's integration into the organization and his connection to social relations, such as group solidarity (Al-Salem, 2015: 67). It also indicates the extent to which the individual matches the organization to which he belongs, his desire to continue in it, and his involvement in its activities. This is related to his sense of loyalty, as the individual agrees with the organization's goals and values, and seeks to participate in achieving them. In addition, emotional loyalty depends on the employee's awareness of the distinctive characteristics of his job duties, such as independence, importance, diversity of skills, degree of participation, and feedback from supervisors. Accordingly, individuals with high emotional loyalty continue to work within the organization because they want to and feel a sense of belonging to it (Al-Kalabi and Khader, 2022).

2- **Continuing loyalty:** refers to the value of the investment that can be achieved if the individual continues with the organization, or the amount of loss that he may incur if he decides to join another organization (Kazem, 2014).

3- **Normative loyalty:** refers to the level of moral commitment that drives the individual to adopt the organization's values and goals and consider it part of it, as normative loyalty arises as a result of the good support the individual receives from the organization, in addition to the opportunities given to him to participate in implementing procedures and achieving goals, and individuals with high normative loyalty usually take into account the opinion of others regarding their departure from the organization, which makes them feel anxious about leaving work and the impact of this on their professional image, so even if continuing to work is at the expense of their personal interests, they are committed to staying out of a sense of responsibility and duty (Al-Kalabi and Khader, 2022 and Al-Sabaawi & Mohammad, 2024).

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Research Problem: The education sector in Iraq faces major challenges related to employee retention, job satisfaction, and institutional commitment, which negatively affects organizational friendship, the efficiency of educational performance, and the stability of educational institutions. This matter made these institutions search for a solution to this problem, as the concept of organizational loyalty came at the forefront of solutions, due to its role in strengthening organizational friendship, and creating friendly and supportive relationships between colleagues in the work environment, which enhances trust and cooperation and creates a positive work environment. Despite the importance of organizational friendship and organizational loyalty, there is a lack of studies that examine the impact of organizational friendship on this loyalty in the Iraqi context. Accordingly, this research seeks to study the role of organizational friendship in achieving organizational loyalty among workers in the Iraqi education sector, by raising the following question: How does organizational friendship contribute to strengthening organizational loyalty?

Study Objective: The study aims to analyze and enhance the relationship between organizational friendship and organizational loyalty. This research will contribute to providing scientific insights that help educational institutions in Iraq adopt strategies that support a work environment based on trust and cooperation, which enhances organizational loyalty and leads to improving institutional performance and job stability.

Study Procedures

1- **Study Methodology:** The study adopted the descriptive analytical approach to demonstrate the role of organizational friendship in enhancing organizational loyalty.

2- **Study Community and Sample:** The study community included leaders in the Iraqi education sector, while the study sample included 372 individuals working in that sector. The sample was intentional and represented (Director General, Head of Department, Division Director, Unit Head).

3- **Data Collection Tool:** The questionnaire form was designed according to the five-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree .... 5 strongly agree) to collect data from that sector. 372 questionnaires were distributed to a sample of workers in the Iraqi education sector. Table 1 also shows the main and sub-questionnaire components with Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each dimension.

4- **Data analysis tools:** After distributing the questionnaires, collecting and filtering the data, it was analyzed using the program (Spss, Amos), in order to identify the results of the three study variables (organizational friendship, organizational loyalty), as well as testing the hypotheses. In light of these results, the study reached a set of conclusions and recommendations.

Table 1: Components of the questionnaire form and Cronbach's alpha coefficients

Main variables	Sub-dimensions	Number items	Cronbach's alpha
Organizational Friendship	Organizational Trust	5	0.80
	Organizational Commitment	5	0.87
	Organizational Citizenship	5	0.85

Main variables	Sub-dimensions	Number items	Cronbach's alpha
Organizational Loyalty	Affective Loyalty	5	0.89
	Continuance Loyalty	5	0.84
	Normative Loyalty	5	0.90

STUDY RESULTS

Analysis of the Results of Organizational Friendship: The results shown in Table (2) indicate the answers of the individuals of the study sample in the Iraqi education sector on the dimensions of organizational friendship, where individuals agreed at a rate of (71%) on the total, which is an acceptable rate in terms of the arithmetic mean value (3.604), as well as in terms of the response rate of (72%), and the best dimension was the dimension of organizational citizenship, which achieved a rate of (76%), indicating that individuals see organizational citizenship as an important factor, and this opinion reflects the importance of citizenship in applying the requirements of organizational friendship, which makes the organization serve its goals in general, while the gap rate was (27.9%), which is a rate within the moderate limits because the standard deviation is less than 1, which indicates homogeneity in the opinions of the sample and the absence of significant variation in visions about organizational friendship.

Table 2: Shows the general index of the study sample individuals' answers to the dimensions of organizational friendship

Organizational Friendship Outcome Response Scale					
	Percentage	Arithmetic mean	S. deviation	Response rate	Gap ratio
Organizational Trust	0.68	3.087	0.987	0.6174	0.3826
Organizational Commitment	0.69	3.645	0.997	0.729	0.271
Organizational Citizenship	0.76	4.081	0.913	0.8162	0.1838
Average	0.71	3.604	0.965	0.720	0.279

Analysis of organizational loyalty results: The results of Table 3 show the answers of individuals working in the Iraqi industrial sector on the dimensions of organizational innovation, where the answers tended towards the agreement scale at a rate of (72.3%), which is a high rate in terms of the arithmetic mean value (3.746), as well as in terms of the response rate of (74.9%), and the dimension that achieved the highest rate of agreement is the dimension of "continuous loyalty", which obtained a rate of (75%), which highlights that continuous loyalty is considered the most important and influential factor in organizational loyalty among the sample, while the gap rate was (25%), which is a low rate, because the standard deviation is less than 1, which indicates homogeneity in the opinions of the sample and the absence of significant variation in visions about the dimensions of organizational loyalty.

Table 3: Shows the general index of the answers of the individuals in the study sample on the dimensions of organizational loyalty

Response scale for the results of the dimensions of organizational loyalty					
	Percentage	Arithmetic mean	S. deviation	Response rate	Gap ratio
Affective Loyalty	0.68	3.378	0.978	0.675	0.324
Continuance Loyalty	0.75	4.001	0.896	0.800	0.199
Normative Loyalty	0.74	3.861	0.879	0.772	0.227
Rate	0.723	3.746	0.917	0.749	0.250

Hypothesis Testing: Figure 1 shows the relationship of influence of the study variables. It is clear that organizational friendship affects organizational loyalty, and the results shown in the figure will pave the way for us to test the study hypotheses explained in the paragraphs below:
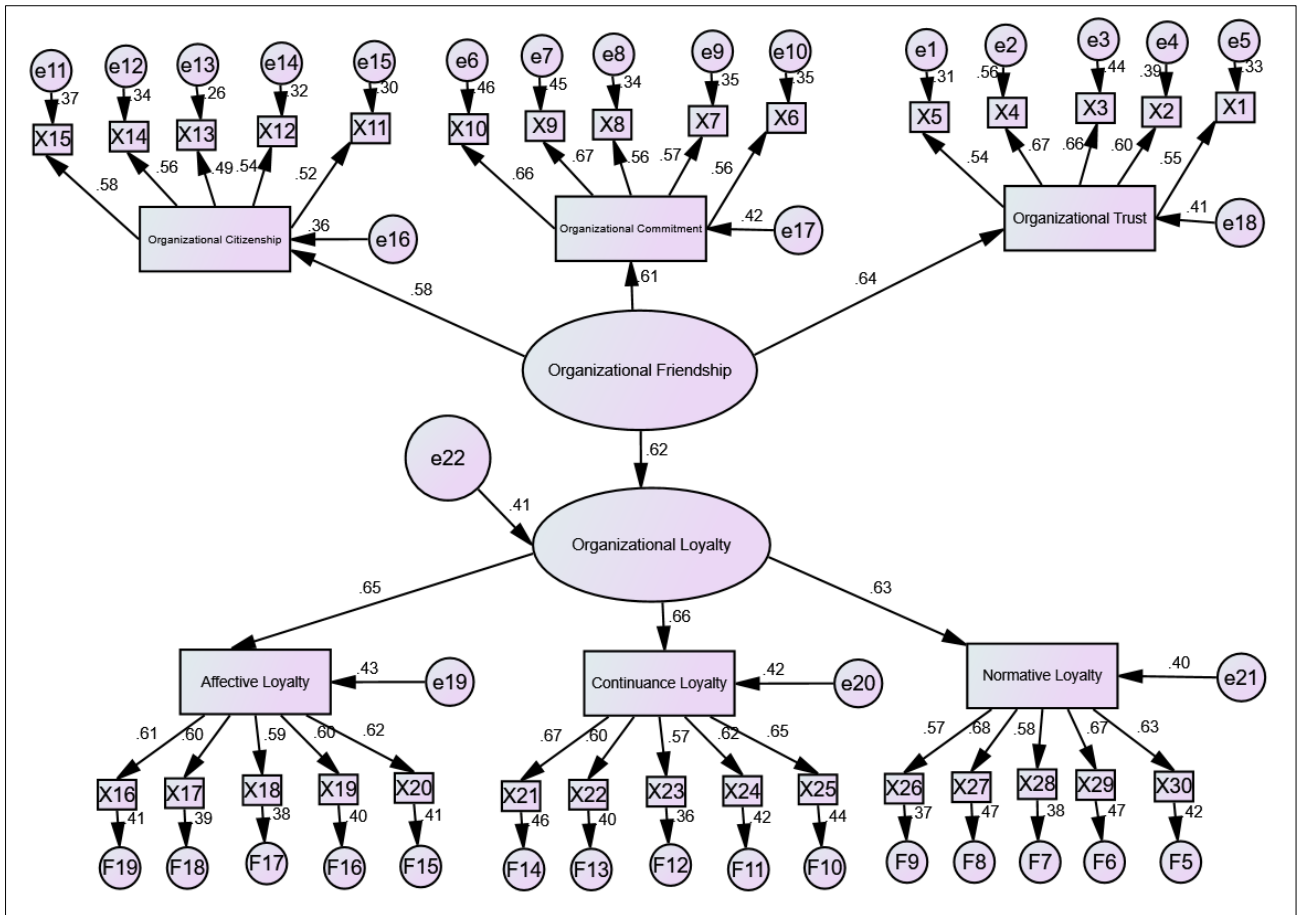
Figure 1: Structural equation model to test the relationship between organizational friendship and organizational loyalty

1- Testing the hypothesis (H1) of the relationship between organizational friendship and organizational loyalty: The results of Table (4) indicate that the estimate value is 0.62, which means that organizational friendship has a significant positive effect on organizational loyalty, while the standard error is 0.069, which indicates the stability of the results, while the critical value is 8.985, which enhances the strong statistical significance of the relationship, while the significance level is 0.000, which means a high significance, while the variance ratio is 0.41, which indicates that organizational friendship explains about 41% of the change in organizational loyalty, and thus the first hypothesis will be accepted.

Table 4: The relationship between organizational friendship and organizational loyalty

Relationship			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Variance
Organizational friendship	→	Organizational loyalty	0.62	0.069	8.985	0.000	0.41

Figure 2 shows the relationship of the influence of the dimensions of organizational friendship (organizational trust, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship) on organizational loyalty, and the results proven in the figure will pave the way for us to test the study hypotheses explained in the paragraphs below and shown in Table (5):
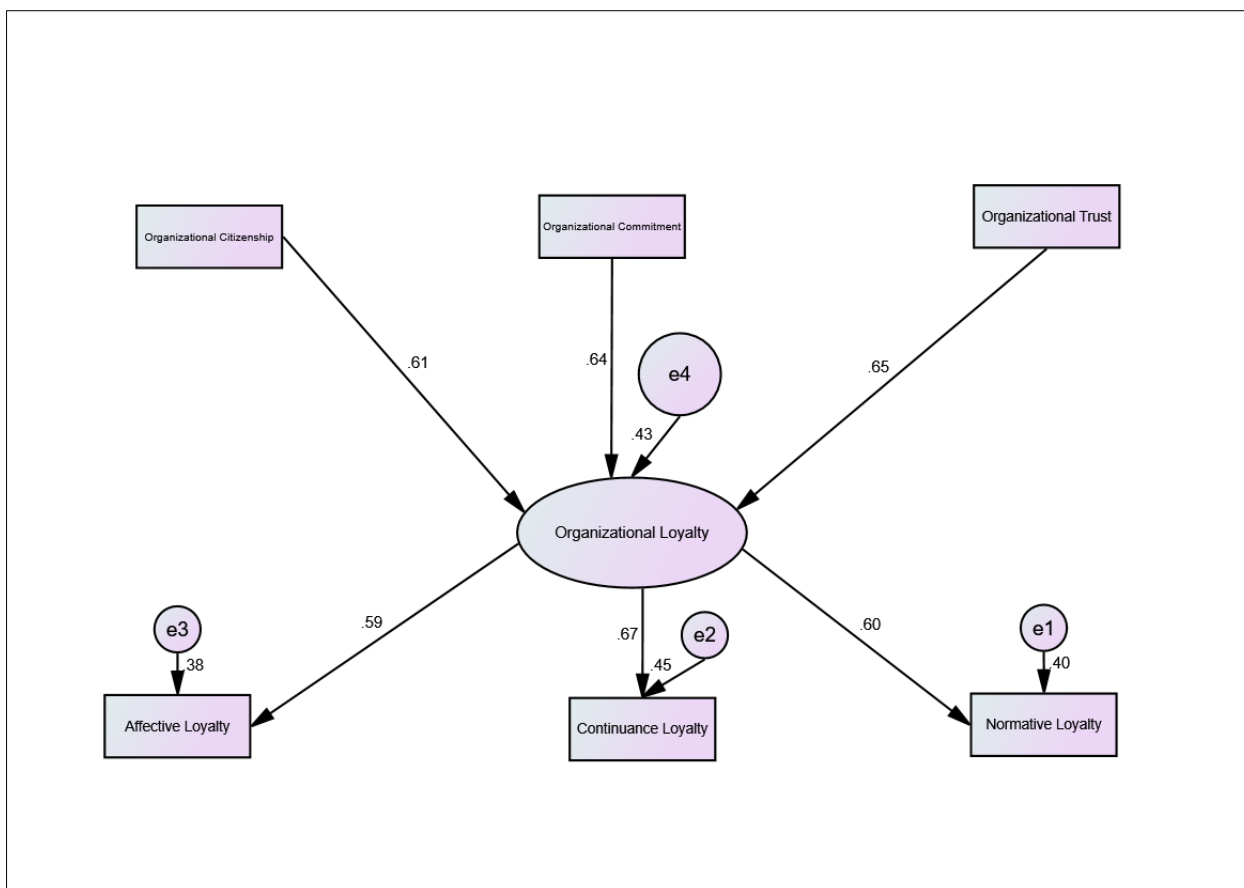
Figure 2: Structural equation model to test the relationships between dimensions of organizational friendship and organizational loyalty

2- Testing the hypothesis (H2) of the relationship between organizational trust and organizational loyalty: The results of Table (5) indicate an estimate value of 0.65, which indicates that organizational trust has a significant positive effect on organizational loyalty, while the standard error is 0.07, which indicates the stability of the results, while the critical value is 9.285, which enhances the strong statistical significance of the relationship, while the significance level is 0.000, which means a high significance, while the variance ratio is 0.43, which indicates that organizational trust explains about 43% of the change in organizational loyalty, and thus the second hypothesis will be accepted.

3- Testing the hypothesis (H3) of the relationship between organizational commitment and organizational loyalty: The estimated value represented a percentage of 0.64, indicating a strong impact of organizational commitment on organizational loyalty, while the standard error represented a percentage of 0.073, indicating the stability of the results. The critical value was 8.767, and P = 0.000, which enhances the strong statistical significance of the relationship, while the variance percentage was 0.44, which means that organizational commitment explains about 44% of the change in organizational loyalty. In light of that result, we will accept the third hypothesis.

4- Testing the hypothesis (H4) of the relationship between organizational citizenship and organizational loyalty: The estimate value was 0.61, indicating that there is a positive effect of organizational citizenship on organizational loyalty, while the (standard error S.E.) ratio was 0.074, which is in a moderate range, indicating the stability of this value, while the (critical value C.R) was 8.243, which is a high value, indicating a strong statistical significance of the relationship, while the significance level (P = 0.000), which means that the relationship is significant at a confidence level of 99% or higher, while the variance ratio was 0.42, meaning that organizational citizenship explains about 42% of the change in organizational loyalty, and on this basis we will accept the fourth hypothesis.

Table 5: Regression analysis results (relationships between variables)

Relationship			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Variance
Organizational Trust	⟶	Organizational loyalty	0.65	0.070	9.285	0.000	0.43
Organizational Commitment	⟶	Organizational loyalty	0.64	0.073	8.767	0.000	0.44
Organizational Citizenship	⟶	Organizational loyalty	0.61	0.074	8.243	0.000	0.42

Research Gap: This study seeks to understand the impact of organizational friendship on organizational loyalty in the Iraqi work environment, with a focus on the education and upbringing sectors. To achieve this, the results of this study were compared with the results of previous studies that addressed related topics, such as the relationship between organizational friendship and organizational loyalty, the role of organizational trust, and the impact of job burnout. Table 6 shows a comparison between the current study and four previous studies, where the subject of each study, its methodology, and the main results were analyzed, in addition to the similarities and differences with the current study. This analysis helps to highlight the new contributions of the current study, and also clarifies the essential differences in the research environment and the organizational context that was studied.

Table 6: Research Gap between the Current Study and Previous Studies Translated Table

Element	Current Study	Study (Lynch, 2022)	Study (Kazem, 2014)	Study (Bae & Kim, 2019)	Study (Fettahlioglu, *et al.*, 2017)
Study Topic	The impact of organizational friendship on organizational loyalty in the education and industrial sectors in Iraq	The relationship between workplace friendship, organizational loyalty, affective commitment, and normative commitment	The role of organizational trust in enhancing organizational loyalty in the Iraqi banking sector	The impact of organizational commitment, organizational loyalty, and job burnout on turnover intention in medical institutions	The relationship between organizational citizenship and organizational loyalty
Study Methodology	Quantitative analysis using a questionnaire for a sample of employees in the education and industrial sectors in Iraq	Online survey design for a sample of 190 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk	Descriptive analysis using a questionnaire for a sample of 67 employees at Rafidain Bank	Quantitative analysis using a questionnaire for a sample of 320 employees in medical institutions	Survey for a sample of 283 employees in a public institution, with data analysis using SPSS
Key Findings	Organizational friendship positively influences organizational loyalty, with a strong impact of organizational citizenship and organizational trust in enhancing loyalty	Results confirmed a positive relationship between organizational friendship, organizational loyalty, and affective and normative commitment	It was found that trust in colleagues and supervisors enhances organizational loyalty more than trust in top management	Results showed that organizational loyalty and organizational commitment are negatively related to turnover intention, emphasizing the need to reduce job burnout to enhance loyalty	The study confirmed a positive relationship between organizational citizenship and organizational loyalty
Similarities with the Current Study	All studies emphasize the positive relationship between organizational friendship or its components (trust, organizational citizenship) and organizational loyalty	Aligns with the current study in that organizational friendship contributes to enhancing organizational loyalty	Aligns with the current study in that organizational trust plays a crucial role in organizational loyalty	Aligns with the current study in that organizational loyalty reduces turnover intention, promoting job stability	Aligns with the current study in that organizational citizenship contributes to increasing organizational loyalty
Differences from the Current Study	The current study focused on the Iraqi work environment in the	This study focused on the digital work environment	This study focused solely on organizational	This study focused on the impact of job burnout as a	This study examined the relationship between organizational

	education and industrial sectors, with a detailed analysis of the dimensions of organizational friendship	(MTurk) rather than traditional institutions	trust without addressing organizational friendship as a comprehensive concept	mediating factor between organizational loyalty and turnover intention	citizenship and organizational loyalty without focusing on organizational friendship

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The study discussed the theoretical aspect regarding organizational friendship and organizational loyalty, in addition to discussing previous studies related to the study variables. It was found that previous studies did not discuss these variables directly, and in addition to that, these variables will not be discussed in Iraq, especially in the education sector.

The results of the study indicate that individuals working in the Iraqi education sector have an acceptable level of organizational friendship, as the overall agreement rate reached (71%), which reflects a positive perception of the concept of organizational friendship within educational institutions. This is evident from the arithmetic mean value (3.604) and the response rate (72%), which enhances the reliability of the results. When analyzing the sub-dimensions of organizational friendship, the highest dimension was organizational citizenship at (76%), indicating that employees see organizational citizenship behaviors as a fundamental factor in enhancing professional relationships and integration within the work environment. This reflects the extent of individuals' awareness of the importance of adopting voluntary behaviors that support organizational goals, which leads to improving the overall performance of the organization.

The results showed that employees in the industrial sector have a high level of organizational loyalty, with the overall agreement rate reaching (72.3%), indicating general satisfaction with the work environment and their relationships with the organization. The arithmetic mean (3.746) and the response rate (74.9%) also reflect a positive degree of interaction with the dimensions of organizational loyalty. When analyzing the sub-dimensions, continuous loyalty was the highest at (75%), highlighting that it is the most influential factor in employee loyalty to their organizations. This indicates that many employees feel that continuing with the organization is the best option for them, whether due to job benefits or the lack of suitable alternatives in the labor market. Based on these results, it can be said that organizations in the education and industrial sectors need sustainable strategies to enhance organizational friendship and organizational loyalty, which will positively reflect on overall performance and job stability.

The results of the hypothesis test indicate that organizational friendship has a positive effect on organizational loyalty, as the estimated value reached 0.62, indicating a medium to strong effect, meaning that there is a real effect and not just a statistical coincidence. The relationship between each dimension of organizational friendship (organizational trust, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship) and organizational loyalty was also analyzed, and the results supported the research hypotheses, as they confirmed that organizational friendship plays a fundamental role in enhancing organizational loyalty, especially through building organizational trust, enhancing organizational commitment, and encouraging organizational citizenship. Organizations can benefit from these results by adopting policies that support a cooperative work environment, which contributes to increasing organizational loyalty among employees.

Based on the results of the study, which showed a positive impact of organizational friendship on organizational loyalty in the education and industrial sectors, the following recommendations can be made to enhance this relationship and achieve a more stable and productive work environment:

1- Enhancing organizational trust by developing clear and transparent management policies, and encouraging open communication channels between employees and management to enhance organizational trust.
2- Stimulating organizational commitment by providing job incentives, both material and moral, to enhance employee engagement with the organization and reduce job turnover rates.
3- Supporting organizational citizenship by encouraging positive voluntary behaviors within the work environment, such as knowledge exchange and cooperation among colleagues, by providing specialized training programs.
4- Creating a supportive and comfortable work environment that motivates employees to build professional relationships based on friendship and cooperation.
5- Developing employee retention programs by providing opportunities for professional development and internal promotions to increase employees' sense of professional stability.
6- Enhancing emotional loyalty by improving the work environment through incentive and reward systems that focus on appreciating employees' efforts.
7- Incorporating the concepts of organizational friendship into education policies: Integrating the principles of organizational friendship into school management to ensure a stimulating work environment.

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