TOP LEADERSHIP'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE KALEIDOSCOPE CAREER MODEL

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Guest Paper

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ABSTRACT. The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) considers an individual's career alters in response to needs for authenticity (A), balance (B) and challenge (C), as the situation changes. However, leaders are expected to deliver pertinent results regardless of environment. The COVID-19 pandemic created career shocks for many and required quick adaptation. This paper investigates the influence the COVID-19 pandemic had over the way the three KCM dimensions manifest for top leadership, and the possibility for a fourth dimension of KCM in the post-pandemic context. 86 structured interviews using both open-ended and close-ended questions were conducted with top leaders. The findings reveal the pandemic affected all three dimensions of KCM, with limited differences in terms of the way different career stages (i.e., early, mid, blossom, late) and leadership positions (i.e., C-level, entrepreneurs, board members) view these changes. However, several differences were found when considering genders (i.e., men, women), especially for the balance dimension. Part of these results are contrary to previous research. Moreover, the majority of interviewees suggested "relationships" (i.e., "dealings" (D)) could be a 4th dimension of KCM, expanding the kaleidoscope from a three mirror system (i.e., "ABC") to a four mirror system (i.e., "ABCD").

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global game changer, impacting, for better or worse, the socio-economic environment. The way of working and collaborating had to rapidly change, creating career shocks. Many businesses had to reinvent themselves in order to survive, or grow, when possible (Sneader, Sternfels, 2022). Organizational leaders worldwide had to set goals while proactively coping with stress (Chang *et al.*, 2021), understanding and motivating their employees.

One career model developed to explain how an individual's career adapts in response to changes in the environment, and thus, in personal needs, is the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM). It was first proposed by Mainiero, Sullivan (2005), being further discussed by the original authors as well as other researchers in subsequent studies. KCM considers three needs (i.e., authenticity, balance and challenge) as a basis for explaining (especially women's) career decisions. The model was rarely studied in a context different from the one it was suggested for, and few studies offer critique or put forward modifications of KCM. One criticism is that the three parameters of the model are insufficient (Tarhan, 2020; Thomas, Inkson, 2007; Mouratidou *et al.*, 2017).

On the post-pandemic background, when career shocks were generated at all levels, and considering leaders as a key factor in managing change, it seems imperative to study their needs, and reflect on their opinions regarding the possibility for a fourth dimension of KCM. The literature review explores KCM in relationship with careers in general and leadership in particular, as well as previous suggestions for KCM expansion or alteration. The research methodology is then introduced, followed by data analysis and interpretation. The final sections discuss the results, present the research conclusions and suggest areas for further investigation.

1. Literature Review

The academic literature defines careers as "evolving sequences of work experiences" (Arthur *et al.*, 1989, p.8). Career success has been studied over the past six decades, at first being seen from the objective perspective (e.g., remuneration), slowly evolving toward including the subjective one (e.g., satisfaction) (Jansen *et al.*, 2022a; 2022b). Visagie and Koekemoer (2014) investigated what career success means for senior managers, finding that although there is a general conceptualization of career success among them, the details are different for each manager, being directly linked to their personal experience of success (e.g., recognition in society, adding value to their company, being associated with important and successful brands). Thus, career success is linked to one's own experiences and perceptions. However, career success is also influenced by external events (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). One such occurrence is the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which stressed the business environment, creating career shocks for many (i.e., negative or positive unexpected career-related events

(Blokker *et al.*, 2019; Seibert *et al.*, 2013; Jansen *et al.*, 2023)). Crawford *et al.* (2019) have shown that the more noteworthy a workplace event, the more probable it is to stimulate change in behaviors. Zhang *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that critical events have a motivational role, increasing proactivity. Uka and Prendi (2021) underline the link between employee motivation and a company's success, and Eckhaus (2021) demonstrates the importance of goal setting for happiness and work satisfaction.

Multiple career models were developed during the years to explain the career journey from various perspectives. Some examples are the social-cognitive career choice model (Lent *et al.*, 1994), the toxic career model (Templer, 2018), the intelligent career model (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994), the early career framework (Daly *et al.*, 2021), the protean career framework (Hall, 1996; Hall, Chandler, 2005), the boundaryless career framework (Arthur, Rousseau, 1996), or the portfolio career framework (Cohen, Mallon, 1999; Gold, Fraser, 2002), to name a few.

Following the changes in the work environment (i.e., people becoming drivers of their own careers), Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) introduced the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM). It uses the metaphor of a three-mirror kaleidoscope to describe how an individual's career adapts in response to changes in three needs: authenticity (A), balance (B) and challenge (C) (Sullivan, Carraher, 2023). Authenticity is portrayed as an individual's need to behave according to personal values; balance refers to the need for achieving work-life balance (WLB); challenge is the need for stimulating work that requires responsibility and/or autonomy, the authors relating it to extrinsic and intrinsic success (Sullivan, Carraher, 2023).

The ABCs of KCM are always active and influencing decision-making, however, their importance at each moment in time is impacted by life's events (Sullivan, Carraher, 2023). For instance, some studies applying KCM considered age and/or career stage. Sullivan *et al.* (2009) applied KCM to professionals in the USA, revealing Generation X has higher needs for balance and authenticity compared with Baby Boomers, and Koekemoer, Crafford (2019) used KCM to investigate Generation Y (Millenials) IT employees' career success, describing in greater detail what ABC mean for them.

It was also argued that the three KCM parameters explain career differences between men and women (Mainiero, Sullivan, 2005; Mainiero, Gibson, 2017), identifying two patterns: alpha pattern (i.e., focusing on challenge in the early-career stage, then on authenticity, and then on balance as time progresses) and beta pattern (i.e., starting by focusing on challenge, then balance, then authenticity) (Sullivan, Mainiero, 2007). The alpha pattern was mostly followed by men and some women with career paths in line with this pattern, while the beta pattern was mostly followed by women and some men seeking family-friendly lives earlier on (Sullivan, Mainiero, 2007). Mainiero, Gibson (2017), illustrated variance in ABC across career stages and genders, balance being more important for women in mid-career, authenticity raised for women in late-career, while challenge had a similar evolution for both men and women, the interest for it declining over time.

KCM considers an individual's career alters in response to ABC needs influenced by the environment. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders had to manage change both at personal and follower level. Leadership in organizations is an influencing process of understanding and aligning objectives and actions, equally at individual and collective level (Yukl, 2013). There is a large variety of theories regarding the types, styles, roles and responsibilities of leaders, however, leadership implies specialization and social influence (Cartwright, 1965), rational, emotional and influential processes (Bass, Riggio, 2006; Yukl, 2013), making a distinction between followers and people under coordination, with formal

power legitimately acquired (French, Raven, 1959). Previous studies used KCM to explain leaders' lives, with a particular emphasis on women. For instance, Shaw, Leberman (2015) provided more detail on what ABC mean for female CEOs in New Zeeland sport, Bishu *et al.* (2022) found the need for balance is consistent for women government leaders in the United States across all generations, and Cho *et al.* (2015) focused on the balance parameter for South Korean women leaders managing their family responsibilities and career aspirations. KCM was also applied to show how entrepreneurs view their ABC needs while pursuing their goals (Sullivan *et al.*, 2007).

KCM received criticism, mainly because ABC are not considered enough to explain all situations, being suggested that other parameters might arise if cultures and socio-economic factors were appraised (Tarhan, 2020). Thomas, Inkson (2007) explain career perceptions are context-dependent and socially constructed, and thus, there are no universal career needs. Moreover, Elley-Brown *et al.* (2015) argued that the ABC parameters are dynamic and interacting. This was further mentioned by Tarhan (2020) who underlined that the KCM model is based on qualitative analysis, its constructs requiring further investigation.

The necessity to expand KCM in order to increase its generalizability was explored by some authors. Mouratidou *et al.* (2017) proposed the acronym ABCS, where "S" stands for safety, after analyzing the needs of public servants in Greece, while Shaw, Leberman (2015) identified sub-themes within each of the three parameters when studying female CEOs in sport (i.e., passion and relationship-building for A; self-awareness and influence for B; and working in a gendered environment and taking opportunities for C).

On the post-pandemic background, when career shocks were generated at all levels, and considering leaders as a key factor in managing change, it seems imperative to study their needs and reflect on their opinions. Since KCM implies needs change with the environment, it was chosen to investigate the impact career shocks generated by the COVID-19 pandemic had on leaders, and if the three parameters are enough to explain behaviors and career choices. The paper is aimed at uncovering the influence the COVID-19 pandemic had over the way the three KCM dimensions manifest for male and female Romanian top leaders, and the possibility for a fourth dimension of KCM in the post-pandemic context. This target population was chosen because, to the best of our knowledge, no study investigates Romanian top leadership through KCM, and no similar study has been performed on this population post-pandemic.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Questions and Method

The following research questions were developed:

RQ1: How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact the three KCM dimensions in the case of top leadership?

RQ2: What could be a 4th dimension of the KCM in the post-pandemic context?

RQ3: How are different top leadership positions, career stages and genders influencing the answers to RQ1 and RQ2?

To answer the research questions, 86 structured interviews using both close-ended and open-ended items were conducted with Romanian top leaders in the August-September 2022 period. The sample size is suitable for qualitative studies while also enabling the use of non-parametric tests, as presented in the data analysis section.

The participants were asked to fill in (i) demographics questions, (ii) 24 Likert questions (1(low) to 5(high) scale of importance) and (iii) a set of open questions. Both (ii) and (iii) were related to each of the three KCM dimensions (and if they were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic) and investigating their suggestions for a 4th dimension.

2.2 Sample Demographics

The respondents are almost equally divided between genders (i.e., 55% women, 45% men), with no statistically significant difference in the distribution of the gender variable across all the other demographic variables. Most of the interviewees are married, aged 36 to 55 years old. However, the entire dataset covers 10 years intervals starting from under 35 to over 65 years old, and all possible marital statuses. All interviewees are alumni of higher education institutions.

The interviewees are active in the top management (i.e., executive, board member or entrepreneur positions) of at least two organizations. ~56% are executives in their primary position (job1), and ~70% are executives in their secondary position (job2), with ~63% of the job1 executives also choosing to be executives in job2, as presented in *Table 1*. No board members (job1) chose entrepreneurship as their secondary job. 90% of the entrepreneurs (job1) have an executive position as job2.

Table 1. Crosstabulation of the top leaders' primary (job1) and secondary (job2) positions

job1*job2 crosstab		job2			Total
		board	executive	entrepreneur	
job1	board	5	2	0	7
	executive	13	30	5	48
	entrepreneur	2	28	1	31
Total		20	60	6	86

Source: own calculations.

All interview questions pertain to the top leaders' activity considering their primary position (job1). 73.3% of the sample have their job1 in Business services & Consulting, Financial services or Industrial. The interviewees were mostly from the private sector (93%), the rest being equally divided between a public-private mix and entirely public. This allows the analysis of top leaders coming from organizations which had more decision-making flexibility during the pandemic (i.e., private), as compared with publicly owned institutions. ~60% of the total are SMEs (<250 employees). Almost 60% of the 86 are doing business both locally and internationally, with 30% being purely local and ~10% being international only.

With a 10 years interval considered for each career stage (i.e., early (<10 years); mid (10-19 years); blossom (20-29 years); late (≥30 years)), ~54% of the 86 top leaders are in the blossom stage, followed by ~23% in mid, ~21% in late and ~2% in early. They mostly see their social ties as average-high, with only 2 interviewees considering their network as low-average.

Their family structure is defined by ~20% interviewees having no children, the others having one to three, mostly minors. Almost 60% reported to have no other people in care, the rest having up to two, but mainly in simple, rather than difficult situations.

2.3 Data Analysis

The answers to the open questions related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on particular topics were manually coded as "no changes", "small changes", and "major changes". Depending on the interviewee, these changes were perceived on a more positive or negative note. Codes were also used when interpreting the answers to the open questions investigating the possibility of having *relationships* as a 4th dimension of the Kaleidoscope Model ("no", "partially", "yes").

The Chi-square test, the Kruskal-Wallis test, and the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test were used where appropriate to test relationships between:

1. Likert questions (pre- vs. post-pandemic rating), N=86;
2. Each Likert question and:
   - Gender (N_{men} = 39; N_{women} = 47);
   - Primary position ($N_{board\ (B)}$ = 7; $N_{executive\ (C)}$ = 48; $N_{entrepreneur\ (E)}$ = 31);
   - Career stage (N_{early} = 2; N_{mid} = 20; $N_{blossom}$ = 46; N_{late} = 18);
   - Men executives (N_{MC}=20) vs. women executives (N_{WC}=28);
   - Men entrepreneurs (N_{ME} = 15) vs. women entrepreneurs (N_{WE} = 16);
   - Men in mid-career (N_{MMC} = 9) vs. women in mid-career (N_{WMC} = 11);
   - Men in career blossom (N_{MBC} = 22) vs. women in blossom (N_{WBC} = 24);
   - Men in late career (N_{MLC} = 7) vs. women in late career (N_{WLC} = 11).

   * No comparisons were made between women board members (N_{WB} = 3) vs. men board members (N_{MB} = 4) and between women in early career (N_{WEC} = 1) vs. men in early career (N_{MEC} = 1) due to low sample sizes.
3. Each coded question and each of the variables tested for the Likert questions (mentioned at point 2).

Only found statistically significant differences were reported. The test results are limited by the small sample sizes. Testing the coded questions (mentioned at point 3) is further limited by researcher processing when coding, which could have altered the reliability and validity.

The non-parametric analysis was complemented by VOSviewer (software using text mining for visualizing data) to create clusters of the most related terms used by the interviewees when answering the question "What could be a 4th dimension of the Kaleidoscope career model?", and for the ones who further validated *relationships* when answering "Would you validate relationships as a potential 4th dimension post-pandemic? Why?" This reveals, in an objective way, the different viewpoints the interviewees had when considering a 4th dimension of KCM.

3. Results

3.1 KCM - Authenticity

The interviewees were asked a series of questions relating to the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted elements of *authenticity*. The coded version of their answers is available in *Table 2*.

Most consider the pandemic did not bring any changes in their *personal values* (76.7%), the others being equally divided into claiming small changes (i.e., some of their existing

values started to be more precious: courage, empathy, family time) and major changes (i.e., they rebuilt their values around: resilience, autonomy, integrity).

Similarly, 74.4% said the pandemic did not influence the *resemblance between their career path and own values*. ~20% mentioned small changes due to the pandemic, mostly integrating new family demands and increased care for the community. The others reported major changes, as the COVID-19 pandemic pushed for making less compromises in terms of authenticity. MC were more inclined to say the pandemic did not impact the resemblance between own career path and own values, than WC, who were more likely to mention small changes (X^2(2, N=48) = 7.321, p<0.05). MLC were more inclined to mention major changes in the resemblance between own career path and own values as a result of the pandemic, compared with WLC, (X^2(2, N=18) = 6.348, p<0.05).

In terms of *general fulfillment perception*, the interviewees who reported changes mentioned finding better ways of working and collaborating with their teams, feeling more authentic than ever before or radically changing their career.

The interviewees who consider the pandemic brought changes to the *resemblance between own attitude towards work and the reality*, adjusted their working style based on their values. MLC were more inclined to mention major changes in the resemblance between own attitude towards work and reality, compared with WLC (X^2(2, N=18) = 6.779, p<0.05).

~45% made at least small changes as a result of the pandemic in the way they find *meaning outside work*, mostly by increasing their contribution to the community's wellbeing.

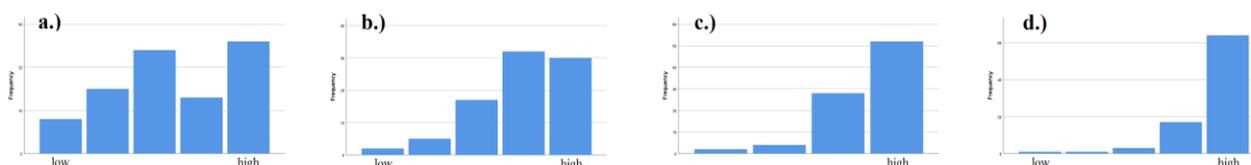**Table 2. COVID-19 pandemic impact on authenticity variables**

Category	Code	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Personal values	no changes	66	76.7	76.7
	small changes	10	11.6	88.4
	major changes	10	11.6	100.0
Resemblance between own career path and own values	no changes	64	74.4	74.4
	small changes	16	18.6	93.0
	major changes	6	7.0	100.0
General fulfillment perception	no changes	56	65.1	65.1
	small changes	19	22.1	87.2
	major changes	11	12.8	100.0
Resemblance between own attitude towards work and reality	no changes	53	61.6	61.6
	small changes	20	23.3	84.9
	major changes	13	15.1	100.0
Meaning outside work	no changes	48	55.8	55.8
	small changes	16	18.6	74.4
	major changes	22	25.6	100.0

Source: own calculations.

The interviewees were asked to rank on a 1 to 5 scale the importance they consider Romanian top leaders gave to *authenticity* pre-pandemic (M = 3.6, SD = 1.109), and post-pandemic (M = 4.07, SD = 1.071) and to what degree they noticed Romanian top leaders practice *authenticity* pre-pandemic (M = 2.76, SD = 0.867), and post-pandemic (M = 3.28, SD = 0.990). They believe the importance Romanian top leaders give to *authenticity* post-pandemic is higher than pre-pandemic, z= -4.664, p<0.001. Similarly for their practice of *authenticity*, z= -5.112, p<0.001. The interviewees consider the pandemic increased the

importance of *authenticity* due to the changes in the business environment which push even more to align personal values with behaviors.

People in the career blossom stage gave lower ratings for the level of practice of *authenticity* by Romanian leaders post-pandemic they perceive (M=3.09, SD=0.939), compared with people in mid-career (M=3.95, SD=0.887), H(3)=12.806, p<0.05.

Notes: a.) early; b.) mid, c.) blossom; d.) late. 1(low) to 5 (high) scale.

Source: own calculations.

Figure 1. **The Importance of Authenticity in Different Career Stages**

The interviewees were also asked to rank on a 1 to 5 scale "How do you appreciate the importance of *authenticity* in different career stages?" The interviewees gave higher ratings for authenticity as career progresses (*Figure 1*). As the years of work and life experience accumulate, top leaders consider the importance of *authenticity* higher.

3.2 KCM - Work-life Balance (WLB)

The interviewees were asked a series of questions relating to the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted elements of *WLB*. The coded version of their answers is available in *Table 3*.

Table 3. COVID-19 pandemic impact on balance variables

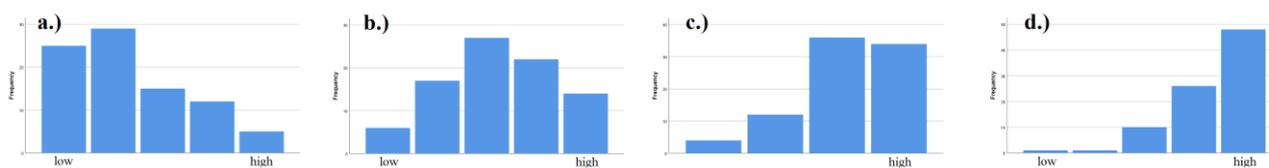| Category	Code	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
General appreciation for WLB	no changes	36	41.9	41.9
	small changes	25	29.1	70.9
	major changes	25	29.1	100.0
Possibilities for achieving WLB	no changes	42	48.8	48.8
	small changes	25	29.1	77.9
	major changes	19	22.1	100.0
Measures taken to improve WLB	no changes	47	54.7	54.7
	small changes	25	29.1	83.7
	major changes	14	16.3	100.0
Got external help for WLB	no changes	55	64.0	64.0
	small changes	23	26.7	90.7
	major changes	8	9.3	100.0
Forced difficult decisions for WLB	no changes	52	60.5	60.5
	small changes	19	22.1	82.6
	major changes	15	17.4	100.0

Source: own calculations.

~60% of the interviewees claimed the COVID-19 pandemic transformed their *general appreciation for WLB*, mentioning changes in their priorities, taking benefit of the new ways of working, or reevaluating their pre-pandemic lives, needs and behaviors. ~50% of the

respondents consider the pandemic affected their *possibilities for achieving WLB*, especially on the background of their age, personal will to change, and being pressured from both the personal and professional aspects of life. The *measures the interviewees took to improve WLB* varied from choosing to delegate more, working remotely, judging their relationships and how they interfere with their priorities, or dedicating more time to education. However, compared to the pre-pandemic period, 64% of the interviewees did not make any changes in *receiving external help for WLB*, while the others increased the help received from family members, or took advantage of their company's culture and policies.

~60% did not *have to make difficult decisions for WLB*, while the others consider they had to increase disciplinary actions, considerably cut expenses, and make substantial personal efforts to meet the pandemic challenges.

The interviewees were asked to rank on a 1 to 5 scale the importance they consider Romanian top leaders gave to *balance* pre-pandemic (M = 3.27, SD = 1.078), and post-pandemic (M = 3.91, SD = 0.941) and to what degree they noticed Romanian top leaders practice *balance* pre-pandemic (M = 2.84, SD = 0.919), and post-pandemic (M = 3.43, SD = 0.952). They believe the importance Romanian top leaders give to *balance* post-pandemic is higher than pre-pandemic, z= -5.624, p<0.001. Similarly for their practice of *balance*, z= -4.660, p<0.001. The interviewees consider the pandemic brought priority changes and taught leaders the importance of *WLB*.

They were also asked to rank on a 1 to 5 scale "How do you appreciate the importance of *balance* in different career stages?" The interviewees gave higher ratings for *balance* as career progresses (*Figure 2*). They consider *WLB* becomes increasingly important as one's career and age progress.
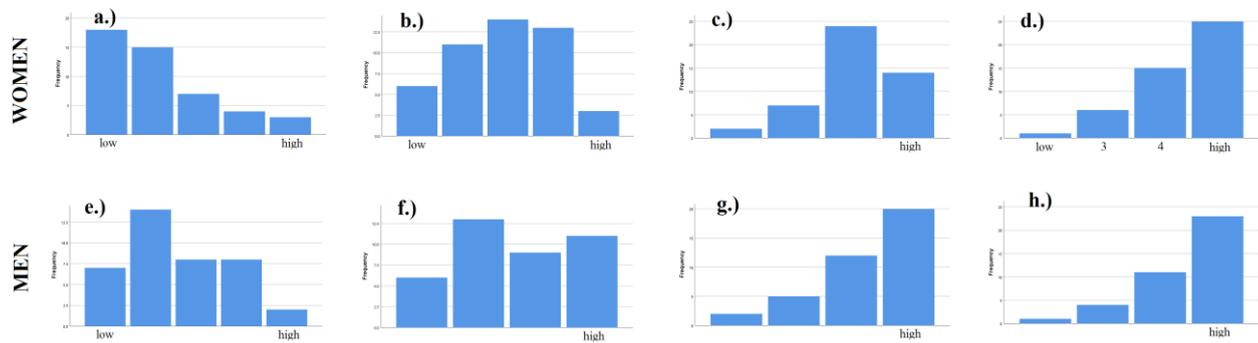

Notes: a.) early; b.) mid, c.) blossom; d.) late. 1(low) to 5 (high) scale.

Source: created by the authors.

Figure 2. **The Importance of Balance in Different Career Stages**

Moreover, in the case of *WLB*, some gender differences are noted (Figure 3). Men rated the importance of *WLB* for Romanian leaders pre-pandemic higher (M=3.56, SD=1.071), compared with women (M=3.02, SD=1.032), H(1)=5.828, p<0.05. Men (overall) and MMC were more likely to say the pandemic did not impact their *possibilities for achieving WLB*, while women (overall) and WMC were more inclined to mention small changes (X^2(2, N=86) = 6.986, p<0.05, and X^2(2, N=20) = 8.153, p<0.05). Moreover, men were more inclined to rate *the importance of WLB* higher during early-career and mid-career (H(1)=4.010, p<0.05; H(1)=7.325, p<0.05), as available in *Figure 3*. Same for MMC and WMC (H(1)=7.837, p<0.05; H(1)=4.766. p<0.05). To add, MMC were more inclined to say they did not get *external help for achieving WLB*, while WMC were more inclined to mention small changes (X^2(2, N=20) = 8.491, p<0.05).

Notes: a.) e.) early; b.) f.) mid, c.) g.) blossom; d.) h.) late. 1(low) to 5 (high) scale.

Source: created by the authors.

Figure 3. **The Importance of Balance in Different Career Stages as Rated by Men vs. Women**

ME rated the importance of WLB mid-career higher (M=4.00, SD=1.000) than WE (M=2.94, SD=1.181), H(1)=5.766, p<0.05. MC and MMC gave higher ratings for the *perceived level of WLB practiced by Romanian leaders pre-pandemic*, compared with WC and WMC, (H(1)=5.203, p<0.05, and H(1)=6.292, p<0.05). MMC gave higher ratings for *the perceived level of WLB practiced by Romanian leaders post-pandemic*, compared with WMC, H(1)=7.091, p<0.05.

3.3 KCM - Challenges

The interviewees were asked a series of questions relating to the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted elements of KCM's *challenges* dimension. The coded version of their answers is available in *Table 4*.

Table 4. COVID-19 pandemic impact on challenge variables

Category	Code	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
View over work challenges	no changes	49	57.0	57.0
	small changes	13	15.1	72.1
	major changes	24	27.9	100.0
View over relational challenges	no changes	48	55.8	55.8
	small changes	15	17.4	73.3
	major changes	23	26.7	100.0
View over personal challenges	no changes	58	67.4	67.4
	small changes	12	14.0	81.4
	major changes	16	18.6	100.0

Source: own calculations.

Challenges could be an enabler, or a blocker. They can motivate or discourage leaders. However, the interviewees mostly see challenges from a positive perspective, mentioning the opportunities they saw during the COVID-19 pandemic.
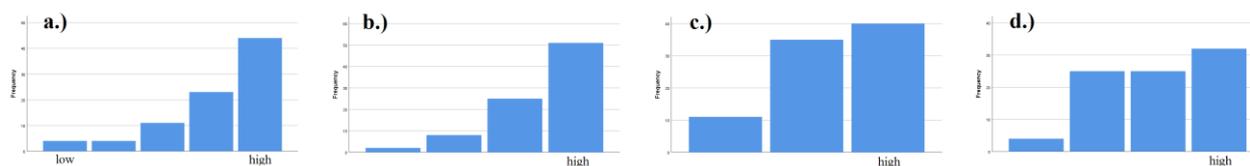
Considering the professional life, 43% reported some changes in their mindset when dealing with *work challenges*, as they had to act fast, acquire further digital skills and communicate with more fluidity. As for their personal life, ~33% mentioned the pandemic brought changes in the way they deal with *personal challenges*, searching for alternatives, opportunities, increasing their knowledge and community involvement.

The pandemic did not bring changes in the way ~56% of the top leaders regard their *relational challenges*. The rest highlighted that they had to adjust the way they communicate, as different generations have different needs and expectations, and working remotely created further challenges. Stress was mentioned several times, affecting interactions.

The interviewees were asked to rank on a 1 to 5 scale the importance they consider Romanian top leaders gave to *challenges* pre-pandemic (M = 4.02, SD = 0.867), and post-pandemic (M = 4.36, SD = 0.701) and to what degree they noticed Romanian top leaders practice their *challenge management* pre-pandemic (M = 3.76, SD = 0.920), and post-pandemic (M = 4.17, SD = 0.857). They believe the importance Romanian top leaders give to *challenges* post-pandemic is higher than pre-pandemic, z= -3.936, p<0.001. Similarly for their practice of *challenge management*, z= -4.391, p<0.001. The leaders mentioned that the pandemic offered lessons for *challenge management*, seeing it through a favorable lens.

People in career blossom gave lower ratings for the importance of *challenges* for Romanian leaders post-pandemic (M=4.13, SD=0.749), compared with people in mid-career (M=4.65, SD=0.489), H(3)=10.187, p<0.05. MMC gave higher ratings for the importance of *challenges* for Romanian leaders pre- and post-pandemic, compared with WMC (H(1)=4.341, p<0.05; H(1)=3.900, p<0.05).

They were also asked to rank on a 1 to 5 scale "How do you appreciate the importance of *challenges* in different career stages?" The interviewees consider *challenges* as important all throughout the career (*Figure 4*).

Notes: a.) early; b.) mid, c.) blossom; d.) late. 1(low) to 5 (high) scale.

Source: created by the authors.

Figure 4. **The importance of challenges in different career stages**

E were more likely to rate the importance of *challenges* in early career higher (M=4.42, SD=1.148), compared with C (M=3.98, SD=1.062), H(2)=6.457, p<0.05.

People who are currently in career blossom (M=3.89, SD=0.900) or late career (M=3.56, SD=1.042) consider the importance *challenges* have in the late career stage as lower, compared with people who are currently in mid-career (M=4.55, SD=0.605), H(3)=12.041, p<0.05. MBC consider the importance *challenges* have in the late career stage as lower, compared with WBC (H(1)=4.435, p<0.05). WE rated the importance of *challenges* in late-career higher (M=4.50, SD=0.894) than ME (M=3.60, SD=0.986), H(1)=6.227, p<0.05.

3.4 KCM – a 4th Dimension Proposal Post COVID-19 Pandemic

The 86 Romanian top leaders were asked "What could be a 4th dimension of the Kaleidoscope career model?" (Q1) and "Would you validate relationships as a potential 4th dimension post-pandemic? Why?" (Q2). Most of them referred to relationships (or related terms) as a potential 4th dimension of the Kaleidoscope career model when answering Q1, and

further validated it in Q2. Their answers, manually coded as "no", "partially" and "yes", are available in *Table 5*.

Table 5. Kaleidoscope 4ᵗʰ dimension investigation: relationships

Category	Code	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Referred to relationships in open question (Q1)	no	19	22.1	22.1
	partially	1	1.2	23.3
	yes	66	76.7	100.0
Confirmed relationships in direct question (Q2)	no	12	14.0	14.0
	partially	1	1.2	15.1
	yes	73	84.9	100.0

Source: own calculations.

No statistically significant differences were found in answering Q1 and Q2 between primary positions, career stages or genders.

People who mentioned *relationships* (or related terms) when answering Q1 (~78%), can be divided into two clusters, as presented in *Figure 5* and *Table 6*. Cluster 1 (red) elaborated on the importance of interpersonal connections in the personal and professional life, while cluster 2 (green) expanded *relationships* to the entire community and its responsibilities, highlighting their will of increasing their involvement at societal level.

Interviewees who did not mention *relationships* (or related terms) when answering Q1 (~22%) were mostly accentuating the need for redefining "purpose" after the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of personal adaptability, growth and health.

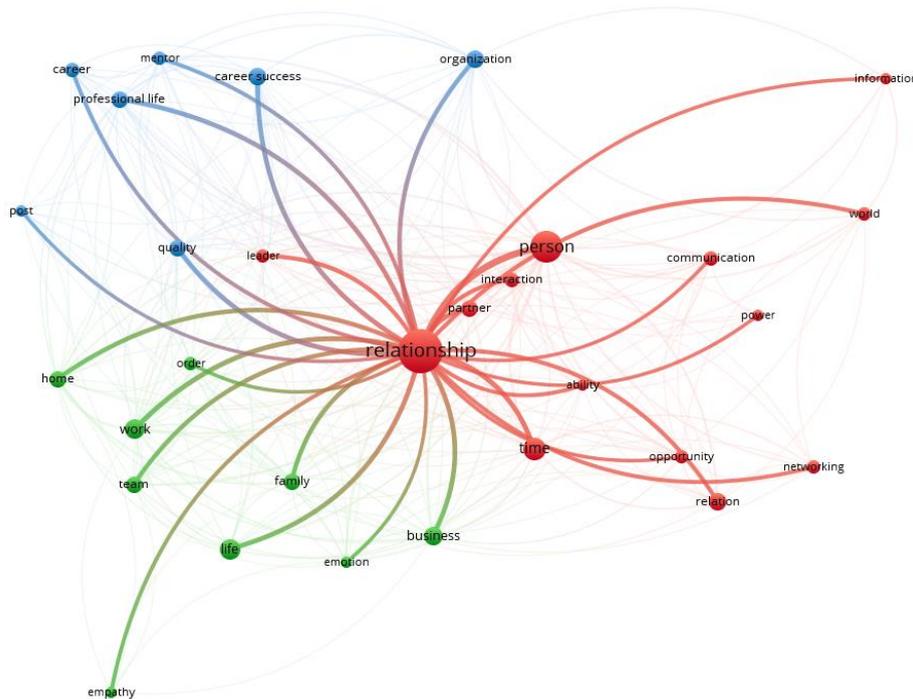*Source:* created by the authors.

Figure 5. **Clustering of the Most Related Terms Used by the Interviewees Who Mentioned Relationships (or Related Terms) When Answering Q1**

Table 6. Clustering info for Figure 5

Cluster 1 (red)	Cluster 2 (green)
Family orientation	Activity
Life meaning	Care
Mentorship	Community
Safety feeling	Environment
Societal impact	
Work culture	
Workplace	

Source: own calculations.

People who validated *relationships* (or related terms) when answering Q2 can be divided into three clusters, as available in *Figure 6* and *Table 7*. Cluster 1 (red) has a pragmatic approach to *relationships*, seeing them as essential for business survival. Cluster 2 (blue) sees them through the leader's professional life, putting an accent on career success and the importance of mentors. Cluster 3 (green) sees a 4th, *relationships*, dimension as a complement to the *balance* dimension, arguing the need to understand the emotional aspects of human interaction when trying to achieve *WLB*.

Source: created by the authors.

Figure 6. **Clustering of the Most Related Terms Used by the Interviewees Who Validated Relationships (or Related Terms) When Answering Q2**
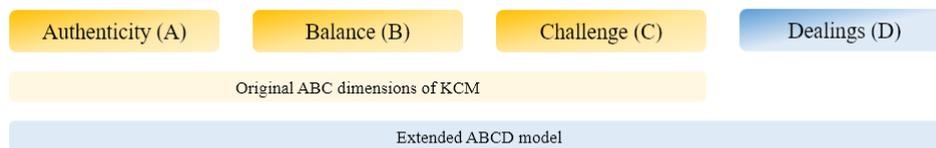
Table 7. Clustering info for Figure 6

Cluster 1 (red)	Cluster 2 (blue)	Cluster 3 (green)
Ability	Career	Business
Communication	Career success	Emotion
Information	Mentor	Empathy
Interaction	Organization	Family
Leader	Post	Home
Networking	Professional life	Life
Opportunity	Quality	Order
Partner		Team
Person		Work
Power		
Relation		
Relationship		
Time		
World		

Source: own calculations.

People who did not validate *relationships* (or related terms) when answering Q2 do not see *relationships* as a separate concept from the other three dimensions of the Kaleidoscope Career Model and/or do not view them as important enough to create a new dimension. They argue that: (1) relationships are part of the *authenticity* or *balance* dimensions, and thus, a new dimension is unnecessary; or (2) a broader dimension, such as "diversity", should be added instead, which would include relationships alongside other elements (e.g., "ethics", "engagement", "loyalty", "charisma"); or (3) an entirely different dimension should be considered, such as "purpose", "meaning", "development", "resilience", "adaptability".

Overall, the interviewees who proposed (Q1) and confirmed (Q2) *relationships* as a 4th dimension of KCM (~73% of the total), referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as an encourager of further exploration of the importance of communication and empathy within the work environment. ~10% did not propose *relationships* as a 4th dimension (Q1), and maintained their position in saying that *relationships* would not be a satisfactory 4th dimension of KCM (Q2). The rest were open to consider *relationships* as a 4th dimension.

Source: created by the authors.

Figure 7. **Proposed Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) Expansion as Resulting from Interviews with Top Leaders**

The *relationship* dimension can be seen as "*dealings*" (D), expanding the kaleidoscope from a three mirror system (i.e., "ABC") to a four mirror system (i.e., "ABCD") in the post-pandemic context. The KCM version with four parameters, as proposed by most top leaders in this research, is pictured in *Figure 7*. The *dealings* parameter refers to the need to maintain an adequate number and quality of personal, professional and community level interactions, in order to have a satisfying career development and achieve career success.

4. Discussion

The paper offers insights regarding male and female top leaders' needs, by applying KCM in three unique circumstances: geography, target population and post-pandemic timing. The research questions were answered, having both theoretical and managerial contributions. First, *relationships* (i.e., *dealings* (D)) was suggested by most top leaders as a potential 4th dimension of KCM in the post-pandemic context, expanding the model from ABC to ABCD. No differences were found between primary positions, career stages or genders on this topic. However, it is suspected that this was also the case pre-pandemic, as previous studies have shown the role of networking in career success (Wolff, Moser, 2009) and leadership development (Cullen-Lester *et al.*, 2017).

Second, the findings reveal the pandemic affected all three original dimensions of KCM, with limited differences in terms of the way different career stages (i.e., early, mid, blossom, late) and leadership positions (i.e., C-level, entrepreneurs, board members) view these changes. However, some differences were found when considering genders (i.e., men, women), especially for the *balance* dimension.

Third, to the best of our knowledge, previous research on KCM and leadership exclusively studied women on such positions (e.g., Shaw, Leberman, 2015; Bishu *et al.*, 2022; Cho *et al.*, 2015), with the exception of Sullivan *et al.* (2007) who focused on entrepreneurs of both genders. This paper has a balanced mix of men and women top leaders, with no statistically significant difference in the distribution of the gender variable across all the other demographic variables, and thus, portraying both perspectives in a consistent manner. Contrarily to previous studies on KCM and employees (Sullivan, Mainiero, 2007; Mainiero, Sullivan, 2005; Mainiero, Gibson, 2017), this research found male leaders were more inclined to rate the importance of *balance* higher during early-career and mid-career compared with female leaders, there was no difference on how male leaders and female leaders regard the importance of *authenticity* as life progresses, and older male leaders consider the importance *challenges* have in the late career stage as lower, compared with similarly-aged female leaders, to name a few of the findings.

Last, the interviewees consider that, for Romanian top leaders in general, the COVID-19 pandemic stimulated the importance and practice of each of the three original KCM parameters. They see the pandemic as a positive agent of change, pushing to align personal values with behaviors, teaching the importance of work-life balance, and offering lessons for challenge management.

4.1 Limitations

The findings are limited by the sample size, which, even if appropriate for qualitative studies, had less applicability for statistical tests. Moreover, the industries covered by the sample were not equally affected by the pandemic. To add, the paper addressed an exclusivist group of interviewees who might differ in personal needs and career perspectives compared with the average employee. However, leaders are expected to deliver pertinent results regardless of environment, and align the organization's objectives with follower actions, their viewpoint and decisions impacting both themselves and others.

4.2 Further Research

Some of the interviewees who did not validate *dealings* as a 4th dimension argued it might be part of the *authenticity* or *balance* dimensions. This might align with Shaw and Leberman's (2015) findings after seven interviews with female CEOs where "relationship-building" was part of *authenticity* and "influence" was part of *balance*. However, the other interviewees in our sample who did not agree on *dealings* as a 4th dimension suggested other parameters instead, either encompassing *dealings*, or diverging from the concept. Thus, as previously mentioned by Tarhan (2020) and Elley-Brown *et al.* (2015), who underlined that the KCM parameters require additional investigation, further research could take a quantitative approach for validating the original KCM constructs, as well as potential expansions.

Moreover, in-depth analyses of particular industries, as well as exploring other nationalities or sub-groups through KCM could uncover useful results.

Mixing KCM with perspectives, theories or models employed in psychology might add value to the findings, alter, or rescind the KCM.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper: (1) uncovered the influence the COVID-19 pandemic had over the way the three original KCM dimensions manifest for top leaders, (2) suggested a fourth dimension of KCM in the post-pandemic context, and (3) investigated the influence top leadership positions, career stages and genders had on (1) and (2).

The findings can be applied within companies for talent management, leadership, strategy development and creating organizational cultures that enhance satisfaction and perceptions of career success. In Romania, as pointed out by Deloitte (2022), progress has been made in the previous seven years toward gender balance within the boards and executive committees of companies listed on the Bucharest Stock Exchange, however, the number of women in such positions is still lower compared to the European Union average, thus, encouraging them to invest more in personal development and to take the initiative to lead.

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AUKŠČIAUSIO LYGIO VADOVŲ POŽIŪRIS Į KALEIDOSKOPINĮ KARJEROS MODELĮ

Alina Mihaela Dima, Adela Jansen, Isabelle Biclesanu, Simona Mascu, Sebastien Point

SANTRAUKA

Kaleidoskopinis karjeros modelis (KKM) numato, kad asmens karjera keičiasi atsižvelgiant į autentiškumo (A), pusiausvyros (B) ir iššūkių (C) poreikius keičiantis situacijai. Tačiau iš lyderių tikimasi, kad jie pasieks tinkamų rezultatų nepriklausomai nuo aplinkos. COVID-19 pandemija daugeliui sukėlė karjeros sukrėtimų ir pareikalavo greito prisitaikymo. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip COVID-19 pandemija paveikė tris KKM aukščiausio lygio vadovų dimensijas ir ketvirtosios KKM dimensijos galimybę po pandemijos. Išvados atskleidžia, kad pandemija paveikė visas tris KCM dimensijas. O skirtumai, kaip skirtingi karjeros etapai (t. y. ankstyvasis, vidurinysis, klestėjimo, vėlyvasis) ir vadovaujančios pozicijos (t. y. C lygio, verslininkai, valdybos nariai), vertinant šiuos pokyčius yra nedideli. Tačiau keletas skirtumų nustatyta vertinant lytį (t. y. virus ir moteris), ypač pusiausvyros dimensijos atveju.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: modelis; sistema; vadovas; valdyti; pasitenkinimas; karjeros sėkmė; karjeros vystymasis.