

Midocean University
Faculty of Management
Department / Specialization: Project Management

Research Ethics Report

تقرير أخلاقيات البحث العلمي

**The Impact of Operational Audit Practices on Quality
Standards
Compliance in Multi-Brand Restaurant Chains in Saudi
Arabia**

Student Name: Mohamed Ali Azzan
Student ID: 233001502

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Faculty of Management – Midocean University

Supervisor

Dr. Abd Al-Rahim Nader

Faculty Member – Faculty of Management – Midocean University

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1. Introduction / المقدمة

Research ethics can be defined as the set of moral principles and professional standards that guide researchers in the planning, conduct, and reporting of their work. At its most basic level, it is about doing research in a way that is honest, respectful, and responsible — both toward the people involved and toward the broader academic community. Ethics in research is not a formality or a checklist item. It is the foundation that makes research trustworthy and meaningful.

The importance of research ethics in academic work cannot be overstated. When researchers follow ethical guidelines, their findings can be trusted, built upon by others, and used to inform real-world decisions. When ethical standards are ignored or violated — whether through fabricating data, plagiarizing others' work, or failing to protect participants' privacy — the entire research enterprise is damaged. Readers lose confidence in the findings, and the researcher's credibility is permanently compromised.

This report outlines the key ethical principles that governed the conduct of this study — an investigation into the impact of operational audit practices on quality standards compliance in a multi-brand restaurant chain in Saudi Arabia. Because this study uses operational audit data collected through the researcher's professional role rather than through surveys or interviews with human participants, many of the ethical considerations take a distinctive form that is worth examining carefully. This report explains what ethical decisions were made, why they were made, and how they were applied throughout the research process.

2. Importance of Research Ethics / أهمية أخلاقيات البحث

Research ethics matters for several interconnected reasons, all of which are relevant to this study.

2.1 Protecting the Integrity of Knowledge / حماية نزاهة المعرفة

Every piece of research adds to a shared body of knowledge that other researchers, practitioners, and decision-makers rely on. If a study's data is fabricated, manipulated, or selectively reported, the damage spreads far beyond the individual researcher — it misleads everyone who reads and builds on that work. In the context of food safety and restaurant quality management, inaccurate research could influence operational decisions that affect public health. This gives ethical conduct in this study a practical as well as academic significance.

2.2 Respecting Organizational Confidentiality / احترام سرية المنظمة

This study uses internal operational data from a real company. The organization shared this data — in the sense that the researcher collected it as part of their professional duties — under an implicit expectation that it would be handled responsibly. Treating that data with care, anonymizing the company's identity, and not disclosing commercially sensitive information beyond what is necessary for the research are all expressions of respect for the organization that made this research possible.

2.3 Maintaining the Researcher's Credibility / الحفاظ على مصداقية الباحث

As someone who works professionally as an operational auditor, the researcher has a reputation to maintain that extends beyond the academic setting. Conducting this research honestly and transparently — reporting results that show both strengths and weaknesses in the company's compliance performance without bias — is important not only for academic integrity but for professional credibility as well.

2.4 Contributing Responsibly to the Field / المساهمة المسؤولة في المجال

The food service sector in Saudi Arabia is growing rapidly, and there is genuine demand for practical, evidence-based guidance on operational quality management. Research that is conducted and reported ethically contributes meaningfully to that need. Research that cuts corners does not — even if it looks credible on the surface.

3. Core Ethical Principles / المبادئ الأخلاقية الأساسية

The following five principles form the ethical backbone of this study. Each principle is described and illustrated with a specific example from the research.

3.1 *Honesty* / الصدق

Honesty means reporting data, methods, and findings accurately and transparently, without distorting results to fit a preferred conclusion. In this study, honesty was applied by reporting the actual audit scores for all 19 branches — including the three Makkah branches that scored critically low (as low as 1.84 out of 5). There was a temptation to frame these results more favorably or to exclude outliers from the analysis, but doing so would have distorted the findings and undermined the value of the research. The low scores were reported, analyzed, and discussed honestly in Chapter 4, and they formed the basis for specific recommendations in Chapter 5.

3.2 *Integrity* / النزاهة

Integrity means following through on commitments to ethical conduct throughout the entire research process, not just at the beginning. In this study, integrity was demonstrated by maintaining a consistent approach to data collection — the same checklist, the same scoring scale, and the same photographic documentation process — across all 19 branches, regardless of whether the researcher expected good or poor results. No branch was given preferential treatment in how it was audited, and no scores were adjusted after collection.

3.3 *Objectivity* / الموضوعية

Objectivity means letting the data speak for itself rather than allowing personal relationships, organizational loyalty, or professional interests to influence how findings are interpreted. This was particularly relevant in this study because the researcher is an

employee of the company being studied. The risk of confirmation bias — unconsciously interpreting results in ways that reflect well on the organization — was real. To mitigate this, the analysis was conducted using standardized statistical procedures applied to the raw data, and the findings were interpreted against established academic benchmarks rather than internal company expectations.

3.4 Confidentiality / السرية

Confidentiality means protecting sensitive information from unauthorized disclosure. In this study, confidentiality was applied at two levels. First, the company's identity was anonymized throughout the research — it is referred to only as 'a leading multi-brand restaurant chain in Saudi Arabia' — so that commercially sensitive performance data cannot be traced back to the specific organization. Second, individual inspector names appear in the dataset but are not highlighted or discussed in ways that could create professional risk for the individuals concerned. The data is used to understand system-level performance, not to evaluate individual employees.

3.5 Informed Consent and Professional Authorization / الموافقة المستنيرة والتفويض المهني

Informed consent is the principle that research participants should understand what their involvement entails and agree to it freely. In this study, the data collection instrument is an operational audit checklist administered by the researcher in their professional capacity as an operational auditor. The audit visits are a routine part of the researcher's job responsibilities, conducted with the full knowledge and authorization of the company's management. This professional authorization is the functional equivalent of informed consent in an organizational research setting. The branches being audited are not 'research subjects' in the traditional sense — they are operational sites being monitored as part of normal business practice. The research element of the study is the academic analysis of data that was collected for legitimate operational purposes.

4. Ethical Issues in Research / القضايا الأخلاقية في البحث

The following ethical issues were considered during the conduct of this study, along with an explanation of how each was addressed.

4.1 Plagiarism / الانتحال الأكاديمي

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's ideas, words, or data without proper attribution. It is one of the most serious violations of academic integrity. In this study, all sources cited in the literature review and throughout the text are fully referenced in APA format, including journal articles (Abdou et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Presti et al., 2023), academic textbooks (Daft & Benson, 2016; Juran & Godfrey, 1999), regulatory documents (Saudi Food and Drug Authority, n.d.), and the Ministry of Municipalities and Housing training booklet (Examination and Evaluation Center, 2024). The audit checklist itself was developed by the researcher from scratch based on professional experience and regulatory knowledge — it is not adapted from any published instrument without acknowledgment. All written content in this project represents the researcher's own analysis and synthesis.

4.2 Data Fabrication and Manipulation / تلفيق البيانات والتلاعب بها

Data fabrication means inventing results that were never actually collected. Data manipulation means altering collected data to produce a desired outcome. Neither practice occurred in this study. All 20 audit responses used in the analysis are real records captured through the Google Forms checklist during actual branch visits conducted between 11 May and 21 May 2026. The raw data was exported directly from Google Forms into a spreadsheet and analyzed without modification. The statistical calculations — means, standard deviations, correlations, and regression coefficients — were computed from the unaltered dataset.

4.3 Researcher Bias / تحيز الباحث

Researcher bias occurs when the researcher's personal perspective, professional role, or organizational loyalty unconsciously influences how data is collected, analyzed, or interpreted. This is a legitimate concern in this study because the researcher is an employee of the company being studied. The risk is that positive findings might be emphasized while negative findings are downplayed. This risk was managed in several ways: the audit

checklist uses fixed, standardized items with a numerical scale, leaving limited room for subjective interpretation during data collection; the analysis was conducted using established statistical procedures rather than informal judgment; and the reporting explicitly highlights areas of poor performance — including three branches with critically low compliance scores — without attempting to minimize or explain them away.

4.4 Privacy and Confidentiality Violations / انتهاك الخصوصية والسرية

Privacy violations in research occur when personal or organizational information is disclosed without consent or necessity. In this study, two potential privacy risks were identified. The first is the disclosure of the company's identity. This was managed by anonymizing the organization throughout the research. The second is the disclosure of individual inspector performance. The dataset records which inspector conducted each visit, but this information was used only for sample description purposes — confirming that two inspectors were involved — and was not used to evaluate or compare individual inspector performance. No personally identifiable information about branch staff, customers, or company management appears anywhere in the research.

4.5 Conflict of Interest / تضارب المصالح

A conflict of interest arises when a researcher has a personal, professional, or financial stake in the outcome of the research. In this study, the researcher is employed by the company being studied and has a professional interest in the audit system performing well, since it was developed as part of their operational role. This conflict of interest is openly acknowledged here and was managed through transparency in methodology, standardized data collection, and honest reporting of results — including unfavorable findings. The researcher did not adjust the audit checklist, scoring criteria, or analysis procedures in response to the results, and the research conclusions are based solely on what the data shows.

5. Rules and Regulations / القواعد والأنظمة

5.1 Institutional Review Boards / لجان المراجعة المؤسسية

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are committees established to review research proposals and ensure they meet ethical standards before data collection begins. Their primary function is to protect human research participants from harm — physical, psychological, or social. In most universities, IRB approval is required for studies involving human subjects, including surveys, interviews, observations of identifiable individuals, and medical procedures.

In this study, formal IRB review was not required for two reasons. First, the data used is operational performance data collected through the researcher's professional duties — it is not a survey of human subjects and does not collect personal information from individuals in a research context. Second, the organization's management authorized the use of this data for academic analysis as part of the researcher's professional role. Midocean University's ethical guidelines do not require IRB approval for studies of this type, where the data is organizational rather than personal and was collected as part of legitimate professional activity.

5.2 APA Ethical Standards / المعايير الأخلاقية لـ APA

The American Psychological Association (APA) publishes a comprehensive set of ethical principles for researchers, covering issues including honesty in reporting, avoidance of plagiarism, proper attribution of sources, fair treatment of research participants, and transparency about conflicts of interest. Although the APA guidelines were originally developed for psychological research, they are widely applied across social science and management research as a general ethical framework.

This study follows APA ethical standards in all relevant respects. All sources are cited using APA 7th edition format. The methodology is described with sufficient detail that another researcher could replicate the study. The limitations of the study are acknowledged openly in Chapter 5. The data collection instrument is described in full in Appendix A, and its sources and validation are documented in Appendix B. No deception was used at any stage of the research process.

5.3 Saudi Food and Drug Authority Compliance / الامتثال لهيئة الغذاء والدواء السعودية

Because this research involves the assessment of food safety and hygiene practices, it also operates within the regulatory framework established by the Saudi Food and Drug Authority. The audit checklist dimensions are aligned with the SFDA Food Hygiene Requirements (Saudi Food and Drug Authority, n.d.), ensuring that the research instrument reflects legitimate regulatory standards rather than arbitrary criteria. The researcher also holds an official food safety certification from the Ministry of Municipalities and Housing (Examination and Evaluation Center, 2024), which validates the regulatory grounding of the checklist's design.

6. Practical Application to This Research / التطبيق العملي على هذا البحث

This section is the most important part of the ethics report. It explains specifically how ethical principles were applied in the conduct of this study — not in general terms, but with direct reference to the actual decisions made during data collection, analysis, and reporting.

6.1 How Data Was Collected / كيفية جمع البيانات

All primary data was collected through the researcher's operational audit checklist, administered via Google Forms during routine branch visits between 11 May and 21 May 2026. The visits were conducted as part of the researcher's normal professional duties as an operational auditor for the company. Each branch was inspected using the same standardized checklist, covering nine sections and 37 scored items across eight operational dimensions. Before-and-after photographs were recorded for each section to provide visual documentation supporting the numerical scores.

No branch received special treatment in terms of checklist content, scoring criteria, or inspection depth. The same instrument was used in the same way for every visit. This

consistency is both an operational requirement of the audit system and an ethical requirement of fair, unbiased data collection.

6.2 Maintaining Confidentiality / الحفاظ على السرية

The company's identity is protected throughout this research. It is referred to only as 'a leading multi-brand restaurant chain in Saudi Arabia' in all academic documents. The names of individual branches appear in the dataset and in the analysis tables in Chapter 4, but these branch names are not publicly identifiable as belonging to any specific company without prior knowledge of the organization. The company's full name, brand names, registered address, and financial information do not appear anywhere in the research.

The audit data is stored in a password-protected Google Sheets file accessible only to the researcher and authorized company personnel. It is not shared with any third parties and is used exclusively for the purposes of this academic study.

6.3 Organizational Authorization / التفويض المؤسسي

The data used in this study was collected through the researcher's professional role as an operational auditor. The company's management is fully aware that the researcher holds this academic position and that operational data may be used for academic analysis as part of the researcher's studies. This constitutes professional authorization for the use of the data in this context. No individual branch staff members were asked to participate in the research — the audit process is an established part of the company's operations, and the branches are subject to regular auditing as part of their normal working environment.

6.4 Potential Risks and How They Were Managed / المخاطر المحتملة وكيفية إدارتها

The primary ethical risk in this study is the dual role of the researcher as both operational auditor and academic researcher. This creates a potential conflict of interest that could, if unmanaged, lead to biased data collection or biased reporting. This risk was managed through three mechanisms: standardized data collection using a fixed checklist with numerical scales; statistical analysis using established procedures applied uniformly to all data; and transparent reporting that includes negative findings — specifically the three branches with critically low compliance scores in Makkah — without minimization or selective omission.

A secondary risk is the potential misuse of the research findings to evaluate or penalize individual branch managers or staff. This risk is mitigated by the academic framing of the research, which focuses on system-level compliance patterns rather than individual performance. The research does not name or identify any individual employees, and the compliance scores are used to analyze operational dimensions rather than to evaluate people.

6.5 Academic Integrity Statement / بيان النزاهة الأكاديمية

The researcher confirms that all written content in this graduation project is original work produced by the researcher. All ideas, frameworks, and findings drawn from external sources are cited accurately in APA format. The audit checklist is an original instrument developed by the researcher, grounded in professional experience and regulatory knowledge. No part of this project was produced with the intention to deceive, mislead, or misrepresent the research process or its findings. The researcher is committed to upholding the academic and professional standards of Midocean University and the field of operational management research.

7. Conclusion / الخاتمة

Research ethics is not a separate layer of bureaucracy sitting on top of the research process — it is woven into every decision a researcher makes, from how data is collected to how findings are reported. In this study, the ethical considerations were shaped by the distinctive nature of the research: a practitioner-researcher using operational data collected through their own professional role to investigate a question with direct practical relevance to the organization they work for.

The main ethical challenges — researcher bias, conflict of interest, organizational confidentiality, and the dual role of the data collector — were all recognized early and managed through specific design and reporting decisions. The company's identity was anonymized. The data was collected using a standardized, fixed instrument. The analysis

was conducted using established statistical procedures. The findings — including unfavorable ones — were reported honestly and completely. These decisions were not accidental. They reflect a genuine commitment to conducting research that is trustworthy, fair, and responsible.

Ultimately, the value of this research depends not only on the quality of the data or the sophistication of the analysis, but on the ethical foundation on which the entire study rests. A research project that cuts ethical corners may look credible in the short term but cannot be trusted in the long term. This study was conducted with the intention of contributing honestly and meaningfully to the understanding of operational quality management in the Saudi food service industry — and that intention was reflected in every ethical decision made along the way.

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