

Financial Sherlock Holmes Role of the Professional Accountant: Empirical Analysis of Contemporary Forensic Accounting Knowledge, Skills and Values

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of a storm of financial fraud, the repeated failures of conventional financial fraud investigations prompt a shift in knowledge, skills, and values in accounting. This study aims to develop a contemporary forensic skills, knowledge, and values model to implement forensic accounting for fraud mitigation. The research is deeply entrenched in institutional theory and institutional forces that necessitate modern skill sets. Furthermore, the study is supported by contingency theory, which indicates that the forensic accountant's skill set is context dependent. Thus, the forensic accountant's context-relevant competencies must align with institutional forces. Accordingly, the study considered 13 forensic knowledge, skill, and value components among forensic accounting practitioners' perceptions of what components are essential for becoming a forensic accountant, including accountants and auditors, academics, forensic accountants, fraud investigators, and users of forensic services. Exploratory factor analysis is used to determine the structure of the variables and to understand the interconnection between them. As a result, the component analysis loaded three latent variables labelled as social and behavioural skills, cognitive skills, and technical skills, which explained 67.314% of the variation. All three variables demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values over 0.82. The results derived from the confirmatory factor analysis supplement the above exploratory study, demonstrating a good and consistent fit to a range of forensic accounting knowledge, skill, and value components. Given that the existing literature is limited in scope, diverse, and fragmented, this study aims to provide a long-term, sustainable solution to combat financial fraud by promoting theoretical, practical, and policy reforms compatible with the new accounting paradigm. The findings contribute theoretically by extending both institutional and contingency theories through a skill-driven perspective. Practically, the study offers a sustainable skills framework to enhance forensic accountants' ability to detect complex fraud, strengthen board accountability, and improve regulatory compliance. The framework also provides valuable insights for professional bodies, audit firms, and policymakers in designing targeted training programs to prevent future fraud.

Keywords: Forensic accounting; knowledge; skills; and values

INTRODUCTION

In order to combat fraud, forensic accounting techniques have developed over time (Alshurafat et al. 2021). Fraud has been a persistent threat that has caused significant problems impacting the continuing operations of corporations. For example, Enron and WorldCom, world leaders in commerce in their prime also fell prey to major corporate scandals, prompting the need for a more supervised system with rigorous scrutiny and bringing forensic accounting to the fore (Kleinman & Anandarajan 2011; Rezaee & Riley 2009; Silverstone & Sheetz 2007). Forensic accounting is the science of gathering, examining, and presenting meticulous financial data for litigation support (Akinbowale et al. 2020; Gangwani 2020). It is used to identify, analyse, and raise public awareness of financial fraud and malpractice. Consequently, forensic accounting has established itself as the most sophisticated branch of accounting in recent years (Akinbowale et al. 2020).

Forensic accountants play a vital role in spotting dubious and fraudulent financial activity and must employ unique skills and techniques to do so. Accordingly, forensic accountants should possess a plethora of different skills and ethical standards that are different from those of traditional accountants (Salleh & Aziz 2014). Financial, auditing, investigative, and litigation skills are a few of those essential in forensic accounting (Taminiau et al. 2019). Eiya and Otalor (2013) identified that a forensic accountant or an auditor blends professional scepticism with experience to gather pieces of evidence on a financial issue, and they emphasised that forensic accounting is an interplay between accounting and law. This socio-professional role of forensic accounting addresses illegal encroachment, destruction, value maintenance, and value addition for legal purposes (Carnes & Gierlasinski 2001). Consequently, forensic accounting is referred to as a specialised practical branch of accounting that provides a range of accounting services (Yadav & Yadav 2013). Forensic accounting services encapsulate consulting, non-scientific testimonies and intelligence services (Akkeren et al. 2013).

Subscribing to the above viewpoints, Arslan (2020) claimed that forensic accounting, which conducts accounting, auditing, and analytical investigations on legal issues, emerged as a result of the institutionalisation of the accounting profession. In the past, combating complex corporate fraud was primarily the role of auditors; however, institutionalisation and professionalisation have led to forensic accounting emerging as a profession. Accordingly, the forensic accounting framework must evolve to be compatible with the new institutional framework.

This study aims to develop a contemporary forensic skills, knowledge, and values model to implement forensic accounting for fraud mitigation. First and foremost, forensic accounting harmonises institutional principles and theories and requires the gradual development of skills and knowledge to bridge the gap between financial fraud and accounting (Arslan 2020). The fact that forensic accounting, which combines multiple competencies including accounting, auditing, and investigative skills, can be effective in fraud mitigation if properly applied, served as the impetus for this study (Akinbowale et al. 2020). Furthermore, fraud investigation effectiveness is contingent upon organisational context, requiring adaptive skill development to detect and address fraud (Mnif & Gafsi 2020; Umar et al. 2016).

Further inspiration stems from the factual data that depicts the significant growth in financial crimes, their complexities, the increased involvement of experts and professionals, and the immeasurable damage to the economy and corporate sector (Bhasin 2013; KPMG 2018; Liu et al. 2015; Reurink 2016). Consistent with institutional and contingency theory, this study argues that a uniform skill set is insufficient to address the complexities of financial fraud, validating the need for adaptive forensic accounting competencies (Mnif & Gafsi 2020; Umar & Aliyu 2018; Umar et al. 2016). Thereby, the aforesaid evidence demands a more sustainable forensic accounting framework that integrates sophisticated forensic knowledge, skills, and values. By doing so, it contributes to strengthening fraud governance oversight, restoring stakeholder confidence, and minimising long-term economic and corporate losses.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND FORENSIC ACCOUNTING

Having good forensic accounting knowledge and a proper skillset necessitates a thorough understanding of the business-societal community. Herein, the characteristics of forensic accounting require institutionalisation and legitimisation at the societal level. The basis of institutional theory lies in Foucault's (1980) scholarly work, in which he argued that power, knowledge, and expertise are not seen as independent entities but are inextricably related. He explained that power regulates social interactions and is a function of knowledge and expertise. Power never stops investigating, inquiring and recording truth; it professionalises, institutionalises, legitimises, and rewards its pursuit. Through Foucault's lens, forensic accounting can be viewed as a source of power that professionalises, institutionalises, and legitimises accounting while unveiling financial fraud by harnessing specialised forensic knowledge and skills. Further, the isomorphic perspective of institutional theory explains how a practice becomes acceptable and spreads widely through an institutionalisation process (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Scott 2008). This perspective of the theory has been developed on three pillars: coercive isomorphism, which refers to regulatory and cultural expectations; mimetic isomorphism, which denotes the imitation of other competitive institutions; and normative isomorphism, which explains the influence of professionalism and level of education (Kabuye et al. 2021). Herein, the forensic knowledge and skill set are also influenced by fraud regulations, fraud monitoring boards, social and cultural expectations, competitive fraud deterrence techniques, accounting, auditing, and the law.

In essence, the study will provide an overview of forensic accountants' knowledge, skills, and values under the new scope of the institutional framework.

CONTINGENCY THEORY PERSPECTIVE AND FORENSIC ACCOUNTING

Building on prior research, this study is further theoretically grounded in contingency theory to explain forensic accountants' adaptive skills for detecting corporate financial fraud. According to Fiedler (1964), contingency theory posits that organisational effectiveness depends on the alignment between internal capabilities and external contextual factors. It therefore rejects the notion of a universal best practice (Lawrence & Lorsch 1967). The adoption of forensic accounting practices is shaped by a combination of institutional pressures and contingency conditions (Khanaki et al. 2025; Umar et al. 2016). This suggests that professional practices evolve in response to regulatory demands and organisational realities (Maulidi 2023; Shonhadji & Maulidi 2022). Umar and Aliyu (2018) provide qualitative evidence supporting this perspective, demonstrating that institutional forces significantly influence the effectiveness of forensic accounting in fraud investigation processes, thereby reinforcing the role of regulatory and normative pressures in shaping professional behaviour. Complementing these findings, Mnif and Gafsi (2020) show that accounting disclosure practices are highly context-dependent, confirming that organisational characteristics and environmental conditions significantly affect governance-related outcomes. Collectively, these studies justify the application of contingency theory in the present research, supporting the argument that forensic accountants' skills must be context-sensitive to effectively detect and respond to the diversity and complexities of financial fraud.

Accordingly, this study will provide an overview of context-sensitive forensic accountants' knowledge, skills, and values from a contingency theory perspective as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Forensic accounting merges forensic sciences and investigative accounting (Akinbowale et al. 2020). Here, the term “forensic” means a careful investigation to find the truth, often for legal purposes (Aktaş & Kuloğlu 2008). Okoye and Gbegi (2013) elucidated that forensic accounting integrates the disciplines of accounting and auditing with investigative skills. Furthermore, it applies financial, accounting, auditing, and investigative skills to solve financial issues within the context of the regulatory framework (Karwai 2004). This legal–accounting system combines knowledge of law, business, and finance to support judicial institutions and to apply these principles in professional accounting practice (Karacan 2012). Consequently, forensic accounting knowledge and skill sets entail recognising, classifying, documenting, retrieving, reporting, validating, and verifying historical financial data required for settling potential legal disputes or employing the information to settle existing legal disputes (Yadav & Yadav 2013; Odelabu 2016).

A forensic accountant plays the role of a bloodhound in financial bookkeeping (Crumbley 2009). Like a bloodhound, they sniff out accounting malpractices, corporate fraud, and criminal transactions of business entities. They search for deliberate misstatements, a substantial body of facts, and conclusive or substantiated evidence. They seek out errors, ambiguity in operations, and inadequately recorded business transactions prior to their conversion to fraudulent practices (Akinbowale 2020). Complex fraud patterns and the forensic accounting function that combat them require a paradigm shift in knowledge, skills, and professional values. Forensic accountants are required to maintain professionalism, independence, and objectivity; they are required to maintain in-depth knowledge of applicable accounting frameworks and regulations; they are required to be innovative, and to avoid prejudice and prejudgment (Gerson et al. 2006).

The modern role of the forensic accountant has transcended corporate fraud investigation. It is now a socio-professional endeavour that uses the knowledge, techniques and skills of law, accounting, auditing, and evaluation to handle and resolve issues of illegal encroachment, value preservation, and value addition for legal purposes (Debnath & Kumari 2017). Forensic accounting now involves divorce settlements and matrimonial conflicts, fatal accidents and personal injury or healthcare benefits, claims for consequential damages and losses, settling confiscation orders, tracing illicit activities, business valuations, asset tracking, fraud and malpractice investigations, and litigation support (Akinbowale et al. 2020). The forensic accountant fulfils numerous tasks, such as objecting to conflicts between companies and/or assets, adjudication, trust, arbitration, liquidation completion, representation, interpreting the parties' contracts, reparation, amalgamations, indemnity, accounting and financial analysis systems of any type, and factual compilation and presentation of equity capital determination reports in accordance with the financial reporting framework (Arslan 2020). Accordingly, forensic accountants are engaged in insurance services, banking and financial services, public practice, police forces, and government bodies that demand ample knowledge, skills, and values (Okoye & Jugu 2010).

An overview of the modern role of forensic accountants shows that the knowledge, skills, and values required now extend beyond traditional accounting, auditing, and litigation competencies. Carnes and Gierlasinski (2001) claimed that forensic accountants should possess analytical reasoning, problem-solving skills, and knowledge of forensic procedures. Forensic professionals command insight and proficiency in branches of accounting and auditing, comprehension of the business environment, application of the regulatory system, knowledge of fraud, and expertise in the applicable legal system (Okoye & Akenbor 2009). Forensic accounting skills and knowledge pillars were further developed as follows: 1) Scrutinising and Investigating – the skill of interviewing, maintaining confidentiality, and accessing information sources; 2) Legal Regulations – knowledge of criminal law, civil law, witnessing testimonies in lawsuits; 3) Crime Science – knowledge of criminal psychology, sociology, criminal theory, and the criminal justice and reconciliation systems; 4) Financial Transactions – knowledge on accounting and auditing theory, and internal control system and financial statement analysis (Arslan 2020; Manning 2000).

Communication and analytical skills are embedded in the forensic accounting framework. These skills encompass oral and written skills, critical reasoning, personal management, and personal attributes (Crumbley et al. 2007; DiGabriele 2008; Tiwari & Debnath 2017). McMullen and Sanchez (2010) conceptualised these skills as people skills and further argued that personal skills must be complemented by puzzle-solving skills. Puzzle-solving skills encompass inquisitiveness, persistence and perseverance, creativity and inventiveness, discretion, organisation, self-esteem and confidence, and sensible professional judgement (Ansari 2005). Further, Stainbank's (2022) study highlighted intellectual skills, which referred to the ability to assess information, use professional judgement, consult appropriate specialists when necessary, and solve financial problems using well-reasoned, innovative thinking. The same study also emphasised the relevance of organising skills, particularly an accountant's ability to collaborate effectively within and across organisations to achieve optimal outcomes from scarce resources. DiGabriele (2008) classified the skills as deductive analysis skills, critical and creative skills, and communication and adjustability skills. Deductive analysis skills enable forensic accountants to understand numerical patterns and uncover existing and potential fraud. Critical thinking skills help to discern factual and credible evidence by applying and analysing financial concepts and principles. This is followed by logical reasoning. Creative thinking skills allow forensic accountants to determine new ways to tackle fraudulent patterns. Detecting fraud and fraudulent patterns involves understanding human behaviour; therefore, it requires communication and adjustability skills. These skills help to read the verbal and non-verbal emotions of

fraudsters. Albrecht et al. (2012) noted skills as technical knowledge, effective communication, computer literacy, financial reporting, business and legal system knowledge, and knowledge of human behaviour. Salleh and Aziz's (2014) study identifies the top skills as investigative skills, auditing skills, strategic and critical thinking skills, the ability to identify the key issues, and comprehension of goals related to the case. Furthermore, contemporary forensic accounting emphasises digital forensic skills, digital data acquisition, and digital analytical skills (Clardhuain 2004; Rogers et al 2006).

Professional skills, such as ethical values, integrity, professional behaviour and conduct, are conceptually embedded within several competencies already examined above. Specifically, forensic auditing requires strong professional scepticism (Chiang 2016) as well as independence in both judgment and appearance (Ponemon & Gabhart 1990; Siriwardane et al. 2014), and ethical compliance with international auditing standards and codes of conduct issued by professional bodies such as the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE) and International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) (Labuschagne & Fourie 2025; Lampion et al. 2023; Osagioduwa & Ogbonmwan 2022). Similarly, forensic accounting and investigation skills presuppose a high level of integrity and adherence to due process in evidence handling and reporting (Emmanuel et al. 2018; Haruna & Emmanuel 2022; McCartney 2015), while communication skills incorporate ethical responsibility in accurate and unbiased reporting and the maintenance of professional confidentiality (Neill 2021; Thummes & Seiffert-Brockmann 2019; Zainazor et al. 2024). Furthermore, the balance of these forensic skills reflects emotional control and ethical resilience when facing organisational pressure or intimidation (Henshall et al. 2020). Hence, the absence of a standalone ethics construct does not undermine the study's theoretical integrity but instead reflects a holistic conceptualisation of ethical competence as a cross-cutting professional capability.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The survey employed a random sampling technique and received responses from 300 forensic accounting practitioners, including accountants and auditors, academics, forensic accountants, fraud investigators, and users of forensic services. The study included these professionals because auditors supervise managerial processes and are involved in detecting, preventing, and monitoring fraud risks, as well as addressing those risks during audits and investigations (Kassem & Turksen 2021); accountants mitigate the risk of information asymmetry and participate in critical financial fraud prevention decision-making (Littleton 2016); forensic accountants and investigators use accounting, auditing, and investigative skills to support legal cases (Kaur et al. 2023); and academics in forensics conduct forensic accounting research and educate others on the subject (Rezaee et al. 1992).

The study retrieved random emails from academic institutes, professional institutes, and audit firm databases and ensured a 74.33% validated response rate. The demographic profile of the sample is presented in Table 1. Among the usable (validated) responses, 122 were received from females, and 101 were received from males. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35 (92 respondents). 42% of respondents have 5–10 years of professional experience, and 21% of respondents have more than 10 years of experience. In terms of academic qualifications, 137 respondents held a bachelor's degree, 44 held a master's degree, and only four held a PhD. The results on professional qualifications illustrated that most respondents are qualified or are studying for the CA examinations offered by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka. These responses were utilised in performing Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) (see Table 1 below).

TABLE 1. Demographic profile analysis for EFA

Category	Scale	Count [n = 223]	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	122	55%
	Male	101	45%
Age of the respondent	Below 25 years	54	24%
	26 to 35 years	92	41%
	Above 35 years	77	35%
Years of experience	Less than 5 years	82	37%
	5–10 years	93	42%
	More than 10 years	48	21%
Academic qualifications	Diploma	38	17%
	Bachelor's Degree	137	61%
	Master's Degree	44	20%
	PhD	04	02%
Professional qualifications (membership/following)	AAT SL	32	14%
	CA SL	104	47%
	CIMA UK	37	17%
	ACCA UK	41	18%
	Other	09	04%

Source: Author-developed

Thereafter, the developed questionnaire was distributed among a similar sample to perform confirmatory factor analysis. As in the EFA, random emails from academic institutes, professional institutes, and audit company databases were selected, resulting in a validated response rate of 77.33%. This sample's demographic profile is shown in Table 2. Of the usable (validated) responses, 124 were from females and 103 were from males. Most of the respondents (41%) were between the ages of 26 and

35, with 97 respondents from the overall sample having 5–10 years of experience and 47 having more than 10 years of experience. In terms of academic credentials, 142 respondents held a bachelor's degree, 44 held a master's degree, and four held a doctorate, indicating that the respondents were highly knowledgeable and hence capable of responding sensibly to the questions. In terms of professional qualifications, most respondents have completed or are preparing for the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka's CA exams (see Table 2 below).

TABLE 2. Demographic profile analysis for CFA

Category	Scale	Count [n = 227]	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	124	55%
	Male	103	45%
Age of the respondent	Below 25 years	56	25%
	26 to 35 years	94	41%
	Above 35 years	77	34%
Years of experience	Less than 5 years	83	37%
	5–10 years	97	43%
	More than 10 years	47	21%
Academic qualifications	Diploma	37	16%
	Bachelor's Degree	142	63%
	Master's Degree	44	19%
	PhD	04	2%
Professional qualifications (membership/following)	AAT SL	32	14%
	CA SL	106	47%
	CIMA UK	39	17%
	ACCA UK	41	18%
	Other	09	4%

Source: Author-developed

The scale of forensic knowledge, skills, and values was developed as follows based on the extant literature: Financial Accounting Skills, Auditing Skills, Investigation and Scrutinisation, Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills (Akinbowale et al. 2020; Aktaş & Kuloğlu 2008; Karacan 2012; Karwai 2004; Okoye & Akenbor 2009; Okoye & Gbegi 2013); Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning (Carnes & Gierlasinski 2001); Written and Verbal Communication Skills, Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology (Albrecht et al. 2012; Crumbley et al. 2007; DiGabriele 2008; McMullen & Sanchez 2010; Tiwari & Debnath 2017); Organisation, Adjustability and Flexibility Skills (DiGabriele 2008; Stainbank 2022); Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills (Albrecht et al. 2012; Clardhuain 2004; Rogers et al. 2006); Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills (DiGabriele 2008); Technical Proficiency (Albrecht et al. 2012); Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills (Ansari 2005); Self-Possession (Crumbley et al. 2007; DiGabriele 2008; Tiwari & Debnath 2017).

Descriptive statistical analysis is used to describe and summarise the central tendencies and deviations of the data set using frequencies and percentage analysis (Brown Breslin 2020). Accordingly, the mean and standard deviation of the 13 components of forensic knowledge, skills, and values were measured. The components Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills ($\mu = 3.86$, $\sigma = 0.733$), Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills ($\mu = 3.71$, $\sigma = 0.894$), and Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills ($\mu = 3.64$, $\sigma = 0.632$) were rated as most vital. On the other hand, Written and Verbal Communication Skills ($\mu = 3.05$, $\sigma = 0.772$), Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology ($\mu = 3.07$, $\sigma = 0.816$), and Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills ($\mu = 3.15$, $\sigma = 0.689$) were considered the least important (see Table 3 below).

TABLE 3. Descriptive statistical analysis

Forensic knowledge, skill, and value components	Mean	SD
Financial Accounting Skills	3.41	0.769
Auditing Skills	3.28	0.657
Investigation and Scrutinisation	3.46	0.605
Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills	3.71	0.894
Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning	3.48	0.667
Written and Verbal Communication Skills	3.05	0.772
Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology	3.07	0.816
Organisation, Adjustability and Flexibility Skills	3.22	0.612
Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills	3.86	0.733
Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills	3.15	0.689
Technical Proficiency	3.27	0.624
Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills	3.64	0.632
Self-Possession	3.35	0.821

Source: System-generated

The correlations among the 13 components were measured. Higher correlations were observed between Financial Accounting and Auditing Skills ($r = 0.667^{**}$), Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills and Investigation and Scrutinisation ($r = 0.624^{**}$), and Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning and Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills ($r = 0.656^{**}$). Nevertheless, as all correlations between independent components were less than 0.7, there was no multicollinearity issue (Nettleton, 2014) (see Table 4 below).

TABLE 4. Correlation analysis matrix

	Financial Accounting Skills	Auditing Skills	Investigation and Scrutinisation	Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills	Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning	Written and Verbal Communication Skills	Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology	Organisation, Adjustability and Flexibility Skills	Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills	Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills	Technical Proficiency	Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills	Self-Possession
Financial Accounting Skills	1												
Auditing Skills	.667 **	1											
Investigation and Scrutinisation	.299 **	.257 **	1										
Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills	.383 **	.281 **	.624 **	1									
Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning	.408 **	.479 **	.263 **	.312 **	1								
Written and Verbal Communication Skills	.434 **	.453 **	.256 **	.439 **	.470 **	1							
Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology	.374 **	.268 **	.392 **	.309 **	.270 **	.439 **	1						
Organisation, Adjustability and Flexibility Skills	.503 **	.472 **	.577 **	.364 **	.346 **	.447 **	.406 **	1					
Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills	.495 **	.208 **	.495 **	.494 **	.497 **	.287 **	.443 **	.279 **	1				
Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills	.200 **	.412 **	.364 **	.483 **	.470 **	.430 **	.358 **	.341 **	.450 **	1			
Technical Proficiency	.501 **	.259 **	.474 **	.594 **	.271 **	.470 **	.452 **	.405 **	.425 **	.298 **	1		
Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills	.339 **	.413 **	.338 **	.356 **	.656 **	.459 **	.416 **	.452 **	.352 **	.465 **	.375 **	1	
Self-Possession	.173 **	.459 **	.364 **	.208 **	.495 **	.494 **	.597 **	.287 **	.443 **	.279 **	.383 **	.281 **	1

Source: System-generated

The first phase of the study, involving exploratory factor analysis was performed to unearth the structure of the variables and comprehend the relationships between variables (Watkins 2018).

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, which examines sample adequacy, measures the appropriateness of a data set for factor analysis (Auerswald & Moshagen 2019). In this study, the KMO value exceeded 0.7, indicating that the sample size is adequate. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity tests the null hypothesis that the variables are not correlated with each other. The results of Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity rejected the null hypothesis, confirming that the variables are correlated and therefore appropriate for factor analysis (see Table 5).

TABLE 5. KMO and Bartlett’s test of sphericity

Kaiser- Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.943
Bartlett’s test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	8768.712
	df	66
	Sig.	.000

Source: System-generated

Communalities are proportions that denote the variance of each variable that can be explained by the factors (Tavakol & Wetzel 2020). Components with low communalities cannot be combined, and a high value ensures high reliability. Herein, only two components have communalities less than 0.5. Therefore, not many factors have been generated in this study (see Table 6 below).

TABLE 6. Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
Financial Accounting Skills	1.000	.675
Auditing Skills	1.000	.618
Investigation and Scrutinisation	1.000	.592
Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills	1.000	.568
Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning	1.000	.632
Written and Verbal Communication Skills	1.000	.679
Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology	1.000	.576
Organisation, Adjustability and Flexibility Skills	1.000	.369
Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills	1.000	.594
Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills	1.000	.444
Technical Proficiency	1.000	.791
Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills	1.000	.632
Self-Possession	1.000	.662

Source: System-generated

The initial number of factors is equal to the number of components used in the factor analysis (13 components). However, not all 13 components will be retained. Eigenvalues indicate the amount of variance explained by each factor (Jacobs & Kane 2022), so the number of factors to be retained or extracted is determined by the Eigenvalue criterion; an Eigenvalue closer to 1 or greater than 1 is considered significant. The percentage of variance accounted for by each factor is presented under ‘% of variance’ in Table 7 (see Table 7 below).

TABLE 7. Eigenvalues

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	6.294	48.076	48.076	5.821	45.759	45.759	2.950	24.538	24.538
2	1.922	11.246	59.322	.906	6.719	52.478	2.565	22.127	46.665
3	.789	7.992	67.314	.460	3.000	55.478	1.412	11.769	58.434
4	.613	5.109	72.423						
5	.561	4.676	77.099						
6	.530	4.192	81.291						
7	.471	3.927	85.218						
8	.398	3.24	88.458						
9	.382	3.066	91.524						
10	.371	2.635	94.159						
11	.368	2.145	96.304						
12	.328	2.094	98.398						
13	.252	1.602	100.000						

Source: System-generated

The three factors extracted from the factor analysis explain 67.314% of the variance. The rotated factor matrix includes the coefficients of components (variables) that are referred to as factor loadings to measure the correlation between the components and factors (Watkins, 2018). Large coefficient values indicate a strong correlation between factors and components. The study employed the orthogonal Varimax rotation method, which reduces the number of components—with high loadings on a single component, improving the factor's interpretability (see Table 8 below). Accordingly, a factor loading threshold of 0.50 or higher was applied to identify statistically meaningful component–factor relationships.

TABLE 8. Rotated factor matrix

	Factor		
	1	2	3
Written and Verbal Communication Skills	.781		
Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology	.736		
Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills	.667		
Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills	.591	.446	.321
Organisation, Adjustability, and Flexibility Skills	.587		
Investigation and Scrutiny		.739	
Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills		.726	
Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills		.640	
Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning	.402	.543	
Financial Accounting Skills	.449	.377	.698
Auditing Skills	.327	.321	.657
Technical Proficiency	.324	.314	.642

Source: System-generated

The first basket of factors loaded five components, namely: Written and Verbal Communication Skills (.781), Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology (.736), Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills (.667), Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills (.591), and Organisation, Adjustability, and Flexibility Skills (.587). They explain 24.538% of the variance of forensic knowledge, skills, and values. These components were labelled as *social and behavioural skills*, which explain life skills, soft skills, and personality traits. Secondly, four components were loaded into the second basket of factors, including Investigation and Scrutiny (.739), Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills (.726), Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills (.640), and Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning (.543). Consequently, these variables, accounting for 22.127% of the variance in forensic knowledge, skills, and value were labelled as *cognitive skills*, which explain logical intuition. The three components that loaded on the final factor were identified as Financial Accounting Skills (.698), Auditing Skills (.657), and Technical Proficiency (.642), and represent 11.769% of the variance. They were labelled as *technical skills*, which explain conventional knowledge of theories, procedures, and methods (see Table 9 below).

In operationalise these three labelled components, descriptive statistical analysis was used. The mean for *social and behavioural skills* was 19.85 ($\sigma = 3.56$), the mean for *cognitive skills* was 11.83 ($\sigma = 2.79$), and the mean for *technical skills* was 10.03 ($\sigma = 3.79$). Internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) were calculated for the three composites and found to be sufficient (.82 for *social and behavioural skills*, .91 for *cognitive skills*, and .86 for *technical skills*).

TABLE 9. Factor labelling

	Mean	SD
<i>Social and Behavioural Skills</i>	19.85	3.56
<i>Cognitive skills</i>	11.83	2.79
<i>Technical skills</i>	10.03	3.79

Source: System generated

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is depicted in terms of route diagrams with circles representing latent variables (*social and behavioural skills, cognitive skills, and technical skills*) and rectangles representing observable variables. The single-headed arrows denote the direction of the relationship, whereas the two-headed arrows denote the covariance between the three latent variables (Kimiaimehr et al. 2020). CFA was used to configure the links between 13 forensic knowledge, skill, and value components, as well as to validate the study. The CFA analysis findings complement the above exploratory analysis (see Figure 1 below).

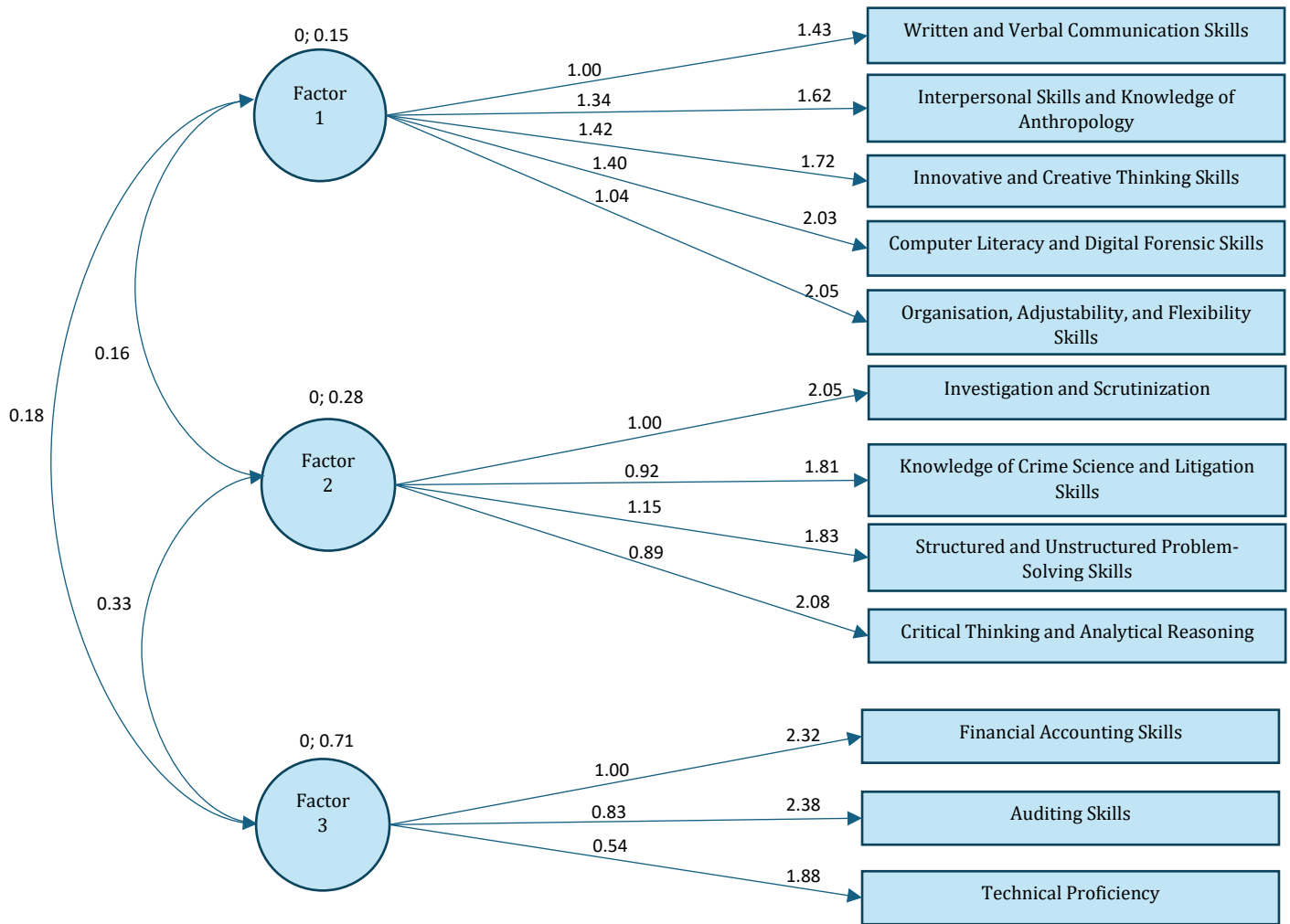


FIGURE 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis
Source: System-generated

Consequently, the three latent variables for the subscales of forensic knowledge, abilities, and values each contained five, four, and three items, respectively (Figure 1). The route diagram results showed appropriate factor loadings ranging from 0.54 to 1.42 for all items, with these values acceptable because they are greater than 0.10.

Indeed, to validate the model's goodness of fit, the following indices were calculated (Nye & Drasgow 2010): Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.898), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.827), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.03), and the resulting values confirmed a solid model fit.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to model a sustainable forensic accounting framework that integrates sophisticated forensic knowledge, skills, and values. Initially, the study examined 13 forensic knowledge, skill, and value components that were perceived as essential for becoming a forensic accountant by forensic accounting practitioners including accountants, auditors, academics, forensic accountants, fraud investigators, and users of forensic services. The scale comprising these 13 components was developed based on the extant literature (Akinbowale et al. 2020; Aktaş & Kuloğlu 2008; Albrecht et al. 2012; Ansari 2005; Carnes & Gierlasinski 2001; Clardhuain 2004; Crumbley et al. 2007; DiGabriele 2008; Karacan 2012; Karwai 2004; McMullen & Sanchez 2010; Okoye & Akenbor 2009; Okoye & Gbegi 2013; Rogers et al. 2006; Stainbank 2022; Tiwari & Debnath 2017). Institutional pressures arising from the recent surge in financial reporting scandals, together with insights from institutional theory, have necessitated the development of these skills (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Kabuye et al. 2021; Scott 2008). Similarly, the contingency theory perspective demands contextually relevant comprehensive skills, maintaining that there is no one-size-fits-all model (Khanaki et al. 2025; Lawrence & Lorsch 1967; Umar, Samsudin & Mohamed 2016).

An exploratory factor analysis was performed to determine the structure of the knowledge, skill, and value components and to understand their relationships. The communalities were above 0.3 and did not eliminate the components. Consequently, the factor analysis loaded three factors, which are labelled as *social and behavioural skills*, *cognitive skills*, and *technical skills*. The confirmatory factor analysis results complemented the above exploratory analysis. In summary, the acquired results reveal a good, dependable fit to a range of forensic accounting knowledge, skill, and value components.

The emergence of *social and behavioural skills* highlights the growing importance of interpersonal competencies and effective interactions between oneself and others. Skills such as Written and Verbal Communication Skills, Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology, Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills, Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills, and Organisation, Adjustability, and Flexibility skills were strongly loaded onto this dimension. This finding aligns with prior studies suggesting strong communication is linked to effectiveness in investigations, law enforcement and stakeholder engagement (Bhasin 2013; McMullen & Sanchez 2010; Salleh & Aziz 2014); knowledge, trust, and comprehension of human behaviour helps in detecting irregularities and fraud patterns (Bhasin 2013; Carnes & Gierlasinski 2001; DiGabriele 2008; Taminiau et al. 2019); innovations and creativity devise effective forensic investigative strategies (Crumbley et al. 2007; Tiwari & Debnath 2017; Kaur et al. 2023); digital and IT skills are vital for examining tech-related innovative fraud (Clardhuain 2004; Rogers et al. 2006; KPMG 2018); flexibility and adaptability depict how forensic accountants respond to evolving and changing situations (Bhasin 2013; DiGabriele 2008; Salleh & Aziz 2014).

The *cognitive skills* dimension reflects the forensic accountant’s mindset orientation. This factor basket comprised four components, including Investigation and Scrutiny, Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills, Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills, and Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning. This is supported by the existing literature where Akinbowale et al. (2020), Crumbley et al. (2007), Karwai (2004) and Manning (2000) maintained that strong observational skills allow accountants to detect irregularities and uncover fraud; Aktaş and Kuloğlu (2008), Arslan (2020), Rezaee and Riley (2009), and Taminiau et al. (2019) highlighted that forensic accountants need an understanding of criminal law and legal procedures; and DiGabriele (2008) Crumbley et al. (2007), and Liu et al. (2015) stressed the importance of both analysing complex financial patterns and anomalies and systematic reasoning.

Technical skills portray the operational dimension of forensic accounting. It includes Financial Accounting Skills, Auditing Skills, and Technical Proficiency. This factor is supported by the literature too, which states forensic accounting skills, auditing, and technical skills include the ability to detect, investigate, and prevent fraud (Bhasin 2013; Crumbley et al. 2007; DiGabriele 2008; Rezaee & Riley 2009; Rogers et al. 2006). These three categories of skills are summarised below (see Table 10).

TABLE 10. Summary of factors

Label applied to each basket of skills-factors	Skills
<i>Social and behavioural skills</i>	Written and Verbal Communication Skills Interpersonal Skills and Knowledge of Anthropology Innovative and Creative Thinking Skills Computer Literacy and Digital Forensic Skills Organisation, Adjustability, and Flexibility Skills
<i>Cognitive skills</i>	Investigation and Scrutiny Knowledge of Crime Science and Litigation Skills Structured and Unstructured Problem-Solving Skills Critical Thinking and Analytical Reasoning
<i>Technical skills</i>	Financial Accounting Skills Auditing Skills Technical Proficiency

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to forensic accounting literature by extending traditional skills models. While earlier frameworks largely emphasised technical proficiency, including forensic accounting, auditing, and technical skills (Albrecht et al. 2012; Clardhuain 2004; Kleinman & Anandarajan 2011), this study empirically demonstrates the equal importance of social, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions. By incorporating skills such as clear written and verbal communication, anthropological and humane understanding, creative-innovative thinking, crime science awareness, and critical and analytical reasoning, this research advances a more holistic theoretical model of effective forensic accounting (Bhasin 2013; Crumbley et al. 2007; DiGabriele 2008; Kaur et al. 2023; Liu et al. 2015; McMullen & Sanchez 2010). The findings support both institutional pressures observed in institutional theory and contextual adoption highlighted in contingency theory. This illustrates that the diverse skill configurations of forensic accountants act as strategic tools for detecting and preventing fraud. Furthermore, the inclusion of digital forensic-analytical competencies reflects the evolving forensic skill set shaped by technological disruption and sophisticated financial crimes. This study therefore, contributes to theory by redefining the competence of a forensic accountant as a dynamic, context-responsive construction essential for preventing future fraud.

Practically, this research provides a robust competency framework that can directly inform forensic accounting practices, professional and continuous training, and fraud deterrence policy development. The identified skills offer forensic investigative and audit firms and regulatory bodies a structured basis for recruitment, performance evaluation, and professional development programmes. For example, social-behavioural, cognitive, and technical skills in forensic accounting can be complemented with targeted training in digital forensics, investigative techniques, and structured problem-solving to enhance fraud detection. Consequently, this study provides actionable insights for strengthening forensic accounting quality by developing practitioners into well-rounded professionals capable of addressing complex fraud cases in contemporary organisations. Furthermore, this advanced skill set helps in taking proactive measures to prevent future fraud.

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APPENDIX 1

Forensic Skills Relevance

Instruction:

Please indicate how relevant each skill is for effective forensic accounting practice.

Scale:

1 = Not relevant

2 = Slightly relevant

3 = Moderately relevant

4 = Highly relevant

5 = Extremely relevant

No.	Skill Area	Questionnaire Item	1	2	3	4	5
1	Financial Accounting Skills	Financial accounting skills are essential for effective forensic investigations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Auditing Skills	Auditing skills are important for detecting financial irregularities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Investigation & Scrutinization	Investigation and scrutiny skills are necessary to uncover fraud.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Crime Science & Litigation Knowledge	Knowledge of crime science and legal procedures improves forensic effectiveness.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Critical Thinking & Analytical Reasoning	Critical thinking skills help analyze complex forensic cases.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Written & Verbal Communication	Strong communication skills improve reporting and evidence presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Interpersonal Skills & Anthropology	Understanding human behavior enhances investigation outcomes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Organization, Adaptability & Flexibility	Being organized and adaptable is important during investigations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	Computer Literacy & Digital Forensics	Digital forensic skills are crucial in modern investigations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Innovative & Creative Thinking	Creative thinking helps solve complex forensic problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	Technical Proficiency	Technical expertise improves the quality of forensic work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	Structured & Unstructured Problem Solving	Problem-solving skills are vital in forensic investigations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13	Self-Possession	Emotional control and confidence are important in forensic work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>