Workplace Factors and Employee Indifference: Psychological Role of Burnout as a Mediator

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Abstract

Background: A change in employee attitude, particularly when online and hybrid modes of work are preferred, is one of the biggest challenges the organizations face during and after the pandemic. Employee indifference characterised by cynicism, lack of motivation and commitment has significant influence on employee well-being and organisational productivity. This study aims to provide valuable insights into understanding and mitigating the critical issues in contemporary wprk environments.

Objectives: This study explores the relationship between workplace factors and employee indifference, focusing on the psychological role of burnout as a mediator.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted among the college teachers in the state of Kerala, India. 217 teachers were selected for the sample. The data for the study was collected using electronic questionnaires sent to the respondents via Google form. The questionnaire included questions to collect responses on workplace factors, employee indifference and burnout. Data analysis techniques like descriptive statistics, correlation, regression and CFA were used to test the hypothesis.

Results: The workplace factors have a mean percentage score of (75%), employee indifference (46.8%) and burnout (34.4%). The workplace factors have a significant negative influence on employee indifference and burnout plays a positive mediating role for the relation between workplace factors and employee indifference.

Conclusion: The workplace factors play a significant role in shaping the indifference attitude of employees, and burnout in turn has a critical role as a mediator in this relationship. Hence the organisationas can implement targeted interventions in planning workplace to control the burnout and employee indifference levels and enhance employee performance and satisfaction.

Keywords: Education sector, workplace, stress, cynicism, emotional exhaustion.

1. Introduction

Workplace is a dynamic and constantly evolving environment that plays a significant role in people's lives and well-being. Workplace is a place where any person would spend the majority of their time in a day whether they work formally or not. Hence the place where one spends most of their time in their life has a profound influence on the mental and physical wellbeing of the person. It also can influence the productivity, quality and contribution of the person towards his/her organization (Weiss, 1999). The workplace also has a significant role in a society's overall economic and social growth. Wherefore, organizations need to give importance to the careful planning and placement of various factors of the workplace inorder to ensure their employees get a positive and motivating

experience from it. Every employee of an organization will definitely have an experience with his workplace and its factors. These experiences have a major role in designing his/her attitude towards their organization and job.

Employees face various problems in today's fast paced and competitive work environment specifically post COVID, including heavy workloads, unreasonable deadlines, job uncertainty and work-family conflict. Employee indifference has become a prevalent concern for organisations worldwide. Employee indifference results in lower productivity and lower job satisfaction as indifferent employees lack drive, emotional involvement in their work and opt out from exhibiting discretionary efforts in their work. Poor workplace factors can also lead to employee burnout which is characterized by the feeling of emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced efficacy. Burnout not only has a detrimental influence on the individual employees but also affects the organization as a whole including decreased productivity, high absenteeism and low commitment (Alqassim, et al., 2022). Understanding the psychological mechanisms through which burnout mediates the relationship between workplace factors and employee indifference becomes crucial for developing effective interventions and strategies to improve employee well-being and hence organisational success.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Workplace is composed of several different factors that combine to create the overall experience of employees. These factors include physical factors such as office spaces, its layout and design and ergonomic elements of the workplace, cultural factors like communication, organizational support and trust, extent of decentralization practiced, employee participation, policies and procedures that govern work processes and also technological factors like digitalization and tools that support work activities (Morgan, 2017). Social support from co-workers and managers can mitigate the negative impacts of stress and can improve employee well-being. It is also found that a positive social support can contribute to job satisfaction and reduce turnover intensions of employees (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). A positive work environment contributes to enhanced employee happiness, engagement and productivity, whereas a bad work environment can lead to disengagement, lack of loyalty and turnover (Seppala & Cameron, 2015). Cropanzano et al 2001 found that organizations with better organizational justice which refers to as fairness in the procedures and outcomes in the workplace, ensure high satisfaction and commitment from their employees. Employers who value employee experience should be careful in designing workplace factors so as to ensure high employee morale, teamwork and overall organizational performance.

Until recently burnout was considered as an individual's issue, it was expected from the individuals to take necessary actions to avoid and overcome burnout and related issues (Moss, 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) has officially recognized burnout as an occupational phenomenon and not a medical condition. Hence the responsibility of managing it has shifted from individual employees to organizations (WHO, 2019). Maslach has defined job burnout as a psychological syndrome which occurs as a result of prolonged exposure and tolerance to various stress contributing factors at the workplace. Maslach has defined burnout in a three dimensional model which includes emotional exhaustion, cynicism and professional inefficacy. Emotional exhaustion is considered to be the preliminary symptom and measure of burnout by various researchers (Baron Perlman, 1982; Maslach, 1982). It is characterized by lack of energy and the employee starts feeling that he is drained out of energy. This results in frustration as employees feel that they could not contribute or perform as they were doing in the past. Feeling of cynicism is when a burned out employee starts to be indifferent towards his/her job, clients, colleagues and the organization itself. The last component, lack of self-efficacy or depersonalization is characterized by one's look down on self, doubtful about one's ability and skills (Maslach & Pines, 1977).

Employee indifference is a state in which the achievement or non-achievement of organizational goals or the success or failure of the organization does not matter to an employee. So people who do repetitive and boring tasks will tend to be burned out and hence indifferent (Fard, Salarieh & Noruzi, 2011; Ghasemi, Sheikh & Mir, 2016). Lack of interest in the job will cause job burnout and eventually indifference (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, Maslach Burnout Inventory, 1997). When an employee after joining an organization and later, sometimes loses the initial enthusiasm and develops an attitude of lack of interest in the job. This stage is very much frustrating and the person loses his hope of achieving his goals, hence he wants to get away from this frustration and hence takes an attitude of indifference (Ghasemi, Sheikh, & Mir, 2016). Fard, Salarieh, & Noruzi (2011) in their research paper says that organizational indifference of employees can be measured from five different dimensions namely

indifference towards manager, indifference towards workplace, indifference towards clients, indifference towards colleagues and indifference towards job. Ghasemi et al (2016) mention that an indifferent employee tends to be not bothered about the achievement of the organizational goals and do not put any discretionary efforts to his/her job, which results in the decreased organizational performance and productivity. Such employees may not care about their job, colleagues or organization. Also, they may be less motivated. Hence one of the most important HR issues of this era to be addressed is the indifferent attitude of employees

The research study has proved that burnout can result in loss of productivity, lower life expectancy levels or can even cause death. Hence organizations without proper measures to support employee well-being will suffer higher attrition levels, lower productivity and higher operational costs (Norman B. Anderson, 2015). Knowing where to invest is very crucial in managing the attitude and commitment of employees, or else those investments of the employers for the improvement of the workplace factors may go lackluster. Organizations have to work on the strategies to ensure the mental well-being of their employees. The changing work pattern and practices and the uncertainty put forward by the pandemic has fueled the stress among employees resulting in their change in attitude towards organization and job. Inattention and non-management of such phenomena can lead to worse dysfunctional ramifications like cynicism or employee indifference (Leiter, 1988; Maslach S. E., 1982).

There are research studies that have investigated the relationship between workplace factors (Maslach & Leiter, 2008) and burnout (Tarcan, Hikmet, Schooley, Top, & Tarcan, 2017; Rionda, Cortés-García, & Jiménez, 2021), how burnout influences employees' attitude, performance (Rehman, Janjua, & Naeem, 2015; Zaid, 2019) and job satisfaction (Ogresta, Rusac, & Zorec, 2008) and also other outcomes of burnout like job related behaviors, absenteeism and turnover intention (Kabir, et al., 2016). There are also several studies conducted among the teachers on workplace factors (Szabo & Jagodics, 2019), employee indifference (Abolfazli, Saidabadi, & Fallah, 2016) and burnout (Yoganand, Annie, & Felix, 2019). Studies show that teachers suffering from higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are more likely to leave their job (Alqassim, et al., 2022). Also the previous studies show that organizational factors like organizational culture, climate, work environment, workplace conditions and managers performance play a key role in indifference management (Abolfazli, Saidabadi, & Fallah, 2016). Though there exist many researches on the concept of workplace and its influence on burnout and indifference separately, most studies have focused on the short term effects or not specifically examined the role of burnout as a mediator in the relation between workplace factors and employee indifference. From the above discussions, the study aims to investigate the various factors that comprises the workplace and their relation with employee indifference while investigating the role of burnout as a mediator.

The aforementioned objectives lead to the following hypothesis for the study (figure 1).

H1: Workplace factors have a significant influence on employee indifference.

H2: Workplace factors are negatively related to Burnout.

H3: Burnout is positively related to employee indifference.

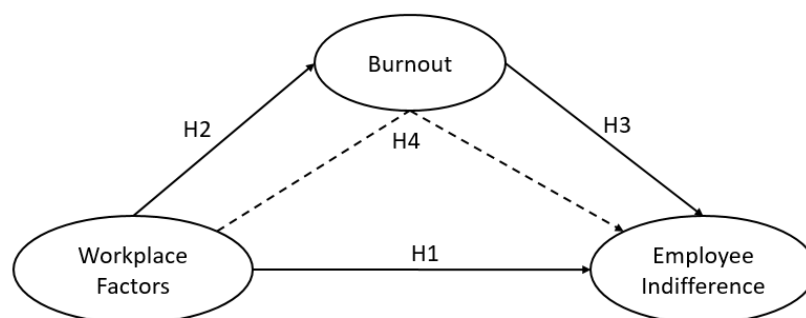H4: Burnout acts as a mediator for the relation between workplace factors and employee indifference.

Figure. 1: The Hypnotized Model

3. Methods

3.1 Participants and Procedure

This cross sectional study was conducted among the college teachers working in the state of Kerala, India. The sample for the study was selected using a multistage sampling technique and 217 teachers from various colleges across Kerala were selected for the data collection. The sample includes representations from Deans, Professors, Associate Professors and Assistant Professors working in full time mode for graduate and postgraduate programs. The sample selection was done by concentrating on aided, autonomous, self-financing colleges and universities in the state of Kerala. The data for the study were collected using questionnaires administered via google forms. These google forms were e-mailed to the official mail id's of teachers collected from the official websites of the colleges. The administration of questionnaires in online mode helped to conduct the survey efficiently and effectively. It also helped to have a better geographical spread of the population in the sample.

3.2 Instrument

The research instrument used for collecting data contains four parts:

The first part contains questions to collect the demographic details of the respondents like gender, age, marital status, educational qualification and type of institution.

The second and third section of the questionnaire focused on measurement of data on workplace factors and employee indifference respectively. There were 33 statements on workplace factors and 39 statements on employee indifference. All the variables in these sections were measured using a five point Likert scale. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement towards the statements on workplace factors and employee indifference. The scale labels ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. On the scale '5' denotes 'Strongly Agree' about the statements and '1' denotes 'strongly disagree' about the statements (Armstrong, 1987). The statements on workplace factors in the questionnaire were derived from Jacob Morgan's study on employee experience equation (Morgan, 2018). The employee indifference was measured using the scale developed by Hasan Danaee Fard et. al in 2011. The scale has five dimensions of indifference i.e indifference towards manager, indifference towards workplace, indifference towards clients, indifference towards colleagues and indifference towards job (Fard, et.al 2011).

The fourth section includes statements on burnout. Burnout of employees was measured using Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), the scale developed by Maslach et. al. Maslach uses a 22 item scale with three dimensions namely emotional exhaustion, feeling of cynicism and self-inefficacy Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1997). The burnout is measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 6, in which 0 represents never felt burnout and 6 indicating feeing burned-out every day.

Face validity is the degree to which the items in the instruments accurately measure what they are meant to measure (Hardesty & Bearden, 2004). The face validity in the study is tested by sending the questionnaires to experienced experts who provide critical feedback on how to improve the instrument. Later, it was revised and resubmitted to ensure that it easily comprehends the target population of college teachers.

3.3 Reliability

Reliability indicates consistency of a method in measuring something. "A reliability coefficient demonstrates whether the test designer was correct in expecting a certain collection of items to yield interpretable statements about individual differences" (Cronbach, 1951). The reliability of scales of the questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's alpha and was found to be 0.969 for workplace factors, 0.902 for burnout and 0.947 for employee indifference, which shows that the survey instrument is reliable and consistent (Taber, 2017).

Table 1. Reliability Analysis

Variable	Workplace Factors	Burnout	Employee Indifference	N of Items
Cronbach's Alpha	0.969	0.902	0.947	33, 21, 39
Culture	0.957			22

Technology	0.916			6
Physical Space	0.752			5
Emotional Exhaustion		0.909		9
Personal Accomplishments		0.904		7
Depersonalization		0.803		5
Indifference to Workplace			0.783	8
Indifference to Job			0.825	9
Indifference to Colleagues			0.813	6
Indifference to Managers			0.881	10
Indifference to Clients			0.863	6

3.4 Data analysis

The method used in the study is exploratory as it utilizes scoring of the variables. The data were analyzed via SPSS 20.0 for Windows. Appropriate statistical techniques were applied to draw inferences and conclusions on the data. Descriptive statistical measures were used to describe the demographic nature of the sample and the study variables. Correlation and regression analysis were used to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the independent variable (workplace factors) and dependent variable (employee indifference). The mediation effect (indirect effect) of burnout on the relationship between workplace factors and employee indifference was investigated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). A level of 0.05 was established as priori for determining statistical significance.

4.   Results

4.1 Data presentation

The sample taken for the study consisted of 217 teachers working in various colleges across Kerala, India. There were 115 (53%) male teachers and 102 (47%) female teachers with an average age 38.26 years in the sample; 194 (89%) of them were married and 23% (11%) were single; 39 (18%) were from Government/aided colleges and 178 (82%) were from self-financing colleges.

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation value of the variables and its sub factors. Form the table, it can be seen that the mean value for workplace factors is above average (3.75 ± 0.70), thus computing to the mean percentage score of 74.91%; for burnout the mean value (1.72 ± 0.98) shows low burnout level with a mean percentage score 24.52% and employee indifference the mean value is below average (2.34 ± 0.67) with mean percentage score 46.85%.

Table 2. Mean score value for the variables

Variables & Factors	Scale Minimum	Scale Maximum	Mean	S.D
Workplace Factors	**1**	**5**	**3.75**	**0.70**
Culture	1	5	3.76	0.72
Technology	1	5	3.70	0.83
Physical Space	1	5	3.74	0.70
Burnout	**0**	**6**	**1.72**	**0.98**
Emotional Exhaustion	0	6	1.43	1.18
Reduced Personal Accomplishments	0	6	2.16	1.40
Depersonalization	0	6	1.61	1.34

Employee Indifference	1	5	2.34	0.67
Indifference to Workplace	1	5	2.32	0.73
Indifference to Job	1	5	2.63	0.77
Indifference to Colleagues	1	5	2.36	0.83
Indifference to Managers	1	5	2.33	0.83
Indifference to Clients	1	5	1.94	0.80

The correlation analysis shows that a significant negative relationship exists between workplace factors and employee indifference (r = -0.761), which indicates improvement in workplace factors reduces indifference of employees. From table 3, the regression estimate of the direct effect of workplace factors on employee indifference is significant (β = -0.477, p-value <0.01); and it is (β= -0.504, p-value < 0.01) for burnout, showing the existence of a significant negative relation between workplace factors and burnout. The estimate (β= 0.675, p-value <0.01) for burnout on employee indifference indicates an increase in burnout proportionately increases employee indifference. Also, the estimate for indirect effect through mediating variable is β= -0.340 and is significant with p-value <0.01 (figure 2). Hence it can be concluded that the burnout mediates the relationship between employee indifference and workplace factors. Since the indirect effect through mediation variable is more than the direct effect one, burnout positively affects the relation between workplace factors and employee indifference. So, improving the workplace factors like culture, technological aspects and physical space helps to reduce burnout level of employees thus reducing employee indifference and vice versa. Hence from the results of the analysis it can be inferred that workplace factors play a profound role in reducing the burnout and in turn reducing the indifference of teachers towards their workplace, job, superiors, students and colleagues and burnout mediates this relationship.

Table 3. Regression Estimates of Direct and Indirect Effect

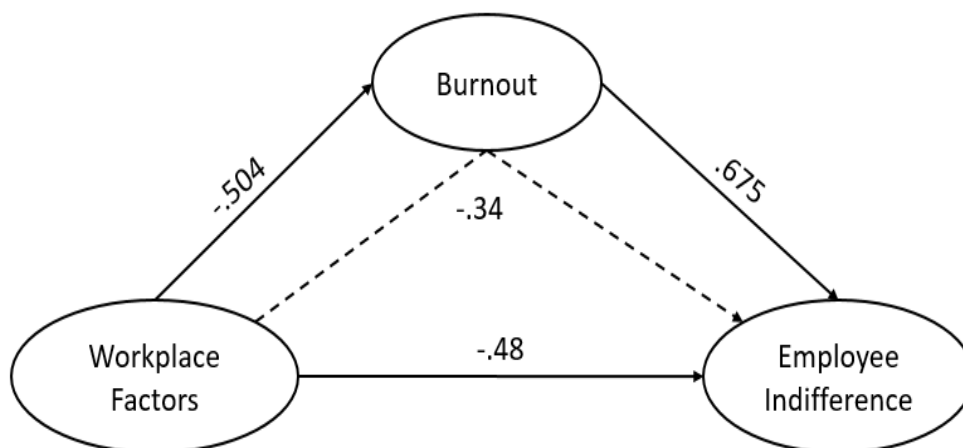| Path	Estimate	t	P	Variance explained (%)
Workplace factors → Employee indifference (*Direct effect*)	-0.477	-7.594	<0.001	22.8
Workplace factors → Burnout	-0.504	-8.114	<0.001	25.4
Burnout → Employee indifference	0.675	11.994	<0.001	45.6
Workplace factors → Employee indifference (*Indirect effect*)	-0.340	-5.180	<0.001	11.6

Figure 2: The Final Model

5. Discussions and Implications

There has been growing significance for studies on employee burnout and employee indifference in recent times, specifically post COVID, as occupational health has become a matter of concern. This has led to many studies in this field. The current study focuses on the relationship between workplace factors and employee indifference. It also aims to investigate the psychological role of burnout as a mediator for the relation between workplace factors and employee indifference using an empirical study conducted among the college teachers. A systematic research process conducted in this regard has provided empirical support for the mediating role of burnout. It was found that workplace factors had a direct influence on the burnout of employees which, inturn significantly influenced employee indifference. This shows that workplace factors have a profound role in contributing and controlling employee indifference. The negative relationship indicates that improving workplace factors reduces indifference among employees and vice versa. This is commensurate with the previous research studies (Nasabi & Bastani, 2018) which says work related factors like job control and work life balance can predict indifference of employees. (Abolfazli, Saidabadi, & Fallah, 2016) says that the fundamental determinants of indifference management are work culture, environment and working conditions. According to the findings of the research study Abolfazli (2016) conducted among the teaching community also aligns with the current research study that organizational related factors like culture, climate, manager's behavior, employee's perception about organization and workplace conditions has a significant role in the management of employee indifference. Despite the fact that the current study reveals a substantial relationship between workplace factors (such as culture, technology and physical space) and employee indifference among the teachers. More research studies can be undertaken in other sectors such as retail, information technology, manufacture to investigate how this relation occurs in these industries and to compare it to the education sector. Such research studies help the workplace designers to place the work related factors and design the workplace elements in such a way to reduce indifference attitude of employees and to ensure employee commitment and discretionary efforts from them.

When workplace factors and employee indifference were studied with burnout as a mediator, the study concluded that burnout acts as a moderator for the relationship. This mediation effect highlights the importance of addressing burnout as a critical pathway through which workplace factors impact employee attitude. This indicates workplace factors are necessary to create a healthy workplace environment. Employee indifference and burnout occur when employees do not feel like they have control within their workplace, therefore leading to lower morale and commitment. The findings of the study align with the previous research that has studied the role of burnout as mediator for the work related factors like organizational support and cynicism (Altamimi, Alsubaie, & Nassani, 2021). According to (Atalay, Aydemir, & Acuner, 2022) emotional exhaustion, a factor of burnout and a significant influence on organizational indifference. From the research study it can be understood that a bad workplace will contribute to employee burnout thus making the employee indifferent. An indifferent employee will not be interested in the achievement and non-achievement of organizational goals (Ghasemi, Sheikh, & Mir, 2016). The research study mainly focused on studying workplace factors, burnout and employee indifference in a holistic way. Conducting further research on the influence of specific workplace factors on inference and burnout, may help to understand the role of each factor in contributing towards employee burnout and indifference. This may vary from sector to sector.

6. Conclusion

The most vital and the unpredictable resource in an organization might be human resources. Anything that is prevalent to it is worth considering for investigation as human resources is one area in which organizations invest a lot. Employee indifference and burnout are common workplace issues affecting the morale and productivity of employees. The study conducted among the teaching community shows workplace factors like poor culture, ineffective adoption and usage of technology in the workplace and bad physical work space contribute to employee indifference and burnout. The study also contributes to the understanding of relationship between workplace factors and employee indifference and provide valuable insights for organisationa specifically academic institutions to improve employee well-being. The study underscores the importance of establishing a healthy workplace that addresses the underlying causes of burnout. By tackling the workplace factors effectively, organisations can reduce burnout levels of its employees and subsequently mitigate employee indifference.

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