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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN PASSION AND PERSISTENCE: A STUDY OF ENGAGEMENT, BURNOUT, AND INTENTION TO LEAVE IN MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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Abstract
This study investigates the relationship between work engagement, burnout, and intention to leave among master's students, with particular attention to the suppressor role of burnout in the relationship between engagement and turnover intention. The research was based on a questionnaire administered to 67 master's students from the Faculty of Management, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, between March 1 and March 25, 2026. The survey included validated measures of work engagement, burnout, and intention to leave, using a 5-point Likert scale. Data was analysed through descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, reliability analysis, and linear regression models. The results indicate moderate-to-high levels of work engagement and moderate levels of burnout and turnover intention. Burnout was positively associated with turnover intention, while work engagement showed a weak negative relationship with intention to leave. Contrary to expectations, work engagement was not significantly related to burnout. Analysis revealed that burnout functions as a suppressor variable: when burnout was controlled for, the negative effect of work engagement on turnover intention became stronger. The study contributes to the literature by showing that engagement and burnout may coexist rather than function as opposite ends of a continuum. It also highlights the suppressor role of burnout in understanding retention. Organizations should adopt dual retention strategies that simultaneously increase engagement and reduce burnout. Programs focused only on motivation and involvement may be ineffective if excessive workload and emotional strain remain unaddressed.

Keywords: Work engagement, Burnout, Intention to leave, Turnover, Job-Demands Resources model, Employee retention.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Employee retention is a growing concern for organizations facing high workloads, labour shortages, and increasing psychological pressure. Turnover intention is considered one of the strongest predictors of actual employee turnover, making it important to understand the factors that influence employees' decisions to remain in or leave an organization.

Two key predictors frequently discussed in the literature are work engagement and burnout. Work engagement refers to a positive work-related state characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002a, 2002b), while burnout reflects emotional exhaustion and reduced well-being caused by excessive job demands (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Previous studies have consistently shown that burnout increases turnover intention, whereas work engagement tends to reduce it (Collins et al., 2024; Scanlan et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2022).

This study is grounded in Social Exchange Theory and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. These frameworks suggest that organizational support and job resources increase engagement, while excessive demands contribute to burnout and turnover intention (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Blau, 1964; Demerouti et al., 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between work engagement, burnout, and intention to leave among master's students and to test whether burnout acts as a suppressor variable in this relationship. The paper includes a literature review, methodology, results, and conclusions.

2. WORK ENGAGEMENT, BURNOUT, AND INTENTION TO LEAVE IN THEORY

Substantial research has examined the relationships between burnout, work engagement, and employees' intention to leave. Drawing on evidence across healthcare, education, and related sectors, the present synthesis integrates prior findings to clarify three key aspects: (1) the independent and joint effects of burnout and work engagement on turnover intentions; (2) the mediating role of these constructs in the

relationship between leadership and organizational factors and turnover intentions; and (3) the moderating influence of contextual and individual variables, such as resilience, professional identity, and supervisory support. Where empirical findings diverge, relevant nuances are highlighted. Overall, the synthesis adheres closely to the extant evidence base and emphasizes the interrelationships among burnout, engagement, and intention to leave.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been widely recognized as a foundational framework in the field of organizational behaviour. Originally articulated by scholars such as George Homans (1958) and later expanded by Peter Blau (1964) and Richard Emerson (1976), SET posits that social interactions are governed by individuals' subjective evaluations of costs and benefits, as well as their comparison of available alternatives. Central to this theory is the notion that social relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments through repeated exchanges between interdependent actors.

Within organizational contexts, SET is frequently applied to explain the reciprocal nature of relationships between employees and their organizations. These exchanges are underpinned by the norm of reciprocity, whereby employees tend to respond to favourable organizational treatment—such as perceived organizational support, fair compensation, and equitable procedures—with positive attitudes and behaviours. Such responses often manifest as increased job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, and discretionary behaviours, commonly referred to as Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB).

Importantly, social exchanges differ from economic exchanges in that they are characterized by open-ended and unspecified obligations, rather than explicit contractual terms. As a result, the development of trust and long-term relational commitment becomes a critical component of these interactions (Colquitt et al., 2013). Consequently, SET provides a valuable theoretical lens for examining how factors such as organizational justice and high-quality leader–member relationships contribute to enhanced employee engagement and retention (Saks, 2006).

Burnout has been consistently identified as a significant predictor of turnover intention across diverse occupational settings, with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization emerging as particularly salient components. Empirical studies conducted among nurses and physicians demonstrate robust positive associations between burnout and intention to leave either the organization or the profession (e.g., Brown et al., 2024; Collins et al., 2024; Salameh et al., 2025; Scanlan et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2022;). For instance, research on paediatric physicians indicates that burnout is directly associated with increased intention to leave, whereas professional fulfilment exerts a mitigating effect (Collins et al., 2024). Similarly, studies of resident physicians in China identify burnout as a key determinant of turnover intention, with resilience and job satisfaction functioning as mediating variables (Brown et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2022). Across these contexts, burnout consistently operates as a risk factor for turnover intention, with statistically significant effects reported across heterogeneous samples.

In contrast, work engagement is generally found to be negatively associated with turnover intention and to exert a protective influence. Work engagement is most operationalized using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), developed by Schaufeli and Bakker to assess employees' positive, work-related state of mind. The UWES conceptualizes engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising three core components: vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour reflects high levels of energy and mental resilience at work; dedication refers to strong involvement characterized by enthusiasm, significance, and pride; and absorption denotes a state of full concentration and immersion in work tasks, often accompanied by a diminished sense of time (Schaufeli et al., 2002a, 2002b). Importantly, engagement is defined as a relatively stable affective-cognitive state rather than a momentary experience, and it is considered conceptually distinct, negatively related to burnout. The UWES has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency, cross-national validity, and a robust three-factor structure, making it one of the most widely used instruments in engagement research. Employees exhibiting higher levels of engagement tend to report lower intentions to leave and greater retention potential. Moreover, engagement may buffer the adverse effects of burnout in certain contexts, including among occupational therapists, mental health nurses, and physicians (Collins et al., 2024; Rutledge et al., 2021; Scanlan et al., 2013). Longitudinal evidence further supports this relationship. For example, two-wave field studies demonstrate that leader identity entrepreneurship predicts subsequent increases in work engagement and decreases in burnout and turnover intentions, with both engagement and burnout mediating these effects (Steffens et al., 2018).

The Job Demands–Resources model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how work characteristics influence employee well-being and organizational outcomes. The model distinguishes between job demands—defined as physical, psychological, or organizational aspects of work that require sustained effort and incur physiological or psychological costs—and job resources, which facilitate goal attainment, reduce the impact of demands, and promote personal development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Central to the JD-R framework are two underlying processes: a health impairment process, whereby excessive job demands lead to energy depletion and burnout, and a motivational process, through which job resources foster work engagement and enhanced performance (Grover et al., 2018; Taris & Schaufeli, 2015). Additionally, job resources are posited to buffer the negative effects of high demands, while personal resources such as self-efficacy and optimism further strengthen employees' capacity to cope with challenging work environments (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). The interplay between burnout, engagement, and turnover intention is frequently conceptualized within the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework or related theoretical models. Within this perspective, job demands and resources influence levels of burnout and engagement,

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which in turn predict turnover intentions. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies support this framework, indicating that interventions aimed at reducing burnout and enhancing engagement can effectively lower intention to leave (e.g., Maniscalco et al., 2024; Scanlan et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2022; Tsapnidou et al., 2025; Willard-Grace et al., 2019).

Leadership and organizational context play a critical role in shaping the burnout–engagement–turnover relationship. Leadership behaviours that promote shared identity, empowerment, and social support have been shown to enhance engagement and reduce burnout, thereby decreasing turnover intentions. For example, leader identity entrepreneurship has been found to predict higher engagement and lower burnout, with both variables mediating its effect on turnover intention (Steffens et al., 2018). Complementary research indicates that empowering, authentic, and fair leadership styles are associated with reduced burnout and lower turnover intentions through increased engagement and improved work conditions (Scanlan et al., 2013; Willard-Grace et al., 2019).

In addition to leadership, professional well-being constructs such as professional fulfilment, compassion satisfaction, and meaningful work have been identified as important protective factors. Evidence from paediatric and nursing contexts suggests that these constructs are negatively associated with turnover intention, whereas burnout and depersonalization increase such intentions (Brown et al., 2024; Collins et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2020). Systematic reviews further indicate that continuing professional development and supportive work environments contribute to reduced turnover intentions by simultaneously enhancing engagement and mitigating burnout (Nantsupawat et al., 2024; Shiri et al., 2023).

Personal resources, particularly resilience, also play a significant role. Resilience is consistently associated with lower burnout and higher engagement, and it exerts indirect effects on turnover intention. Empirical studies involving nurses, physicians, and educators demonstrate that resilience reduces emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and enhances engagement, thereby lowering the intention to leave (Nantsupawat et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2022; Wang & Pan, 2023; Zhang, 2022). However, the strength of these relationships may vary depending on context and measurement approaches.

From a social exchange perspective, perceived organizational support (POS) and job crafting behaviours further contribute to understanding turnover intentions. Evidence suggests that POS mediates the relationship between job crafting and turnover intention, reinforcing the notion that reciprocal organizational support enhances engagement and retention (Priyanka et al., 2024).

Work environmental characteristics also exert a significant influence. Factors such as leadership quality, staffing adequacy, role clarity, and unit-specific conditions are associated with variations in burnout and turnover intention. For instance, toxic leadership and role ambiguity have been linked to increased burnout and intention to leave in nursing contexts (Tsapnidou et al., 2025), while differences across clinical units highlight the importance of context-specific drivers (Mohamed, 2025).

Sector-specific analyses reveal both convergence and nuance. In healthcare, a substantial body of evidence confirms a strong positive association between burnout and turnover intention, with engagement serving as a protective factor. While burnout often demonstrates a stronger direct effect, engagement may partially mediate this relationship in certain models. Leadership and organizational interventions that enhance engagement and reduce burnout have been shown to improve retention outcomes (Collins et al., 2024; Salameh et al., 2025; Scanlan et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2020).

In educational settings, similar patterns are observed. Teacher burnout is positively associated with turnover intention, whereas engagement and meaningful work serve as buffering factors. Structural equation modelling studies suggest that job stress and burnout predict turnover intention, with engagement and job satisfaction acting as mediators (Wang & Pan, 2023; Wu et al., 2020; Zhang, 2022). In allied health professions, such as occupational therapy, the relationships among engagement, professional identity, burnout, and turnover intention are more complex and context-dependent (Rayner et al., 2025; Scanlan et al., 2013).

Across domains, several cross-cutting themes emerge. Resilience consistently functions as a key personal resource, while professional fulfilment, meaningful work, and supportive leadership act as protective organizational factors. The JD-R framework provides a unifying theoretical lens for integrating these elements and explaining their combined effects on turnover intention.

From a practical perspective, the literature suggests that interventions should simultaneously target burnout reduction and engagement enhancement. Leadership development initiatives that foster shared identity and supportive team climates appear particularly promising (Steffens et al., 2018). At the organizational level, strategies aimed at increasing job resources—such as supervisor support, adequate staffing, and positive work climates—while reducing excessive demands are essential, especially in high-stress environments (Lombardi et al., 2025; Mohamed, 2025; Nantsupawat et al., 2024; Tsapnidou et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, several research gaps remain. Greater use of longitudinal and multi-wave designs is needed to establish causal relationships and clarify mediation mechanisms. Additionally, further research is required to examine the roles of resilience and professional identity across different contexts using standardized measures. Importantly, some studies suggest that the relationships among burnout, engagement, and turnover intention are not universally consistent, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive analyses and more precise operationalization of key constructs (Mohamed, 2025; Scanlan et al., 2013; Willard-Grace et al., 2019).

In summary, the literature provides strong support for five key claims: (1) burnout is positively associated with intention to leave (turnover); (2) work engagement is negatively associated with turnover intention and can buffer the effects of burnout; (3) leadership and organizational context influence turnover intention

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through their impact on burnout and engagement; (4) personal resources such as resilience and professional fulfilment mitigate burnout and reduce turnover intention; and (5) burnout and engagement frequently function as mediating mechanisms linking organizational factors to turnover intention, although the strength of these relationships varies across contexts and study designs.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire consisted of 22 items, of which only 3 were identification questions (e.g., age and gender), while the remaining items addressed the variables under study: Work Engagement (items 4–10), Burnout (items 11–15), and Intention to Leave (items 16–19). Data collection took place between March 1 and March 25, 2026, and was distributed among master students from the Faculty of Management, Bucharest University of Economic Studies. During the preliminary stage of the statistical analysis, the database (N=67) was cleaned and verified. Text responses were coded into numerical values using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree), allowing the calculation of mean scores for each dimension.

Some hypotheses were constructed to develop this research:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a significant negative relationship between Work Engagement and Intention to Leave.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is a significant positive relationship between Burnout and Intention to Leave.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Work Engagement is significantly and negatively correlated with Burnout.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Burnout acts as a statistical suppressor in the relationship between work engagement and intention to leave.

The internal consistency of each scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α). In social sciences, values above 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability, while values above 0.80 indicate very good reliability. All three instruments showed high internal consistency:

Work Engagement (7 items): α = 0.853

Burnout (5 items): α = 0.891

Intention to Leave (4 items): α = 0.932

These results indicate that the instruments measured the intended constructs accurately and consistently.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND DISTRIBUTION INDICES

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Work Engagement	3.53	0.88	-0.86	0.85
2. Burnout	3.22	0.96	-0.26	-0.41
3. Intention to Leave	3.13	1.29	0.04	-1.22

Note: Responses were measured on a scale from 1 to 5.

Source: Authors' research

To obtain an overview of the data and determine the appropriate statistical procedures for hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed, along with distribution shape indices (Skewness and Kurtosis). The results are summarized in Table 1.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the means indicates that respondents report moderate-to-high levels of work engagement (M=3.53, SD=0.88), while burnout (M=3.22, SD=0.96) and turnover intention (intention to leave) (M=3.13, SD=1.29) remain moderate. To verify the assumption of normality required for parametric testing, Skewness and Kurtosis were examined. Following organizational research standards, values within the [-2, +2] range were considered acceptable. As shown in Table 1, all indices fall within these limits, justifying the use of parametric tests (such as Pearson correlation) for subsequent analyses.

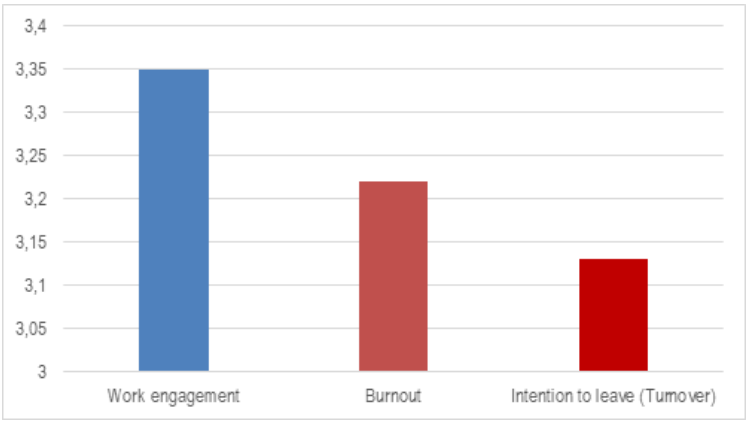


FIGURE 1. THE MEAN SCORES FOR THE ANALYSED VARIABLES MEASURED ON A 5-POINT LIKERT SCALE
Source: Authors' research

Mean scores (on a 5-point scale) indicate moderate-to-high work engagement (M = 3.53, SD = 0.88), alongside moderate levels of burnout (M = 3.22) and turnover intention (M = 3.13). Skewness and kurtosis indices for all variables fell within the acceptable range of [-2, +2], confirming the assumption of normality. Consequently, the use of parametric procedures, such as Pearson correlation, is statistically justified for subsequent analyses.

Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to examine the direction and strength of associations between work engagement, burnout, and turnover intention. The normality of the data distribution justified this parametric approach.

TABLE 2. PEARSON CORRELATION MATRIX FOR THE STUDIED VARIABLES

Variable	1	2	3
1. Work Engagement	1		
2. Burnout	0.04	1	
3. Intention to Leave	-0.21	0.43	1

Source: Authors' research

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To move forward with this study, the correlation among work engagement, burnout, and intention to leave (turnover) was examined in SPSS. The results are presented in Figure 2 and below.

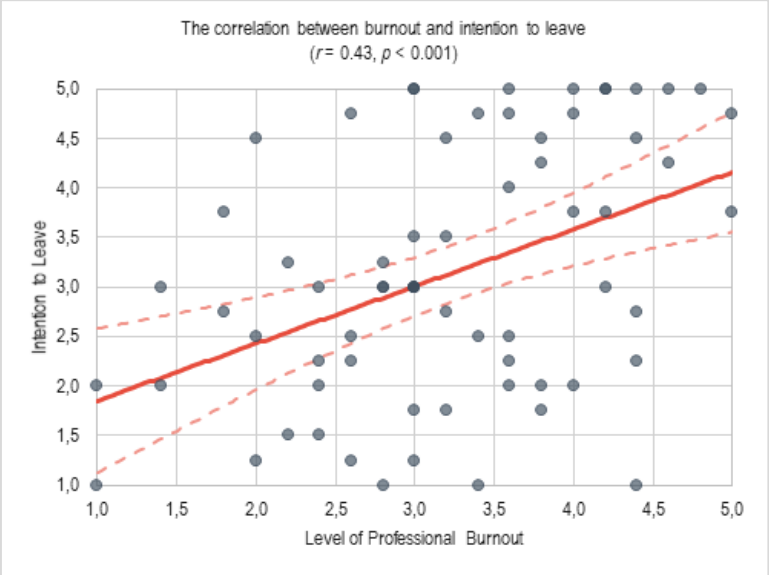


FIGURE 2. SCORE DISTRIBUTION AND TREND LINE FOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BURNOUT AND TURNOVER INTENTION
Source: Authors' research

The correlational analysis revealed distinct patterns between the studied variables. Most notably, burnout emerged as a critical predictor of turnover intention, showing a strong, positive association ($r = .43, p < .001$). Conversely, work engagement displayed only a weak, marginally significant negative relationship with turnover intention ($r = -.21, p = .084$) and, unexpectedly, showed no statistical link to burnout ($r = .04, p = .742$). These results suggest that while burnout significantly drives the desire to leave, engagement operates as an independent and relatively weaker retention factor in this sample.

To test that burnout acts as a mediator between work engagement and turnover intention, a series of linear regression analyses was conducted. Following established mediation protocols, the procedure independently evaluated direct and indirect effects. The regression results are summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3. REGRESSION ANALYSIS RESULTS

Model path	Predictor	β	SE	t	p	R2
Model 1: Total Effect (Path *c*) *VD: Intention to leave*	Constant **Work Engagement**	4.23 -0.31	0.64 0.18	6.56 -1.75	< 0.001 0.084	0.045
Model 2: Effect on Mediator (Path *a*) *VD: Burnout*	Constant **Work Engagement**	3.06 0.04	0.49 0.13	6.25 0.33	< 0.001 0.742	0.001
Model 3: Direct/Mediated Effect (Paths *b* and *c'*) *VD: Intention to leave*	Constant **Work Engagement (Path *c'*)** **Burnout (Path *b*)**	2.42 -0.34 0.59	0.73 0.16 0.15	3.29 -2.10 4.01	0.002 **0.039** < 0.001	0.233

Source: Authors' research

The mediation analysis revealed a suppression effect. While the total effect of work engagement on turnover intention was only marginally significant (Model 1: $\beta = -0.31, p = .084$), the direct effect

became significant once burnout was controlled for (Model 3: $\beta = -0.34, p = .039$). Burnout served as a strong predictor of turnover intention (Model 3: $\beta = 0.59, p < .001$), but because work engagement did not significantly predict burnout (Model 2: $p = .742$), a standard mediation was not supported. Instead, the inclusion of burnout in the model clarified the relationship between engagement and retention.

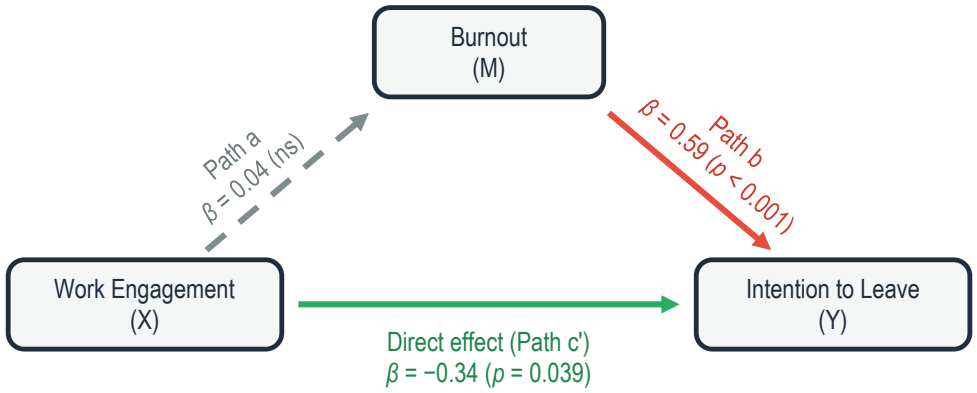


FIGURE 3. STATISTICAL MEDIATION AND SUPPRESSION MODEL DIAGRAM
Source: Authors' research

Figure 3 illustrates the mediation and suppression model for the variables studied. The analysis shows that Work Engagement (X) does not significantly predict Burnout (M), precluding a standard mediation effect. However, a significant suppression effect is observed; the direct effect of engagement on Intention to Leave (Y) is statistically significant and stronger than the total effect. Additionally, Burnout (M) acts as a robust predictor of the intention to leave, accounting for a substantial portion of the variance in the final model. This demonstrates that burnout functions as a suppressor variable, as its presence masks and distorts the true relationship between engagement and staff retention. The theoretical and practical implications are significant: Work Engagement indeed serves as a retention factor—with engaged employees being less likely to leave—yet this beneficial effect only becomes statistically visible and produces concrete results when the negative influence of burnout is neutralized or controlled.

- Hypothesis 1 (H1): Partially Supported. The relationship followed the predicted direction, though it reached only marginal significance (r = -.21, p = .084).
- Hypothesis 2 (H2): Strongly Supported. Analysis confirmed a robust, statistically significant positive correlation ($r = .43, p < .001$).
- Hypothesis 3 (H3): Rejected. Unexpectedly, the data showed no statistical link between these two constructs (r = .04, p = .742), suggesting they are independent dimensions in this sample.
- Hypothesis 4 (H4): Supported. The direct effect of engagement on retention only became significant (beta = -.34, p = .039) once the variance of burnout was controlled for in the regression model.

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While work engagement is a valuable tool for retention, its impact is suppressed or hidden if the organization does not simultaneously address burnout. Improving engagement without reducing burnout will likely result in insignificant changes to turnover intention.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the relationship between work engagement, burnout, and turnover intention among master's students using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Social Exchange Theory. The results showed a strong positive relationship between burnout and turnover intention ($r = .43$, $p < .001$), while the association between work engagement and burnout was non-significant ($r = .04$). These findings suggest that engagement and burnout may coexist rather than represent opposite ends of the same continuum. Young employees may remain motivated, enthusiastic, and highly involved in their work while simultaneously experiencing high levels of exhaustion due to workload, time pressure, or limited recovery resources.

A key contribution of the study is the identification of burnout as a suppressor variable. When burnout was controlled for, the negative effect of work engagement on turnover intention became stronger. This indicates that engaged individuals are generally more likely to remain in an organization, but this protective effect can be weakened or even cancelled by burnout.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that retention strategies should combine efforts to increase engagement with measures to reduce burnout. Initiatives focused only on motivation, development, or team cohesion may be insufficient if excessive workload, overtime, and emotional strain are not also addressed.

The study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and included only master's students, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions. Future research should test these relationships in larger and more diverse samples, including employees from different industries and age groups, and should use longitudinal designs to better capture changes over time.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly to correct spelling and writing and ChatGPT to sort and arrange the reference list in APA Style. After using this tools/services, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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