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Work Burnout and Spiritual Well-Being During Covid-19 Pandemic Amongst Staff in Two Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

In early 2020, the government enforced the work-from-home order for all Malaysians in response to the Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb the Covid-19 global outbreak. Many have faced challenges in acquiring the skills and knowledge to use the latest information technology applications to do their work at home. Moreover, the sudden need to simultaneously perform several tasks, while working from home, has led to mental and emotional strains. As a result, many individuals started to experience work burnout and other negative repercussions. Thus, this study aims to investigate the motivating and demotivating factors that lead to work burnout. This study is important in contributing data and information for both universities in order to reduce work burnout issues amongst staff. This study employed the quantitative survey research methodology. A survey instrument was used to collect data online via Google Form and was analysed using SPSS version 26. The survey comprises four main sections; Section A focuses on respondents' demographic profiles, Section B contains six items on personal burnout, Section C contains seven items on work-related burnout and lastly, six items in section D probed colleagues-related burnout. 106 respondents from two public universities in Malaysia were chosen purposively to answer the survey. The study found that personal-related burnout has the highest mean score of 3.3. This is followed by work-related burnout with 3.0. The lowest mean score was observed for colleague-related burnout, with 2.6. Hence, this study implies that tasawuf education should be emphasised to help individuals achieve spiritual well-being. In this regard, tasawuf education focuses on educating one's heart to shape a person into a quality individual according to the Islamic mould. As a result, they develop strong resilience when facing

challenges and obstacles in life. Further research may focus on examining a tasawuf-based spiritual well-being model from selected Sufi members' perspectives to produce holistically successful individuals according to the true Islamic teachings.

Keywords: Work Burnout, Spiritual Well-being, Malaysian Public Universities

Introduction

Background of Study

The term "remote work" refers to completing work tasks away from the office environment through technology. It allows employees to work from anywhere outside the office, either at home, a satellite office, or a customer's premises full time, part-time, or occasionally (Jansen et al., 2022). Likewise, work burnout refers to one's sustained reaction to persistent emotional and interpersonal pressures in the workplace. It can be determined through indicators like cynicism, low efficiency, and exhaustion. In other words, burnout occurs when the body reacts when the coping strategies used to deal with workplace pressures fail (Marin et al., 2010). Similarly, Brummelhuis et al (2011) described burnout as a stress condition commonly induced by excessive job expectations and a lack of work resources. It is commonly indicated by emotional weariness and cynicism.

Remote work and work burnout has become new phenomena in light of the Covid – 19 pandemic, including in Malaysia. Since early 2020, employees have faced unexpected lockdowns to curb the rapid spread of COVID-19 worldwide. This situation has forced Malaysians to work from home to control the spread of the novel and life-threatening virus. The Movement Control Order (MCO), implemented continuously in stages over the last two years, has forced Malaysians to strictly adhere to the standard operating protocols (SOPs) outlined. This situation has negatively impacted Malaysians directly and indirectly, particularly employees forced to work from home.

Amidst the lockdown, many individuals working from home started to feel the burden of balancing their work and personal matters, such as managing the household and monitoring their children's online schooling. This extremely difficult situation has indirectly put enormous pressure on them, especially those with poor mental and emotional well-being. Subsequently, work burnout and fatigue have become very common. In many cases, individuals are left with their own devices to find a solution for workplace burnout.

Statement of Problem

Working from home (WFH) has become a worldwide trend as the world goes through the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, the effects of WFH on job efficiency and employees' well-being outside the academic sphere have garnered substantial attention (Aczel et al., 2021). Before Covid-19, Garg & Rijst (2015) study "*The Benefits And Pitfalls Of Employees Working From Home: Study Of A Private Company In South Africa*" described that working from home benefits both employers and employees. It could decrease travel expenses for employees. At the same time, employers could cut down their expenses for premise electricity, levy and utility chargers like sewage and water bills. Various studies have also found many positive aspects of WFH, such as not less time commuting, increased employee autonomy, fewer interruptions, and personal comfort (Aczel et al., 2021). Studies also found that WFH provides flexible schedules, contributing to better work/life balance (Xiao et al., 2021). Moreover, Rahman et al (2020), in their study "*Working from Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Satisfaction, Challenges, and Productivity of Employees,*" showed that work

flexibility is the main factor contributing to job satisfaction for most participants working from home (WFH) during the covid-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, WFH could lead to work burnout that negatively impacts one's physical and mental well-being. Xiao et al (2021) found reported low physical and mental well-being when one experiences WFH- related conflicts due to lifestyle factors such as physical activity, exercise and eating habits, and other issues like the number of family members living at home, distractions while working, adjusted work hours, workstation set-up, indoor workspace environment, and communication issues with co-workers. Chung et al (2020) highlighted that many employees experience feeling conflicted and stressed. This situation is more evident among women who need to undertake double/ triple responsibility for completing work tasks, caring for their household and facilitating their children's home-schooling throughout the covid-19 lockdown, which has limited their capacity to work.

Therefore, this study investigates the motivating and demotivating factors at work that lead to burnout. Specifically, this study answers the following questions:

RQ1: What are the motivating factors that lead to work burnout?

RQ2: What are the demotivating factors that cause work burnout?

Literature Review

Remote Work

Remote Work has become a growing trend. It started to emerge around the 2000s as the world experienced rapid development in telecommunication technology, the internet, and virtual interaction (Rahman et al., 2021; Vyas et al., 2021). Remote work became more common as the world faced the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020. The situation forced many employees to remotely work from home or anywhere outside the office premise provided. The phenomenon has been studied using numerous, partially overlapping terms, such as telecommuting, telework, virtual office, remote work, location independent working and home office (Aczel et al., 2021).

From a Positive Perspective, remote work is advantageous for its flexibility, especially for working parents who need to take care of their children at home (Aczel et al., 2021; Vyas et al., 2021). Furthermore, it provides employees with the autonomy to manage their time between working and caring for their families (Rahman et al., 2021). Remote working also helps avoid unwanted distractions and reduces commuting costs such as toll and parking fees (Xiao et al., 2021). Remote working can also be more satisfying as it gives more personal comfort (Aczel et al., 2021). When one has access to adequate infrastructure and their physical needs are fulfilled, working from home could provide more job satisfaction and motivation due to autonomy and flexibility while working (Reuschke, 2019; Niebuhr et al., 2022).

Working from home also has its drawbacks. Employees are more likely to prefer working from the office again as they often feel isolated at home and cannot interact with other colleagues due physical and social distancing (Vyas et al., 2021). In this regard, remote work limits the opportunity to gain social support, especially for individuals living alone at home. Such social isolation leads to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Hayes et al., 2021). Moreover, working from home forces employees to work outside of their official working hours (Vyas et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021), especially those who need to juggle working and managing small children and other family members (Aczel et al., 2021). This reflects the constant conflict between work and family employees face while working from home, leading to emotional exhaustion or burnout (Mahudin & Zaabar, 2021). Studies

also found that the flexibility of remote work results in more pressure to manage time and set boundaries between work and household affairs. An employee could have been easily trapped in doing many tasks simultaneously, leading to confusion, stress, and neglect of family responsibilities (Vyas et al., 2021; Xioa et al., 2021). Employees might also experience health problems like eye strain, fatigue, headaches, and body ache from sitting in front of the computer for a prolonged period with little movement (Xioa et al., 2021). The invisibility of working at home also raises concerns about not getting a promotion or positive performance evaluation by employers (Aczel et al., 2021).

Types of Work Burnout

There are three types of work burnout -personal-related burnout, work-related burnout and colleague-related burnout (Khesroh et al., 2022). Personal-related burnout is defined as the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion experienced by the person. Meanwhile, work-related burnout is the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion that the person perceives as related to his or her work (Kristensen et al., 2005). Lastly, colleague-related burnout can be defined as the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion that the person perceives as related to his or her colleague.

Past Studies

Past Studies on Working Online

Numerous studies have investigated the negative and positive impacts of working online. Shlenskaya et al (2020) focused on teacher burnout while teaching online university courses during the pandemic. The study used the Maslach (1980) questionnaire adapted by Vodopianova (2013) to evaluate burnout among university teachers and estimate factors influencing burnout during the pandemic. 66 higher education teachers, mostly foreign languages teachers, were involved in this study. The result indicated that the teachers' gender does not affect burnout. However, the study found differences in burnout in different components.

Cheptea et al (2021) assessed burnout among teachers in the Republic of Moldova during the covid-19 pandemic. It was found that working online increased perceived stress amongst 375 participants. A two-stage questionnaire using Maslach Burnout Inventory was administered to the participants to investigate the occurrence of burnout. This study found significant relationships between some demographic variables and burnout. It has also been shown that women are more susceptible to burnout than men. Furthermore, the study identified several strong predictors of burnout, including occupational stress, poor working conditions and the absence of physical contact with students. On the other hand, one protective factor against burnout is work experience.

Another study related to working online was conducted by Hayes et al (2021) to understand the impact of involuntary remote working during the early phases of the covid-19 pandemic on perceived stress and work-related burnout among workers with and without previous remote work experience. The questionnaire incorporated the Perceived Stress Scale, Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, demographic, and work-related items. This study found that pandemic restrictions increased perceived stress for all 256 participants. However, age and gender have had significant effects on stress and burnout. The most significant challenges reported are communication, collaboration, and time management with colleagues via technology.

These past studies indicated some negative impacts of working online on an individual's well-being. If not implemented wisely, working online could be a significant factor for work burnout among employees.

Past Studies on Work Burnout

A recent study by Wijayanuddin & Zulkifly (2021) examined work-family conflict and work burnout among female public school teachers in Malaysia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study used The Work-Family Conflict Questionnaire, distributed online to 376 female public-primary school teachers, to measure work-family conflict. The study also adopted the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory to measure work burnout. The multiple regression analyses showed that the overall work-family conflict predicts work burnout. The results also indicated that while working at home, female teachers experience work burnout as they feel strained in handling work demands as these demands interfere with their roles at home.

Another study investigating the levels of workload and the presence of burnout in the government staff during the pandemic was conducted by (Mahudin and Zaabar, 2021). The study used a survey questionnaire containing items on demographic characteristics and items adapted from the NASA Task Load Index for workload measurement and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory to measure the level of burnout. The 118 participants reported feeling burdened with high workloads and exhibited high burnout. The regression analyses indicated that workload strongly predicts work-related burnout and depression, anxiety, and stress, even after controlling the participants' age. The study showed that remote working during pandemic affected government employees' psychological well-being.

To understand the impact of remote working on well-being, Xiao et al (2021) surveyed 988 respondents who worked from home during the Covid-19 outbreak. The study found that working at home negatively affected the participants' overall physical and mental well-being. Physical exercise, food intake, communication with co-workers, children at home, distractions while working, adjusted work hours, workstation set-up and satisfaction with workspace are significant factors contributing to the issue. The past studies reviewed have indicated how remote working had impacted employees' well being and became one of the significant factors for work burnout among employees.

Conceptual Framework

Work-related burnouts may not be all demotivating to the employees. They can also be seen as motivating factors. This study is rooted in categories of work burnout by (Kristensen, 2005). Work-related burnouts are seen as part and parcel of work conditions. Most employees will feel exhausted or worn out at the end of each working day due to the nature of the work. However, some may feel exhausted because of work frustrations.

In addition, personal-related burnouts can be demotivating to many as they feel physically or emotionally exhausted. In this regard, work-related burnout can make employees feel weak and susceptible to illness. Colleague-related issues can also lead to work burnout as people may find it difficult to work with others due to work-related or even personally related issues.

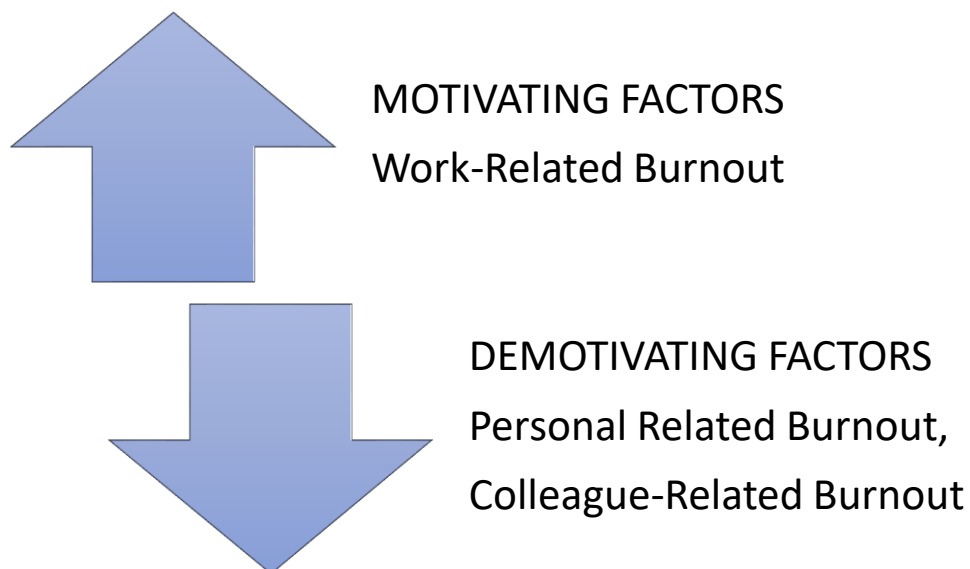


Figure 1- Theoretical Framework of the Study – Motivating and Demotivating Factors at the Workplace (source: Kristensen et al., 2005)

Methodology

This quantitative research investigates the motivating and demotivating factors at work that lead to burnout. This study’s instrument is a survey questionnaire adapted from (Kristensen et al., 2005). 106 respondents were purposively chosen to answer the survey. As shown in Table 1, the survey questionnaire has three main sections; items in section A focused on the respondents’ demographic profile; Section B contains six items on personal burnout; Section C contains seven items on work-related burnout, and section D contains six items on colleague-related burnout.

Table 1-Distribution of Items in Survey

SECTION	CONSTRUCTS	NO OF ITEMS
B	Personal Burnout	6
C	Work Burnout	7
D	Colleague Related Burnout	6
E		19

Table 2- Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.940	19

Table 2 presents the reliability statistics for the instrument. SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach alpha of .940, indicating the high internal reliability of the instrument used. Data were collected online via Google Form and using SPSS version 26. The percentages and mean scores obtained from the data analysis were presented to answer the two research questions.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

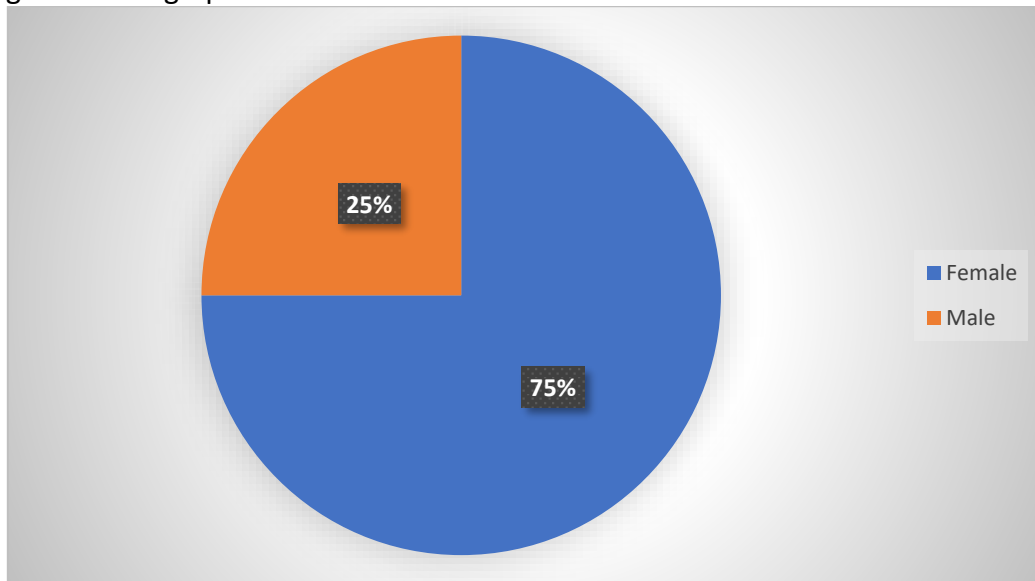


Figure 2- Percentage for Gender

Figure 2 shows the respondents' gender distribution. The study involved 106 respondents from two public universities in Malaysia. It was found that 75% of the respondents are female, and only 25% are male. Thus, the finding mostly reflects the experiences and perspectives of female employees.

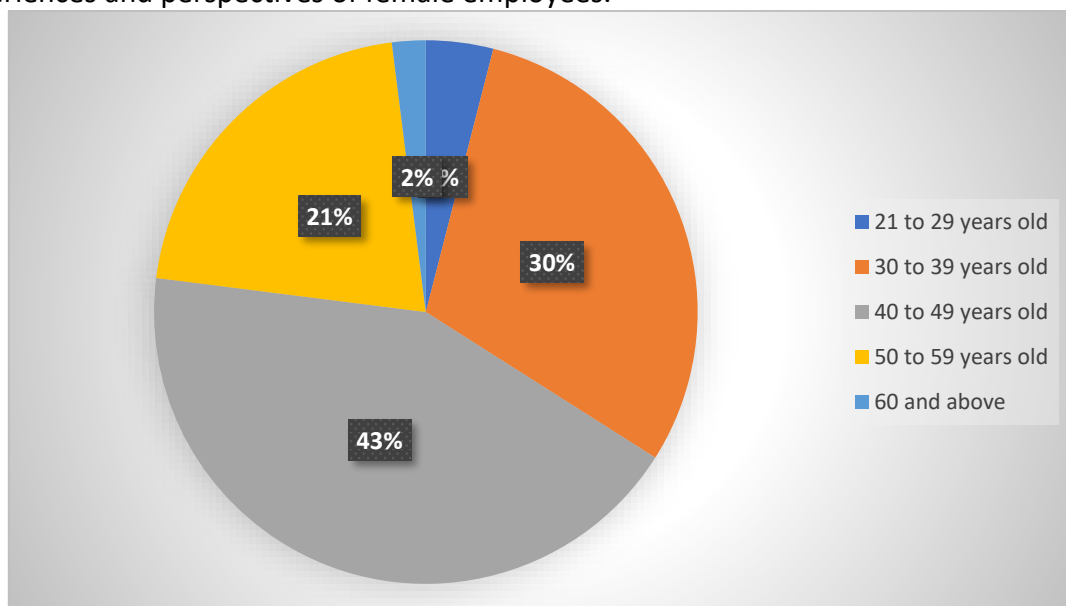


Figure 3- Percentage for Age Group

The respondents' age was divided into five categories. The majority of respondents (43%) are aged 40 to 49, followed by 30 to 39 with 30%, 50 to 59 with 21%, 21 to 29 with 4% and 60 and above with 2%.

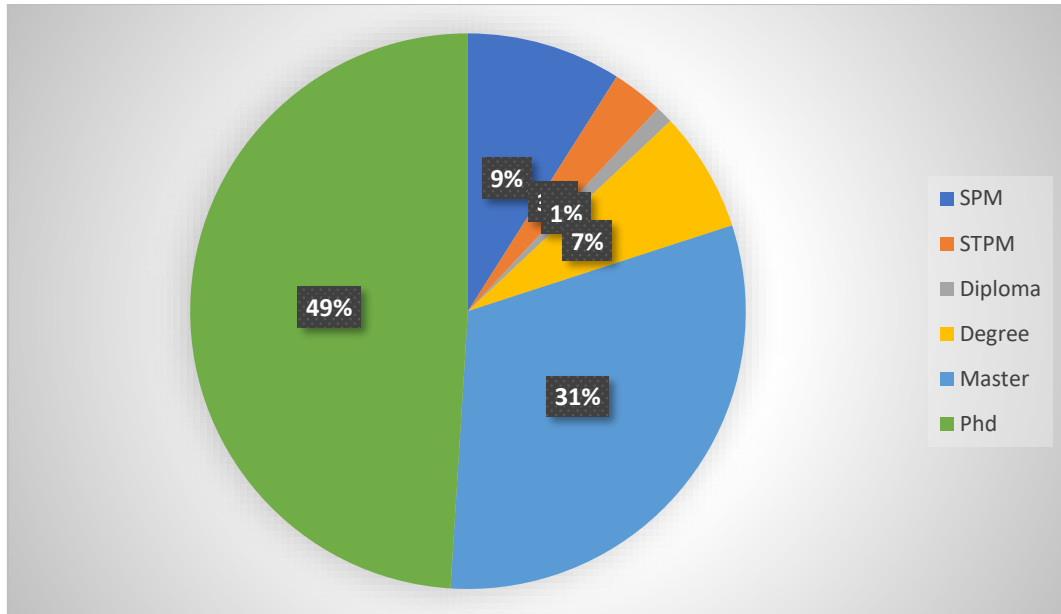


Figure 4- Percentage for Highest Academic Level

Regarding their highest academic level, the largest percentage comes from those with PhD qualifications with 49%, followed by Master's qualifications (31%). On the other hand, a small percentage of respondents have other qualifications, specifically SPM at 9%, Bachelor's Degree at 7%, STPM at 3%, and Diploma at 1%.

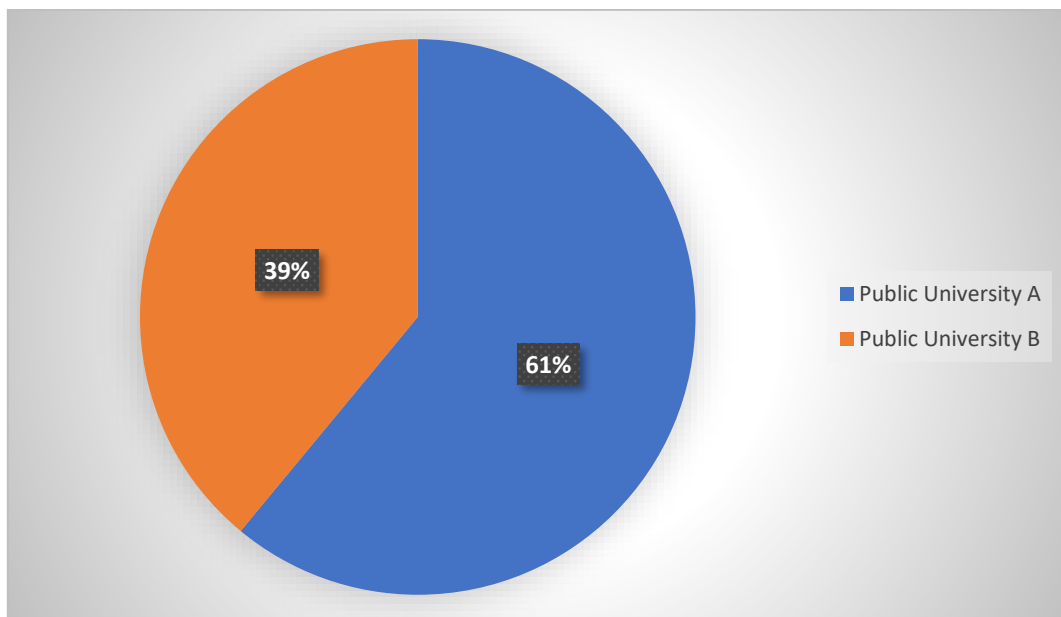


Figure 5- Percentage of respondents from each Institution

Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of respondents from Public University A and Public University B. 61% of the respondents are working in Public University A, and 39% of the respondents are working in Public University B.

Findings on Motivating Factors

This section presents the result of data analyses to answer Research Question 1: What are the motivating factors that can lead to work burnout? In this light, work-related burnout usually starts from the need to perform well at work.

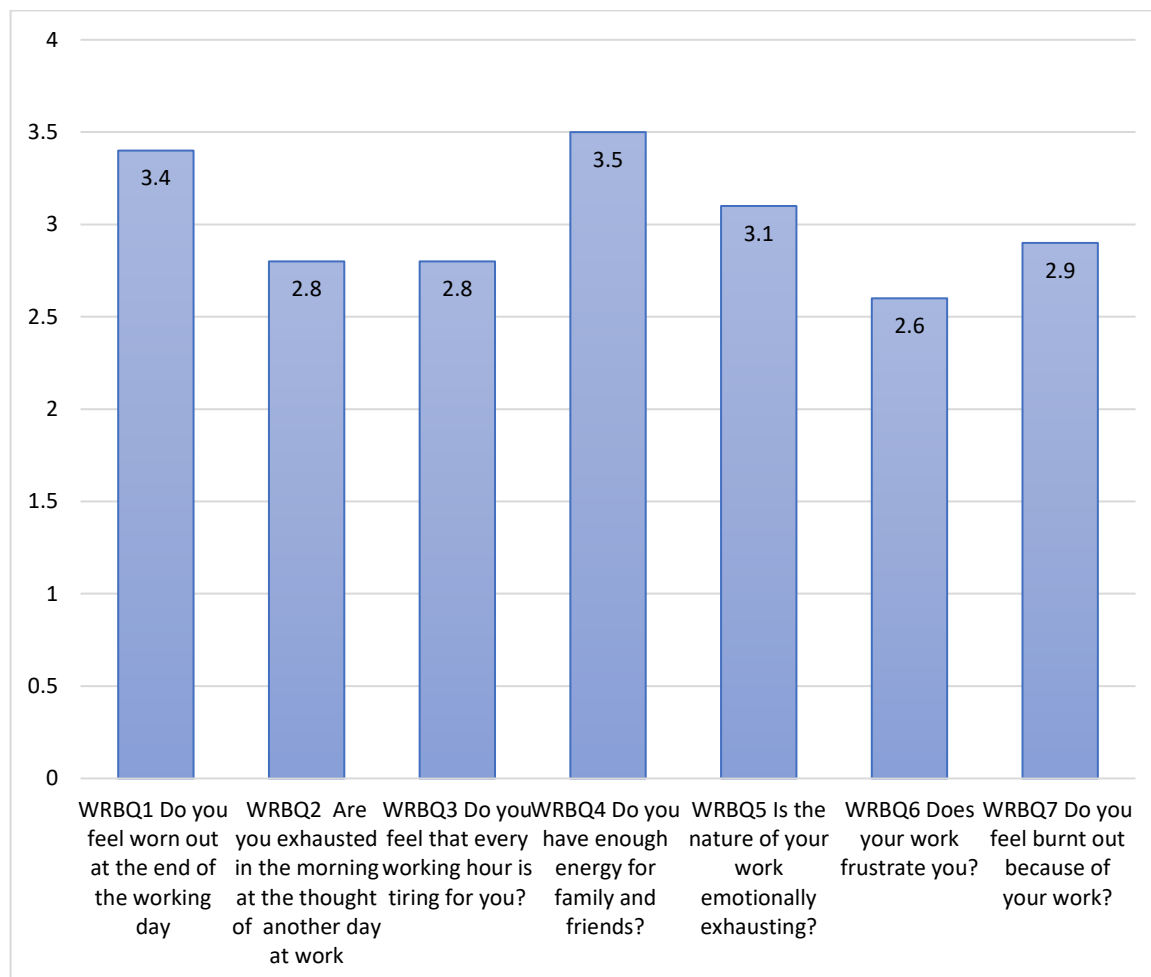


Figure 6- Mean scores for items on Work-Related Burnout

Figure 6 indicates that the mean scores for seven items on Work-Related Burnout (WRB) are above average. The highest mean score is 3.5, obtained by item four on 'having enough energy for family and friends'. This is followed by item one, 'feeling worn out at the end of the working day' with 3.4, item five on emotional exhaustion of work scored the mean of 3.1 and item seven about feeling burnt out because of work with the mean score of 2.9. Items two and three share a similar mean score of 2.8, while item six on frustration towards work obtained the lowest mean score with 2.6.

Findings for Demotivating Factors

This section answers Research Question 2: What are some demotivating factors that cause work burnout? In the context of this study, demotivating factors are (a) personal burnout and (b) colleague-related burnout.

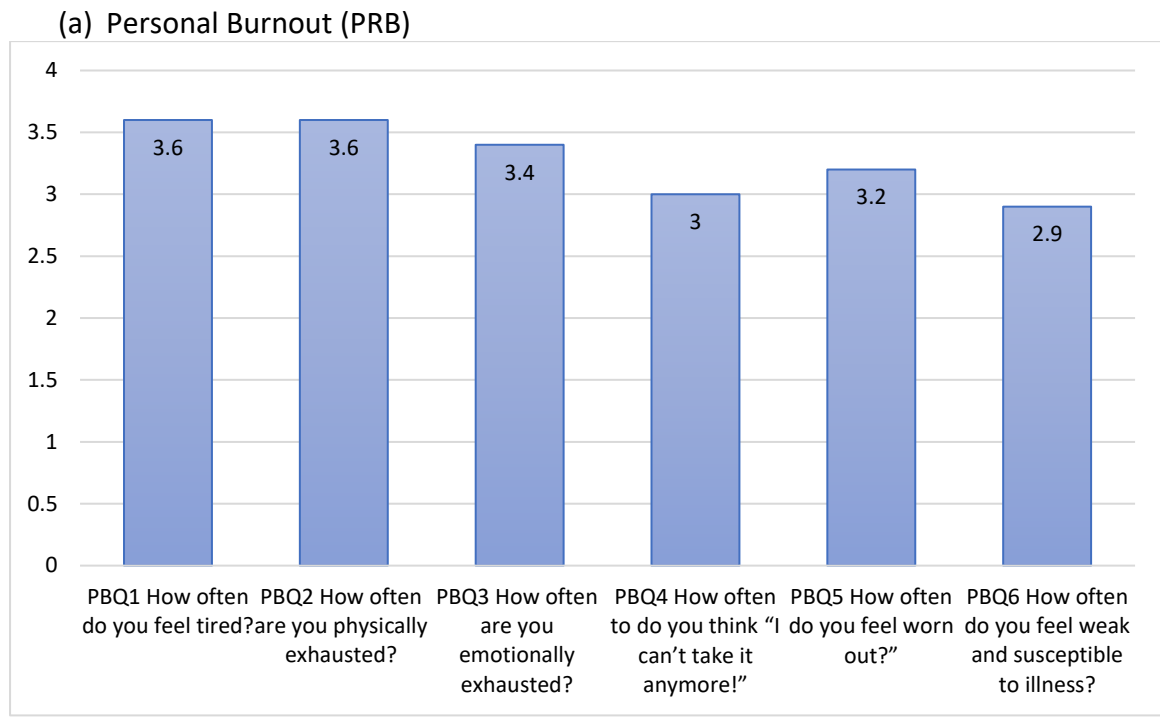


Figure 7- Mean for Personal -Related Burnout

Figure 7 illustrates the mean scores of six items on personal-related burnout (PRB). All of the items' mean scores are above average. The highest mean score (3.6) was obtained by item one and item two, which are constantly feeling tired and physically exhausted. The second highest score is 3.4 for item number three, often feeling emotionally exhausted. Item 5 on often feeling worn out has a mean score of 3.2, and item number four on often thinking I can't take it anymore' obtained a mean score of 3. In contrast, the item with the lowest score of 2.9 is item number six, often feeling weak and susceptible to illness.

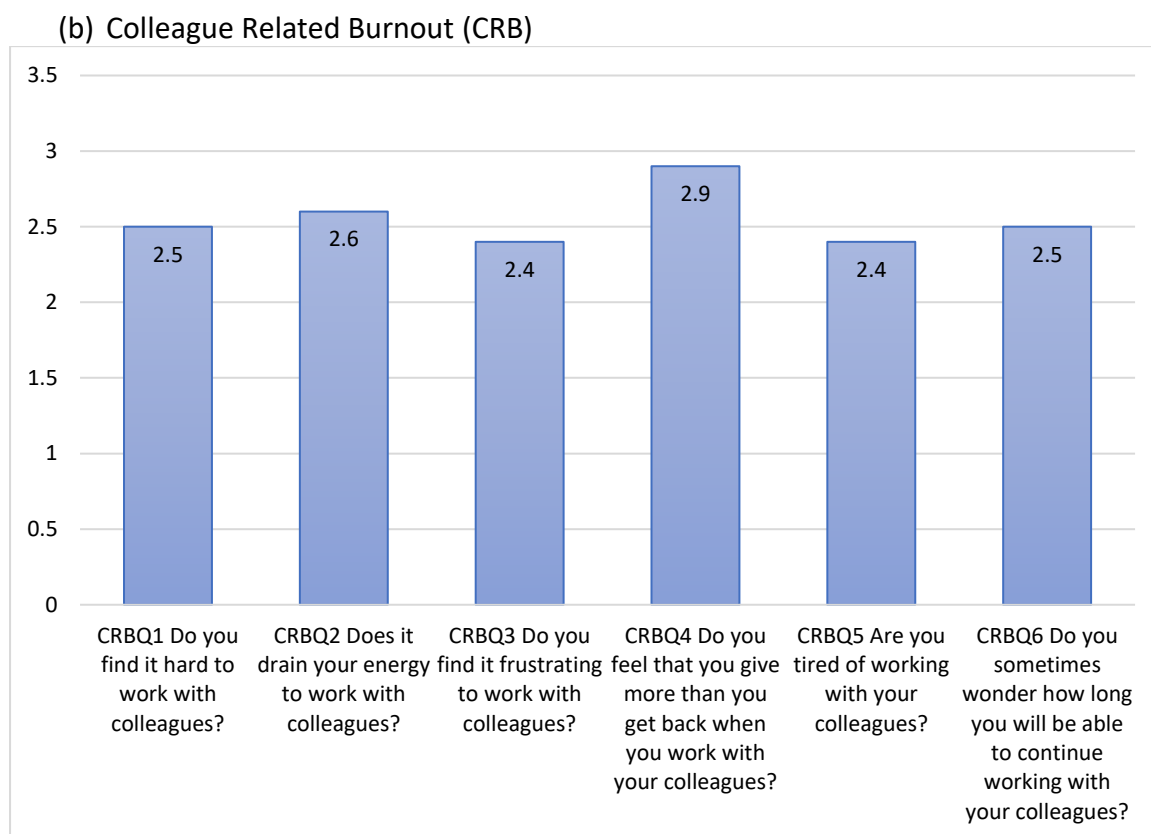


Figure 8- Mean for Colleague-Related Burnout

The mean scores for items on Colleague Related Burnout (CRB) are shown in Figure 8. The mean scores for these items ranged from 2.5 to 2.9. Item four obtained the highest mean score of 2.9, followed by item 2 with 2.6, items one and six both obtained the mean score of 2.5, while item 3 and item 5 scored below the average mean score with 2.4.

Conclusion

Table 3- Total Mean for Types of Burnout

Work-Related Burnout	3.0
Personal related Burnout	3.3
Colleague Related Burnout	2.6

The mean scores for different types of burnout are shown in Table 3. This study found that personal-related burnout has the highest mean score with 3.3. This is followed by work-related burnout with 3.0. The smallest mean score was observed for colleague-related burnout, with 2.6.

This finding indicates that personal-related burnout and colleague-related burnout can be considered demotivating factors that can lead to burnout. This finding is in accordance with Wijayanuddin and Zulkifly (2021), which found that work-family conflict could lead to work burnout. In this study, the respondents experienced strain from handling work demands that interfered with their home roles. Likewise, studies by Xiao et al (2021); Vyas et al (2021) claimed that factors like the lack of physical exercise, food intake, household affairs, the presence of children at home, distractions while working, adjusted work hours, workstation set-up and satisfaction with workspace are significant factors contributing to the issue. The respondents experienced difficulties balancing their work and personal lives during the

Movement Control Order (MCO) during the covid-19 pandemic. They were forced to stay at home and readjust their daily routines to balance working at home and managing personal matters such as taking care of household matters and supervising their children's online schooling.

Concerning colleague-related burnout which has a mean score of 2.6, the finding aligns with a study by (Vyas et al., 2021). According to this study, remote work has limited the interaction between employees and their opportunity to gain social support. WFH has restricted their physical interaction with their colleagues, which led to the feeling of isolation. Therefore, they yearn to socialise again with their colleagues after a prolonged stay at home order during the MCO. Meanwhile, the implication of employees' relationship with their colleagues is not as significant as before the MCO as this study found that colleague-related burnout is at a moderate level.

Finally, work-related burnout is considered as motivating factor that can lead to burnout, which is in line with the study by (Cheptea et al., 2021). The study found that working online increased perceived stress. This study identified several strong predictors of work burnout, including occupational stress, poor working conditions and the absence of physical contact with students. Similarly, Mahudin and Zaabar (2021) showed that workload is a strong predictor of work-related burnout.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The implications of this study can be seen from the perspective of work burnout. Work burnout is an imminent issue for many employed individuals; hence, we can not avoid this issue. The only difference is the magnitude of its impacts on our lives. Therefore, every human being must strive to achieve personal well-being, especially spiritual well-being, to obtain a fulfilled and happy life. Increasing one's spiritual well-being should be prioritised to produce quality and worthy individuals in the eyes of Allah SWT. Indirectly, this effort will positively affect not only one individual but also others. The first step to achieving spiritual well-being is by educating one's heart. In this light, tasawuf education, which encompasses purifying and educating one's soul, is seen as the best step toward spiritual well-being. The application of tasawuf education could help individuals become more resilient mentally to cope and deal with difficulties, including work-related burnout, colleague-related burnout and personal-related burnout, calmly and wisely. In short, spiritual well-being plays an important role in helping individuals thrive emotionally, cognitively, physically, and personally.

Future studies could examine a tasawuf-based spiritual well-being model from selected Sufi members' perspectives to produce holistically successful individuals according to the true Islamic mould. Tasawuf education plays an important role in producing holistic and successful individuals according to the true Islamic mould, especially in the present era of the metaverse.

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