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Performance Pressure and Work Meaningfulness: The Role of Emotional Exhaustion and Emotional Labour.

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Abstract
This study examines the relationships among performance pressure, emotional exhaustion, and work meaningfulness, with emotional labour as a moderating variable. Grounded in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework and a self-regulatory capacity perspective, the study proposes that performance pressure contributes to emotional exhaustion, which in turn relates to work meaningfulness. Data were collected from 308 employees working in private banks in Pakistan. The hypotheses were tested using covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM). The results show that performance pressure is positively related to emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is also positively associated with work meaningfulness, contrary to the hypothesized negative relationship. Further analysis indicates that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between performance pressure and work meaningfulness. In addition, emotional labour moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and work meaningfulness, such that the relationship becomes stronger at higher levels of emotional labour. Overall, the findings indicate that emotional exhaustion functions as an intervening mechanism linking performance pressure to work meaningfulness, while emotional labour conditions this relationship

1. Introduction

Employees in private banks in Pakistan operate under sustained performance regimes characterized by aggressive targets, continuous monitoring, and performance-contingent evaluation systems. In such environments, employees are expected to achieve quantifiable outcomes under conditions where expectations are difficult to negotiate due to structural and cultural constraints (Bhutto, Munir et al. 2023). Pakistan represents a context marked by relatively high-power distance and constrained job mobility, which limit employees' discretion in responding to organizational demands and increase dependence on maintaining performance(Hofstede 2003, Islam 2004). More importantly, constrained autonomy reduces employees' ability to actively manage how they allocate effort across competing demands, thereby intensifying the effects of simultaneous performance and interpersonal requirements(Jang and Kim 2025). This context therefore serves as a theoretically relevant high-intensity setting in

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which the underlying mechanisms linking job demands to strain are more likely to be revealed.

Within organizational research, the relationship between job demands and strain is well established. The Job Demands–Resources model explains how demands impair functioning by placing sustained pressure on employees' capacity to maintain effort over time (Bakker and Demerouti 2017, Bakker and De Vries 2021). However, although the model recognizes that multiple demands can co-occur, it has largely treated their effects as additive. Comparatively less attention has been given to how qualitatively distinct demands jointly draw on shared self-regulatory capacity, thereby shaping strain through interference rather than accumulation (Diestel and Schmidt 2009).

In banking contexts, employees face two distinct demands. Performance pressure represents a goal-oriented demand, requiring sustained focus on achieving targets and measurable outcomes (Mitchell, Greenbaum et al. 2019). In contrast, emotional labor—conceptualized as the regulation of emotional expressions to conform to organizational display rules—requires employees to manage how they feel and present themselves during customer interactions(Grandey 2000, Grandey and Gabriel 2015). Although emotional labor may also generate strain through mechanisms such as emotional dissonance, it is particularly relevant in the present study as a demand that draws on the same underlying self-regulatory capacity required for task performance(Yao, Gao et al. 2019). Both goal pursuit and emotion regulation require sustained effortful control, making them reliant on a shared pool of regulatory resources (Muraven, Baumeister et al. 1999). Recent evidence continues to show that sustained emotional labor depletes emotional energy and contributes to exhaustion (Hung, Chang et al. 2025).

When these demands occur together, employees must simultaneously maintain task performance while regulating their emotional expressions. Because both demands rely on the same underlying capacity for effortful control, their co-occurrence creates competition for limited self-regulatory resources, particularly under sustained or high-intensity demands(Andersen, Pihl-Thingvad et al. 2025). Under such conditions, the ability to effectively manage performance requirements becomes constrained by ongoing emotion regulation demands. In addition to its role in contributing to strain, emotional labor may also shape how employees experience the consequences of emotional exhaustion. Because emotional labor requires continued regulation of emotional expressions, it draws on regulatory resources that are already depleted under conditions of exhaustion (Jeung, Kim et al. 2018). When emotional labor demands remain high, employees must sustain effortful control despite reduced resource availability, further limiting their capacity to engage in reflective processing and meaning construction (Andersen, Pihl-Thingvad et al. 2025). Accordingly, emotional labor is expected to intensify the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on work meaningfulness(Chen, Huang et al. 2024).

While the co-occurrence of these demands explains the emergence of strain, a second limitation concerns its consequences. Prior research has largely examined emotional exhaustion as an outcome or linked it to performance-related variables, while work meaningfulness has mainly been treated as a resource that helps employees cope with

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stress(Maheshwari, Kaur et al. 2024). Grounded in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework and a self-regulatory capacity perspective, and drawing on insights from meaning-making literature, the present study conceptualizes work meaningfulness as a cognitive evaluation that depends on employees' capacity to interpret and integrate their work experiences into a coherent sense of purpose (Park 2017, Maheshwari, Kaur et al. 2024).

Emotional exhaustion may influence this process by constraining the cognitive and regulatory capacity required for such interpretation. Specifically, exhaustion is associated with reduced capacity for sustained cognitive engagement, which limits employees' ability to reflect on their experiences and integrate them into meaningful interpretations (Maslach and Jackson 1981). In this way, exhaustion may disrupt the process of meaning construction itself, rather than merely reducing positive attitudes toward work. Although prior research suggests that meaningfulness may also influence exhaustion, indicating potential bidirectionality, the present study adopts a theoretically grounded perspective in which strain is theorized to shape subsequent cognitive evaluations of work.

This perspective highlights a limited but growing stream of research, particularly studies integrating demand interaction with meaning-related outcomes. While existing work has explored meaningfulness as a predictor of strain, fewer studies have explained how demand-driven strain reshapes employees' sense of purpose at work through intervening processes(Galanakis and Tsitouri 2022) .

Addressing these gaps, the present study proposes a moderated mediation model in which performance pressure increases emotional exhaustion, which in turn reduces work meaningfulness. Emotional labor is conceptualized not only as a demand directly associated with emotional exhaustion, but also as a boundary condition that shapes how emotional exhaustion translates into downstream outcomes. Specifically, when emotional labor demands are high, the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on work meaningfulness is expected to be stronger, as the additional regulatory effort is likely to further constrain employees' capacity to engage in meaning construction.

These effects are likely to be particularly pronounced in contexts characterized by high regulatory demand intensity, where employees must simultaneously meet performance expectations and manage emotional expressions. By specifying how distinct job demands can be understood as competing for shared self-regulatory capacity and linking this process to the erosion of work meaningfulness, this study contributes to a more mechanism-based understanding of demand interaction within the JD-R framework and highlights work meaningfulness as an outcome of strain, complementing its established role as a protective resource.

1. Literature Review

2.1. Performance Pressure → Emotional Exhaustion Link (PP→EE)

Performance pressure requires employees to continuously align their behavior with externally imposed targets and evaluative standards. Empirical evidence indicates that such pressure alters how employees regulate their actions. For example, performance pressure has been linked to hypervigilant decision-making, reflecting sustained

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monitoring and heightened control over task execution, which is associated with increased emotional exhaustion (Brown, Locander et al. 2022). Similarly, under time pressure, employees must maintain performance within constrained timeframes, increasing the intensity of effort required during task completion and contributing to strain (Rafique 2023). In emotionally demanding roles, prolonged regulation of responses under expectations has also been associated with exhaustion over time (Annor, Ayertey et al. 2023).

While prior studies emphasize different explanations—such as cognitive strain, time constraints, or emotional demands—these findings suggest that performance pressure heightens demands on employees' capacity for sustained control and adjustment(Sheng and Fan 2022, Lan and Nie 2026). Maintaining performance under continuous evaluation requires ongoing monitoring and effortful regulation, which, when prolonged, is likely to deplete psychological resources and result in emotional exhaustion (Hung, Chang et al. 2025). However, this underlying process has rarely been explicitly articulated, as performance pressure is often treated as a general job demand rather than a condition requiring sustained regulatory effort.

2.2 Emotional Exhaustion → Work Meaningfulness Link (EE→WM)

Empirical research grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory consistently shows that work meaningfulness is strengthened under conditions that preserve or provide psychological resources and is associated with lower emotional exhaustion ((Blanco-Donoso, Garrosa et al. 2017, Hong, Xue et al. 2025) Across these studies, meaningfulness functions as a resource-linked state that reflects employees' capacity to maintain connection, purpose, and engagement in their work(Rabiul, Al Karim et al. 2023).

In contrast, emotional exhaustion is associated with diminished psychological involvement and detachment from work roles, indicating reduced capacity to sustain such connection (Brown, Locander et al. 2022). Evidence from emotional labour contexts further suggests that exhaustion corresponds with weakened discretionary engagement and reduced contextual involvement, reflecting a broader erosion in how employees relate to their work (Annor et al., 2023).

When considered together, these findings suggest that meaningfulness and emotional exhaustion are not independent but reflect opposing psychological conditions. While prior research has demonstrated that meaningfulness can reduce exhaustion, this pattern implies that exhaustion—characterized by reduced psychological availability—may also constrain employees' ability to experience their work as meaningful (May, Gilson et al. 2004). However, this directional relationship remains underexamined, as existing studies have primarily treated meaningfulness as an antecedent rather than a potential outcome of emotional strain.

2.3. Emotional Exhaustion as Mediator on Link of (PP → Work Meaningfulness)

Emotional exhaustion is widely recognized as a mechanism linking job demands to employee outcomes. Empirical findings show that emotionally exhausted individuals exhibit reduced engagement and diminished psychological involvement in their work

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(Brown, Locander et al. 2022), suggesting that exhaustion reflects a state in which individuals' capacity to invest effort in work-related processes is compromised.

In contrast, research on work meaningfulness has primarily conceptualized it as an antecedent or protective factor, demonstrating that meaningfulness can buffer the effects of stressors or mediate positive organizational influences (Mostafa, 2022; Hong et al., 2025). This perspective, however, does not fully address how meaningfulness itself is formed. Meaning construction is not automatic; it is an effortful process that requires individuals to interpret their work and integrate it with their broader sense of purpose.

Both interpretation and integration depend on the availability of psychological resources. When employees experience emotional exhaustion, their ability to sustain attention, engage in reflective processing, and connect their work to personal values is reduced. In this sense, exhaustion constrains not only how much employees engage in their work, but also how they make sense of it.

Supporting this interpretation, evidence indicates that negative emotional experiences under performance pressure are more pronounced when employees perceive lower meaningfulness (Lee, Gip et al. 2026) suggesting that meaningfulness is sensitive to prior psychological conditions. Taken together, these findings suggest that emotional exhaustion functions as a pathway through which performance pressure limits employees' capacity to construct work meaningfulness, although this process has not been directly examined in prior research.

2. 4. Emotional Labour as Moderator on Link of (EE → WM)

Emotional labour provides an important lens for understanding variation in how employees experience the consequences of emotional exhaustion. It involves regulating emotional expressions to meet organizational expectations and requires sustained control over internal states and outward behavior (Annor et al., 2023). Emotional exhaustion tends to emerge when such regulatory effort is prolonged, indicating that emotional labour draws on the same limited psychological resources required for task performance.

In service-oriented roles, emotional labour is embedded within job requirements, meaning that employees must regulate their emotions while simultaneously meeting performance expectations (Rughoobur-Seetah 2024). This suggests that emotional labour co-occurs with other job demands rather than functioning as an independent demand. From this perspective, performance pressure and emotional labour can be understood as drawing on a shared pool of effortful control. Performance pressure requires ongoing monitoring and behavioral adjustment, whereas emotional labour requires regulation of emotional expressions. When both demands are high, employees must allocate greater effort to maintain both task performance and emotional display, resulting in greater depletion of regulatory resources.

Importantly, emotional labour may also shape how employees experience the consequences of emotional exhaustion. When emotional labour demands remain high, employees must continue regulating their emotional expressions even under conditions of depleted regulatory capacity (e.g., Annor et al., 2023). This sustained requirement

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for effortful control further limits the cognitive and emotional resources available for reflective processing and meaning construction. As a result, the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on work meaningfulness is expected to become stronger under higher levels of emotional labour.

Although prior studies have examined emotional labour primarily as an antecedent or mediator, its role as a boundary condition shaping how strain translates into downstream psychological outcomes remains underdeveloped.

2.5. Integrated Theoretical Position & Contribution

Overall, prior research has examined performance pressure, emotional exhaustion, and work meaningfulness largely in isolation, offering fragmented explanations that emphasize cognitive strain, emotional demands, or motivational processes (Annor et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2022; Rafique et al., 2023). This fragmentation obscures a common underlying process.

The present study advances literature by proposing a shared self-regulatory capacity perspective through which these relationships can be better understood. Both performance pressure and emotional labour require sustained monitoring, adjustment, and control, thereby drawing on a limited pool of regulatory resources (Annor et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2022). Within this framework, emotional exhaustion reflects the depletion of these resources, whereas work meaningfulness depends on their availability for interpretation and integration (Hong et al., 2025; Mostafa, 2022).

This perspective extends prior models that treat job demands as independent stressors or position exhaustion primarily as an endpoint. Instead, it conceptualizes exhaustion as a resource-based transmission mechanism, through which the effects of competing demands may unfold (Rafique et al., 2023; Rughoobur-Seetah, 2024).

Theoretically, this shifts attention from isolated demand–outcome relationships toward a capacity-based explanation of how job demands translate into psychological outcomes, offering a account of why similar levels of performance pressure may result in different levels of emotional exhaustion and subsequent work experiences.

Accordingly, this study examines how performance pressure influences work meaningfulness through emotional exhaustion as the focal mediating mechanism, emotional labour as a condition that shapes how emotional exhaustion influences work meaningfulness.

Hypothesis Development

Building on the preceding theoretical framework, performance pressure, emotional exhaustion, and emotional labour are expected to be linked through a shared self-regulatory capacity mechanism. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Performance pressure is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

H2: Emotional exhaustion is negatively related to work meaningfulness.

H3: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between performance pressure and work meaningfulness.

H4: Emotional labour moderates the emotional exhaustion–work meaningfulness relationship, such that it is stronger at higher levels of emotional labour.

2. Methodology

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3.1 Research Context and Data Collection

This study was conducted in the context of private banking organizations in Pakistan, a setting characterized by high performance expectations, strict monitoring systems, and continuous customer interaction. Employees in this sector are required to simultaneously meet aggressive performance targets while managing emotional expressions during client interactions, making it an appropriate context for examining the combined effects of performance pressure and emotional labour.

Data were collected from employees working in private banks across major cities in Pakistan. A total of 308 usable responses were obtained. Participants were approached through professional networking platforms, primarily LinkedIn, and invited to complete an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms.

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured to reduce evaluation apprehension and encourage honest responses. Due to the absence of an accessible sampling frame and restrictions in organizational access, a non-probability convenience sampling approach was employed, which is common in organizational research involving professional populations.

The sample size of 308 is adequate for the statistical analyses employed in this study. Prior methodological research suggests that sample sizes exceeding 200 are sufficient for regression-based mediation and moderation analyses, providing stable parameter estimates and acceptable statistical power (Cohen, 1992; Hair et al., 2017; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Therefore, the current sample meets recommended thresholds for structural analysis.

The data were analyzed using covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM). This approach was implemented using the lavaan package in R. CB-SEM was selected as it is suitable for theory testing and confirmation of hypothesized relationships (Hair et al., 2019). The present study aims to examine a theoretically grounded model involving mediation and moderation effects; therefore, CB-SEM is appropriate for assessing both the measurement model (via confirmatory factor analysis) and the structural model simultaneously.

Additionally, CB-SEM is preferred when the objective is to evaluate model fit and validate constructs using established measurement scales (Kline, 2016). Given that the study focuses on confirmatory analysis rather than prediction, CB-SEM is considered more appropriate than variance-based approaches such as PLS-SEM.

3.2 Measures

All constructs were measured using previously validated scales. Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Emotional labour was measured using items adapted from Alicia A. Grandey (2003) and Céleste M. Brotheridge and Raymond T. Lee (2003), focusing on surface acting. Sample items include:"I fake the emotions I show to customers.""I put on an act in order to deal with customers in an appropriate way.""I display emotions that are

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different from what I really feel.”“I hide my true feelings when interacting with customers”.

Performance Pressure

Performance pressure was measured using four items adapted from prior research on performance demands and evaluation pressure (e.g., Barron W. Brown et al., 2020). Sample items include:“I am expected to achieve high performance targets in my job.” “My job performance is closely monitored and evaluated.” “I am required to meet strict performance standards.” “I am expected to continuously improve my performance results.”

Emotional Exhaustion

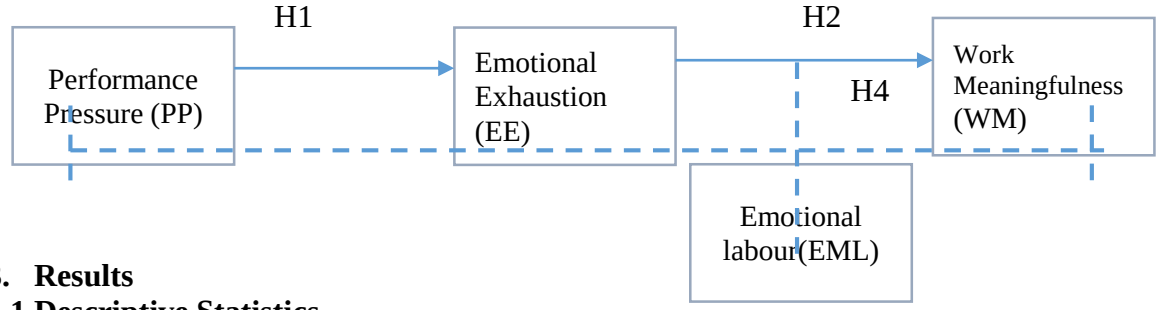
Emotional exhaustion was assessed using items adapted from the Christina Maslach and Susan E. Jackson (1981) burnout scale (Maslach Burnout Inventory). Sample items include:“I feel emotionally drained from my work.” “I feel used up at the end of the workday.” “I feel fatigued when I start my workday.” “My job leaves me feeling physically and emotionally exhausted.” “I feel burned out because of my work.”

Work Meaningfulness

Work meaningfulness was measured using items adapted from Bryan J. Dik and Ryan D. Duffy (2009) and Marjolein Lips-Wiersma and Lloyd Morris (2009). Sample items include:“The work I do is meaningful to me.” “My job activities are personally significant.” “I feel that my work serves an important purpose.” “My work contributes positively to my life.” “I find my work to be valuable and worthwhile.”

The research model in Figure 1. examines the effect of performance pressure on work meaningfulness, with emotional exhaustion acting as a mediator. Emotional labour moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and work meaningfulness, forming a moderated mediation model.

Figure 1.



3. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were assessed using education level and work experience (proxied by age categories). These variables were selected as they are most relevant to understanding employees’ perceptions of performance pressure, emotional exhaustion, and work meaningfulness.

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As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents held a bachelor's degree (46.8%), followed by post-graduate qualifications (31.8%). A smaller proportion reported high school (14.9%), diploma (2.9%), and less than high school education (3.6%).
In terms of experience, most respondents were between 20–30 years (39.9%) and 31–40 years (34.7%), indicating a relatively young and early-to-mid career workforce. Smaller proportions were aged 41–50 (15.6%), 51–60 (4.5%), and above 60 (0.3%).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 308)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Education	Less than high school	11	3.6
	High school	46	14.9
	Diploma	9	2.9
	Bachelor	144	46.8
	Post-graduate	98	31.8
Age (Experience)	Less than 20	15	4.9
	20–30	123	39.9
	31–40	107	34.7
	41–50	48	15.6
	51–60	14	4.5
	More than 60	1	0.3

Source: Authors own work

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 2. Performance pressure (M = 4.17, SD = 1.73), emotional exhaustion (M = 4.72, SD = 1.62), and work meaningfulness (M = 4.78, SD = 1.58) showed moderate mean values. Emotional labour had a mean of 3.13 (SD = 1.30).
Correlation analysis indicated that emotional exhaustion was positively associated with work meaningfulness ($r = .50$, $p < .01$). Other correlations were relatively low, suggesting no multicollinearity concerns.
Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

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Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Performance Pressure	4.17	1.73	—			
2. Emotional Exhaustion	4.72	1.62	.09	—		
3. Work Meaningfulness	4.78	1.58	.08	.50**	—	
4. Emotional Labour	3.13	1.30	.10	.02	.05	—

Note: N = 308. $p < .05$*, $p < .01$**. Source: Authors own work

4.2 Measurement Model

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using lavaan to assess the measurement model. The model demonstrated excellent fit to the data (CFI = 0.997, TLI = 0.996, RMSEA = 0.019, SRMR = 0.025). These values exceed recommended thresholds (CFI and TLI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08) as suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999).

Similarly, the structural model also demonstrated excellent fit (CFI = 0.997, RMSEA = 0.017), further confirming the adequacy of the proposed model. Overall, the results indicate that both the measurement and structural models fit the data well. The results of the model fit indices are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold	Interpretation
χ^2/df	1.31	< 3	Good
CFI	0.991	> 0.90	Excellent
TLI	0.990	> 0.90	Excellent
RMSEA	0.032	< 0.08	Excellent
SRMR	0.052	< 0.08	Good

Note: Recommended threshold values are based on Hu and Bentler (1999).

During the measurement model assessment, Items PP3 and PP4 were removed from the Performance Pressure construct due to low factor loading and high inter-item correlation (multicollinearity). Additionally, EMl2 was removed due to redundancy. The final model includes only retained items with acceptable loadings (Hair et al., 2019). As shown in Table 4, all remaining factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating acceptable indicator reliability (Hair et al., 2019).

Reliability analysis further indicated strong internal consistency. As presented in Table 4, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeded 0.70, meeting the recommended criteria for reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

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Additionally, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values in Table 5. were above the recommended threshold of 0.50, confirming convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results (Final Measurement Model)

Construct	Item	Loading
Performance Pressure	PP1	0.887
	PP2	0.841
Emotional Exhaustion	EE1	0.831
	EE2	0.855
	EE3	0.855
	EE4	0.850
	EE5	0.881
Work Meaningfulness	WM1	0.859
	WM2	0.890
	WM3	0.829
	WM4	0.674
	WM5	0.863
Emotional Labour	EM1	0.843
	EM3	0.858
	EM4	0.933

Source: Authors own work

Table 5. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Alpha	CR (Omega)	AVE
Performance Pressure	0.85	0.85	0.75
Emotional Exhaustion	0.93	0.93	0.73

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Construct	Alpha	CR (Omega)	AVE
Work Meaningfulness	0.91	0.91	0.68
Emotional Labour	0.91	0.91	0.78

Source: Authors own work

4.2 Structural Model

The structural model was evaluated using SEM and demonstrated excellent fit (CFI = 0.997, RMSEA = 0.017), again satisfying recommended thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

As reported in Table 6, performance pressure had a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.339$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1.

Emotional exhaustion had a significant positive effect on work meaningfulness ($\beta = 0.402$, $p < .001$), contrary to the hypothesized negative relationship.

Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of emotional exhaustion was examined using indirect effect analysis. As indicated in Table 6, the indirect effect of performance pressure on work meaningfulness through emotional exhaustion was significant ($\beta = 0.136$, $p < 0.001$). This confirms partial mediation, as both direct and indirect effects were significant, consistent with mediation guidelines (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Therefore, H3 was supported.

Table 6. Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	p-value	Result
H1	PP → EE	0.339	< .001	Supported
H2	EE → WM	0.402	< .001	Not Supported
H3	Indirect Effect	0.136	< .001	Supported

Source: Authors own work

Moderation Analysis

Moderation analysis was conducted using regression analysis. As shown in Table 7, emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.348$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional labour ($\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.001$) both had significant effects on work meaningfulness.

Importantly, the interaction term between emotional exhaustion and emotional labour was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.106$, $p = 0.001$), indicating moderation. A significant interaction term is the standard criterion for moderation (Aiken & West, 1991), thus supporting H4.

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Furthermore, the interaction plot illustrates that the relationship between emotional exhaustion and work meaningfulness becomes stronger at higher levels of emotional labour.

Table 7. Moderation Analysis

Predictor	β	p-value
Emotional Exhaustion	0.348	< .001
Emotional Labour	0.296	< .001
Interaction (EE × EL)	0.106	0.001

$R^2 = 0.27$ Source: Authors own work

Multicollinearity Assessment

Multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. As shown in Table 8, all VIF values ranged from 1.04 to 1.50, which are well below the recommended threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2019). This indicates that multicollinearity is not a concern in the model and that the predictors are sufficiently independent.

Table 8. Multicollinearity Diagnostics (VIF)

Predictor	VIF
Performance Pressure	1.04
Emotional Exhaustion	1.50
Emotional Labour	1.49

Note: All VIF values are below the recommended threshold of 5, indicating no multicollinearity concerns (Hair et al., 2019). Source: Authors own work

Common Method Bias

Common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted in which all measurement items were loaded onto a single factor. The results indicated that the single factor accounted for 30% of the total variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This suggests that common method bias is not a significant concern in this study.

5. Discussion

The results provide support for the positive relationship between performance pressure and emotional exhaustion, which is consistent with prior research demonstrating that

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performance-related demands increase psychological strain (Brown et al., 2020; Rafique et al., 2023). This finding supports the view that performance pressure operates as an important job demand that is associated with reduced emotional resources among employees.

However, the relationship between emotional exhaustion and work meaningfulness was found to be positive, contrary to the hypothesized negative association. This finding diverges from prior research, which has largely conceptualized work meaningfulness as a resource that mitigates emotional exhaustion (Hong et al., 2025; Blanco-Donoso et al., 2017; Chakravorty et al., 2024). These studies imply a largely unidirectional relationship in which meaningfulness protects against strain. However, the present results suggest that this relationship may be more complex. Rather than diminishing meaningfulness, emotional exhaustion may, under certain conditions, coexist with, or in some cases be associated with higher perceptions of work significance.

One possible explanation is that in high-demand work environments, employees may, in some contexts, interpret emotional strain as an indicator of the importance and value of their work. In such contexts, effort and sacrifice can become closely associated with purpose, potentially leading employees to derive a sense of meaning from demanding experiences despite experiencing exhaustion.

While the theoretical framework of this study, grounded in the Job Demands–Resources model and meaning-making perspectives, suggests that emotional exhaustion constrains employees' capacity for meaning construction through resource depletion, the present findings indicate that this process may not operate uniformly. In high-demand contexts, employees may rely on alternative interpretive processes, whereby sustained effort and strain are interpreted as signals of work importance.

The findings extend existing research by suggesting that emotional exhaustion may function as an important explanatory mechanism through which performance pressure translates into employees' evaluations of their work. Rather than treating emotional exhaustion solely as an outcome, this study positions it as a potential transmission pathway that links job demands to meaning-related perceptions, thereby extending attention somewhat beyond performance-based outcomes to existential work experiences. now check consistency

The moderating role of emotional labour offers additional insight into this relationship by showing that the impact of emotional exhaustion on work meaningfulness is not uniform but contingent on emotional job demands. Specifically, when emotional labour is high, the relationship between exhaustion and meaningfulness appears stronger, suggesting that multiple demands may jointly influence employees' interpretation of their work. This highlights the importance of considering interacting demands, rather than isolated stressors, in understanding how employees construct meaning under pressure.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends prior research by challenging the dominant view of work meaningfulness as primarily a protective resource and instead demonstrates that meaningfulness can also emerge as an outcome

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of demand-driven emotional states (Allan et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019). Specifically, the findings show that work meaningfulness does not necessarily diminish under conditions of emotional exhaustion, indicating that its role within the stress process is more complex than previously assumed.

Second, drawing on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and meaning-making perspectives (Park, 2010), this study highlights emotional exhaustion as an important mechanism through which performance pressure is translated into employees' cognitive evaluations of their work. By establishing this transmission process, the study extends JD-R research beyond traditional performance and well-being outcomes to include meaning-related evaluations.

Third, the study advances understanding of demand interactions by demonstrating emotional labour conditions how emotional exhaustion influences work meaningfulness. The findings show that job demands do not operate independently but instead interact through competition for shared self-regulatory capacity, providing a more precise explanation of how multiple demands jointly shape employees' work experiences within the JD-R framework.

5.2 Practical implications

The findings offer several practical implications for organizations operating in high-demand work environments such as banking and service sectors.

First, managers should recognize that performance pressure, while effective in driving outcomes, is associated with increased emotional exhaustion. Rather than eliminating performance pressure, organizations should focus on how it is structured and communicated. For example, emphasizing process-based performance metrics alongside outcome targets may help reduce excessive strain while maintaining performance expectations.

Second, the positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and work meaningfulness suggests that employees may interpret demanding work experiences as indicators of task importance. While this may sustain motivation in the short term, it also creates the risk that signs of burnout remain unnoticed. Managers should therefore avoid equating high commitment or perceived meaningfulness with employee well-being and should incorporate regular assessments of emotional exhaustion, even among employees who appear highly engaged.

Third, the moderating role of emotional labour indicates that employees facing both performance demands and emotional regulation requirements are particularly susceptible to intensified work experiences. In roles requiring frequent emotional display (e.g., customer-facing positions), organizations should differentiate performance expectations by role type and provide structured recovery periods between high-interaction tasks to reduce cumulative strain.

Finally, organizations should acknowledge that job demands do not operate in isolation. When multiple demands coexist, their combined impact may shape how employees interpret their work. Rather than addressing demands independently, job design should consider how performance pressure and emotional labour jointly affect employees, ensuring that simultaneous high demands are not consistently imposed on the same

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roles. This is particularly important as these demands draw on shared self-regulatory capacity, increasing the likelihood of cumulative strain.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and future research using longitudinal designs could better capture the temporal dynamics between emotional exhaustion and work meaningfulness.
Second, the study focuses on high-demand contexts such as banking and service sectors, which may limit generalizability to settings with different demand structures.
Third, emotional exhaustion was examined as the primary mechanism, and other processes (e.g., cognitive appraisal or identity-related factors) were not considered.
Finally, while the study draws on the Job Demands–Resources framework, it primarily focuses on job demands; future research could incorporate personal and organizational resources to provide a more balanced perspective.

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