

The Mediating Role of Surface and Deep Acting on the Nexus between Emotional Intelligence and Work-Related Burnout

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Abstract

Work-related burnout (WBO) is prevalent in the global economy, culminating in profit loss, productivity decline, and employee absenteeism. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the preceding threats in human resource management within the manufacturing industry. The ongoing discussions on WBO highlight the significance and value of this issue. Additionally, empirical proof regarding the association among emotional intelligence (EQ), emotional labour strategies, and WBO, particularly within the human resource division of the manufacturing industry, is scarce. Thus, the current study aims to identify the relationships and models with emotional contagion theory as a foundation using the PLS-SEM technique. The responses from 311 questionnaires were collected among HR managers in selected ISO 9001 Malaysian manufacturing companies using an online survey. The study found a negative relationship between EQ and emotional labour-deep acting (ELSA) and a positive relationship with emotional labour-surface acting (ELSA). Besides, ELSA is also negatively correlated with WBO, while ELDA has a positive relationship with WBO. The study also proved that emotional labour strategies (deep-acting and surface-acting) operated as an intermediary factor in the connection between EQ and WBO. Past research on WBO has been inconclusive, and there has yet to be a comprehensive exploration of the direct or indirect connections between EQ, ELSA, ELDA, and WBO. Furthermore, previous studies often overlooked the viewpoint of HR managers in WBO investigations. The results of this research contribute to the literature concerning this issue, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context, and help policy developers of human resource management bring in the elements of psychological factors while forming human resource policies and practices.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Labour, Surface Acting, Deep Acting, HR Managers, Work-Related Burnout.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) officially acknowledged burnout as a recognised work-related phenomenon in January 2022 (World Health Organization, 2023). WHO categorised work-related burnout as “persistent workplace stress that has not been effectively mitigated”. Prolonged stress can lead to chronic anxiety, psychosomatic sickness, and other emotional issues (Lloyd et al., 2002). A burnout employee would feel sensations of drive depletion or extreme fatigue, heightened vigorous impartiality from employee’s professional responsibilities, or the emergence of pessimism or cynicism in connection with one’s occupation, along with diminished professional effectiveness (World Health Organization, 2023). American Institute of Stress (2020) stated that the key factors contributing to work-related burnout (WBO) are excessive job demands and imbalances in workload distribution. The research also revealed that 43% of employees experience a sense of being overwhelmed by their job tasks, resulting in elevated stress levels and ultimately contributing to WBO.

A similar situation is in Malaysia, where more than 50% of Malaysian workers have reported experiencing WBO in 2022, as written by providers of human resource solutions (The Star, 2023). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic induced a notable shift in how employees viewed the importance of their careers and mental health, leading them to consider different industries or explore alternative work approaches (Free Malaysia Today, 2022). These would culminate in critical decision-making for them as Malaysia is currently in an economic slump where quitting their job might lead to unemployment. Nevertheless, finding a means to survive with some imbalances in mental health seems to be better than remaining still. The last few years have been tragic for many people, with economic layoffs, recession, movement-restricted orders, political turmoil, and the high depression. Sadly, the aftermath of the pandemic further exacerbates the already worst situation. The

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employees' WBO percentage increased by 58% in 2022. Even employees who maintain an appropriate equilibrium between work and personal life have a 49% tendency to experience WBO (The Malaysian Reserve, 2022). The findings of the so-called survey The Healthiest Workplace by AIA Vitality Malaysia show a persistent increase of 22% in mental health issues in the workplace (New Straits Times, 2019). Teoh and Kee (2022) stated that the notable factors contributing to WBO encompassed elevated work demands, overwhelming workloads, stringent time constraints, and extended working hours. Excessive workload and a high level of responsibility can lead to overwhelming stress and eventual burnout (Hassan & Samy, 2022; Sidik et al., 2017a) would inevitably lead to increasing turnover rates and a higher risk of mental health issues (Khalid et al., 2020; Sidik et al., 2017b; Tulili et al., 2022). Employees who suffer from WBO are 9% more likely to perceive reduced productivity (The Wellness at Work Report, 2022).

The manufacturing industry contributes significantly to Malaysia's economic growth, accounting for RM156.3 billion in trade value, with sales value reaching RM1.8 trillion in 2022, up 8.6% year-over-year. As of December 2022, the manufacturing industry has employed 2.34 million people to cater to production and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Malaysian manufacturing bestows a profusion to the country's growth. Unfortunately, post-pandemic challenges such as political turbulence, national inflation, supply chain disruptions, labour shortages, performance drop and profitability decline are burdensome and need heavy attention too (The Edge Markets, 2022; The Malaysian Reserve, 2021; The Star, 2023). The manufacturing industry's growth shows employees' power, effort, and efficiency despite the pandemic and linked difficulties. Notably, the recovery from the pandemic did not unfold uniformly across all manufacturing industry segments. Challenges persistently evolved as the situation shifted. Thus, the sustained recovery and growth of the Malaysian manufacturing industry require an ongoing commitment to adaptability and resilience to change efforts.

Hence, this is a heavy challenge to human resource (HR) managers as the guardians of the workforce within a business organisation, as they perform a multifaceted function in assisting business organisations in mitigating the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and are influential in driving the human resource recovery efforts while ensuring the well-being and engagement of the workforce. Therefore, it is vital to study the phenomena of the current WBO among HR managers working in the manufacturing industry. Researchers focus more on WBO in the manufacturing industry than other industries, yet the findings are still not widely available. Conversely, many past studies focus on different functional or operational managers rather than HR managers. Understanding and acknowledging the HR manager's WBO would help reverse the conditions and bring significant organisational change, especially in getting the right person for the right job; mismatching would lead to poor performance. Indeed, the continuous pressure on HR managers to develop, engage and sustain competent employees for long-term success is high. Besides, working with other functional managers to ensure the workforce is directly committed to achieving the mission and vision of the company also entails many levels of stress, especially when the company has problematic employees. Haar (2023) stated that WBO is prevalent among HR managers. Andreychik (2019) supports and alludes that an occupation designated for helping, such as HR managers, is often struck with some forms of WBO. Previous research has also discovered the connection between emotional intelligence (EQ), emotional labour (deep and surface acting), and WBO. However, the findings in this area are inconclusive since research has not thoroughly examined the predictive role of individual attributes such as EQ on WBO directly and indirectly, specifically on HR managers, across various cultural and work environments. Neglect on the issue of WBO among HR managers, who are the key personnel leading human capital, could lead to imbalances in human capital management and a decline in overall organisational performance. At any point in time, it is essential to study the WBO of any profession; thus, this study aims to estimate the antecedents of WBO among HR managers in Malaysia's manufacturing industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Labour Strategies

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is well-defined as the capability of individuals to recognise and control feelings, as well as the skill to precisely perceive the emotions of others while flexibly prioritising the assimilation of information to inform their decision-making processes (Mayer et al., 2016). Goleman (2021, 2020) and Sharma and Tiwari (2023) pointed out that a person with a high level of EQ would demonstrate the capability to

comprehend and proficiently control their own emotions, along with potentially understanding and navigating the emotions of others. On the other hand, emotional labour is a strategic planning and conscious regulation to regulate emotions that support the organisation's goals throughout interpersonal interactions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Gowan, 2023; Morris & Feldman, 1997; Ren, 2023). Emotional labour is a crucial aspect of many jobs, including managing human resources involves the endeavour, provision, and regulation compulsory to handle emotions to meet the demands of effective functioning of a job role or position in an organisational hierarchy (Wang & Chen, 2022). Emotional labour consists of two strategies: deep acting and surface acting. Emotional labour-deep acting (ELDA) signifies the practice of intentionally modifiable individual emotions to align with organisational norms and expectations, even if they conflict with one's personal feelings. Those who practice this technique display positive emotions and create a positive workplace environment (Adams & Mastracci, 2020; Jeung & Chang, 2021; Lartey et al., 2020; Lee & Madera, 2019). Meanwhile, Emotional labour-surface acting (ELSA) implies suppressing or pretending an individual's genuine emotions to exhibit emotions that align with the circumstances. Those using this technique hide negative emotions and create a positive workplace environment.

The association between EQ and ELDA has gained much attention in the past. Cote (2005) and Cote et al. (2021) found that those with high EQ potentially participate in ELDA for interpersonal relationships. Those who had high EQ tend to be more resilient under pressure. Their capacity to manage and channel their emotions effectively enables them to manoeuvre through intricate social circumstances (Fteiha & Awwad, 2020; Grandey, 2000; Goleman, 1995). Therefore, they have a solid commitment to their work, have better satisfaction and are less susceptible to labour effects (Fteiha & Awwad, 2020; Kant & Shanker, 2021; Grandey, 2000). In a study by Brotheridge (2006), employees with higher EQ were better at modulating their emotions following organisational guidelines. On the other hand, employees with lower EQ tend not to use their feelings. Therefore, EQ and ELDA are presumed to have a positive relationship.

Cote (2005) also supports a positive and robust connection between EQ and the practice of ELSA. EQ can mitigate the negative impact of ELSA, reducing WBO (Bayighomog & Arasli, 2022). According to Grandey (2000), individual differences and emotional expressiveness play a role in determining whether individuals need to practice emotional regulation actively. Cottingham (2022) and Hwang and Park (2022) have found that a person's consistent emotional state remains unaffected, regardless of whether they mimic their emotions at work instead of openly adjusting their mood. Hence, from these insights, it is presumed that EQ and ELSA have a negative relationship.

Relationship between Emotional Labour and Work-Related Burnout

WBO refers to a condition characterised by emotional, mental, and physical fatigue that arises from continuous or excessive exposure to stress in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). World Health Organization (2023) characterised burnout as pessimism, disengagement and hopelessness. Coherently, Vansoeterstede et al. (2023) defined WBO as exhaustion, failing, and emotional and physical exhaustion owing to high energy, strength, or demands. Moreover, WBO is a mixture of psychosocial and physical signs (Freudenberger, 1975). Hochschild (1983) popularised "emotional labour" to describe organising emotions to show facial and physical responses. He says it involves expressing or suppressing actual emotions to make others feel safe and cared for. Previous studies discovered a significant linkage between ELDA and emotional exhaustion (Davis & Stazyk, 2022; Fouquereau et al., 2019; Ha et al., 2021). Deep acting instils constructive outcomes, such as personal achievement, and boosts emotional well-being (Adams & Mastracci, 2020; Jeung & Chang, 2021). Therefore, a happy employee is less likely to experience WBO. Past studies found that ELDA has mitigated the WBO effects on employees (Adams & Mastracci, 2020; Jeung & Chang, 2021; Lartey et al., 2020; Lee, 2019). Hence, a negative relationship exists between ELDA and WBO.

Effective emotion regulation happens when HR managers alter their circumstances, manage and adapt their thought processes, and react appropriately to counterparts in manners that don't cause prolonged dissonance and stress, as Hur et al. (2022) emphasised. Yin et al. (2023) have identified significant and positive correlations between emotional labour surface acting (ELSA) and WBO. A substantial body of research findings consistently supports the idea that ELSA is a strong and direct predictor of WBO (Kim, 2020; Nam & Kabutay,

2021; Theodosius et al., 2021; Yin, 2023). Therefore, these observations show a positive relationship between ELSA and WBO.

Mediating Role of ELDA and ELSA

Literature reviews define emotional labour as an innate emotional condition (Hochschild, 1983), including ELDA (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Sayre et al., 2021). Practically, ELDA is well-established, positively connected to performance, and reduces emotional exhaustion (Grandey, 2003). Choi et al. (2019) found that ELDA appropriately manages and reduces emotional labour stress-induced WBO. In a study by Silbaugh et al. (2023) on the mediation of ELDA between EQ and WBO, ELDA mediates the relationship between EQ and WBO. Choi et al. (2019) found that individuals who can cope with their emotions moderate the WBO impact, and having a solid EQ improves the relationship between ELSA and WBO. The findings also suggest that employing high EQ and seeking support can reduce the effects of ELSA on WBO. Further, Chen et al. (2019) and Silbaugh et al. (2023) found the mediation influence of ELSA on alleviating WBO. Hence, ELSA is presumed to mediate the relationship between EQ and WBO.

Previous studies on emotional labour have focused on several critical factors within the workplace, such as the WBO (Ardanty et al., 2023; Nam & Kabutey, 2021), turnover (Kang & Jang, 2022; Kerdpitak & Jermittiparsert, 2020), organisational commitment (Akin, 2021; Yang & Guy, 2023) employees' passion (Chen et al., 2019), job satisfaction (Lee & Jang, 2020; Wen et al., 2019), and emotional regulations and displays (Riforgiate et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2022). It is also evident in various areas of research on surface acting and deep acting where the former is positively correlated and the latter combats WBO (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Chi & Grandey, 2019; Grandey, 2003; Grandey et al., 2020; Yang & Guy, 2023). The alternative of an emotion regulation approach significantly affects personnel and organisational outcomes.

Theoretical Foundation

Emotional contagion theory (ECT) posits that emotions can spread from one person to another, particularly in social interactions, leading to shared emotional experiences. WBO is emotional, bodily, and mental weariness induced by chronic stress, generally from working. Prior studies illustrated that emotional contagion contributes to WBO (Petitta & Jiang, 2020; Petitta et al., 2020). Social interactions can cause emotional contagion and behavioural synchronisation. The ECT provides a valuable framework for understanding how emotions are shared, communicated, and experienced within individuals and social groups and the potential consequences in different domains. Therefore, this study conforms to the exposition of the ECT using EQ, ELDA, ELSA and WBO.

METHOD

Population and Sample

A quantitative method was employed in this study to describe and explore the relationships between variables while determining causality between them. The sampling frame for this study is 3016 manufacturing companies registered and listed in the Federation of Malaysia Manufacturers (FMM) Directory (2022). All the companies considered for selection have ISO 9001 standards certification within the Malaysian manufacturing industry. Concerning Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) population size calculation, a sample size 341 is statistically appropriate. Nevertheless, the sample increased by 25% per cent to ensure a sizeable response, resulting in an adjusted sample size of 426.

Instruments and Data Collection

The EQ construct was measured using the 16-item scale developed and validated by Wong and Law (2002). The emotional Labour Scale (ELS) was used to measure ELDA (3 items) and ELSA (3 items) (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) was used to measure WBO, using a 7-item scale specifically for WBO (Kristensen et al., 2005). A five-point Likert Scale, '1' representing "strongly disagreeing" and a scale of '5' expressing "strongly agree", was used to score the responses. Permission to use received from the original creators of the instruments. Three experts thoroughly reviewed the final survey forms to ensure their precision and extensiveness. This cross-sectional study used a self-administered survey to obtain the

necessary responses. The survey questionnaire only took 10 minutes to complete and was distributed online using Google Forms. The online self-administered questionnaire yielded 311 valid responses, with a response rate of 73%. In this study, the respondents were HR managers. The participants were made aware that their identity will remain anonymous.

Data Analysis Using PLS-SEM

Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) using the SmartPLS 4 examines the connections between the constructs. It can model latent constructs even when sample sizes are limited and work under non-normal settings (Chin, 1998). This study's model was developed from multi-item components, reflecting measures rather than formative ones. The constructs that were inter-correlated, unidimensional, and have high internal consistency. The research outcomes were based on a two-step procedure, initially evaluating the measurement model and then estimating the structural model.

RESULT

Research Participants

One hundred eighty male HR managers (58%) and 131 female HR managers (42%) participated in the survey willingly. Currently, males hold a slight majority of the HR manager jobs in Malaysia's manufacturing industry. Most HR managers in the survey fell into the age groups of 31-40 years (n=109; 35%) and 41-50 years (n=118; 38%). All responders have completed higher education and possess a range of accolades such as certificates, degrees, PhDs, and professional certifications. The participants showed substantial tenure at their current company in the survey. The respondents' job experiences validated a reasonable response to the question. Forty-seven employees have been with the company for over ten years. One hundred forty-six managers have worked for the company for 6-10 years, and 109 managers have worked for 3-5 years. Only a minority of HR managers (n=9) appear to be new to the organisation and have worked there for less than two years.

Common Method Bias

Anonymity was well-ensured because the study did not ask the respondents' identities. As a result, there was a decrease in the fear of being judged negatively by others and a rise in the number of sincere survey responses. Second, there is no request for sensitive information or the company's confidentiality, which could lower CMV (Fulmer et al., 2009). Furthermore, exploratory factor analysis using Harman's single-factor evaluation found that the first component only accounted for 23.19% of the variability. Since no element could account for more than 50% of the variance overall, CMV did not taint the research (Eichhorn, 2014; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The VIF scores (see Table 2) are another advantage in confirming the absence of CMB because they surpass the suggested threshold value of less than 5 points (Hair et al., 2023; Sarstedt et al., 2021).

Measurement Model

When evaluating the construct validity, all the conditions are measured. Within the scope of this investigation, an indication loading larger than 0.70 is deemed satisfactory. Table 1 shows that all sixteen items connected to EQ, six items from ELDA and ELSA, and seven items from WBO were able to complete the conditions for the measurement model assessment. Since this was the case, the PLS-SEM analysis included all the survey items without leaving any out. Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio correlations (HTMT) criteria by Henseler et al. (2015) to determine the discriminant validity of the test is commonly used and well established. Compared to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the HTMT criterion is a more stringent indicator that can find potential discriminant validity between the latent variables. This claim is something that Hamid et al. (2017) support for. In their study, Sarstedt et al. (2021) suggested that HTMT values should not be higher than 0.90. It was clear from Table 1 that all of the HTMT values stayed lower than 0.90, which proves the discriminant validity.

Table 1: Results of constructs reliability, convergent and discriminant validities

Construct	Reliability (CA & CR) Convergent Validity (AVE)			Discriminant Validity: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)		
	CA	CR	AVE	ELDA	ELSA	EQ
ELDA	0.855	0.913	0.778			
ELSA	0.849	0.909	0.770	0.757		
EQ	0.837	0.891	0.671	0.719	0.792	
WBO	0.927	0.941	0.694	0.636	0.768	0.819

Note: CA= Cronbach's Alpha; CR=Composite Reliability; AVE=Average Variance Extracted;

HTMT=Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio

Structural Model

Their R^2 values are robust regarding endogenous constructs if they are equal to or more than 0.75. Hair et al. (2023) consider it moderate if the value is between 0.50 and 0.75. However, if the value is between 0.25 and 0.50, it is considered weak. Considering the data collected from SmartPLS 4.0, the report on the model fit outcomes is in Table 2. The observed variance of ELSA (38.1%) and ELDA (44.4%) contained a considerable contribution from EQ. ELSA and ELDA accounted for 54.1% of the observed variance in WBO. The effect size is moderate if the f^2 values are between 0.02 and 0.15. The effect is medium if the f^2 values are between 0.15 and 0.35. Finally, if the f^2 value is more significant than 0.35, the effect is considered large (Cohen, 1988). Both ELSA and ELDA significantly impacted WBO. The Q-square values of the endogenous constructs demonstrated that the models had a high level of predictive relevance, with values ranging from 0.291 to 0.377. These values are from the blindfolding analysis.

Table 2: Models fit test

Exogenous Construct	R ² Endogenous Construct	f ² effect size	Q ² Endogenous Construct
EQ	ELSA (0.381: Moderate)	0.417 (high effect)	ELSA (Q ² =0.337) Good predictive relevance
EQ	ELDA (0.444: Moderate)	0.060 (small effect)	ELDA (Q ² =0.291) Good predictive relevance
ELSA ELDA	WBO (0.541: Moderate)	0.797 (high effect) 0.614 (high effect)	WBO (Q ² =0.335) Good predictive relevance

Before further testing the direct and indirect effects, it was essential to confirm there was no issue with multicollinearity. Conferring to Hair et al. (2021, 2017), to ensure the research data is accessible from the multicollinearity dispute, the variance inflated factor (VIF) is assured not to exceed 5 points. Since VIF values (ranges between 1.001 – 1.724) were under the prescribed thresholds established by Hair et al. (2023) and Sarstedt et al. (2021), multicollinearity was not an issue. Table 3 shows the paths and multicollinearity values. There was no instance where the confidence interval between the lower level (LL) and upper level (UL) contained a zero value. It indicates all the direct paths are significant and similarly suggests the presence of mediation effects. Bootstrapping techniques were employed, with 5000 retests and the complete model PLS algorithm (Wong, 2013). Path coefficients for direct and indirect relationships are in Table 3. confirming that a positive relationship exists between EQ and ELDA ($\beta = 0.617$, $t = 18.741$, $p < 0.001$) and a negative relationship between EQ and ELSA ($\beta = -0.666$, $t = 19.371$, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, a negative relationship between ELDA and WBO ($\beta = -0.219$, $t = 4.716$, $p < 0.001$) and a positive relationship between ELSA and WBO ($\beta = 0.575$, $t = 14.216$, $p < 0.001$) revealed. Through the bootstrapping (5000 subsamples) at the 95% CI, Both ELDA ($\beta = -0.135$, $t = 4.366$, $p < 0.001$) and ELSA ($\beta = 0.383$, $t = 10.351$, $p < 0.001$) partially mediates the relationship between EQ and WBO. The observed direct and indirect effects are statistically significant. Bias-corrected bootstrap confidence further supports the decisions for indirect relationships.

Table 3: Results of direct and indirect effects

Path Relationship	Std. Beta (β)	σ	t -value	p -value	LL	UL	VIF	Decision
Direct Effects								
ELDA→WBO	-0.219	0.046	4.716	0.001	-0.293	-0.14	1.724	Accept
ELSA→WBO	0.575	0.040	14.216	0.001	0.501	0.636	1.724	Accept
EQ→ELDA	0.617	0.033	18.741	0.001	0.553	0.665	1.001	Accept
EQ→ELSA	-0.666	0.034	19.371	0.001	-0.717	-0.604	1.001	Accept
Indirect effects								
EQ→ELDA→WBO	-0.135	0.031	4.366	0.001	-0.186	-0.084	-	Accept
EQ→ELSA→WBO	-0.383	0.037	10.351	0.001	-0.442	-0.320	-	Accept

Note: bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for upper level (UL), bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for lower level (LL)

DISCUSSION

In this study, the WBO concept was proposed and developed as an extension to the ECT to understand WBO among HR managers in manufacturing firms in Malaysia. The three variables are functional in measuring and identifying WBO effectively. EQ has a significant positive correlation with ELDA. The finding was following the prior studies (Cote, 2005; Cote et al., 2021; Fteiha & Awwad, 2020; Grandey, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Platsidou, 2013; Samaci et al., 2017). Therefore, HR managers had a solid commitment to their work, leading them to have better satisfaction and less susceptibility to WBO. The finding aligns with previous studies that found ELDA was negatively related to WBO (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Kim, 2020; Yang & Jang, 2022). There was also a lack of consistent literature that relates ELDA to WBO compared to ELSA (Diefendorff et al., 2011; Pandey & Singh, 2016; 2015).

The research findings also proposed that ELDA mediate the relationship between EQ and WBO. This study supports Brotheridge's (2006) claim that persons with more incredible EQ are likelier to behave intensely and adapt their expressions to their organisation's display norms. WBO is lower among HR managers that have a high level of EQ. Since EQ strongly drives ELDA, it may shape an individual's practice and reduce WBO. The results were coherent with previous findings. Brotheridge and Grandey (2002), De Diego-Cordero et al. (2022), Platsidou (2013), Shkoler and Tziner (2017) and Silbaugh et al. (2023) unanimously supported this claim. They stated that employees with higher EQ may better regulate, use, express, and analyse emotional information, reducing fatigue.

Another objective of this study was to gauge the mediation effect of ELSA on EQ and WBO. Coherent with our expectations, the findings indicated that EQ significantly reduced ELSA, which mediated the decrement in WBO. ELSA positively relates to WBO and thus demonstrates that displaying fake emotions at the workplace causes mental exhaustion and WBO for employees. It is due to the mental stress and anguish of an individual to fake their feelings so that the emotion displayed is presentable to their colleagues, denying their right to express themselves freely. Nevertheless, this study proves that having high EQ, such as solid motivation, anger management, high rationality, a sense of sympathy, and empathy, alleviates the negativity in ELSA and reduces a positive correlation between ELSA and WBO.

These findings align with the studies by Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) and Silbaugh et al. (2023), which identified a positive connection between ELSA and emotional exhaustion, an essential aspect of WBO. It holds significance in comprehending the emotional labour requirements of HR managers. As internal service providers, HR managers could conduct numerous interviews daily to attract suitable talent, as noted by Fischbach and Schneider (2022). Alternatively, they may need to operate with prudence and efficiency when addressing a substantial volume of claims from internal clients, a point emphasised by Adikaram et al. (2021). This correlation becomes evident when employees hide their genuine emotions to present a suitable emotional reaction. Our research revealed that Malaysian HR managers exhibit a reasonably elevated WBO and correspondingly lower scores in EQ.

Furthermore, in the context of extensive interpersonal engagements with subordinates and colleagues, HR managers tend to rely more on ELSA. It reinforces Liu et al. (2021) observations regarding how collectivist cultures prioritise social relationships in their emotional expressions. Comparable to other collectivist societies, Malaysian culture encourages the regulation of emotions to nurture positive interpersonal connections (Tharbe et al., 2020). For HR managers, this might occasionally necessitate concealing their genuine emotions to prevent the emergence of discord within the organisation, as Liu et al. (2019) indicated. Furthermore, our research is one of the limited initiatives aimed at comprehending the strategies for diminishing WBO among HR managers in non-Western settings, as Fish et al. (2022) highlighted. Until now, our theoretical and practical comprehension of HR managers and WBO has predominantly relied on Western theoretical and empirical insights, as demonstrated by Rattrie et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2022). A significant portion of HR managers' responsibilities entails showing patience and empathy when addressing diverse employee requests, especially by those who can effectively regulate their emotions.

HR managers who handle administrative chores should be recognised as strategic partners and free to express emotions and make constructive decisions. This mentality change may enhance HR practices and benefit companies. Moreover, training programs, workshops and seminars should be designed to improve EQ skills in stress management, employee resilience and developing crisis response plans. Further, they help employees better cope with future crises. The recommendations include companies' policymakers incorporating psychological aspects into the Malaysian manufacturing industry's human resource practices and policies, such as revising leave policies, implementing flexible working arrangements, and offering resources for managing stress and WBO. The manufacturing industry is among the most challenging sectors globally. However, this study is not confined solely to the manufacturing industry; other industries can also explore how EQ, ELDA and ELSA affect WBO.

Additionally, previous studies have examined HR management practices in developing economies, but they mainly described and portrayed the setting rather than explaining HR managers' specific roles and responsibilities (Gamage, 2021). Furthermore, this study illuminates the responsibilities and approaches of HR managers within non-Western contexts, elucidating the cultural factors that influence them and enhancing understanding of the interpersonal dynamics between HR managers and their co-workers. Other than that, significant judgements are offered toward examining WBO amid Malaysian HR managers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, intending to facilitate recovery following the detrimental impact of the pandemic.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge of organisational behaviour by emphasising the function of EQ and emotional labour (ELDA and ELSA) among HR managers. This study expands the research on WBO in a developing nation to enhance and complement the existing studies. Unanimously, the linkage between study variables appears consistent across countries, irrespective of their economic reliance. This study also underpins ECT as evidence that humans, whether HR managers, their teams, workers, or other stakeholders, are affected by emotions. Thus, this fills the gap in ECT, showing that individual differences in the construct of EQ also affect the contagion effect.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, this study successfully proposed that the theoretical framework of ECT provides a robust basis for elucidating the selection of emotional labour strategies and the potential alleviation of WBO within the context of the Malaysian manufacturing industry. The outcomes prove that improving EQ helps form a better ELDA and reduces ELSA, thus lowering WBO. Subsequently, this suggested that manufacturing companies operating in developing nations should prioritise implementing strategies aimed at enhancing the EQ levels of their workforces as a way of helping them choose the right emotional labour strategy, ELDA and limits ELSA. While this study is valuable, it is not without limitations, notably the utilisation of small but reasonable respondents. Thus, for better generalisation, future research could repeat this study on a wide-ranging or in different settings, aforesaid in the various industries. The study was carried out and completed during the recovery period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the result of the study can be related to a tumultuous situation. The findings of this study, thus, render it applicable to future studies. Besides, this study only used individual differences as antecedents of WBO. Hence, future studies can examine the other antecedents of

WBO, such as leadership styles or inadequate resources, work-life balance, spiritual intelligence, success intelligence, and religiosity; this might provide significant benefits. Therefore, a longitudinal study can monitor the development of WBO in HR managers. Finally, this study uses a survey or quantitative method. Future research could employ qualitative or mixed methods to better validate the constructs and items.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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