

## Promoting Sustainable Careers and Reducing Burnout Through Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, and Emotional Labor: A Sequential Mediation Model

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### Abstract

*The current study aimed to develop a comprehensive model that increases an understanding of how an organization that entails a culture of spiritual leadership helps to mitigate burnout through intervening mechanisms of workplace spirituality and emotional labor and to promote sustainable careers. The study collected multi-timed data from 525 employees working in the banking sector of Pakistan by using a multi-stage sampling technique. The findings of the study corroborate the proposed hypothesis. The study results revealed that spiritual leadership inversely influenced job burnout. Additionally, results confirmed that the serial mediation of workplace spirituality and emotional labor on job burnout was significant. The study has several implications for academicians and practitioners. The study also highlights the significance of spiritual leadership in promoting sustainable careers in the workplace. It highlights the importance of spiritual leadership to create sustainable careers in the workplace. This study also highlights the importance of spiritual leadership, which fosters the purpose of employees and also reduces the burnout of the employees.*

**Keywords:** Sustainable Careers, Burnout, Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, Emotional Labor.

### Introduction

The current workplaces are becoming more dynamic due to globalization, technological advancements, and ongoing changes in the workplace (Balzer, 2020). As a result, it fosters unceasing transitions for workers and instability in their work lives. Besides that, the pandemic era has also fostered instability, impacted the ways of work performed, changed the way of living, and threatened employees' health (Khalaf et al., 2023). Among all the ills of the workplace that threaten employees' health, Burnout is an occupational syndrome caused by continuous workplace stress and insufficient availability of resources such as time, energy, and support (Danaci & Koç, 2020). Employees feel emotionally drained, overwhelmed, and unable to fulfill the demands of their work. As a result, it is deteriorating employees' physical, mental, and emotional health. Henceforth, they are losing their interest in workplaces (Lu et al., 2023). Although workplaces are fulfilling the employee's personal needs, they also act as a bridge between society and individuals. Hence promoting sustainable growth and development. Therefore, employees are searching for workplaces that help regain their interest, promote sustainable growth, and provide meaning to their lives (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Such career unfold has increased the importance of sustainable careers for organizations, individuals, and societies.

The term sustainable career refers to a “sequence of individual’s different career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces characterized by individual agency, at this moment providing meaning to the individual” (Wang et al., 2023). The psychology of sustainability emphasizes synchronization between an individual’s environment (natural, social, personal, and psychological) and improving their well-being (McDonald & Hite, 2023). According to Eweje (2014), individuals can develop and sustain their careers. Still, it all depends on the dynamic interaction of individuals with their social environment (organizational policies, cultural factors, family norms, occupational sector). The more they interact, the more it will help them to maintain sustainability in their careers. Moreover, previous research has shown that sustainable careers have contributed to individuals' growth by three basic elements, i.e., happiness (career satisfaction), health (dynamic fit of career with mental and physical capacities), and productivity (job performance) (Pickerell & Hopkins, 2023.). Hence, it takes an hour to formulate such strategies that help employees reduce burnout and promote sustainable careers (creating a dynamic fit of a career with mental and physical health).

Over the past few years, spiritual leadership (SPL) has gained scholarly importance. Prior research has also investigated the positive outcomes of spiritual leadership at the workplace, such as decreased absenteeism, reduced turnover, increased employee well-being and performance, etc. (Djaelani et al., 2020; Hunsaker & Jeong, 2023). Spiritual leadership and sustainable careers are two different but interrelated concepts. Spiritual leadership focuses on the leader’s inner values, beliefs, and systems and how the leader uses these values to inspire, motivate employees, and develop a sense of belongingness within an organization (Hunsaker & Jeong, 2023). On the other hand, a sustainable career emphasizes long-term career success while minimizing negative consequences on society, the environment, and individual well-being (Wang et al., 2023). Besides that, various indicators at the workplace, such as secularism, globalization, capitalism, pandemic, and technological advancements, have entrapped employees. They have lost their spirit, respect, and values and hampered the path of sustainable careers. As a result, they witnessed burnout (BO), increased turnover intentions, absenteeism, and decreased performance. Therefore, employees need such leadership, which helps reduce burnout, regenerate their lost spirit and values, and develop a sense of belongingness within an organization.

Moreover, previous studies have shown that leading employees through vision, relationships, and values are better than leading through fear, power, and control. In literature, the leaders who observe all these qualities are known as spiritual leaders. Although literature research has investigated various solutions to reduce burnout, minimizing burnout and promoting sustainable careers through spiritual leadership is still under investigation.

Based on this backdrop, spiritual leadership will act as a novel framework for minimizing all ills of workplaces. However, we observed that workplace spirituality and emotional labor are an underlying mechanism between spiritual leadership and burnout to strengthen a relationship. We grounded our assumptions on Spiritual leadership theory and the job demand resource model and argue that leaders who motivate and inspire employees through their spiritual values, beliefs, and practices establish a culture of meaningfulness and a sense of belongingness (workplace spirituality) WPS at the workplace (Fry et al., 2005). On the other hand, the job demand resource model states that managing emotions is a highly demanding practice in the workplace. When job demands are high, employees must exert extra effort to achieve organizational goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Therefore, they become emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted, i.e., increased burnout (BO). In that phase, a meaningful environment, sense of belongingness, and inner values created by spiritual leadership (SPL) can help employees manage their emotions

(emotional labor) effectively, eventually reducing burnout and leading them toward sustainable career development.

The study contributes by considering spiritual leadership as a novel framework for leading employees toward sustainable career development. It also aids in managing organizational problems, such as decreasing employees' burnout. The process above can be developed through an underlying mechanism of workplace spirituality and emotional labor strategies. The study also contributes by providing evidence from the banking sector of Pakistan, which has continuously changed over the last two decades, developing a need for studying means for reducing burnout. While observing the varying dynamics of the banking sector in Pakistan, managing emotions becomes a need of an hour. Employees have to manage their emotions frequently, which results in increasing burnout. (Khalaf et al., 2023) Also stated, technological changes and the pandemic era have devastated the mental, physical, and emotional health (burnout) of individuals in the banking sector of Pakistan, which eventually hampers their sustainable career growth. Hence, promoting a sustainable career, managing emotions, and reducing burnout in the banking sector is challenging and requires investigation of social realities. Thus, creating a need for devising strategies (spiritual leadership) for managing emotions, reducing burnout, and promoting sustainable careers.

## Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### Spiritual leadership and Burnout

Spiritual leadership (SPL) is “a holistic approach based on an interaction between followers, leaders, and coworkers, which facilitates creating and sustaining an organizational culture that positively influences organizational performance and effectiveness” (Djaelani et al., 2020). Some scholars are of opinion that “spiritual leadership comprise of attitudes, values, and behaviors required to motivate one's self and others so that leaders and followers can have a collective spiritual welfare” (Afsar et al., 2016). These definitions allow us to study SPL regarding hope/ faith, vision, and selfless love. Prior studies have observed a positive association between SPL and organizational-level variables such as OCB, OC, and job satisfaction (Adnan et al., 2020). Besides the fact that spiritual leadership is rewarding, it can also be challenging and contribute to minimizing the negative impact of counterproductive work behaviors, burnout, turnover intentions, absenteeism, etc.

Burnout (BO), as stated by Bridgeman et al. (2018), is “a state of mental, physical and emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged stress and is characterized by feelings of cynicism, detachment, and sense of reduced personal accomplishment.” Emotional exhaustion is when employees feel depleted and overextended of their emotional and physical resources (Raza et al., 2023). Conversely, cynicism is a feeling of detachment from colleagues, peers, and work. Detachment can be considered an employee's ability to cope with stress and workload. Burnout can be termed as a harmful virus that affects not only organizations but also highly committed employees. In the banking sector of Pakistan, employees continuously become victims of burnout due to lack of support, work-life imbalance, workload, role conflict etc (Lu et al., 2023). It has “spillover” effects in all parts of their lives. They feel emotionally drained, stressed, and depressed and have sleepless nights. Hence, it drastically impacts the psychological and physical health of employees. Besides, burnout has negative consequences for organizations, such as increased absenteeism, low organizational productivity, job withdrawal, absenteeism, turnover, and reduced commitment and job satisfaction. Keeping in view the above-mentioned negative consequences of burnout both at the organizational and individual levels, it becomes the need of an hour to undermine its consequences through cost-effective means. Again, with this backdrop and owing to the positive outcomes of

spiritual leadership, we propose that spiritual leadership helps minimize the drastic impacts of burnout at the individual and organizational levels.

Based on the spiritual leadership theory by Fry (2003), we argue that organizations whose leaders possess spiritual values such as vision/ hope, faith, meaningfulness, and inner values focus on practicing and implementing spiritual values in the workplace continuously. They can teach mindfulness, promote a culture of self-care, help employees maintain work-life balance, create a sense of purpose, and become part of the community, helping them reduce stress and manage work pressures effectively. As a result, employees feel less exhausted, drained, and tired and have depicted more attachment with their peers and colleagues and actively participate in their daily routine tasks. They are subsequently reducing their burnout level. Therefore, it can be proposed that.

H1: SPL is negatively associated with BO

Mediation of workplace spirituality and emotional labor strategies

While observing the positive consequences of spiritual leadership, previous studies have examined the explanatory mechanism (perceived organizational support, person-organization fit). In contrast, the serial mechanism between SPL and burnout has yet to be observed. The current study will contribute to the literature by determining an underlying mechanism of WPS and emotional labor strategies. Previous studies identified that employees are always in search of meaningful and purposeful environments at the workplace. Such employees feel meaningfulness, belongingness, love, and vision/ faith, often attributed to spiritual leadership (SPL) (Fry et al., 2005). The meaningful, purposeful environment and sense of belongingness created by SPL often lead toward workplace spirituality (WPS), eventually leading to positive emotions, which employees manage well. Managing emotions in literature is often stated as a strategy of emotional labor, which is a highly demanding and self-regulatory effort used by employees to manage emotions at the workplace, which eventually becomes a cause of burnout. This process is assumed to be an underlying mediation mechanism.

H2ii: WPS is positively associated with the DA strategy of EL.

H2iii: WPS is negatively associated with the SA strategy of EL.

Finally, we assumed that ELS is significantly related to burnout. Given that WPS leads to ELS, it has been proposed that employees using the DA strategy tend to be low on cynicism and high on personal accomplishments, i.e., have low-level burnout. Contrary to this, employees using a surface acting strategy tend to have a high level of burnout (i.e., high cynicism, more detachment, and low personal accomplishment. The following hypothesis was proposed.

H2iv: Deep acting strategy is negatively associated with Burnout.

H2v: Surface acting strategy is positively associated with Burnout.

The first part of this section is formulated on spiritual leadership theory by Fry (2003), which states that leaders who are grounded in their spirituality can create a sense of purpose, meaning, and community among their members; hence, in a workplace whose leader has visionary thoughts, create a meaningful and purposeful environment, become part of the community, its employees will become more responsive and they also align their values with organizational value, build social connections with their colleagues and value their own beliefs ultimately develops a culture of WPS.

The second half of this section is built upon the job demand resource model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which states that when job demands are high, employees need to exert extra effort to achieve organizational goals, which leads to stress and emotional exhaustion, and detachment from peers and work. According to this model, job demands are stressors in the workplace, such as heavy workload, emotional labor, and stressful

environment (Larner et al., 2017). Resources are physical, social, or organizational support given to employees for managing and reducing stress, managing emotions, and achieving organizational goals. In this study, emotional labor acts as job demand, i.e., stressor, which leads to increased burnout. In that phase, WPS, i.e., meaningful environment, sense of belongingness, and alignment of personal values with organizational values, will be a resource to manage emotions and reduce burnout effectively. Hence, a sequential mediation model exhibits postulated below:

H2vi: SPL and BO are sequentially mediated by WPS and DA strategy of emotional labor

H2vii: SPL and BO are sequentially mediated by WPS and SA strategy of emotional labor

## Methodology

Considering the scope of the study, we collected data from the banking sector of Pakistan, where front desk employees regulate their emotions frequently while interacting with customers. In Pakistan, 55 banks operate (eight government-owned banks, four privatized banks, sixteen private banks, three foreign banks, thirteen developmental financial institutions, and eleven nonmember banks and DFIs). Limiting the scope of the study and due to the limited period, the data was collected using a multi-stage sampling technique in the first stage. In the first stage, out of six categories of banks, three (government-owned, privatized, and private) were selected using a simple random sampling technique. Out of 28 banks of these categories, five were selected using simple random sampling. In the second stage, two branches of each bank were selected using stratified random sampling. In the third stage, employees were selected using a convenience sampling technique.

### Data collection and participants

Before collecting data, we obtained permission from the managers of the banks. To minimize common method biases, data was collected in two phases. In the first phase, we distributed 600 questionnaires (60 questionnaires in each branch) in selected banks to report spiritual leadership and burnout, while 582 (97%) responded. After a time, lag of two weeks, similar 582 employees were again targeted to measure workplace spirituality and EL strategies. Of 582 employees, 547 (93%) responded in this phase. However, after a preliminary analysis of 22 questionnaires reporting outliers, missing values were rejected. Therefore, we left with 525 usable responses for data analysis.

### Measures

For data collection and to avoid validity issues, already-developed scales were used. SPL was measured through 26 26-item scale developed by Fry. We used 21 21-item scales to measure WPS, developed by Milliman et al. (2003), to measure Workplace spirituality. Further, Diefendorff, Croyle, and Gosserand's (2005) eleven-item scale were used to measure emotional labor strategies. Burnout was measured using an eight-item scale developed by (Demerouti et al., 2003). The reliability of all these scales was assessed through Cronbach alpha, and its value for all scales was above the cut-off range, i.e., above 0.7. Based on demographic analysis of useable responses, it was observed that most respondents were male (66%), with ages ranging between 20-30 years. Their average tenure was up to 2 years, and 56% were graduates. Details of demographics statistics Cronbach alpha of variables are mentioned in Table 1.

### Analysis of Data

We used the SEM two-step approach to analyze the hypothesized model. First, we analyzed the model fitness of the proposed model by constructing a measurement model. Then, we tested the hypothesis by formulating a structural model. Table 1 shows the

values of means, reliability, and standard deviations. Reliability is assessed through Cronbach Alpha, and the values of all variables for Cronbach Alpha were above the threshold value, i.e., 0.7. Discriminant validity of the instrument was ensured through values of AVE < 0.5 and MSV values. Correlation results show SPL is positively associated with WPS (r=0.36\*\*) and DA (r=0.623\*\*), whereas it has a negative association with SA (r= -0.417\*\*) and BO (r= -0.422\*\*), indicating that we may proceed for further analysis.

TABLE-1

VARIABLE	SPL	WPS	DA	SA	BO	MEAN	CR	AVE	MSV
SPL	(0.92)					3.78 (0.72)	0.95	0.82	0.55
WPS	0.36**	(0.81)				3.57(0.85)	0.78	0.54	0.45
DA	0.623**	0.165	(0.95)			2.99 (1.07)	0.90	0.58	0.50
SA	-.417**	-.148	-	(0.81)		3.76(0.83)	0.76	0.53	0.43
			.332**						
BO	-.422**	.329	-	.400**	(0.93)	5.12 (0.88)	0.93	0.73	0.55
			.249**						

NOTE: \* P < 0.05, \*\* P < 0.01,

Common method bias was checked through Herman's single-factor test. The proposed model (5-factor model) represents good model fit indices, i.e. (CFI=0.922, CMIN/DF= 1.66, CFI=0.922, RMSEA= 0.041, TLI=0.91), comparative to other 3- factor model and 1- factor model.

Table 2

MODEL	CMIN/DF	CFI	RMSEA	TLI
MEASUREMENT MODEL	1.66	0.922	0.041	0.911
THREE-FACTOR MODEL	2.31	0.818	0.060	0.801
ONE FACTOR MODEL	4.231	0.654	0.113	0.522

#### Hypothesis testing

The findings of hypothesis testing through SEM are detailed in Table 3. It is clear that SPL predicts burnout ( $\beta = -0.481$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), WPS ( $\beta = 0.366$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), SA ( $\beta = -0.418$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and DA ( $\beta = 0.611$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), thus H1 and H2i support. It's also observed that WPS predicts both DA ( $\beta = 0.165$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and SA ( $\beta = -0.133$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), hence supporting H2ii and H2iii. Interestingly, SA influences burnout ( $\beta = 0.345$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while DA has no impact. Hence, accepting only the 2iv hypothesis. Additionally, the sequential mediation model was assessed by linking WPL to burnout through WPS and emotional labor strategies (deep acting and surface acting) using bootstrap at a 95 % confidence interval. Findings depict that the indirect result of serial mediation of SPL and BO through WPS DA and SA was significant ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $\beta = -0.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, supporting both serial mediation hypotheses H2vi and H2vii.

Table 3

Direct and Indirect effects	Coefficients	P-value
Spiritual leadership→ Workplace spirituality (H2i)	0.366	***
Workplace spirituality→ Deep acting (H2ii)	0.165	***
Spiritual leadership→ Deep acting	0.611	***
Surface Acting→ Burnout (H2v)	0.345	*
Spiritual leadership → Burnout (H1)	-0.481	***
Spiritual leadership → Surface Acting	-0.418	***
Workplace spirituality→ Surface acting (H2iii)	-0.133	*
Deep acting → Burnout (H2iv)	-0.085	Ns
Indirect Effects		
Spiritual leadership →Workplace spirituality → Deep Acting →Burnout (H2vi)	0.333	**
Spiritual leadership →Workplace spirituality → Surface Acting →Burnout (H2vii)	-0.24	*

Note: \* P < 0.05, \*\* P < 0.01, \*\*\*P<0.001

## Discussion

Even though SPL and its positive consequences, the underlying mechanism of when and how SPL impacts employees' outcomes is still under-rated. The current study developed a comprehensive model of an underlying mechanism linking SPL and BO through spiritual leadership theory and the job demand resource model. We also established that the abovementioned mechanism can be viewed through sequential mediation of WPS and ELS. The findings reveal that leaders who are grounded in their spirituality can create a sense of purpose, meaning, and community among their members; hence, in a workplace whose leader has visionary thoughts, create a meaningful and purposeful environment and become part of the community, its employees become more responsive and will also align their values with organizational values, build social connections with their colleagues and value their own beliefs ultimately develops a culture of WPS. Eventually, WPS enables employees to manage their emotions (SA and DA) effectively, reducing their burnout and promoting sustainable careers. Thus proving the sequential mediation mechanism.

Although the proposed mechanism is highly ignored in the previous research, it supports the results of previous studies. For example, prior studies depict that SPL influences behaviors in the workplace through perception and attitudinal responses. However, they didn't observe the role of emotional labor strategies in the process. Hence, we tried to extend the results of previous studies by developing a comprehensive mechanism. The current study results reveal that SPL at the workplace creates a sense of purpose, meaning, and community among its members, ultimately developing a spiritual culture at the workplace, i.e., WPS. The results are supported by previous literature, which observed that SPL is significantly associated with positive and strong cultures in the workplace. The study also highlighted the call of various researchers who instigated to determine a mechanism of SPL and determinants of BO.

The study further determined that WPS leads to the regulation of emotions at work in an effective manner. The finding suggests that employees who observe meaningfulness in

the workplace align their values with organizational values. Eventually, they manage their emotion. The findings support this proposition and signify that in the presence of SPL and spiritual culture at the workplace (WPS), they tend to use a DA strategy. SA also viewed that emotional labor mediates SPL and BO.

The study further highlights that managing and regulating emotions frequently leads to BO, and the banking sector of Pakistan is the leading sector, where front-line employees have to regulate their emotions while interacting with customers. However, no study has been found investigating the relationship aimed through a serial mediation of WPS and ELS. The findings also supported the theoretical assumptions of the study using SPL theory and the JDR model and observed that spiritual leaders in the workplace who are grounded on their spirituality can create a sense of purpose, meaning, and community among their members; hence, in a workplace whose leader has visionary thoughts, create a meaningful and purposeful environment, become part of the community, depicts its employees become more responsive. They will also align their values with organizational values, build social connections with their colleagues, and value their own beliefs, ultimately developing a WPS culture. Eventually, WPS enables employees to manage their emotions (SA and DA) effectively, reducing their burnout and promoting sustainable careers.

### **Theoretical Contributions & Managerial Implications**

The study has several practical and theoretical implications. Firstly, the study contributes to the field of spirituality literature by considering SPL as a valuable resource to mitigate negative workplace behaviors such as BO. Previous studies focused on the impact of spirituality on various individual-level outcomes. The current study gives empirical evidence that SPL is negatively associated with BO. Further, it contributes to organizational psychology and OB literature by considering SPL as a novel and cost-effective framework for mitigating the negative impacts of EL strategies such as BO. Prior studies considered the predictors and consequences of ELS, but the key role of this variable needs to be investigated.

Besides theoretical contributions, the study has various implications for managers as well. First, our study observed that SPL at the workplace will lead to positive consequences of workplace behaviors and mitigate the impacts of negative workplace behaviors. Spiritual leaders can build this culture by creating a sense of meaningfulness at the workplace, fostering social ties and connections, and respecting their employees' spiritual beliefs and values. Hence, we need to determine the positive impacts of SPL and WPS. Furthermore, in Pakistan, the banking sector is not only a leading sector of the service industry but also a major contributor to the economic growth of Pakistan. Hence, this sector must value its human resources and provide them with resources that help them perform their organizational task effectively. It's a sector where employees socialize and interact with customers frequently. Therefore, when the banking sector is equipped with spiritual leadership and provides a spiritual environment to its employees, it is expected that they would consider it spiritual attention and would depict positive emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal outcomes.

Secondly, the study contributed to emotional labor literature in the banking sector by establishing an underlying mechanism that enables employees to manage their emotions well. It signifies that when spiritual leaders lead an organization and develop a spiritual environment at the workplace, employees tend to use deep and surface-acting strategies while interacting with customers. Eventually, it will minimize the impact of workplace stressors such as BO. Thus, the model proves a mechanism that may predict the BO.



## Research Limitations and Future Directions

Besides theoretical and practical implications, the study is full of limitations as well. First, the study's limited sample size makes it difficult to generalize the results. Future research can focus on collecting data from large sample sizes, multiple levels, and multiple industries to confirm validity in other contexts. The other limitation is the period. Although the data is collected in two phases, the study is cross-sectional. Future researchers can conduct longitudinal studies to determine the reverse causal relationship among variables. Third, the study didn't determine the dimensions of burnout. Future studies can develop an underlying mechanism by considering its dimensions to have a holistic picture of the comprehensive model. Lastly, with the growing interest in Eastern philosophies, more research on SPL and WPS is needed globally to understand better the cross-cultural differences in how workers practice and perform spiritual values at their workplaces.

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