Exploring the Causes of Burnout Syndrome among University Instructors in Thailand

[1]Nuchjaree Pookkaman, [2]Auttapon Sripradit, and [3]Waraporn Theerasak

[1, 3]Burapha University International College, Thailand

[2]Faculty of Science and Social Sciences, Burapha University, Sakaeo campus, Thailand

Email: [1]Nuchjaree@buu.ac.th, [2]Auttapons@buu.ac.th, [3]Waraporn@buu.ac.th

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Abstract

This study delves into the factors associated with burnout among Thai university teachers, focusing on demographic, academic, and work-related factors. Out of 373 participants, most are men aged 41–50 with doctorate degrees. The highest levels of burnout are depersonalization (25.47%), emotional exhaustion (20.91%), and reduced personal achievement (15.82%). Eighty-seven respondents are experiencing burnout. Females are 34% more likely to experience it, while those aged 51–60 have a 34% chance. Single individuals have a 31% higher likelihood of experiencing burnout, while those with a doctoral degree are 32% more likely. Academic positions, such as assistant professor (56% higher) and assistant dean (67% higher), also increase the likelihood of burnout. Work factors, such as starting careers (0–10 years), having over 21 years of experience (34% and 33%, respectively), and working overtime for 11–20 hours per week (58% higher), also contribute to burnout. These findings are not just informative but crucial for understanding the prevalence and causes of burnout among Thai university instructors. They can guide the development of effective human resource management policies in higher education institutions, addressing burnout and improving staff well-being and efficiency.

Keywords: burnout syndrome; causes; instructors; University; Thailand

Introduction

In today's intensely competitive corporate environment, with rapid technological breakthroughs, employees must adapt to dynamic situations to fulfill their tasks properly. This daily adjustment can put employees under more strain and stress than before, harming them physically and emotionally. They may feel fatigued, bored, and unwilling to work, which can contribute to

poor job performance. It may lead to staff absenteeism, disrupting the organization's operations in severe circumstances. Emotional depletion, tiredness, and a diminished sense of job achievement are defined as burnout (Maslach, 1981).

Deloitte, a global consulting firm specializing in auditing, tax, and business consulting, conducted a Burnout Survey among 1,000 full-time employees. The survey found that 77% of respondents experienced burnout. Additionally, it was found that 63% of employees who experienced burnout tend to take sick leave and look for new jobs, while 13% have decreased performance evaluations. Only half would discuss their work performance with their supervisors (Deloitte, 2018). These survey results indicate that the majority of employees are experiencing burnout, which impacts not only the employees themselves but also the organization's overall efficiency (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). This is consistent with Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) studies. Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized burnout as a medical condition that requires treatment for the first time. Therefore, burnout is not just a local issue but a critical global issue that every organization, including higher education institutions, should consider and address.

University instructors, who are particularly vulnerable to burnout, face a multitude of challenges in their roles, encompassing teaching, research, and administrative duties (Winefield. et al., 2003). The pressure to publish research, secure funding, and contribute to the academic community adds to the stress (Gillespie et al., 2001). Moreover, large class sizes, demanding students, and the need for continuous curriculum development contribute to the workload and stress experienced by educators (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). According to a 2023 survey on health and well-being conducted by the Network of Happy Universities, under the Institute for Population and Social Research at Mahidol University, involving 10,864 university staff members, it was found that the dimension of mental health was rated at a moderate level, with only 57.4%. These statistics highlight the significant impact of burnout on the well-being and performance of university instructors, underscoring the importance of this research.

Given the significant impact of burnout on the well-being and performance of university instructors, this research is of utmost importance. It aims to guide the development of human resource management policies in higher education institutions, ensuring that instructors can work happily, retain staff in the long term, and maintain their work efficiency. The urgency of addressing burnout among university instructors in Thailand cannot be overstated. This study provides a crucial step toward that goal, emphasizing the immediate need for action.

Objective

1. To study the level of burnout syndrome among Thai university instructors.
2. To study factors related to burnout syndrome among Thai university instructors.

Literature Reviews

Job burnout captures the physical, emotional, and psychological conditions in the individual that cause a work–related stress response, and this principally takes the form of direct emotional exhaustion, professional detachment, and reduced individual accomplishment (Maslach, 2003). In addition, burnout syndrome is an individual stress reaction at work that accumulates and becomes chronic; consequently, it induces specific alterations in the sufferer's health (Montero–Marín, J., 2016). Therefore, this paper aims to discuss various reasons that have been pointed out for causing burnout. (Maslach, 2001) identifies job demands, including work overload, lack of control, insecurity of incentives, and impaired balance between work and family obligations, as the leading causes of burnout. Burnout causes behavioral changes that manifest both physically and psychologically. The physical symptoms are commonly characterized by chronic fatigue, and this is coupled with frequent manifestations of headaches and sleep disturbances (Ahola & Hakanen, 2007). Consequently, people may experience depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, resulting in low scores and reduced personal achievement (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This can decrease job performance, productivity, and satisfaction, prolonging the burnout cycle (Demerouti et al., 2001).

Some of the previous researchers, including Maslach et al. (2001), Ahola et al. (2006), and Kroon et al. (2009), point out that younger employees, especially those in their young working age, are likely to suffer high burnout rates because they have not developed adequate coping strategies. In other words, they do not have sufficient experience in the workplace. However, some studies indicate that burnout signs decline with age, as workers at a particular age have higher job decision–making authority and better stress–coping mechanisms, showing lower signs of burnout.

Purvanova and Muros (2010) and Demerouti et al. (2014) reveal that women suffer from a higher level of emotional exhaustion than men suffering from depersonalization because of social demands and expectations from them as workers and family caretakers. Another demographic factor that affects burnout is the marital status of the healthcare worker. Therefore, married

people are likely to have a lower level of burnout than single, divorced, or widowed people (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Interestingly, marriage positively reduces burnout arising from work–related stress since it provides emotional support; however, single employees are likely to gain higher burnout due to a lack of support from a partner. Leiter and Durup (1996), Burke and Greenglass (2001), and Shirom (2003) argue that the quality of marital relationships is crucial, and marriages with poor quality can lead to high burnout.

Education at a higher level can help people develop enhanced problem–solving and stress–coping abilities, which may help lower burnout levels. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that those with higher education levels may experience greater job demands and expectations, possibly resulting in higher incidences of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Studies by Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) indicate that professionals with advanced degrees, such as doctors and lawyers, often report higher burnout levels due to the demanding nature of their work.

Lertwilai (2020), Golembiewski et al. (1986), and Taris et al. (2004) show that burnout levels vary among professional ranks. For example, higher–ranked professionals experience higher stress due to increased responsibilities and decision–making pressures. In contrast, lower–ranked employees may experience burnout due to a lack of control and monotonous tasks. For example, middle managers often face the highest burnout levels due to pressures from upper management and their subordinates. Other positions with stable welfare benefits are less likely to experience burnout, while roles requiring longer hours outside regular office hours are more susceptible to burnout.

Based on the results shown by previous studies, the variables used in this research are as follows: 1) sex, 2) age, 3) marital status, 4) educational level, 5) academic position, 6) management position, 7) years of work, 8) overtime/week, and 9) burnout syndrome; Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced personal achievement.

Theoretical Framework

This study used a quantitative approach. The researchers formulated a research framework based on the concepts and theories of Maslach (1981), Purvanova & Muros (2010), Demerouti et al. (2014), Ahola et al. (2006), Kroon et al. (2009), Leiter & Durup (1996), Burke & Greenglass (2001), Shirom (2003), Schaufeli & Enzmann (1998) Lertwilai (2020), Golembiewski et al. (1986), and Taris et al. (2004). The independent variables are 1) sex, 2) age, 3) marital Status,

4) educational level, 5) academic position, 6) management position, 7) years of work, and 8) overtime/week. The dependent variable is burnout syndrome.

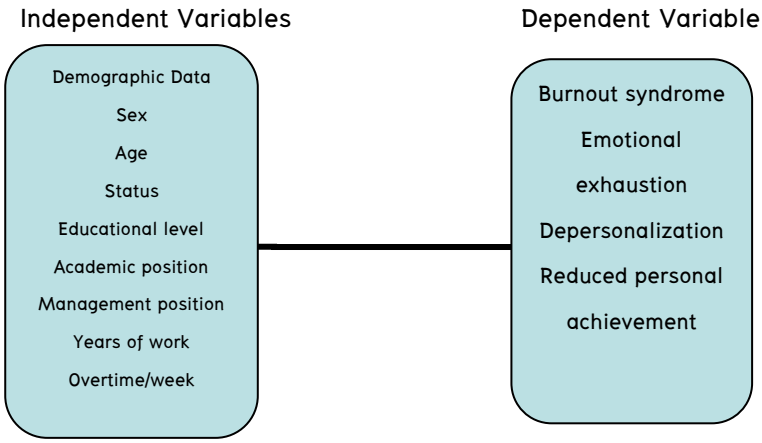

Figure 1 Research Theoretical framework

Research Methods

The population in the study was university instructors working in various establishments in Thailand. The sample size was determined by a computational method using the formula of W.G. Cochran (1953) when the exact population was unknown. Determined at the 95% confidence level with an error of ± 5%, the sample size was 385 people. Data was collected from the respondents who cooperated in answering the questionnaire. Concerning the questionnaire gathering, this study applied the purposive sampling technique. As a result, a total of 373 questionnaires were received.

Research instrument

The questionnaire was the research data collection tool used in this study. It consisted of two parts.

Part 1: General Information

This part includes eight questions to gather basic demographic information about the respondents: sex, age, marital status, educational level, academic position, management position, years of work, and overtime/week.

Part 2: Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The MBI questionnaire comprises 22 questions divided into three subscales measuring different dimensions of burnout. The three scales are described as follows.

Emotional Exhaustion: It consists of nine questions assessing emotional fatigue and depletion feelings.

Depersonalization: It includes five questions evaluating detachment and depersonalization toward service recipients.

Reduced personal achievement: It comprises eight questions measuring the individual's perception of success and effectiveness in their role.

Data collection

1. Questionnaires were distributed to university instructors working in various establishments in Thailand who consented to the information and voluntarily answered the questionnaire.

2. The obtained questionnaires were used to verify their integrity and lead to the statistical analysis process.

Statistical Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using a computer software program, including descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics consisted of frequency, percentages, mean, standard deviation, and percentile. Inferential statistics included Fisher's exact test and logistic regression.

Result

The descriptive statistics and logistic regression are provided as shown in Table 1–3

Table 1: Respondents' demographic (n=373)

Characteristics		(n)	% of total
Gender	Male	222	59.5
	Female	151	40.5
Age	31–40	131	35.1
	41–50	179	48
	51–60	63	16.9
	>60	–	–
Marital status	Single	179	48
	Married/Living together	181	48.5
	Separate	13	3.5
	divorced/widowed	–	–
Education	Bachelor's Degree	–	–
	Master's Degree	149	39.9
	Doctoral Degree	224	60.1
Academic position	Lecturer	224	60
	Assistant Professor	144	38.7
	Associate Professor	5	1.3
	Professor	–	–
	Other	–	–
Management position	Chair of Department/Head of Department/Program Chair	73	19.6
	Assistant Dean	10	2.7
	Associate Dean	31	8.3
	Dean	13	3.5
	Other Administrative Positions	38	10.2
	None	208	55.7
Years of work	0.1–10 years	171	45.8
	11–20 years	192	51.5
	21 years or above	10	2.7
Overtime/week	0–10 hours/week	261	70
	11–20 hours/week	81	21.7
	21 hours/week or above	31	8.3

As shown in Table 1, 373 respondents had the following demographic information: 1) most respondents (59.5%) were male, 2) the age range of 41 to 50 years old (48%), 3) had single status and married in a similar number; being single at 48%; married or living together at 48.5%, 5) having the highest degree of education at the doctorate level (60.1%), 6) approximately 60% of respondents are lecturers. 7) 55.7% of respondents do not hold management positions, 8) 51.5% have been working for 11–20 years, and 9) 70% work overtime for 11–20 hours per week.

Table 2: Levels and frequency of burnout syndrome (n=373)

Components	Level						Mean
	Low		medium		high		
	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	
Emotional Exhaustion	201	53.89	94	25.20	78	20.91	34.24
Depersonalization	135	36.19	143	38.34	95	25.47	16.57
Reduced personal achievement	253	67.83	61	16.35	59	15.82	33.29
High level					87	23.32	–
Low to moderate levels					286	6.68–7	

As shown in Table 2, the highest levels of burnout in the three dimensions are depersonalization (25.47%), emotional exhaustion (20.91%), and reduced personal achievement (15.82%). Additionally, 87 respondents are experiencing burnout.

Table 3: The relationship between factors and burnout in the three dimensions and levels of burnout were analyzed using stepwise multiple logistic regression. This method compares individuals experiencing high levels of burnout in each dimension to those with low to moderate levels.

Characteristics	Variable	Emotional Exhaustion (stepwise regression OR (95%CI))	Depersonalization (stepwise regression OR (95%CI))	Reduced personal achievement (stepwise regression OR (95%CI))	Burnout syndrome (stepwise regression OR (95%CI))	P-value
Gender	Male	0.19	0.32	0.10	0.21	0.552
	Female	0.39	0.37	0.25	0.34	
Age	31–40	0.38	0.25	0.16	0.26	0.002
	41–50	0.19	0.31	0.22	0.24	
	51–60	0.26	0.75	0.17	0.39	
	>60				–	
Marital status	Single	0.35	0.39	0.19	0.31	<0.001
	Married/Living together	0.21	0.33	0.21	0.25	
	Separate	–	–	–	–	
	divorced/widowed	–	–	–	–	
Education	Bachelor's Degree	–	–	–	–	0.099
	Master's Degree	0.32	0.32	0.01	0.21	
	Doctoral Degree	0.23	0.36	0.36	0.32	
Academic position	Lecturer	0.17	0.11	0.20	0.16	<0.001
	Assistant Professor	0.47	1.03	0.19	0.56	
	Associate Professor	–	–	–	–	
	Professor				–	
	Other		–		–	
Management position	Chair of Department/ Head of Department/ Program Chair	0.26	0.46	0.74	0.49	<0.001
	Assistant Dean	1.00	1.00	–	0.67	
	Associate Dean	0.72	0.72	–	0.48	
	Dean	–	–	–	–	
	Other Administrative Positions	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15	
	None	0.20	0.27	0.12	0.20	
Years of work	0.1–10 years	0.40	0.34	0.29	0.34	0.0142
	11–20 years	0.17	0.35	0.08	0.20	
	21 years or above	–	–	1.00	0.33	
Overtime/week	0–10 hours/week	0.19	0.29	0.19	0.22	0.0317
	11–20 hours/week	0.84	0.84	0.07	0.58	
	21 hours/week or above	–	–	0.72	0.24	

As shown in Table 3, among Thai university instructors, 23.32% experience high levels of burnout. This study found that females are 34% more likely to experience burnout than other groups, while those aged 51–60 also have a 34% chance of experiencing burnout. Single individuals have a 31% higher likelihood of experiencing burnout compared to other groups. Similarly, those with a Doctoral Degree are 32% more likely to experience burnout than others. Considering the academic position factor, those with the rank of Assistant Professor have a 56% higher chance of experiencing burnout than other groups. Individuals holding the position of Assistant Dean are 67% more likely to experience burnout than others. Regarding work factors, those just starting their careers (0–10 years) and those with over 21 years of experience have a similar likelihood of experiencing burnout at 34% and 33%, respectively. Furthermore, those who work overtime for 11–20 hours per week have a 58% higher chance of experiencing burnout compared to other groups.

Discussion

The increased likelihood of burnout among female instructors (34% more likely) reflects more significant work–related stress from balancing professional and personal responsibilities, gender biases, and workload disparities (Grissom et al., 2012; Benschop & Brouns, 2003). Implementing gender–sensitive policies and support systems can help mitigate these challenges. Instructors aged 51–60, with a 34% chance of experiencing burnout, face cumulative stress from years of service and potential health issues (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Tailored wellness programs and workload adjustments for older faculty can help reduce burnout.

Single status is 31% more likely to experience burnout, highlighting the importance of social support in managing work stress (Ross et al., 1990). Creating a supportive community and promoting work–life balance can help single instructors manage stress better. The 32% higher likelihood of burnout among those with Doctoral Degrees indicates intense pressure from high expectations for research output, securing grants, and achieving tenure (Winefield et al., 2014). Robust support systems, such as mentoring and professional development programs, can assist these individuals. Assistant Professors and Assistant Deans experience higher burnout levels (56% and 67%, respectively) due to significant responsibilities and pressures from heavy teaching loads, research expectations, and administrative duties (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Universities should redistribute workloads, provide administrative support, and offer professional development

resources. The similar likelihood of burnout among early-career instructors (0–10 years) and long-tenured instructors (21+ years) at 34% and 33%, respectively, highlights different stressors at various career stages (Gillespie et al., 2001). Mentorship programs and career rejuvenation initiatives can address these issues. Overtime significantly impacts burnout, with those working 11–20 hours per week overtime being 58% more likely to experience burnout, aligning with research indicating excessive work hours contribute to higher stress and burnout levels (Bakker et al., 2007). Institutions should enforce policies that limit overtime, promote work–life balance, and provide resources to improve work efficiency.

New Knowledge

The results of this study provide new insights into the demographics and factors contributing to burnout among university instructors. Understanding these factors can help in the education and research fields in the following ways:

1. Tailored support: Recognizing that certain demographic groups, such as females, individuals aged 51–60, and those with a Doctoral Degree, are more susceptible to burnout can help develop targeted support and intervention programs for these groups. This can ultimately improve overall well-being and job satisfaction among university instructors.

2. Human resource management: Understanding that certain academic positions, such as Assistant Professors and Assistant Deans, are associated with higher chances of experiencing burnout can guide human resource policies and practices in academic institutions. This may involve developing strategies to reduce work-related stress and create a more supportive work environment for individuals in these positions.

3. Work–life balance initiatives: The finding that individuals who work overtime for 11–20 hours per week are more likely to experience burnout highlights the importance of promoting work–life balance initiatives within academic institutions. Implementing policies that encourage reasonable work hours and support mechanisms for managing workloads can be beneficial in addressing burnout among university instructors.

These insights can inform the development of targeted policies, programs, and support mechanisms to promote well-being and job satisfaction among university instructors, ultimately contributing to a more productive and positive academic environment.

Conclusion

The data from this quantitative study provide a comprehensive understanding of the demographic and work-related factors contributing to burnout among Thai university instructors. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including policy changes, support programs, and fostering a supportive institutional culture. By implementing these strategies, institutions can help mitigate burnout and promote the well-being and productivity of their faculty members.

Suggestion

Child care resources, sexual harassment policies, equal opportunities training, and flexible working hours can assist women academically in balancing their work and family responsibilities. Unique wellness plans and changes in working conditions are essential for older faculty, and social support networks and work-life balance programs can help single teachers. Scholar support and subsequent career training can help doctoral graduates cope with these pressures. Handing out the tasks and assisting in overcoming administrative responsibilities could help reduce the load on assistant professors and deans. Training and development during the early career, mid-career, and staff rejuvenation for those who have given long service can help reduce stress at different times in the career cycle. Preventing excessive working hours and encouraging the autonomy of work-family life are equally important steps in supporting faculty members, as are periodic check-ups as to the status of policies and guidelines required for the improvement of the health of university staff. These strategies can foster a positive environment, decrease feelings of burnout, and increase satisfaction with the job and productivity.

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