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Work burnout and work-family conflict: The moderating role of emotional intelligence

Xinxin Chu[1,2] and Xingyuan Sun[3,*]

[1]*College of Business and Accountancy, Angeles University Foundation, Angeles, 2009, Pampanga, Philippines*
[2]*Department of Economics, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN, UK*
[3]*School of Economics and Management, Dezhou University, Dezhou, 253023, China*

**Correspondence: Xingyuan Sun,* sunxingyuan@dzu.edu.cn
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Abstract: The study examines the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI), work-family conflict, and burnout among remote workers, a highly relevant issue in modern working dynamics. The sample included 557 remote workers (Males = 59.1%, M_{age} = 31.9, SD = 4.64) including different professions (Information technology, engineers, business and management, content writers and finance) in China. Data was gathered using a cross-sectional survey utilizing standardized tools, including the Work-Family Conflict Scale, Maslach Burnout Inventory, and Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale. Structure equation modeling with slope checks on moderation effects was conducted. The findings indicated a significant inverse relationship between work-family conflict and all subdimensions of emotional intelligence, indicating that increased EI could alleviate issues related to work-family conflict in remote working environments. In addition, emotional intelligence and depersonalization, a component of burnout, were found to be inversely related in the study. These findings highlight the role of emotional intelligence on work-family conflict and burnout relationships. Our study findings provide a foundation for targeted interventions aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence, thereby reducing burnout in remote work settings and ultimately fostering the well-being and productivity of remote employees.

Keywords: work-family conflict; burnout; emotional intelligence; remote workers; China

Introduction

Remote working is also known as telecommuting, working from home or digital nomadism is a nontraditional office setting. It is becoming the new normal with the exponential advancements of technological development including instant communication, use of digital tools such as data exchange, team management and video conferencing platforms. Remote working has revised the traditional understanding of work environment, with more flexibility and autonomy in managing one's time and working style. However, it risks encroaching on other life domains including family life. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985, p.77) define WFC as "a type of inter-role conflict characterized by some degree of incompatibility between the pressures of one's professional and familial roles." It is other drawbacks include issues such as procrastination tendencies, inadequate communication, and feelings of isolation (Šímová & Zychová, 2023; Wang et al., 2021b), risking work burnout. Few studies have examined the joint risks of work burnout and work family conflict affecting remote employees, hence this study.

Burnout and WFC

Burnout is a multidimensional psychological illness caused by extended exposure to chronic workplace stressors, with three main dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal success. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines burnout as a syndrome caused by unmanaged chronic workplace stress. The symptoms include energy depletion, mental detachment, and decreased professional effectiveness (Leiter & Maslach, 2024; Li-Sauerwine et al., 2020). Research has indicated a noticeable rise in burnout prevalence among occupations such as healthcare, construction workers, and teachers (Abdalla et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2021). Remote workers are an at risk population from limited social interactions (Elshaiekh et al., 2018; Van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). Researchers have highlighted the need of empirical research to investigate the impact of burnout on WFC among remote working environments (Wang et al., 2021a; Zhang et al., 2021), and in non-western settings. In the China setting, Zhao and colleagues (Zhou et al., 2022) reported internet usage for work, but they did not specifically investigate the relationship between burnout and WFC with remote working. There is reason to believe that workers may be differently vulnerable by their emotional intelligence, although this remains unexplored.

EI and WFC

According to Mayer et al., (2004), emotional intelligence is a collection of skills that includes the capacity to understand and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others. It also includes the understanding and distinguishing of emotions. There is evidence to suggest that people with high emotional intelligence may be less vulnerable to work family conflict due to their self-management, social awareness, and relationship management Sergio et al., (2015). Similarly, Akintayo (2010) found that persons with emotional intelligence had the capacity to effectively handle conflicts between their professional and familial responsibilities. It is likely that self-regulation and self-efficacy capabilities have both mediating and moderating effects on WFC (Juniarly et al., 2019; Zainal et al., 2022).

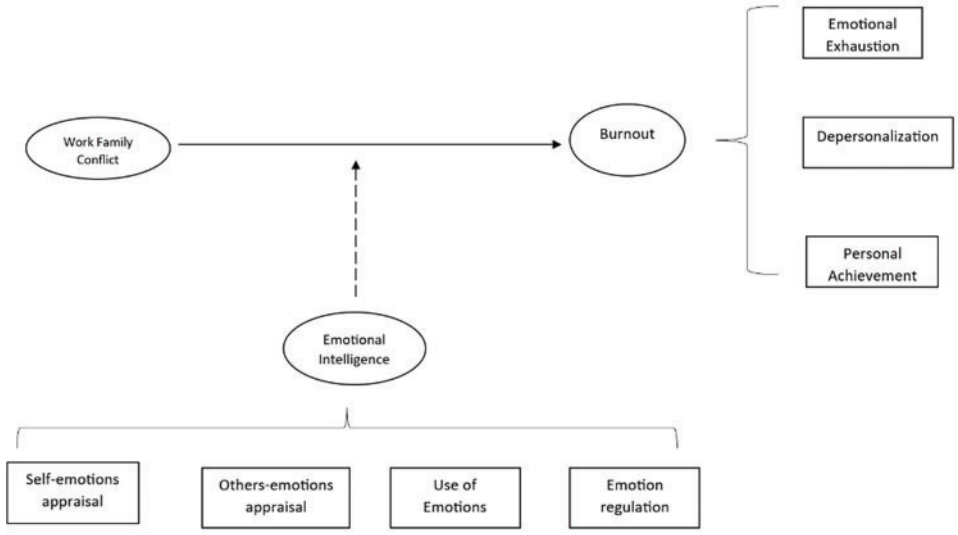

Figure 1. Study conceptual framework

Thus, there is need for studies on EI abilities in the relationship between WFC and burnout in the realm of remote work.

Goals of the Study

The primary objective of the study was to investigate the relationships between WFC and burnout and the role of EI in that relationship. Figure 1 presents the study's conceptual framework.

Based on our conceptual model, we formulated the following hypotheses for testing:

Hypothesis 1: Burnout is higher with work-family conflict.

Hypothesis 2: Burnout is lower with higher emotional intelligence.

Hypothesis 3: Work family-conflict is lower with higher emotional intelligence.

Hypothesis 4: Emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between work-family conflict and burnout for lower burnout with higher emotional intelligence.

Method

Participants and setting

This study utilized convenience of the 557 remote workers from the information technology, engineers, business and management, content writers and finance occupations. (see Table 1). The average age of the participants was 31.9 years (SD = 4.64 years). Most participants were male (59.1%), with 64.4% having a postgraduate degree or above. Professionally, the largest groups of participants worked in IT (30.7%) and content writing (21.5%). The majority of the participants (57.7%) work less than 40 h weekly. A significant proportion were married (61.9%).

Measures

Participants self-reported their socio demographics of gender, age, education background, marital status, profession and weekly working duration. They completed the following standardized measures of burnout, work family conflict and emotional intelligence.

Work-Family Conflict Scale (WFC)

The Work-Family Conflict Scale (Breyer & Bluemke, 2016) consists of four items. The scale is constructed to assess two aspects of WFC: the negative impact of work on family life (items 1 and 2) and the negative impact of family life on work (items 3 and 4). Each item has a "Don't know" option in addition to a 4-point rating scale with responses ranging from 1 ("several times a week") to 4 ("never"). Higher values indicating greater conflict. The Chinese version of the scale has been shown to have a reliability coefficient of 0.74 (Tang et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2013). Scores from the WFC yielded a reliability of 0.71 in the present study (see Table 2).

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach et al., 1997), comprises 22 items on three domains of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement. The items are on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (representing "never") to 6 (representing "every day"). Higher scores higher levels of burnout. MBI scores yielded high levels of reliability in related studies (Wang et al., 2015a; Wu et al., 2018). Scores from the MBI subscales yielded reliability indices of emotional exhaustion (0.78), Depersonalization (0.77) and personal achievement (0.72) in the present study (see Table 2).

Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)

The Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; Law et al., 2004) comprises 16 items on four EI domains: self-emotions appraisal, others-emotion appraisal, emotional regulation, and use of emotions. Items are on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Higher scores indicate better emotional intelligence. The reliability of scores for WLEIS subscales ranges from 0.76–0.79 in the present study (see Table 2).

Table 1. Demographic and characteristics of remote workers (N = 557)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage or Mean Mean (SD)
Age (years)		31.90(4.64)
Male	329	59.1
Education background		
Intermediate	37	6.6
Graduation	161	28.9
Postgraduate and above	359	64.4
Profession		
IT	171	30.7
Engineer	43	7.7
Business and management	118	21.2
Content writer	120	21.5
Finance	105	18.9
Weekly working hours		
Less than 40	3219	57.7
40–59	155	27.9
60 and above	81	14.5
Marital status		
Single	212	38.1
Married	345	61.9
Monthly income (RMB)		
<5000	108	19.4
5000–8000	306	54.9
>8000	143	25.7
Working years		
Less than 5	110	19.7
6–10	111	19.9
11–15	131	23.5
16 and above	205	36.8

Table 2. Descriptives of the study variables

		Range						
Variables	**No. of items**	**Min**	**Max**	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**M**	**SD**	**Skew**	**Kurt**
WFC	4	4	15	0.71	6.92	2.36	1.01	0.80
EI	16	16	112	0.81	60.73	30.04	−0.13	−1.41
SEA	4	4	28	0.79	16.34	8.11	−0.26	−1.48
ER	4	4	28	0.76	14.16	7.68	0.21	−1.22
EMU	4	4	28	0.76	14.25	7.25	0.19	−1.21
OEA	4	4	28	0.79	15.98	8.98	−0.13	−1.56
BOS	22	70	124	0.83	97.63	13.44	0.07	−0.99
EE	7	17	45	0.78	31.87	6.14	−0.28	−1.05
Dep	7	18	43	0.77	30.51	4.57	0.24	−0.51
PA	8	21	47	0.72	35.26	6.33	−0.11	−0.79

Note. WFC = Work Family Conflict; EI = Emotional Intelligence; SEA = Self Emotion Appraisal; ER = Emotional Regulation; EMU = Emotions Use; OEA = Others Emotion Appraisal; BOS = Burnout Scale; EE = Emotional Exhaustion; Dep = Depersonalization; PA = Personal Achievement.

Procedure

The study was approved by Dezhou University. Participants provided written informed consent. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence being highlighted. Participants were also assured of confidentiality, and all responses were anonymized during data collection. Data was collected through secure, web-based platform to ensure privacy and security.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed with SPSS 26 and AMOS 23 (Corp, 2019). A sequence of linear regression analyses was performed to examine the moderation of EI on the relationship between burnout and WFC. Moreover, structure equation modeling (SEM) with moderation terms was utilized for estimating concurrent effects of several factors on a dependent variable (WFC). Subsequently, a simple slope analysis was performed to assess the moderating influence of the

significant interaction factors (see Figure 3). The analytical methodology was based on the conceptual framework of the study (see Figure 1), guaranteeing that the interpretations of the results were both methodologically robust and contextually appropriate.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Tables 2 and 3 present the descriptive studies for the study variables.

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed significant negative relationships ($p < 0.001$) between WFC and all EI sub domains (see Table 4). Additionally, in relation to burnout domains, WFC showed significant positive association with reduced personal achievement. Furthermore, all EI subdomains were found negatively associated with both depersonalization and reduced personal achievement. It is noteworthy that as WFC increases, individuals experience a decrease in personal achievement. Additionally, individuals with improved emotional abilities also experience a decline in personal achievement. There was no significant correlation observed between emotional exhaustion and either WFC or EI.

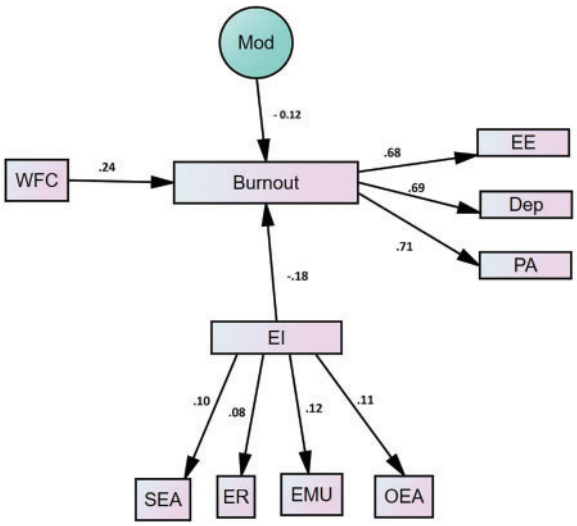

Figure 2. SEM model analysis

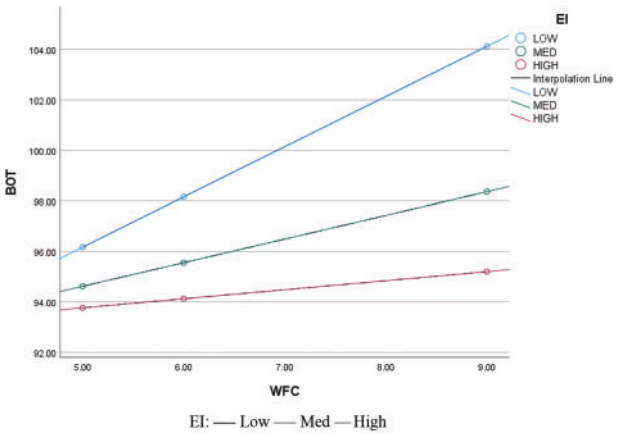

Figure 3. Moderating role of EI on the relationship between WFC and Burnout

From Table 4 analysis, its apparent that gender differences are significant in WFC, with females reporting higher levels (M = 7.72) than males (M = 6.34) ($p < 0.001$). When considering educational background, significant differences are observed in WFC and burnout, particularly among those with a postgraduate level of education reporting much higher means, suggesting a relationship between higher education and increased perception of WFC and burnout. Professional background does not seem to significantly differentiate among WFC, EI, or burnout scores. For the rest, see Table 3.

Burnout and WFC

The results of the multiple regression analysis (Table 5) indicate that among burnout domains, reduced personal achievement is the only significant predictor of WFC (B = 0.297, $p = 0.009$) (see Table 5). The standardized path coefficients for H1 supported a positive association between WFC and burnout (see Figure 2).

Emotional intelligence in burnout and WFC

All emotional intelligence skills significantly negatively predict WFC (see Tables 6 and 7). The beta values for others' emotional appraisal and self-emotional appraisal were higher compared to other emotional intelligence skills. Individuals who possess a greater comprehension of their own emotions as well as the emotions of others tend to have less WFC. Consequently, these EI skills have a direct influence on both work and family life. In addition, the regression examination of EI and burnout did not reveal any statistically significant results.

Based on the regression analysis results, which showed important links between WFC and all EI skills and reduced personal achievement and the lack of strong predictive association between EI and burnout elements, the research now proceeds to SEM. The hypothesized correlations utilizing SEM are depicted in Figure 2. In support of Hypothesis 2, the data show a strong negative association between EI and burnout. In addition, in support of Hypothesis 3, the linear regression model (see Table 6), indicates a strong negative association between WFC and all components of EI.

Table 8 reported a strong, negative interactive association with burnout ($\beta = -0.12$, $p < 0.01$), with regard the SEM analysis findings that confirm Hypothesis 4, indicating that the interaction between EI has a significant moderating influence on the relationship of WFC and burnout. The model fit indices supported the proposed model with acceptable values (see Table 8). It is important to note that the Chi-Square test is sensitive to sample size, which can sometimes lead to an inflated impression of mismatch (Jöreskog, 1969).

Figure 3 illustrates the moderating effects of high, medium, and low EI on the relationship between WFC and burnout. As WFC increases, burnout also increases across all levels of EI; however, the rate of this increase depends on the EI level. Individuals with high EI experience a less pronounced slope, indicating that higher levels of EI buffer the negative impact of WFC on burnout. Conversely, the slope is more pronounced for individuals

with low EI, indicating a stronger relationship between WFC and burnout.

Discussion

Firstly, this study found a significant positive association between WFC and one component of burnout (i.e., reduced personal achievement). The findings align with existing literature. For example, previous studies have shown that WFC is linked to higher levels of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001) and that EI can mitigate the negative impact of work family stress (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). WFC as an important stress factor impacts work performance which may lead to impact other dimensions of burnout as well including emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Abdelhafiz et al., 2020). However, it is also possible that reduced personal achievement could be a result of other factors such as lack of motivation or limited resources, rather than solely being caused by work-family conflict (Wang et al., 2015b).

Secondly, the study found a higher between WFC with lower EI skills. This finding may be explained by the fact that individuals having developed emotional skills may be better at managing work and life challenges resulting in reduced WFC (Akintayo, 2010). Previous studies have also reported on the protective role of EI among workers (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Zeidner et al., 2004). This would be particularly true of professionals engaged in occupations requiring high emotional labor, such as customer service, caregiving, or social services, shown enhanced emotional competence (Chakravorty & Singh, 2020; Pekaar et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2015a).

In addition, numerous studies have repeatedly demonstrated that decreased personal achievement is linked to elevated levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, which in turn contribute to burnout (Janssen et al., 1999; Sudha & Saxena, 2021; You et al., 2015). The association between work-related expectations and resources is quite apparent, and self-esteem acts as a moderator in this relationship.

These findings indicate that EI has a moderating role in the association between WFC and burnout. Finding that individuals with high EI have a less significant increase in burnout when faced with increasing WFC is consistent with the findings of Mustafa et al. (2016). Mustafa's research has shown that EI has the ability to decrease the adverse effects of emotional strain on burnout. This comparison implies that comparable mechanisms may be involved in alleviating the impact of WFC on burnout among individuals who work remotely.

Moreover, the results indicate that those with lower EI experience a more significant increase in burnout when WFC becomes more intense. This correlation is generally attributed to challenges in regulating emotional reactions and efficiently balancing the demands of both work and family commitments. The increased conflict can also be attributed to the reduced ability of these individuals to regulate their emotions and adjust to new settings.

Implications for research and practice

The present study is one of the first to investigate the multifaceted relationship between burnout, WFC, and EI in the context of remote working in China. Moreover, the relationship between the many aspects of burnout and EI reveals complexity by inverse associations between depersonalization and subdimensions of EI, less well articulated by current burnout models (e.g., Maslach et al., 2001). Nonetheless, prioritizing the well-being of remote workers is important sustainable production. Organizations should consider working dynamics with remote working by adjusting on-site working hours since remote working is the new normal. When employer organizations reduce risks for WFC, they create safer stress remote workers, enhancing their productivity and achieving a harmonious work-life balance.

Related programs have the potential to decrease both burnout an WFC (Iacolino et al., 2023) Moreover, when organizations take regard of the association between emotional skills and work exhaustion, they create safer work environments (Kartono & Hilmiana, 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

We have several limitations that suggest directions for further investigation. The study utilized self-report measures and these have potential social desirability bias. Moreover, the study employed a cross-sectional survey method, which restricts the capacity to determine causality. Further research using longitudinal methodology could provide a clearer understanding of the causal links between the study

Table 3. Correlation of WFC, EI, and burnout subdomains

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. WFC	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. SEA	−0.232***	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. ER	−0.171***	0.814***	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. EMU	−0.168***	0.756***	0.837***	–	–	–	–	–
5. OEA	−0.203***	0.910***	0.843***	0.862***	–	–	–	–
6. EE	−0.005	0.056	0.034	0.028	0.068	–	–	–
7. Dep	0.007	−0.150***	−0.151***	−0.152***	−0.181***	0.217***	–	–
8. PA	0.111**	−0.448***	−0.489***	−0.464***	−0.482***	0.547***	0.471***	–

Note. *** $= p < 0.001$, ** $= p < 0.01$; WFC = Work Family Conflict; EI = Emotional Intelligence; SEA = Self Emotion Appraisal; ER = Emotional Regulation; EMU = Emotions Use; OEA = Others Emotion Appraisal; BOS = Burnout Scale; EE = Emotional Exhaustion; Dep = Depersonalization; PA = Personal Achievement.

Table 4. Demographic differences of remote workers between WFC, EI, and Burnout scores

	WFC	Burnout	EI
Gender differences			
Male	6.34(1.87)	96.79(13.38)	61.16(29.48)
Female	7.72(2.67)	98.97(13.41)	60.18(30.71)
t	−7.18	−1.89	0.377
p	<0.001	0.74	0.09
Education background			
Intermediate	7.86(2.66)	99.86(9.23)	62.00(32.07)
Graduation	7.08(2.50)	99.57(12.38)	56.38(29.39)
Postgraduate and above	19.19(6.53)	285.23(42.06)	182.06(84.93)
F	5.58	4.78	2.04
p	<0.001	<0.001	0.086
Profession			
IT	6.63(2.31)	95.70(13.36)	62.98(29.12)
Engineer	6.88(2.07)	99.45(13.61)	67.00(28.76)
Business and management	6.97(2.39)	100.31(13.69)	58.81(32.48)
Content Writer	7.10(2.42)	97.54(12.72)	60.55(30.17)
Finance	7.08(2.36)	97.03(13.66)	57.12(28.87)
F	0.95	2.31	1.20
p	0.431	0.056	0.310
Weekly working hours			
Less than 40	6.50(2.07)	96.61(13.27)	62.37(29.64)
40–59	7.48(2.57)	98.08(13.68)	62.29(30.08)
60 and above	7.43(2.57)	100.88(12.98)	52.43(30.36)
F	11.96	3.42	3.81
p	<0.001	0.033	0.023
Marital status			
Single	7.14(2.30)	97.64(13.65)	61.39(29.86)
Married	6.79(2.38)	97.63(13.32)	60.31(30.16)
t	0.41	0.01	1.71
p	0.78	0.36.	0.81

Note. WFC = Work Family Conflict; EI = Emotional Intelligence; *t* = *t* values; *p* = *p*-values.

Table 5. Multiple linear regression analysis between WFC and Burnout

					95% CI	
Variables	**B**	**SE**	***Beta***	***p***	**LL**	**UL**
EE	−0.012	0.11	−0.005	0.911	−0.23	0.20
Dep	0.014	0.08	0.007	0.866	−0.15	0.17
PA	0.297	0.11	0.111	0.009	0.07	0.52

Note. EE = Emotional Exhaustion; Dep = Depersonalization; PA = Personal Achievement; B = Unstandardized Regression Coefficient; SE = Standard Error; CI= Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit; *p* = Level of Significance.

Table 6. Multiple linear regression models of WFC and EI

					95% CI	
Variables	**B**	**SE**	***Beta***	***p***	**LL**	**UL**
SEA	−0.799	0.14	−0.23	<0.001	−1.07	−0.52
ER	−0.559	0.13	−0.171	<0.001	−0.82	−0.29
EMU	−0.518	0.12	−0.168	<0.001	−0.77	0.26
OEA	−0.775	0.15	−0.203	<0.001	−1.08	−0.46

Note. SEA = Self Emotion Appraisal; ER = Emotional Regulation; EMU = Emotions Use; OEA = Others Emotion Appraisal; B = Unstandardized Regression Coefficient; SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit; *p* = Level of Significance.

Table 7. Multiple linear regression analysis between EI and Burnout

					95% CI	
Variables	**B**	**SE**	***Beta***	***p***	**LL**	**UL**
EE	0.011	0.00	0.056	0.187	−0.00	0.02
Dep	−0.007	0.00	−0.049	0.248	−0.02	0.00
PA	−0.006	0.00	−0.03	0.481	−0.02	0.01

Note. EE = Emotional Exhaustion; Dep = Depersonalization; PA = Personal Achievement; B = Unstandardized Regression Coefficient; SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL= Upper Limit; p = Level of Significance.

Table 8. Model fit indices for SEM path analysis for WFC, EI, and Burnout

	χ^2	***Df (p-value)***	χ^2/df	**RMSEA**	**CFI**	**GFI**	**SRMR**	**TLI**
Model	242.86	85(0.001)	2.85	0.06	0.90	0.91	0.04	0.89

Note. χ^2 = likelihood ratio chi-square statistic; df = degree of freedom; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual; GFI = Goodness of Fit Indices; TLI = Tucker Lewis Index.

variables. The generalizability of the results is limited by their exclusive focus on remote workers. To increase the generalizability of the findings, future research should compare and incorporate both on-site and remote workers from a variety of professions. Additionally, the impact of work-family conflict on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization may vary depending on individual differences and coping mechanisms (Chakravorty & Singh, 2020). Further research is needed to explore the relationship between work-family conflict, burnout dimensions, and other potential contributing factors.

Conclusion

This study findings indicate the essential role of EI in remote workers work burnout and WFC experiences. Specifically, there are notable inverse relationships between the components of burnout and the subdimensions of EI, which emphasize the complex interaction between emotional elements and burnout. Importantly, those with high EI have a less noticeable increase in burnout, even when they encounter elevated levels of WFC. These results provide evidence that could inform the design of focused interventions that seek to improve quality of work life for with remote working, which is the new normal.

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Author Contributions: Data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and draft manuscript preparation: Xinxin Chu; Study conception and design, and supervision: Xingyuan Sun. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials: The data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics Approval: This study did not involve clinical trials on humans or animals and was approved by Dezhou University. We certify that the study was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and later amendments. Participants provided written informed consent. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence being highlighted. Participants were also assured of confidentiality, and all responses were anonymized during data collection. Data was collected through secure, web-based platform to ensure privacy and security.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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