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The crisis cloud's silver linings: The effects of hope and gratitude on employee burnout and engagement

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ABSTRACT

A crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic has a tremendous impact on organisations and their employees. Building on the job demands–resources model, conservation of resources theory and the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, we examined the influence of job stressors on employee burnout, as well as how positive emotions can help employees thrive in tough times. We collected data from 503 Australian employees during the transition period of the COVID-19 crisis, when the country had reached a high vaccination rate and was starting to prepare to return to pre-crisis normal. Our findings show that financial insecurity has a direct impact on employee burnout, whereas a health threat has only an indirect effect. Further, our findings highlight the importance of positive emotions. Hope for the post-crisis future was found to buffer the negative impact of financial insecurity and reduce employee burnout, and feeling gratitude at work was found to mitigate the effects of burnout and enhance employee engagement even when employees are emotionally exhausted.

1. Introduction

A major crisis that impacts a whole society should not be viewed as a rare event, as such crises are likely to happen more often than expected (Penn, 2021). Crises at an organisational level are also frequently reported (Lee et al., 2020; Mishra, 1996; Potocan and Nedelko, 2021; Snyder et al., 2006). In the current study, ‘crisis’ refers to a trigger event that creates serious threats to an organisation or leads to an individual having inadequate resources for coping with the situation (Webb, 1996). Such crisis events can reduce employees’ physical, psychological and economic wellbeing. In the COVID-19 pandemic situation, service employees have been placed under high pressure to ensure a relatively safe environment for their customers and themselves (Northington et al., 2021; Siddiqi et al., 2022). Also, many countries responded to the pandemic by closing their borders to minimise the health risks. Many service employees experienced stress and income instability due to being employed as subcontracting or casual workers by businesses that experienced a steep reduction in customer numbers because of these border closures (Grimmer, 2022; Martins et al., 2020). Consequently, burnout and disengagement at work were often reported as outcomes of employees having to work during the pandemic (Laker and Roulet, 2021; Reinwald et al., 2021).

According to the job demands–resources (JD-R) model (Auh et al., 2016; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), a feeling of burnout is caused by two factors: job demands and inadequate resources. ‘Job demands’ refers to various job components whose performance requires physical or mental effort (Ashill et al., 2015). ‘Job resources’ refers to physical or psychological factors that help employees achieve goals and reduce stress and burnout. Employees with larger pools of resources are more capable of dealing with job demands, perform better and are less likely to become burnout (Singh, 2000). In contrast, employees with inadequate resources tend to experience burnout or disengagement due to being ‘decreasingly capable of meeting the challenge’ of their work, resulting in loss spirals’ (Hobfoll et al., 1996, p. 326). While a variety of methods are available to prevent burnout (e.g., organisations altering the sources of stress at work or reducing the severity of stress via employee assistance or training programs) (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Richardson and Rothstein, 2008), ultimately, to overcome stressors and avoid burnout, employees must have adequate skills and psychological resources (Yavas et al., 2013).

Studies related to employee burnout during COVID-19 tend to focus on organisational support as a way to increase employees’ resources for coping with stress (Chen and Eyoum, 2021; Cheng et al., 2022). Using conservation of resources (COR) theory and broaden-and-build theory,

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we argue that experiencing positive emotions (i.e., hope and gratitude) in the transition period is far more powerful than organisational support for enhancing employees' wellbeing and work engagement. Fig. 1 illustrates our proposed conceptual model.

We focus on hope and gratitude because these positive emotions are commonly experienced by employees in the transition period (Kim et al., 2022; Ni et al., 2022; Northington et al., 2021). Importantly, these positive emotions not only make people feel good but also benefit them beyond the present moment. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004) posits that experiencing positive emotions can broaden people's awareness of opportunities and encourage exploratory thoughts and actions. These cognitions and behaviours will then help them build useful skills and intellectual and psychological resources.

Hope and gratitude can encourage people to think about seeking opportunities to build additional resources that may buffer them against negative life events (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2018). Hope for a better future tends to have a positive impact on a person's wellbeing because hopeful individuals are motivated to explore ways to achieve goals (Counted et al., 2022). Hope is a belief in the possibility of a positive outcome in the future (MacInnis et al., 2004). COR theory suggests that individuals with higher resource pools are more likely to expect a positive future (i.e., have higher hope) due to spirals of resource gains, meaning that they have more resources available to invest and will find it less difficult to achieve future goals. Hope is also an outcome of personal appraisal processes, which explains why a given situation can have different meanings for different individuals (Folkman, 2010). Employees may experience hopeful feelings due to their expectations of positive outcomes resulting from the direction and policy of their company (Schulman, 1999) or the government (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2021) or from the leaderships of organisations (Laker and Roulet, 2021). Hope is a relevant emotion in the COVID-19 pandemic context because, although job loss and financial insecurity are paramount concerns for many service employees, the expectation of a good future can still exist and offer psychological resources that help them overcome their difficulties.

Similarly, gratitude had an important role in motivating people to succeed despite feeling depressed after the September 11th attacks (Fredrickson et al., 2003). Both gratitude and hope are emotions that require individuals to be mindful of benefits existing within the situation that they are experiencing (Sawyer et al., 2022). Workplace gratitude is difficult for employers to promote because simply providing employees with organisational resources may not be enough to generate it (Fehr et al., 2017). Employees may not appreciate the benefits provided to them at work because several factors can divert their attention, including daily work demands and organisational complexities (Jett and George, 2003). Gratitude occurs when individuals are aware of both the benefits they receive and the costs to their benefactors of offering those benefits (Fehr et al., 2017). For employees who experience workplace gratitude, it could provide psychological resources that motivate them to broaden their thinking and skills to adapt the ways that they deal with

a pandemic.

The limited studies reporting on employee burnout during crises mainly focus on internal assistance (i.e., organisational support or emotional support) and the demographics of the employees (e.g., generation) as the factors that explain employees' ability to cope with stress (e.g., Chen and Eyoun, 2021; Cheng et al., 2022; Mahmoud et al., 2020). Despite some valuable insights offered by this scant literature, little is known about how positive emotions might prevent employee burnout and foster work engagement even during challenging times. To address this research gap, we have employed the JD-R model, COR theory and the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions to examine the influence of job stressors on employee burnout during the transition period of the COVID-19 crisis and the role of positive emotions as job resources that help employees overcome the stress of the crisis. The transition period refers to the time during the pandemic where a society reaches a high vaccination rate and starts preparing to return to pre-crisis normal. We have focused on this period because positive emotions will be more prominent and because it is a time of change during which organisations must prepare their employees to return to the regular work.

Unlike previous studies (Chen and Eyoun, 2021; Kloutsiniotis et al., 2022; Vo-Thanh et al., 2022) that focused on employee burnout at the peak of the pandemic and identified COVID-19 fatality risk and job insecurity as key stressors, our study examined the effects of the stressors that were induced by the crisis once the majority of people were vaccinated and employees started preparing to return to pre-crisis normal. We propose that financial insecurity was the major driver of employee burnout in the transition period. Here, 'financial insecurity' refers to financial concerns caused by an uncertainty of income due to COVID-19 (Wolfe and Patel, 2021). Using COR theory, we argue that during the transition period of the crisis, the COVID-19 health threat was one of the job stressors for frontline employees but had only an indirect effect on employee burnout, via a sense of financial insecurity. Here, 'health threat' refers to being worried about contracting the disease (Shin and Kang, 2020).

Further, we highlight the roles of hope and gratitude in providing job resources that help employees thrive during the transition period. In this study, hope is defined as a feeling of expecting and desiring a positive outcome in the post-crisis future (Kim et al., 2022). Hope can offer psychological protection against adversity (Snyder et al., 2006). We propose that hope for post-crisis conditions (e.g., border openings, more tourists and customers, and regular operating hours without lockdowns) can buffer employees against the negative impact of financial insecurity and reduce employee burnout. In addition, gratitude, another positive emotion, has been shown to co-occur with hope during times of crisis (Fredrickson et al., 2003; Slaughter et al., 2021). We define workplace gratitude as employees' feelings of appreciation in response to an experience at work through which they receive benefits (Emmons and McCullough, 2004). When gratitude is expressed to co-workers during a crisis, this can increase both in-role and extra-role performance (Ni et al., 2022). Feeling grateful can motivate an individual to reciprocate support and assistance (Fehr et al., 2017). Therefore, we propose that gratitude can mitigate the negative impact of burnout and enhance employee engagement even when employees are feeling emotionally exhausted.

Our study offers multiple contributions. First, there are limited studies (e.g., Chen and Eyoun, 2021; Vo-Thanh et al., 2022) of employee burnout during the crisis, and these have captured employee experiences only at the peak of the pandemic, when vaccination programs had not been commenced or had only just started. In contrast, using the JD-R model and the COR and broaden-and-build theories, we have examined the influences of the COVID-19 health threat and of financial insecurity on employee burnout during the transition period, when the lockdowns and control measures were being phased out and a national (i.e., Australia-wide) plan of border opening and returning to normal had been confirmed. Second, unlike prior studies of work engagement and

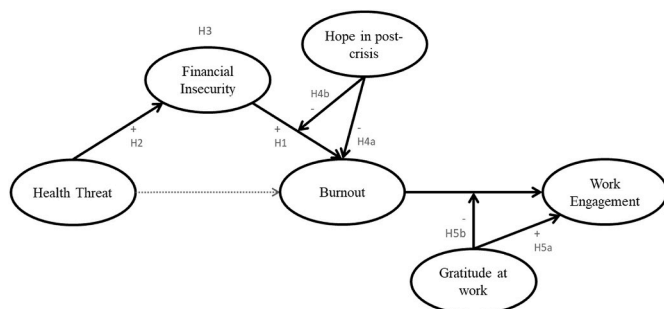


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

employee burnout during the COVID-19 crisis (Chen and Eyoum, 2021; Cheng et al., 2022) that established only organisational resources as a moderator in buffering the negative influence of the pandemic, our study examined psychological resources derived from hope and workplace gratitude. Although some studies of COVID-19's effects have examined these two emotions, they have tended to focus on the emergence or alteration of hope and gratitude during the crisis (Slaughter et al., 2021), the workplace factors that engendered hope (e.g., Kim et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2021) or the positive effects on employee performance of receiving thanks from co-workers (Ni et al., 2022). Lastly, our study advances the currently limited knowledge regarding hope and workplace gratitude during crises (Fehr et al., 2017; Slaughter et al., 2021). Our study is among the first to investigate how hope for the post-crisis future and workplace gratitude helped employees to thrive during the transition period.

The current research is organised as follows. First, we review relevant literature and state the hypotheses we developed, based on that literature, to guide the investigation. Next, we describe our research method and our findings. To conclude, we discuss our study's theoretical and managerial implications and recommend future research directions.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Employee burnout

Burnout, in general, refers to a strain caused by stressors (Etzion et al., 1998). Employees in various occupations can face burnout due to job stressors and demands and having insufficient resources for work motivation. Employee burnout can be a result of not having enough resources to cope with job stressors at workplace (Auh et al., 2016). The symptoms of burnout often include exhaustion, depersonalisation and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 1997). However, a meta-analysis by Lee and Ashforth (1996) found that emotional exhaustion is the most common symptom. In a customer-service relationship context, Singh (2000) found that reduced personal accomplishment (inefficacy) was less common than the other symptoms of employee burnout. As a result, our study followed Auh et al. (2016) by focusing on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation dimensions of burnout.

2.2. Job Demands–Resources model, conservation of resources theory and broaden-and-build theory

In the JD-R model (Auh et al., 2016; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), job demands and resources are considered the two major factors causing feelings of burnout. Resources, according to COR theory, are valuable entities, such as objects, conditions (e.g., physical or financial well-being) and psychological capital, that can be possessed by or accessible to an individual. The theory postulates that individuals 'strive to retain, protect and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources' (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). These resources can be tangible (e.g., money or rewards) or intangible (e.g., self-esteem).

Further, resources can be gained with the help of positive emotions. According to broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2004) in positive psychology, positive emotions such as hope and gratitude can allow one's thoughts to explore opportunities and can broaden one's actions to develop useful skills and personal resources. Thus, although positive emotions may not appear to have immediate tangible value, they can lead to skills and personal resources increasing over time. For example, employees whose working hours have been cut due to the pandemic might start learning new skills outside working hours in the hope of experiencing positive outcomes (e.g., obtaining a job in another industry) in the near future. Beyond merely feeling good, individuals may build up resources over time, providing them with survival skills. Therefore, positive emotions should be cultivated by organisations to enable employees to develop psychological resilience in the long term

(Fredrickson, 2004).

The following sections further discuss job demands and resources in the context of working during the pandemic.

2.3. Job demands during the COVID-19 pandemic: health threats and financial security

Resource depletion can be triggered by job demands, that is, 'physical, social, or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain psychological costs (e.g., exhaustion)' (Crawford et al., 2010, p. 835). Most existing studies have defined job demands only in terms of negative characteristics of employee–organisation or employee–customer relationships and have included role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload in the factors driving employee burnout (e.g., Auh et al., 2016; Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Singh et al., 1994). According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), burnout may occur because a threatening situation (e.g., a pandemic) leads to a spiral of loss of valuable psychological and emotional resources, and this loss reduces individuals' ability to manage the stress or perform their tasks. Individuals are likely to halt such resource loss, but it can continue when they are confronted with uncontrollable threatening situations such as a pandemic. The resulting downward spiral is likely to diminish individuals' psychological health and wellbeing (Hobfoll, 2001).

Our study focused on job demands that involve feeling stressed or threatened due to the pandemic, which has created extremely uncertain situations for service employees. Financial insecurity is one of the most concerning factors for service employees during the pandemic (Rasdi et al., 2021). Many governments around the world have placed movement restrictions on their residents. This policy has greatly affected service and retail industries, forcing many businesses to close altogether or temporarily close during the pandemic (Grimmer, 2022). When employees experience high levels of financial pressure through, for example, worrying about their monthly earnings due to economic uncertainty, they are likely to experience high levels of stress (Sinclair and Cheung, 2016). Such experience could exhaust employees' emotional or psychological resources. Hence, our first hypothesis was as follows.

H1. Financial insecurity is positively associated with burnout.

Frontline employees are at high risk of COVID-19 infection. At the beginning of the crisis, many people contracted COVID-19 quickly and it was unclear how to treat it. As a result, the COVID-19 health threat could cause employee burnout (Vo-Thanh et al., 2022). The experience of burnout, based on COR theory, occurs because there is a lack of resources for managing job stress (e.g. a new disease and a limited way to protect oneself at work). In the transition period, however, effective vaccination helped reduce the transmission and severity of the disease (Lavine et al., 2021). In a country with a high vaccination rate, people start to develop a complacent attitude towards COVID-19 (Crabb and Toole, 2022). This could be because they perceive COVID-19 as less life-threatening, or because they are learning to live with COVID-19. This would mean that the benefits of COVID-19 vaccines—the prevention of serious illness and the reduction in transmission—become resources that employees can use to manage job stress. As a result, we argue that during the transition period of the crisis, the COVID-19 health threat was a job stressor but did not directly lead to burnout because employees had more resources for coping with it.

However, the health threat is likely to have an indirect impact on employee burnout via a sense of financial insecurity. Infected employees still had to take leave or stay at home. For many employees, particularly subcontractors or casual workers, this would reduce their working hours and incomes. A lack of stable income can contribute to burnout. Therefore.

H2. Health threat is positively associated with financial insecurity.

H3. The relationship between health threat and burnout is mediated

by financial insecurity.

2.4. Job resources' variation over time during the COVID-19 crisis

Job resources refer to 'facilitating factors of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, stimulate personal growth and development, ...include aspects such as job control, opportunities for development, participation in decision making, task variety, feedback, and work social support' (Crawford et al., 2010, pp. 835–836). Job resources motivate service employees to work towards their goals, learn and develop their skills, improve their performance and commit to the work task through the conservation and replenishment of resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Employees who have good resources, such as workplace or peer support, tend to be resilient at work, but a lack of resources can lead to inability to cope with stress and, consequently, to burnout (e.g., Auh et al., 2016; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). According to COR theory, one's personal resources, which can be derived from one's internal or external organisational environment, can enhance one's ability to cope with stressful situations and lessen the impact of stress on one's wellbeing (Hobfoll et al., 1996).

Here, crisis refers to a trigger event that creates serious threats to organisations or individuals who have inadequate resources for coping with the situation (Webb, 1996). Employees' job resources can vary from one month to another during a crisis. There is great uncertainty at the beginning of a crisis, and this necessitates direction from leaders to navigate their people and organisations out of the crisis. Because there are inadequate resources, managing a crisis typically involves moving resources from one area to another via reallocating, transforming, collecting or borrowing (Webb, 1996). A study by Slaughter et al. (2021) examining employees' emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that as time went on, employees' emotional profiles changed from predominantly negative to predominantly positive (i.e., hope and gratitude). At the beginning of the crisis, workers experienced considerable uncertainty, but towards the end they would have received some direction from leaders or organisations and their resources would have been somewhat replenished from multiple sources. As a result, hope and gratitude tended to emerge over time. Previous studies by Fredrickson et al. (2003) and Slaughter et al. (2021) explored various emotions during times of crisis and found that both gratitude and hope are commonly experienced by employees, especially during the transition period when their lives start to return to normal. These positive emotions, according to broaden-and-build theory, can help employees build survival skills and resources, explore new potentials and take actions that lead them to overcome challenges at work.

2.5. Job resources via positive emotions: hope for the post-pandemic future and workplace gratitude

Hope for the post-crisis future can provide resources for employees. Hope is a belief in the possibility of positive outcomes in the future. It tends to occur when a person's life situation is unsatisfactory, and it gives vital psychological resources to individuals to help them thrive in the midst of difficulty (Lazarus, 1999). High-hope individuals have the cognitive ability to self-regulate (Bandura, 1997), and this enables them to successfully perform tasks during highly stressful situations (Luthans and Youssef, 2007). Hope also enhances self-confidence and reduces anxiety at work (Lindblom et al., 2020). Hope increased during the COVID-19 transition period as the opening of borders and the abolition of lockdowns created a positive outlook for future economic conditions and financial security. According to COR theory, employees with greater hope are less likely to experience burnout because they have more psychological resources to draw upon compared to those with less hope. Therefore, we proposed that when employees perceived threats to their financial security due to the pandemic, having hope for the post-crisis future gave them psychological resources that allowed them to better cope with the stress of financial insecurity and thus reduce the effect of

financial insecurity on burnout. Hence.

H4a. Hope for the post-crisis future is negatively associated with burnout.

H4b. Hope for the post-crisis future moderates the effect of financial insecurity on burnout, so that the effect is weaker when there is a high level of hope.

Gratitude is another positive emotion that can emerge during a transition period to help reduce the impact of employee burnout on work engagement. There has been very little empirical studies (Auh et al., 2016; Suh et al., 2011) of the negative impact of burnout on work engagement. According to the JD-R model, employees become disengaged partly due to a lack of resources for coping with high levels of job stressors. The experience of burnout can lead an employee to disengage (Auh et al., 2016) and can weaken service employees' performance (Babakus et al., 1999). However, feeling grateful at work can replenish an employee's depleted emotional resources. Gratitude helps broaden one's thinking about, and actions aimed at, obtaining and replenishing resources that improve one's abilities to cope with challenges (Fehr et al., 2017). Workplace gratitude refers to employees' feelings of appreciation in response to an experience at work where they receive benefits (Emmons and McCullough, 2004). It improves employees' wellbeing, endorses norms of reciprocity and promotes prosocial behaviours (Fehr et al., 2017).

Workplace gratitude may increase during a challenging time as a result of employees feeling thankful for various forms of help and support provided by employers or other employees. A feeling of gratitude occurs when employees appreciate the support of other employees (e.g., task or emotional support or career mentoring) or of the organisation itself (e.g., flexible working hours or career advancement opportunities) (Bono et al., 2004). Organisations could provide various supports during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, some workplaces offered mental health counselling services, provided regular communications and updates from leaders, reduced employees' exposure to the COVID-19 virus by permitting flexible working arrangements, or protected employees' safety by providing free protective equipment and regularly disinfecting the workplace. Such voluntary actions during a difficult time show that employers value the wellbeing of their employees and care about them. Employees who experience high levels of workplace gratitude may be able to replenish their depleted psychological resources and thus become more engaged with work and more capable of dealing with burnout compared to those who experience only low levels of gratitude. Thus.

H5a. Workplace gratitude is positively associated with work engagement.

H5b. Workplace gratitude moderates the effect of burnout on work engagement, so that the effect is weaker when there is a high level of gratitude.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and design

The population of interest is employees who are currently working in service organisations in Australia. Research participants were recruited via Prolific, an online recruitment and data collection platform for workers to complete surveys. A total of 503 useable questionnaires were used in the final analysis. The most common types of service organisations reported as employers were retail stores, restaurants, café, and transportation services. The average age of respondents was 31 years old with 58% being female.

3.2. Measures

Items for the key constructs in the study were sourced from relevant literature. All measures employ seven-point scales. Table 1 shows individual items and reliability and validity of the construct measures. We adapted burnout measures from Auh et al. (2016) to measure the burnout during covid-19. To measure health threat and financial insecurity during covid-19, we used items adapted from Conway et al. (2021), Shin and Kang (2020), and Wolfe and Patel (2021). We measured hope in post-crisis and gratitude at work based on the items from Slaughter et al. (2021). Next, the items for work engagement are based on Schaufeli et al.'s (2006) short scale.

Evaluation of the measurement and structural model in PLS is based on a set of nonparametric evaluation criteria and uses procedures such as bootstrapping (Hair et al., 2014). Assessment of reflective measurement models in Table 1 includes composite reliability to evaluate internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha, individual indicator reliability (i. e. outer loadings), and average variance extracted (AVE) to evaluate convergent validity. The composite reliability values range from 0.85 to 0.96 which are above the satisfactory level of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Regarding internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alphas are all above the acceptable level of 0.70. Next, the outer loadings

(indicator reliability) are above the critical value of 0.70 and significant. Next, all AVE values are above 0.50 indicating convergent validity at the construct level. The results of discriminant validity test are presented in Tables 2 and 3. To assess discriminant validity, we employ Fornell-Larcker's criterion by comparing the square root of the AVE values with the latent variable correlations. The correlation matrix in Table 2 shows that the square root of each construct's AVE is greater than its highest correlation with any other construct. Therefore, the test for discriminant validity was met. In addition, the HTMT ratio (Table 3) is used to test discriminant validity. The maximum value in the HTMT Table is 0.62. This is considerably below 0.85 which is the most conservative critical HTMT value (Henseler et al., 2015).

4. Results

Partial Least Squares (PLS) is chosen as an analysis method in the current study. Before evaluating a structural model, collinearity must be assessed (Chin, 2010). Before evaluating a structural model, collinearity must be assessed (Chin, 2010). Table 4 shows that all VIF values are lower than 5 indicating no collinearity concerns. Next, Table 5 shows the results of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). To assess the significance of structural model relationships, we use the

Table 1
Measurement reliability and validity.

Constructs and items	Internal consistency reliability		Indicator reliability	Convergent validity	Discriminant validity
	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha	Outer loading (sig)	AVE	Square root of AVE
Health Threat (M = 3.76, SD = 1.72)	0.94	0.90		0.83	0.91
I am worried about contracting covid-19			0.90***		
I am afraid of the Covid-19			0.90***		
I am stressed around other people because I worry I'll catch the coronavirus			0.93***		
Financial Insecurity (M = 3.55, SD = 2.04)	0.97	0.94		0.94	0.97
The covid-19 could impact me negatively from a financial point of view.			0.97***		
I could potentially loss income because of covid-19			0.97***		
Gratitude at work (M = 4.73, SD = 1.49)	0.94	0.90		0.84	0.92
Grateful			0.92***		
Appreciative			0.94***		
Thankful			0.89***		
Hope in post-crisis (M = 4.63, SD = 1.25)	0.85	0.78		0.66	0.81
Hopeful			0.80***		
Optimistic			0.80***		
Encouraged			0.83***		
Burnout (M = 3.09, SD = 1.43)	0.96	0.95		0.86	0.93
I feel emotionally drained during my work			0.94***		
I feel burned out because the impact of covid-19 on my works			0.94***		
I feel a lack of personal concern for my work			0.91***		
I feel I'm becoming more hardened toward other at work.			0.91***		
Work Engagement	0.96	0.95		0.71	0.84
Vigorous (M = 3.85, SD = 1.36)	0.88	0.93		0.81	0.90
At my work, I feel bursting with energy			0.92***		
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous			0.92***		
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.			0.86***		
Absorption (M = 4.39, SD = 1.33)	0.91	0.85		0.77	0.88
I feel happy when I am working intensely.			0.87***		
I am immersed in my work.			0.91***		
I get carried away when I am working			0.85***		
Dedication (M = 4.47, SD = 1.44)	0.94	0.90		0.84	0.91
I am enthusiastic about my job.			0.93***		
My job inspires me.			0.93***		
I am proud of the work that I do.			0.88***		

Table 2
Discriminant analysis.

	Burnout	Health threat	Financial insecurity	Work engagement	Gratitude at work	Hope in post-crisis
Burnout	0.93					
Health threat	0.04	0.91				
Financial insecurity	0.27	0.18	0.97			
Work engagement	-0.26	-0.01	-0.04	0.84		
Gratitude at work	-0.26	-0.00	-0.18	0.60	0.92	
Hope in post-crisis	-0.63	-0.00	-0.21	0.26	0.27	0.80

Notes: The square root of each construct’s AVE is on the diagonal. The nondiagonal elements indicate the correlations between the latent variables.

Table 3
The heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT).

	Burnout	Health threat	Financial insecurity	Work engagement	Gratitude at work
Burnout					
Health threat	0.05				
Financial insecurity	0.28	0.18			
Work engagement	0.27	0.05	0.05		
Gratitude at work	0.27	0.03	0.02	0.62	
Hope in post-crisis	0.62	0.07	0.22	0.30	0.32

Table 4
Collinearity analysis.

Financial insecurity		Burnout		Work Engagement	
Independent variables	VIF	Independent variables	VIF	Independent variables	VIF
Health threat	1.00	Health threat	1.06	Burnout	1.10
		Financial insecurity	1.11	Gratitude at work	1.07
		Hope in post-crisis	1.12		

Table 5
Significance testing results of the structural model path coefficients.

	Financial insecurity	Burnout	Work engagement
	Path coefficients	Path coefficients	Path coefficients
Health threat	0.20***	0.02	
Financial insecurity		0.18***	
Hope in post-crisis		-0.56***	
Gratitude at work			0.55***
Burnout			-0.16***
Moderating variables			
Hope*Burnout		-0.17***	
Gratitude*Burnout			0.08**
Control variables			
Gender	0.03	0.03	-0.02
Age	-0.10**	-0.09**	0.08**
R ²	0.10	0.45	0.45
Q ²	0.08	0.38	0.31

bootstrapping procedure in which 5000 subsample are drawn randomly from the original data. The robustness of our model is tested by controlling for age and gender. The parameters in PLS-SEM are obtained by fitting the model to the sample data and the estimation occurs as a result of maximizing the explained variance of the dependent variable. Hence, the model assessment in PLS-SEM is based on heuristic criteria which are determined by the model’s predictive capabilities rather than the measures of goodness of fit. The two important criteria are the coefficient of determination (R²) and the predictive relevance (Q²). The Q² is an indicator of a model’s predictive relevance and obtained by using the blindfolding procedure. This measure indicates how well the path model can predict the originally observed values when the dth data point in the

endogenous variable is omitted (Chin, 2010). When the Q² values are larger than 0, it indicates the exogenous variables have predictive relevance for the endogenous variable.

Our results in Table 5 show the R² values range from 0.10 to 0.45 and the Q² values are larger than 0. Our results also show that financial insecurity is positively associated with burnout (b = 0.18, p ≤ 0.00). Hence, hypothesis 1 is supported. Our data support hypothesis 2 which predicts that a health threat is positively associated with financial insecurity (b = 0.20, p ≤ 0.00). To test hypothesis 3 that the relationship between covid threat and burnout is mediated by a financial threat, we followed Preacher and Hayes’s (2004) approach to assessing mediation. Our results show that the indirect effect (b = 0.04, p ≤ 0.05) is significant hence H3 is supported. Next, hypotheses 4a and 4b are also supported. Hope in post-crisis (b = -0.56, p ≤ 0.00) is negatively associated with burnout. Hope will moderate the effect of financial insecurity on burnout (b = -0.17, p ≤ 0.00), such that the effect will be weaker when there is a high level of hope. Next, our results support H5a which states that gratitude at work is positively associated with work engagement (b = 0.55, p ≤ 0.00). Hypothesis 5b is also supported. Gratitude will moderate the effect of burnout on work engagement (b = 0.08, p ≤ 0.05), such that the effect will be weaker when there is a high level of gratitude.

5. Discussion

A major crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to happen more often than expected (Penn, 2021). It impacts everyone in society, and organisations need to be prepared to support their employees’ wellbeing during the difficult times it engenders. Employee burnout and work engagement are problematic issues that require attention from organisations to manage them during a peak or transition period of a crisis. Our research examined the influence of job demands during the transition period of a crisis and studied the roles of positive emotions in alleviating employee burnout and fostering work engagement.

Our theoretical contributions are fourfold. First, unlike previous studies (Chen and Eyoun, 2021; Vo-Thanh et al., 2022), we focused on the transition period of the COVID-19 crisis, when a country starts to reopen and employees gradually return to their workplaces. When a crisis is related to an outbreak of an infectious disease, the fatality risk of the disease is a serious concern for many frontline employees. The existing studies of employee stress during the COVID-19 pandemic found that the health threat was one of the key drivers of employee burnout (Vo-Thanh et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2021). However, towards the end of the crisis, because the disease was less lethal due to

vaccinations, employees were found to be less stressed when working with customers and other colleagues. According to the JD-R model and COR theory, burnout is a result of employees having inadequate resources for coping with job stressors. We extended this knowledge by showing that the job stressors that contribute to burnout may change from one period of a crisis to another because employees gain more resources for coping with stressors. For example, when vaccines become available, employees may change their views of the level of threat posed by COVID-19. Our results show that health threat—concern about contracting a disease—is a job stressor but has no direct impact on employee burnout. However, health threat can have an indirect impact on employee burnout via financial insecurity. In the case of COVID-19, employees who contracted the virus had to be absent from the workplace for a specific period of time, and hence health threat could make them uncertain about their working hours and incomes. Further, we found that employees' sense of financial insecurity had a direct impact on employee burnout. Our findings highlight how serious financial insecurity was during the transition period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, we have extended the knowledge on the positive roles of hope and gratitude in enhancing employees' resources and abilities to cope during a transition period. A previous study by [Chen and Eyoum \(2021\)](#) found that organisational support reduced the effects of job insecurity on employees' emotional exhaustion during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, [Jung et al. \(2021\)](#) found that employees who are from older generations tend to have greater resources for coping with the stress of job insecurity. Our study contributes to this knowledge by showing that positive emotions (i.e., hope and gratitude) can reduce burnout and also enhance work engagement. This is potentially explained by [Fredrickson's \(2004\)](#) broaden-and-build theory, which states that positive emotions can broaden the thoughts and actions of employees and motivate them to explore new opportunities. By doing so, employees may gain additional resources that can help them cope with stress and perform better at work.

Third, the existing studies related to the COVID-19 pandemic examined hope as an emotion that emerges over time ([Slaughter et al., 2021](#)), is an outcome of organisational efforts ([Mao et al., 2021](#); [Zhong et al., 2021](#)), and is an emotional response to the individual's cognitive assessment of their situation ([Kim et al., 2022](#)). Our study contributes further knowledge about the role of hope during a transition period. Specifically, the results of our study show that feeling hopeful for the post-crisis future can mitigate the negative effects of financial insecurity and reduce the overall experience of burnout. Overall, our findings support the current understanding that hopeful emotions offer psychological resources that enhance employees' self-confidence and reduce their anxiety at work ([Luthans and Youssef, 2007](#)).

Finally, very few studies have examined workplace gratitude during the COVID-19 crisis. [Yamamoto et al. \(2022\)](#) looked at a gratitude intervention during COVID-19 that enhanced employees' trust and work engagement. Other studies of employee gratitude during the pandemic revealed its positive effects on employees' performance ([Ni et al., 2022](#)) and wellbeing ([Datu et al., 2022](#)). Our study supported and extended these findings by showing that workplace gratitude plays an important role in fostering employees' engagement and reducing the impact of burnout during a transition period. During COVID-19, employees could feel thankful for various kinds of help and support provided by their employers, such as mental health services, flexible work arrangements and safe, healthy work environments. Feeling gratitude can direct people's attention to the kind behaviours of their benefactors and encourages them to reciprocate that kindness and build long-term relationships with those benefactors ([M. Y. Bartlett et al., 2012](#)). If gratitude is cultivated by an organisation, it can replenish the depleted resources of employees experiencing burnout. Further, gratitude can build and enhance social relationships among co-workers ([Monica Y. Bartlett et al., 2012](#)). This suggests that further resources can be gained from the relationships.

5.1. Managerial implications

Our study has several managerial implications. First, a sense of financial insecurity can greatly increase employee burnout during the transition period in a crisis. Therefore, organisations must consider offering employees financial support when planning for crisis management. Financial support may also come from governments through pandemic leave payments or other monetary assistance. Additionally, employers might consider relieving the financial stress of employees not only during the crisis but also after returning to normal. Employees experiencing financial insecurity tend not to perform well at work and spend some of their working hours trying to deal with issues related to financial stress. A number of companies, including Bupa, Hungry Jack's and Accor, take this issue seriously and permit their employees to access their wages in advance when they encounter unexpected expenses ([Woodard, 2022](#)).

Although a health threat does not directly lead to burnout, it is still part of job stressors and can influence a sense of financial insecurity. It is important for organisations to reduce employees' perceived health threat as well as their risk of becoming sick. To create a healthy and safe work environment, firms can implement various measures such as giving hand sanitiser and face masks to employees and customers during a pandemic. Employers can consider providing flexible working arrangements which include changes to working hours or locations to allow employees who may want to avoid crowded areas to feel safe from contracting a disease.

While reducing the severity of stress as suggested above could prevent burnout, our findings also indicated that encouraging positive emotions in employees could provide them with psychological resources that would be beneficial for their wellbeing and work engagement. Specifically, hope for a post-crisis future is an important psychological resource that can reduce employee burnout and buffer the negative impact of financial insecurity. Employees can thrive during a crisis if they have high levels of hope for the future. Positive expectations can be enhanced by leadership, organisational policy and national plans. Leaders of organisations or governments can cultivate hope by providing clear explanations of what needs to be done to move people from a prevailing crisis situation to a better future. Resistance to a change (such as returning to the office or opening the borders to all international tourists) may arise due to a lack of a clear vision of the change's potential positive outcomes. To instill hope rather than fear, organisations must gain the support of their employees in moving forward and promote the benefits of the plan and the possibilities of a positive future. Clear communication of organisational policies or national plans and pathways to returning to normal could also encourage more hope among employees. After implementing the plan, positive outcomes or feedback should also be communicated to encourage employees to move forward.

Many organisations also try to cultivate gratitude among employees. For example, the Campbell Soup Company embraced a culture of gratefulness, and its CEO wrote thank-you notes to 30,000 employees ([Newman, 2017](#)). When employees feel valued by their supervisors or organisations, they tend to be motivated to do the best for their organisations, leading to greater engagement and productivity. Given the power of gratitude in reducing stress and promoting positivity, organisations should consider cultivating employees' experiences of gratitude during a crisis and a transition period. Some approaches to fostering gratitude include sending appreciation notes to employees, providing wellness programs that encourage mindfulness and meditation, and creating a virtual space where employees can say thank-you to their colleagues. Using a digital platform that enable each employee to send a thank-you note to others will make it more convenient for all employees to show their appreciation to colleagues and enhancing the gratitude and positive feeling for both senders and receivers. Moreover, employees tend to experience workplace gratefulness when they do their jobs with mindfulness. To help staff reduce stress and increase a sense of appreciation through mindfulness, employers can offer training's

activities such as yoga, mindful movement, meditation, and mindful breathing to offer employees opportunities to practice mindfulness at work. During a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, employees' emotional resources are consumed by trying to cope with challenges such as keeping up with new rules for managing health and safety at work or taking more responsibility during the crisis. Their sense of wellbeing and their capacity to carry out daily tasks are diminished. Gratitude can refuel their psychological resources, allowing them to engage and achieve work goals even during a difficult time.

5.2. Limitations and future research suggestions

Our study had some limitations, and these suggest several potential future research directions. The study was implemented as a cross-sectional study during the transition period in the pandemic, but employees' burnout and work engagement outcomes may differ in a crisis situation not related to health. Future research could investigate employees' outcomes in different types of crisis situations, or take a longitudinal perspective to further investigate both the impacts of positive emotions (i.e., hope and gratitude) and changes in employee burnout and engagement. It would be meaningful to investigate post-crisis employee burnout and engagement and compare the results with those of the present study to observe differences in threat perceptions and positive emotions.

Different countries tackled the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic in very different ways. For example, people in Asian countries willingly put on protective masks, whereas there is more resistance in Western countries. Cultural norms and values can strongly shape crisis-related behaviours. As our study focused on employees working in a Western society, similar research could be conducted in Asian countries to make it possible to compare Western and Asian employees' perceptions of threats and the effects of positive emotions on their levels of burnout and engagement.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant impact on service industries, disrupting the work and lives of many people around the world. Using the JD-R model, COR theory, and broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, our study offers insight into the impact of threats (specifically, threats to health and financial security) and the effects of positive emotions (specifically, hope and gratitude) on employee burnout and engagement during the transition period of a crisis. The results indicate that financial insecurity is a major factor in employee burnout, whereas health threat has only an indirect effect on employee burnout, via financial insecurity. Both hope for the post-crisis future and workplace gratitude can increase the psychological resources that help employees cope during difficult times. Feeling hopeful for the future can reduce employee burnout and mitigate the impact of a financial threat. Workplace gratitude can increase an employee's ability to engage at work and reduce the negative effects of burnout. Overall, our findings show that crisis-related job stressors and positive emotions have significant effects on employees, and hence on organisational success, during the transition period of a crisis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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