

MOTIVATION UNDER PRESSURE: UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND BURNOUT

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Abstract: *In today's organizational environment, performance pressure has reached unprecedented levels, posing major challenges related to employee motivation and the risk of burnout. This paper analyses the relationship between professional motivation, work engagement, and burnout syndrome, seeking to identify the mechanisms through which organizational pressure affects employee well-being. The theoretical framework draws on Self-Determination Theory, the three-dimensional burnout model and recent research on the role of leadership in preventing exhaustion. The analysis reveals that employees with predominantly controlled (extrinsic) motivation exhibit higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to those with autonomous (intrinsic) motivation, thereby confirming the research hypotheses. The findings underscore the importance of systemic managerial interventions targeting motivation quality, effort recognition, and structured recovery mechanisms as essential means of preventing burnout in modern organizations.*

Keywords: motivation, work engagement, burnout, organizational pressure, psychological resources, workplace well-being.

JEL Classification: J28, J81, M12, M54.

1. Introduction

The contemporary organizational environment is undergoing profound transformations driven by digitalization, increasing competitiveness, and an accelerating pace of work. In this context, professional motivation has become one of the central themes in organizational management. The question is no longer merely how to make employees work harder, but how to help them work sustainably without burning out. Burnout, defined after 35 years of research as a chronic syndrome of exhaustion and reduced professional efficacy (Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach, 2009), represents one of the most serious consequences of unmanaged organizational pressure.

The literature offers a paradoxical perspective: the most engaged and motivated employees are precisely those most exposed to the risk of burnout. Montani, Courcy and Vandenberghe (2017) demonstrate that, under conditions of high organizational stress, even strong commitment to the organization can become a risk factor if not accompanied by leadership support. Therefore, understanding the relationship between motivation, engagement, and burnout is not merely a psychological issue but also a managerial priority.

The research gap addressed by this paper concerns the lack of an integrated perspective showing how motivation, engagement, and burnout interact under conditions of high organizational pressure. Although each concept is well studied independently, the connections between them in the specific context of organizational pressure are rarely analysed as a unified framework.

The aim of this paper is to analyze, based on the literature, the mechanisms through which organizational pressure influences employee motivation, with a focus on the relationship between engagement and burnout. The objectives are: (1) to clarify the concepts of professional motivation and burnout; (2) to identify the mechanisms by which pressure transforms engagement into a source of exhaustion; (3) to analyze the role of leadership as a protective factor; (4) to formulate conclusions with practical implications for managers.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section addresses the theoretical framework of the central concepts (motivation, engagement, and burnout); the second chapter covers the development of the research hypotheses; the third chapter focuses on the research methodology; the fourth chapter concentrates on the presentation and interpretation of results. The paper ends with final conclusions, practical implications, and directions for future research.

2. Motivation, engagement, and burnout: conceptual distinctions

2.1. Professional motivation

Professional motivation represents the set of internal and external forces that trigger, direct, and sustain an individual's behavior at the workplace. It explains why an employee chooses to exert effort, how much, and for how long. In managerial practice, understanding motivation is essential: it underlies performance, job satisfaction, and employee retention.

The most relevant theoretical framework for this paper's theme is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2000). It draws a fundamental distinction between autonomous motivation, generated by interest, curiosity, or personal satisfaction, and controlled motivation, determined by external pressures such as rewards, deadlines, or fear of sanctions. Autonomous motivation is associated with sustained performance and psychological well-being, while controlled motivation generates tension and, in the long run, exhaustion (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

SDT posits that high-quality motivation depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the freedom to decide how a task is accomplished), competence (the feeling of being efficient and capable), and relatedness (positive connections with colleagues and the organization). When these needs are disrupted by the organizational environment, motivation decreases and vulnerability to stress increases (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

The connection between motivation and burnout becomes evident when examining the organizational context under pressure. Montani, Courcy and Vandenberghe (2017) show that highly motivated employees placed in stressful situations without leadership support often resort to innovative behaviors as an adaptive mechanism, but this additional unprotected effort accelerates exhaustion. In other words, even authentic motivation can become a risk factor if the organizational environment does not provide the necessary resources.

2.2. Burnout and its relationship with organizational pressure

Burnout is a syndrome of chronic work-related exhaustion whose roots have been studied for over 35 years in literature. Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach (2009) define burnout through three fundamental dimensions: emotional exhaustion (a sense of inner emptiness and lack of energy resources), depersonalization (a detached or negative attitude toward colleagues, clients, and the organization), and reduced personal accomplishment (the feeling that one is no longer effective and that one's work does not matter). These three dimensions develop progressively and reinforce each other, making burnout difficult to identify in its early stages.

Maslach and Leiter (2016) emphasize that burnout is not mere fatigue, but a consequence of a chronic imbalance between job demands and available resources. Among the most important contributing factors are excessive workload, lack of autonomy, absence of recognition, and poor quality of the relationship with one's direct supervisor. This perspective has direct implications for managers: burnout is not an individual problem of resilience, but an indicator of a dysfunctional organizational environment.

An important aspect highlighted by Montani, Courcy and Vandenberghe (2017) is that the most dedicated and motivated employees are often the most vulnerable to burnout. Under organizational pressure, they tend to exert additional effort and ignore their limits, sacrificing recovery to meet demands. Without rest periods and without active support from leaders, psychological resources become gradually depleted, generating a downward spiral that becomes increasingly difficult to escape.

Recent research confirms that leadership is one of the most important protective factors against burnout. Onan et al. (2025) demonstrate that positive leadership styles (transformational, authentic, and servant) are associated with increased psychological resilience and lower levels of exhaustion among employees. Similarly, Pladdys (2024) shows that involving employees in recovery programs actively supported by leaders significantly reduces the risk of burnout even in high-demand environments. Therefore, leadership is not merely a performance factor, but an essential mechanism for protecting employee well-being.

3. Development of research hypotheses

Building on the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter, this chapter formulates the hypotheses underpinning the research. The two hypotheses address the relationship between motivation quality and burnout, and the risk generated by excessive engagement, respectively.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) posits that not all forms of motivation have the same effect on employee well-being. Autonomous motivation, generated from genuine interest, personal satisfaction, or a sense of meaning, is associated with minimal exhaustion and supports resilience in the face of stress. In contrast, controlled motivation, based on external pressure, fear of failure, or conditional rewards, generates an imbalanced internal state and high energy expenditure without satisfaction (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

This distinction is essential in the context of burnout. Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach (2009) show that emotional exhaustion is more frequent among employees who work out of obligation or fear, rather than from their own initiative. Therefore, the quality of motivation is a relevant predictor of burnout risk. Based on these arguments, the first research hypothesis is:

H1. Employees with a high level of controlled (extrinsic) motivation exhibit a higher level of burnout compared to those with predominantly autonomous (intrinsic) motivation.

The first hypothesis was evaluated through two complementary methods. From a bibliometric perspective, the co-occurrence analysis of keywords performed in VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010) enabled identification of the relationship between terms associated with controlled motivation and those associated with burnout in the literature. From the interview perspective, the hypothesis was tested through questions targeting the respondent's dominant motivation type (intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation) and the level of emotional exhaustion experienced at the workplace, analysed through the thematic tree generated in LiGRE (LiGRE Software, 2024).

As Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach (2009) have shown, there is a fundamental difference in the behaviour of dedicated employees: the most engaged are the most exposed to the risk of exhaustion. Employees with a high level of engagement tend to ignore fatigue signals, sacrificing recovery and repeatedly exceeding their personal capacity limits. Without rest periods and without the active intervention of leaders, psychological resources become gradually depleted.

Onan et al. (2025) confirm that high engagement, unprotected by positive leadership, is associated with increased levels of long-term emotional exhaustion. Moreover, Pladdys (2024) demonstrates that employees who do not participate in recovery programs and do not benefit from leadership support are significantly more vulnerable to burnout. Based on these arguments, the second research hypothesis is:

H2. Employees with a high level of work engagement who do not benefit from leadership support and do not have access to recovery mechanisms face a significantly higher risk of burnout than those with moderate engagement sustained by adequate resources.

The second hypothesis was evaluated using the same two methods. The bibliometric analysis tracked the co-occurrence of terms related to excessive engagement, leadership, and recovery in the selected literature. In the interviews, the hypothesis was tested through questions addressing how frequently respondents exceed their working hours, their perception of leadership

support, and their access to rest periods and recovery resources, with data analyzed through the LiGRE thematic tree (LiGRE Software, 2024).

The two formulated hypotheses complement each other, outlining a model of the relationship between motivation, engagement, and burnout. The first hypothesis establishes that the type of motivation influences vulnerability to exhaustion. The second hypothesis shows that excessive engagement, in the absence of leadership support and recovery mechanisms, transforms even a positive trait into a risk factor. Together, they suggest that burnout is not a purely individual problem, but the result of a combination of motivation quality and organizational conditions.

4. Research methodology

This paper adopts a dual methodological approach, combining two types of information sources to capture the relationship between motivation and burnout from two complementary perspectives: how it is reflected in the literature and how it is perceived by employees in real work settings. By integrating the two approaches, we aimed to highlight both common elements and differences between the theoretical and practical perspectives.

Stage 1. Bibliometric Analysis. The first stage of the research consisted of conducting a bibliometric analysis based on scientific articles indexed in the Web of Science database (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016), using "motivation and burnout" as search terms in article titles. Bibliometric analysis is an established quantitative method for mapping a research field, frequently used in literature synthesis studies (Donthu et al., 2021). After applying document type filters (letter, meeting abstract, editorial material, and book chapter were excluded) and language filters (English only), the data were exported in Plain Text File format and imported into the VOSviewer application (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010) to generate bibliometric maps.

Two types of analyses were performed: a keyword co-occurrence analysis (Type of Analysis: Co-occurrence; Unit of Analysis: Authors' Keywords), which enabled identification of dominant clusters, and a country-level analysis (Type of Analysis: Co-authorship; Unit of Analysis: Countries), which revealed the international collaboration network in the field. A thesaurus file was also used to standardize synonyms.

In addition to examining article metadata, the abstracts of 23 selected papers identified through the Web of Science search (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) were also analysed. The selection of the 23 articles was based on relevance to the paper's theme. Priority was given to articles whose abstracts explicitly highlighted the relationship between motivation, engagement, and burnout in an organizational context, with a focus on factors such as workplace pressure, motivation type, or the role of leadership. Articles treating burnout exclusively in medical, sports, or educational contexts were excluded, retaining only works applicable to the organizational and financial domain. The choice of Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) as the database is justified by its broad coverage of indexed publications and the quality of its indexing process. The selected abstracts formed the basis of the comparative analysis presented in section 5.3.

The bibliometric analysis provided an overview of how the motivation-burnout relationship is studied in international literature, enabling identification of dominant keywords, research trends, and countries with the highest volume of publications.

Stage 2. Interview Analysis. The second stage of the research consisted of collecting and analyzing responses obtained through a structured interview applied to a sample of 11 professionals from the financial-banking sector.

The research instrument included both closed multiple-choice questions addressing aspects such as motivation level (scale 1-5), exhaustion frequency (frequently/occasionally/rarely), and work-life balance perception (satisfactory/unsatisfactory), as well as open-ended questions through which respondents described stress factors, motivation sources, and proposed solutions for reducing burnout. Responses to closed questions enabled an initial quantitative evaluation of the formulated hypotheses, while open-ended responses were analyzed qualitatively through the thematic tree generated in LiGRE (LiGRE Software, 2024).

The sample included individuals aged between 24 and 45 years, with varying levels of professional experience (1-12 years) and diverse roles: financial analyst, investment banker, auditor, banking risk analyst, accountant, Chief Financial Officer (CFO), financial consultant, bank teller, FP&A analyst, and credit specialist. This diversity enabled a more detailed perspective on the analyzed phenomenon.

Drawing on the analyses conducted through both stages, we aimed to highlight common elements and differences between the perspective of the specialized literature and the experiences reported by the interviewed employees. This dual approach allows for the validation or nuance of theoretical conclusions through the lens of real-world practice.

5. Presentation and Analysis of Results

5.1. Bibliometric Perspective

This section presents the results of the bibliometric analysis along two complementary dimensions. The first dimension addresses the quantitative perspective: the evolution of the number of publications on the motivation-burnout topic during the period 1984-2026 and the geographical distribution of research at the international level, illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The second dimension addresses the thematic perspective: the structure of dominant keywords and the international collaboration network, generated through VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010) and illustrated in Figure 3 and Figure 4. Together, these analyses provide an overview of how the motivation-burnout relationship is studied in international literature.

The peak in Figure 1 is recorded in 2021, 2022, and 2025, each with approximately 19 publications, reflecting the impact of the pandemic context on research in the field. The slight decline in 2023-2024, followed by a new peak in 2025, suggests that the topic remains active in current international research. The year 2026 records only 4 publications, explainable by the fact that the export from Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) was performed at the beginning of the year, when most articles had not yet been published.

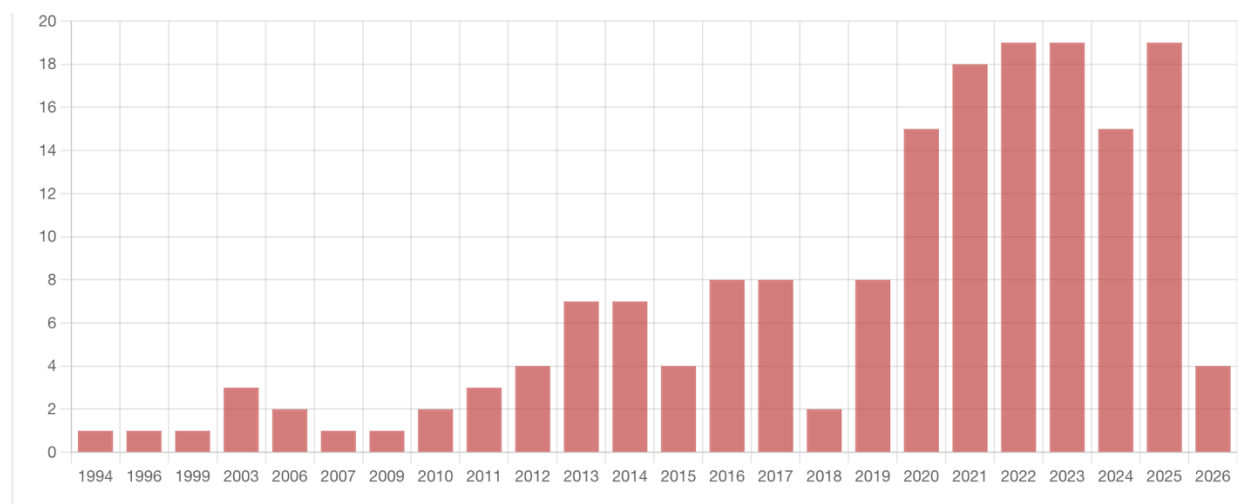


Fig. 1. Annual distribution of publications on the motivation-burnout topic (1984-2026)

Source: Authors' own processing based on data exported from Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) (2026)

The chart regarding geographical distribution confirms the clear dominance of the United States, with 31 articles, followed by China with 29 articles. Australia, Iran, and Spain occupy positions 3, 4, and 5 respectively, reflecting a broader geographical distribution than traditional hierarchies would suggest. The presence of Iran in the top 5 is a distinctive element, indicating a high interest in the burnout phenomenon in the context of that country's healthcare systems. Also noteworthy is Romania's presence with 3 indexed publications, confirming that Romanian research in this field exists, albeit with a modest volume.

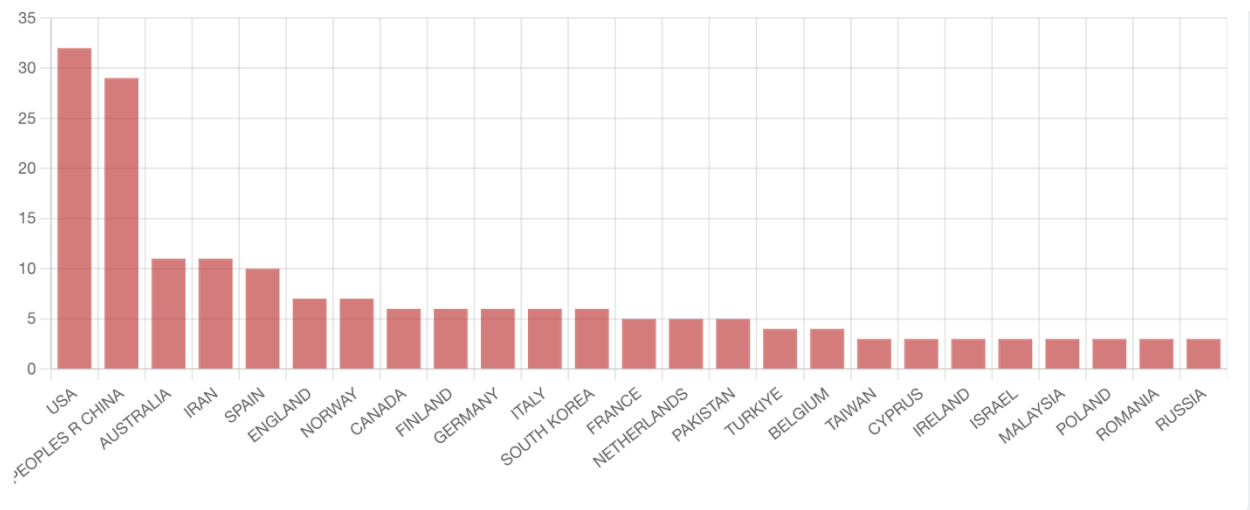


Fig. 2. Geographical distribution of publications on the motivation-burnout topic
Source: Authors' own processing based on data exported from Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) (2026)

These results are consistent with the publication volume distribution presented above: countries with the most articles (USA, China, United Kingdom, and Spain) are also those with the densest international collaboration networks, confirming that high academic productivity is accompanied by an increased openness to cross-border research partnerships.

A new map was created using the country-level co-authorship analysis in VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010), with Co-authorship as the analysis type and Countries as the unit of analysis. After completing the configuration, the country co-authorship map was generated, illustrated in Figure 3.

Through the country-level co-authorship analysis, the map illustrated in Figure 3 was generated, highlighting four main geographical collaboration clusters. The red cluster, dominated by the USA and Canada, represents the most active research hub, with strong connections to all other regions. The green cluster groups the Western European countries: United Kingdom, Netherlands, Spain, Germany, and Italy. The blue cluster groups the Asia-Pacific countries: China, Australia, South Korea, and Taiwan. The yellow cluster encompasses the Latin American countries: Brazil and Chile. The strength of the links confirms that research on the motivation-burnout topic is a global endeavor.

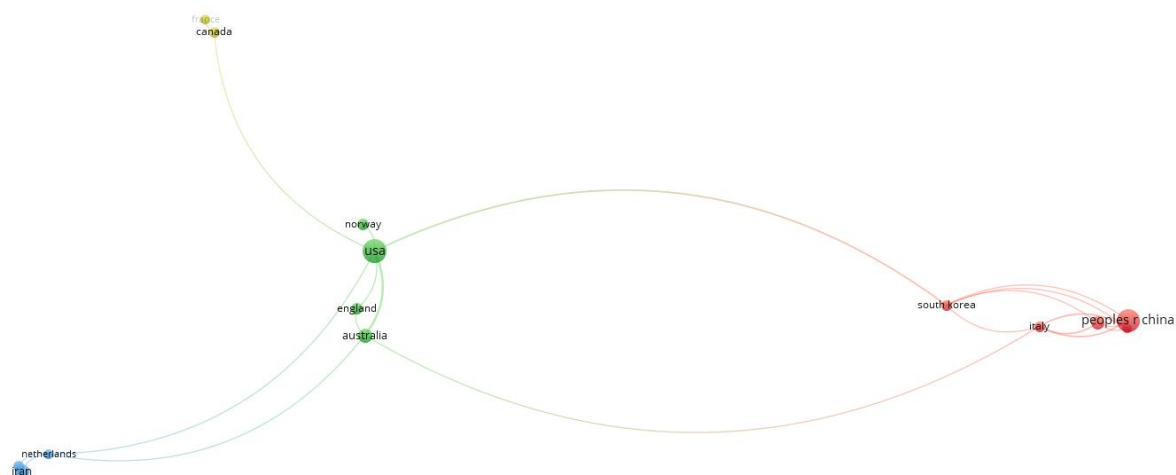


Fig. 3. Country co-authorship map in motivation-burnout research
Source: Authors' own processing in VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010) based on data exported from Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) (2026)

Using keyword co-occurrence analysis in VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010), the map illustrated in Figure 4 was generated, highlighting four main thematic clusters. The first cluster represented in purple, groups the concepts related to motivation and work engagement.

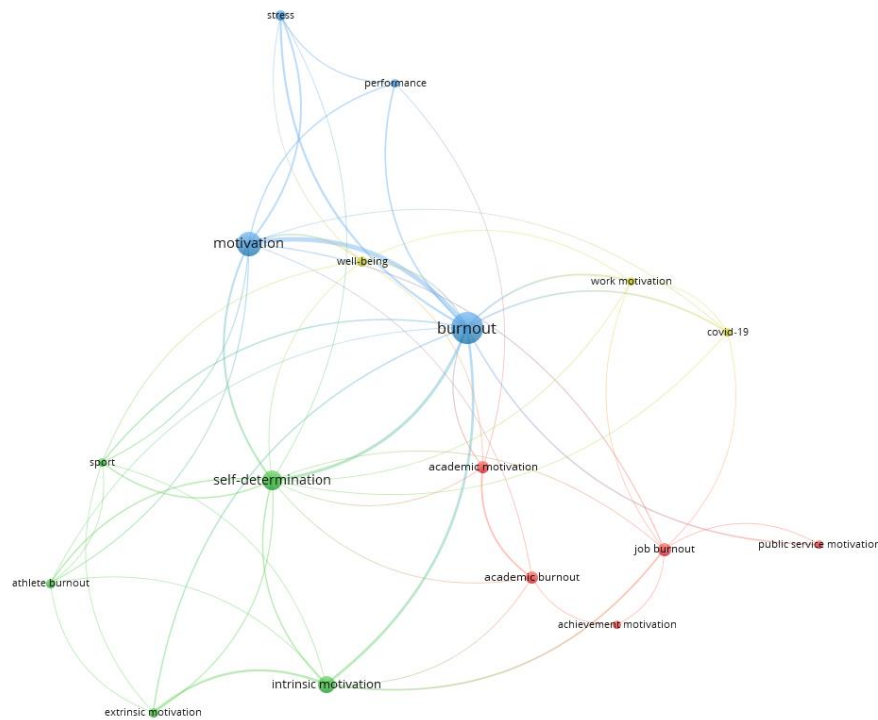


Fig. 4. Keyword co-occurrence map in motivation-burnout research

Source: Authors' own processing in VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010) based on data exported from Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) (2026)

The second cluster, in red, brings together the dimensions of burnout. The third cluster, in blue, encompasses the concepts related to organizational theoretical models (job demands, job resources). The fourth cluster, in green, groups the protective factors (leadership, recovery, well-being).



Fig. 5. Thematic tree based on selected abstracts from Web of Science

Source: Authors' own processing in LiGRE (LiGRE Software, 2024) based on 23 abstracts selected from Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) (2026)

Based on the 23 abstracts selected from Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016), a thematic content analysis was also performed, the result of which is presented in Figure 5. The thematic tree highlights the dominant themes identified in the selected literature: causes of burnout (deadlines, workload, repetitive activity, lack of recognition), negative effects (emotional detachment, chronic fatigue, low WLB), reduced motivation (routine, performance pressure, lack of autonomy), and protective factors (autonomy, project diversity, leadership support). This thematic analysis forms the basis of the comparison with the interview perspective conducted in section 5.3.

5.2. Interview Perspective

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis conducted based on the 11 interviews applied to professionals from the financial-banking sector. The thematic tree generated in LiGRE (LiGRE Software, 2024), illustrated in Figure 6, synthesizes the main themes identified in the respondents' answers, structured around six main branches: stress factors, motivation level, motivation sources, energy and work-life balance, proposed solutions, and demographic profile.



Fig. 6. Thematic tree from interviews on motivation and burnout in the financial-banking sector
Source: Authors' own processing in LiGRE (LiGRE Software, 2024) based on interviews conducted (2026)

The first thematic tree, generated based on the analysis of the specialized literature, is motivated and burnout as its central node and highlights five main branches: negative effects, causes of burnout, reduced motivation, protective factors, and proposed solutions. The causes of burnout represent the dominant branch and include deadlines, high workload, repetitive activity, and lack of recognition. The reduced motivation branch reflects mechanisms such as routine, performance target pressure, and lack of autonomy. Protective factors, such as autonomy and leadership support, emerge as essential resources.

The second thematic tree, built based on the 11 interviews from the financial-banking sector, retains the same central node but reflects the practical experience of the respondents. The most frequently cited stress factor is deadline pressure (4 out of 11 respondents), followed by multitasking and communication issues (3 out of 11). Regarding motivation, 5 out of 11

respondents report a decrease, 3 remain at the same level, and 3 report a slight increase, the latter generally having greater autonomy. Exhaustion is felt frequently by 4 out of 11 respondents and occasionally by another 6.

5.3. Comparative analysis of the motivation-burnout relationship

This subchapter presents the results of the comparative analysis between the selected specialized literature and the responses collected from the 11 professionals from the financial-banking sector. The analysis seeks to identify which aspects of their experience are reflected in international research, which relevant factors appear in literature but were not explicitly mentioned in the responses, and which aspects appear in the interviews but are not emphasized in the analyzed literature.

5.3.1 What responses share with the specialized literature

The most frequently mentioned source of stress is deadline pressure and excessive workload, aspects directly confirmed by the selected literature. The financial analyst, auditor, and FP&A analyst describe intense periods generated by strict financial cycles and fixed deadlines, while the investment banker reports working days exceeding 12 hours. Trepanier et al. (2020) demonstrate that insufficient resources relative to job demands significantly amplify the risk of burnout, with motivation acting as a moderator of this relationship. Rubino et al. (2009) show that stress generated by high demands leads to burnout through the progressive deterioration of motivation.

The financial analyst, accountant, and credit specialist mention that repetitive activity and the lack of growth opportunities have led to decreased motivation. Chambel et al. (2021) identify a similar mechanism: when tasks do not correspond to the individual's potential, motivation decreases and burnout emerges as a result. The financial analyst explicitly mentions that the recognition of effort is not proportional to the workload, MacDonald et al. (2019) confirm that satisfaction and recognition are direct predictors of motivation and, implicitly, of burnout.

5.3.2 What appears in literature but not in the responses

An important factor identified in the selected literature but absent from the responses is perfectionism as an amplifier of burnout. Vealey et al. (2020) show that perfectionist employees under pressure invest additional resources to reach impossible standards, thereby accelerating exhaustion. Although the occupational profile of the sample of the financial analyst, auditor, investment banker suggests that perfectionism is likely present, no respondent mentioned it as a source of stress.

A second absent factor is motivational congruence. Rawolle et al. (2016) show that the mismatch between the reasons why an employee chose a role and what that role entails is a powerful predictor of burnout. Although the financial analyst and investment banker describe an evolution from initial enthusiasm to exhaustion, both attribute the decrease in motivation to external factors rather than to the mismatch between initial expectations and the reality of the role. No respondent mentioned the meaning of work as a protective factor, although Wright, Hassan and Baluran (2025) emphasizes that employees who find a deeper sense of purpose in their work are significantly more protected against exhaustion.

5.3.3 What appears in interviews but is not emphasized in literature

Beyond the common elements and those present exclusively in the literature, the comparative analysis also identified an element that appears in the interviews but is less emphasized in the specialized literature: the solutions proposed by respondents are predominantly reactive and punctual (automation, better planning, hiring additional staff), while the international literature insists on systemic organizational interventions (job redesign, structured recovery programs, a well-being-oriented organizational culture). This difference represents a specific contribution to the present research: it suggests that employees in the sample studied do not fully

appreciate the role that the organization plays in preventing burnout, attributing responsibility predominantly to operational management rather than organizational strategy. This perspective constitutes an element of novelty relative to what already exists in specialized literature.

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed to analyse the relationship between professional motivation, work engagement, and burnout in the context of organizational pressure, combining the bibliometric analysis performed in VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010) based on data from Web of Science (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016) with interviews applied to a sample of 11 professionals from the financial-banking sector. The results confirm both formulated hypotheses: employees with predominantly controlled motivation (credit specialist, accountant, financial analyst) report higher levels of emotional detachment compared to those with autonomy and strategic impact, validating the first hypothesis. The second hypothesis is confirmed by the investment banker and financial broker, who combines extreme engagement with the complete absence of recovery mechanisms.

From a managerial perspective, the results indicate that preventing burnout requires systemic interventions targeting motivation quality through granting autonomy, recognizing effort, and creating a sense of meaning in work, alongside structured recovery programs actively supported by leaders. The research also presents several limitations: the restricted sample (N=11) limits generalizability, and limited access to complete abstracts may affect the precision of selection. Future research could expand the sample to the national level, introduce standardized instruments (MBI, UWES), and conduct longitudinal studies that capture the transition from engagement to exhaustion in real time.

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