

Exploring Cognitive Overload, Social Conformity, and Emotional Labor in the Age of Social Media among Pakistani Professionals

Kehkashan Arouj¹, Sana Jameel², Iqra Hidayat³ & Kainat Zia⁴

¹ Department of Psychology, IIUI.

² SZABIST, Islamabad.

³ Bahria University, Islamabad.

⁴ Universal Mental Health Forum (Global Platform)

ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>As social media becomes increasingly integrated into work life, this study examined the mental costs of using digital tools at work for Pakistani professionals. It focused on cognitive overload, emotional labor, and social comparison as signs of job burnout. The study employed a cross-sectional design with 223 participants to test a moderated mediation model and compare the groups. The results showed that cognitive overload was a strong predictor of burnout, and emotional labor played a small role in this connection. Additionally, comparing yourself to others on social media exacerbates the link between emotional labor and burnout, suggesting that digital comparisons can worsen the situation. Employees in the public sector reported much higher degrees of burnout than those in the private sector. Male professionals also had more emotional repression and cognitive stress than female professionals. These results highlight the importance of organizations establishing guidelines for digital wellness and providing training on emotional management. Culturally sensitive therapies that deal with gendered norms and pressures that are specific to certain sectors are especially important for reducing burnout in workplaces that are full of technology.</i>
Received:	June	10, 2025	
Revised:	July	13, 2025	
Accepted:	July	24, 2025	
Available Online:	August	02, 2025	
Keywords:			
Burnout, Cognitive Overload, Emotional Labor, Social Comparison, Digital Stress, Organizational Sector, Pakistani Professionals			
Corresponding Author:			
Kainat Zia			
Email:			
universalpsyche@gmail.com			



Introduction

Professionals today must deal with a lot of cognitive, emotional, and social pressures that are made worse by the widespread use of social media. For workers in Pakistan, this mix shows itself in different ways. For example, traditional cultural values about respecting authority and protecting one's image combine with being constantly visible online, making it easy to get burned out. Managing email, WhatsApp, and shared organizational platforms while still trying to keep a great image at work and outside of work is a lot of work and can be very stressful for people. However,

even though a lot of people in Pakistan use social media, not much research has been done on how social comparison, digital boundary blurring, and emotional labor affect professional well-being. This study tries to fill this vacuum by using ideas from cognitive and social psychology, like information overload, social conformity, and emotional labor, to figure out how they all work together to cause burnout in Pakistani workplaces.

Cognitive Load and Social Media Overload

Using social media a lot at work can lead to too much information, communication, and social overload, which can make you mentally tired and less productive. Kamal et al. (2020) discovered that too much time spent on social media was strongly associated with information and communication overload among employees in the Pakistani telecom sector. This, in turn, predicted tiredness and lower job performance. Research from throughout the world backs up the idea that too much social media can make it harder for your brain to work. Rodriguez et al. (2014) talked about how the high amount of internet content can make it hard for people to pay attention, which can make them digest information less and feel more stressed.

Emotional Labor and Burnout in Pakistani Workplaces

Emotional labor, or controlling your sentiments to meet job needs, is a well-known source of stress in service jobs. Hotel workers in Pakistan who used surface acting reported far higher levels of emotional weariness and worry (Rafiq et al., 2022; Safdar & Qayyum, 2021). Also, healthcare workers in Gujranwala were reported to be stressed out and burned out at work because of emotional dissonance. These studies show how hard it is to control your emotions, especially in jobs that involve dealing with the public.

Social Comparison, Conformity, and Digital Visibility

Pakistani workplaces place a lot of importance on working together and getting along with others. In the digital world, employees may feel that they must show off polished professional personas online because of social pressures to fit in and not look weak (Imran et al., 2018). We don't have any actual empirical evidence from Pakistan yet, but Sabatini and Sarracino's (2015) research shows that social media sites make people compare themselves to others more, which often leads to unhappiness. In Pakistan, where hierarchical rules make peer and authority-based judgment stronger, the effect is probably stronger.

Relationship Between Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Stressors

Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources hypothesis shows that being exposed to cognitive, emotional, and social demands at the same time can drain psychological resources and lead to burnout. Studies of organizations in Pakistan show that cognitive stressors from multitasking, emotional labor, and pressure to conform all work together to make people less engaged and more tired at work (Iqbal et al., 2021; Younus et al., 2023). This combination of stressors calls for a holistic approach that looks at how emotional and cognitive burden interact with each other in the context of digital cultures driven by social media.

Significance of the study

Many times, organizational policies in Pakistan don't consider the blurry lines between work and digital life. Employees are expected to "stay available," answer WhatsApp messages even after hours, or post happy things about company events, all while dealing with their own tiredness. Looking at this from the perspectives of cognitive and social psychology, based on how things work in Pakistani culture, fills in a big hole in the research and opens the door to better digital

communication practices at work. Even though there have been studies on overload, emotional labor, and burnout in Pakistan, none have looked at how cognitive load, emotional labor demands, and social comparison pressures from social media work together to affect burnout in companies.

Methodology

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between cognitive overload due to professional social media use and employee burnout.
2. To investigate the mediating role of emotional labor in the relationship between cognitive overload and burnout.
3. To analyze how social comparison through workplace-related social media moderates the link between emotional labor and burnout.
4. To know differences in burnout experiences across organizational sectors and gender.

Hypotheses

H1: Cognitive overload due to social media use will be positively associated with burnout among employees.

H2: Emotional labor will mediate the relationship between cognitive overload and burnout.

H3: Social comparison on social media will moderate the relationship between emotional labor and burnout.

H4: Employees in public sector organizations will report significantly higher levels of burnout compared to those in the private sector.

H5: Male employees will report higher emotional suppression and cognitive overload than female employees.

Research Design & Sample

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design to investigate the relationships among cognitive overload, emotional labor, social comparison, and burnout within a sample of Pakistani working professionals. A total of 223 working professionals were taken from diverse organizational sectors in urban Pakistan, including corporate offices, public institutions, and service-based industries. Participants were selected using non-probability purposive sampling to ensure representation from both the public and private sectors, as well as balanced gender inclusion.

Inclusion criteria

- Aged between 22–55 years.
- At least 1 year of full-time employment.
- Active use of professional social media platforms (WhatsApp groups, LinkedIn, internal networks).

Measures

1. **Cognitive Overload Scale;** Adapted from Zhang et al. (2016), this scale assesses perceived information and decision-making overload due to multitasking and digital interruptions. It

consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Cronbach's alpha in the present study: $\alpha = .82$.

2. **Emotional Labor Scale**; Adopted from Brotheridge and Lee (2003), this scale includes subscales for surface acting, deep acting, and emotional expression requirements at work. Participants responded to 14 items on a 5-point scale. Cronbach's alpha: $\alpha = .85$.
3. **Social Comparison on Social Media Scale**; Based on the work of Vogel et al. (2014), this 6-item scale measures upward comparison and perceived inadequacy due to others' professional posts. Cronbach's alpha: $\alpha = .79$.
4. **Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBIGS)**; The MBIGS is a 16-item scale that measures exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. Responses are recorded on a 7-point scale (0 = Never to 6 = Every day). Cronbach's alpha: $\alpha = .91$.
5. **Demographic Sheet**; Participants reported age, gender, organizational sector, position, social media usage frequency, and daily working hours.

Procedure

After securing ethical approval from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were approached via organizational contacts, online professional forums, and HR departments. Informed consent was obtained before participation, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Surveys were administered online via Google Forms, with the average completion time being approximately 20–25 minutes.

Results

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Cognitive Overload	3.87	0.68	-		
2. Emotional Labor	3.45	0.72	.41***	-	
3. Burnout	3.72	0.76	.47***	.53***	-

$p < .001$

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations among the main study variables. Cognitive overload was significantly positively correlated with both emotional labor ($r = .41$, $p < .001$) and burnout ($r = .47$, $p < .001$). Emotional labor also showed a strong positive correlation with burnout ($r = .53$, $p < .001$), supporting preliminary expectations.

Table 2: Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Burnout from Cognitive Overload ($N = 223$)

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	R^2
Cognitive Overload	0.52	0.08	.47	6.50	<.001	.22

Note. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; *SE* = standard error; β = standardized coefficient. R^2 represents the proportion of variance in burnout explained by cognitive overload. $p < .001$.

Table 2 showed that cognitive overload is a significant positive predictor of burnout among Pakistani professionals, $B = 0.52$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = .47$, $t(221) = 6.50$, $p < .001$, accounting for approximately 22% of the variance in burnout ($R^2 = .22$), which is considered a moderate effect in psychological research. Specifically, for every one-unit increase in perceived cognitive overload due to social media use, burnout increased by 0.52 units on the burnout scale.

Table 3: Mediation of Emotional Labor in the Relationship Between Cognitive Overload and Burnout (N = 223)

Path	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cognitive Overload → EL	0.38	0.07	5.43	<.001
EL → Burnout	0.45	0.06	7.50	<.001
CO → Burnout (Direct)	0.35	0.08	4.38	<.001
Indirect Effect (CO → EL → Burnout)	0.17	—	—	CI [0.10, 0.25]

Note: CO = Cognitive Overload; EL = Emotional Labor.

These values indicate that emotional labor partially mediates the relationship between cognitive overload and burnout. To test the hypothesis, a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples was conducted. Cognitive overload was a significant predictor of emotional labor ($B = 0.38, p < .001$), and emotional labor, in turn, predicted burnout ($B = 0.45, p < .001$). The indirect effect of cognitive overload on burnout through emotional labor was significant (indirect effect = 0.17, 95% CI [0.10, 0.25]), indicating partial mediation.

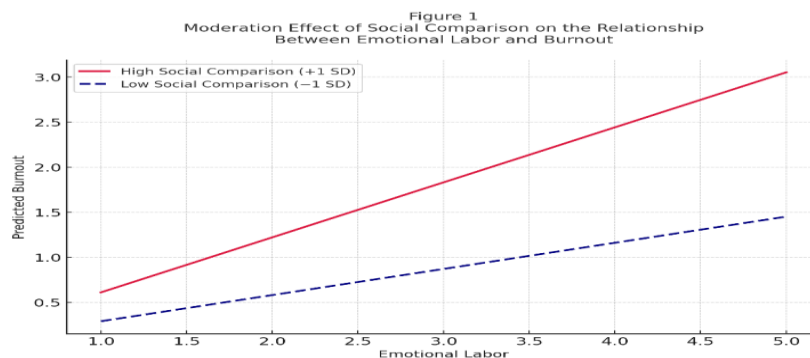
Table 4: Moderation Analysis of Social Comparison on the Relationship Between Emotional Labor and Burnout (N = 223)

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Emotional Labor (EL)	0.41	0.07	5.86	<.001
Social Comparison (SC)	0.26	0.08	3.25	.001
EL × SC (Interaction Term)	0.22	0.09	2.45	.015
R ²	.39			
F (3, 219)	46.66			<.001

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. The interaction term is significant, indicating that social comparison moderates the relationship between emotional labor and burnout. $p < .05$.

The significant interaction term indicates that social comparison intensifies the emotional labor and burnout link. In simpler terms, professionals who frequently compare themselves to others on social media experience a steeper climb toward burnout when engaging in emotional labor. Conversely, those low in social comparison tendencies show a weaker connection between emotional labor and burnout.

Figure 1: Moderation effect of social comparison on the relationship between emotional labor and burnout



Here is Figure 1, illustrating the moderation effect: burnout increases more steeply with emotional labor when social comparison is high, confirming that individuals who frequently compare themselves to others on social media are more susceptible to emotional strain.

Table 5: Independent Samples *t*-Test Comparing Burnout Between Public and Private Sector Employees (*N* = 223)

Sector	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Public Sector	112	3.88	0.69	3.56 (221)	.001	0.52
Private Sector	111	3.49	0.78			

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = *t*-value; *df* = degrees of freedom; *p* = significance level.

As shown in Table 5, public sector employees report significantly higher levels of burnout (*M* = 3.88, *SD* = 0.69) than their private sector counterparts (*M* = 3.49, *SD* = 0.78), *t*(221) = 3.56, *p* = .001, indicating a moderate effect size (*d* = 0.52).

Table 6: Gender Differences in Emotional Suppression and Cognitive Overload (*N* = 223)

Variable	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Emotional Suppression	Male	3.76	0.71	5.22	.023	.023
	Female	3.51	0.66			
Cognitive Overload	Male	4.02	0.65	7.18	.008	.031
	Female	3.73	0.69			

Note. Gender differences were examined using univariate ANOVAs following a significant multivariate test, *F* (2, 220) = 4.21, *p* = .016, Wilks' Λ = .963.

The findings in Table 6 reflect statistically significant gender differences in how Pakistani professionals psychologically respond to the demands of social media in their work lives. Male participants consistently reported higher emotional suppression and greater cognitive overload while struggling to filter the volume of information encountered online. Greater cognitive overload among men could be a function of higher engagement in performance-driven online environments, or possibly less emotional processing flexibility when dealing with digital interactions. These insights could be valuable for gender-sensitive workplace interventions aimed at digital wellness.

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine how cognitive overload, emotional labor, and social comparison caused by social media lead to burnout among Pakistani professionals, with an emphasis on disparities between men and women and between organizations. The results provide a better understanding of the mental and social consequences of using technology in a collectivist, high-context culture like Pakistan's.

As hypothesized, employees who used social media too much were more likely to experience burnout because of cognitive overload. This finding is in line with previous research that says too much digital input, especially from fast-paced and emotionally charged sites like WhatsApp, Facebook, and LinkedIn, can split attention and make emotional weariness worse (Reinecke et al., 2017; Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). In Pakistani companies, where digital contact commonly goes on outside of work hours, the psychological strain may be worse because the lines between personal and professional roles are not always clear. The results support the cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) and show how important it is to have limits on how professionals interact online.

The second hypothesis, which stated that emotional labor would be a link between cognitive overload and burnout, was similarly supported. This mediation shows that mentally overloaded workers are more prone to use emotional regulation techniques like surface acting to deal with online demands, which raises the risk of burnout. This fits with Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labor, which was backed up in the digital age by researchers like Grandey (2000), who stressed the need to control emotions in dealing with work stress. In Pakistan, where people are taught to keep their emotions in check at work, the cumulative effect of emotional labor may not be recognized or dealt with. These results show that people need to be trained at work on how to be emotionally strong and how to talk to each other honestly in digital places.

Social comparison on social media had a big effect on the link between emotional labor and exhaustion, which is what the third hypothesis said would happen. Specifically, people who were more likely to compare themselves to others online had a greater link between emotional labor and exhaustion. This interaction backs up Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory and adds to it by looking at mental health at work. The results are in accordance with those of Vogel et al. (2014), who found that comparing yourself to others on social media often lowers your self-esteem and raises your mental stress. In professional environments that care a lot about how they look, where success is often shown off online, social comparison can make an already stressful digital presence much more so.

Hypothesis 4 was likewise true: public sector workers said they were much more burned out than private sector workers. This result is in line with other research that says that bureaucratic rules, restricted opportunities for advancement, and strict hierarchies in public institutions make people feel more stressed (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Jabeen & Jadoon, 2019). On the other hand, private companies in Pakistan may be more flexible, have more resources for digital literacy, or have programs for mental health, even though they have their problems. These results show how the structure and environment of a company can affect how workers deal with and react to digital stressors.

Finally, the fifth hypothesis was proven to be true: male employees reported much higher levels of emotional repression and cognitive overload than female employees. This tendency is similar to what other studies have found about how men and women communicate their emotions in South Asian societies, where men are generally told not to show weakness (Mahmood, 2020; Fischer & Manstead, 2000). Men may also have higher cognitive overload because they feel more pressure to accomplish or are more involved with online personas that are focused on achievement. Interestingly, previous research has shown that women do more emotional labor (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002), but the current results reveal a different pattern. This could be because of the way men and women are expected to act in digital professionalism in Pakistani society.

Implications

These findings show that workplaces require policies that are responsive to different cultures and that deal with digital health, emotional control, and mental health support. Digital literacy training, setting limits on how much time you spend on social media for work, and emotional intelligence courses that are specific to gender norms are some examples of interventions. Organizations should acknowledge emotional labor as a real sort of invisible work that needs to be recognized and supported.

Limitations and Future Research

The study gives us useful information, but a few limitations are: First, the cross-sectional design makes it hard to draw causal conclusions. Longitudinal studies are needed to follow how burnout grows when people must deal with a lot of mental and emotional work for a long time. Second, all the measures were self-reported, which makes it more likely that there was common method bias. Third, the sample may not adequately represent the many types of jobs or areas of Pakistan.

Future studies could investigate these factors in different provinces or among those who work from home or as freelancers. Also, qualitative methods like in-depth interviews might do a better job of showing the real-life experiences behind emotional labor and social comparison.

Conclusion

This study adds to the growing body of research on the mental and social effects of using technology in the workplace by showing how cognitive overload, emotional labor, and social comparison can all lead to burnout among Pakistani professionals. The results support a moderate mediation model by showing not just the direct impact of cognitive overload but also how emotional labor is a major psychological factor that makes burnout worse, especially when people are comparing themselves to others more. Also, differences in emotional strain based on gender and sector show how cultural and institutional norms continue to affect digital experiences. It seems that the emotional and mental demands of a hyper-connected work life hit public sector workers and men harder than other types of workers.

These ideas have substantial real-world effects. Companies need to stop seeing digital overload and emotional labor as personal problems and start seeing them as problems with their employees' health. Interventions should focus on setting digital boundaries, improving emotional literacy, and making sure that gender-sensitive mental health assistance is built into institutional policy frameworks. In a time where professional identity is increasingly managed online, these kinds of systemic measures are necessary to keep employees well and keep productivity high at work.

References

1. Barber, L. K., & Santuzzi, A. M. (2015). Please respond ASAP: Workplace telepressure and employee recovery. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 20*(2), 172–189. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038278>
2. Brotheridge, C. M., & Grandey, A. A. (2002). Emotional labor and burnout: Comparing two perspectives of “people work.” *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 60*(1), 17–39. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.2001.1815>
3. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations, 7*(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
4. Fischer, A. H., & Manstead, A. S. (2000). The relation between gender and emotions in different cultures. In A. H. Fischer (Ed.), *Gender and emotion: Social psychological perspectives* (pp. 71–94). Cambridge University Press.
5. Grandey, A. A. (2000). Emotion regulation in the workplace: A new way to conceptualize emotional labor. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 5*(1), 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.5.1.95>
6. Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
7. Imran, N., Haider, I. I., & Bokhari, R. H. (2018). Mental health of medical professionals in Pakistan. *Journal of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan, 28*(4), 268–269.

8. Iqbal, Z., Mirza, A. M., Sajid, M., & Adeel, M. (2021). Impact of emotional labor on emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction in public sector organizations. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 11(2), 45–58.
9. Jabeen, S., & Jadoon, I. A. (2019). Job burnout among public sector employees in Pakistan: A structural equation modeling approach. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research*, 34(1), 101–119.
10. Kamal, N., Rabbani, S., Samdani, H., Shujaat, S., & Ahmad, M. (2020). Social media usage, overload and exhaustion: A performance perspective. *Journal of Business Studies*, 3(5), 45–64.
11. Mahmood, Z. (2020). Masculinities in Pakistan: Navigating emotional expression in a patriarchal culture. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38(3), 341–358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1790458>
12. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, 15(2), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311>
13. Qureshi, S. U., Saleem, T., & Fatima, M. (2020). Organizational stress and its impact on mental wellbeing: A study of public sector doctors in Pakistan. *Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 30(1), 1–14.
14. Rafiq, N., et al. (2022). Examining relationship between emotional labor, emotional exhaustion and organizational commitment ... *COMSATS University, Islamabad*.
15. Reinecke, L., Aufenanger, S., Beutel, M. E., Dreier, M., Quiring, O., Stark, B., ... & Müller, K. W. (2017). Digital stress over the life span: The effects of communication load and Internet multitasking on perceived stress and psychological health impairments in a German probability sample. *Media Psychology*, 20(1), 90–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2015.1121832>
16. Rodriguez, M. G., Gummadi, K. P., & Schoelkopf, B. (2014). Quantifying information overload in social media and its impact on social contagions. *Proceedings of the 8th International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 318–327.
17. Sabatini, F., & Sarracino, F. (2015). Keeping up with the eJoneses: Do online social networks raise social comparisons? *PLoS ONE*, 10(5), e0124968.
18. Safdar, C. A., & Qayyum, R. (2021). Moral injury, emotional labor and burnout: An unbearable burden for health professionals. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, 37(5), 1256–1258.
19. Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science*, 12(2), 257–285. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202_4
20. Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), 206–222. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>
21. Younus, S., Azeem, M., & Mirza, F. (2023). Job burnout: A case of public organizations in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(3), 3009–3018.