



# Exploring work engagement of public sector employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, Namibia



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**Orientation:** In Namibia, the public sector employs a majority of employees which contributes to significant economic growth and development of the country.

**Research purpose:** This study investigated the association among job satisfaction, burnout and work engagement. This study explored if work engagement is experienced differently based on the biographical variables.

**Motivation for the study:** Namibia aims to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs), Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP) and National Development Goals. The state-owned enterprises are required to provide quality services to the nation through their employees. The health and well-being of these employees facilitate the productivity of these state-owned enterprises (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 8, 11 and 16).

**Research approach/design and method:** A total of  $n = 130$  public sector employees were randomly selected and responded to a questionnaire. The questionnaire included demographic questions, the *Job Satisfaction Survey*, the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* and the *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale*. Data analysis was performed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software to test the hypotheses of the study.

**Main findings:** Positive relationships were found between job satisfaction, burnout and work engagement. Work engagement reported a positive relationship with burnout. Work engagement is experienced the same in relation to the biographical variables.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The study suggests a constant evaluation of job attitudes, implementation of effective performance management systems, team building activities and implementation of workplace wellness programmes.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study adds to the understanding of job satisfaction, burnout and work engagement within state-owned enterprises in Namibia.

**Keywords:** job satisfaction; burnout; work engagement; COVID-19; public servants; Namibia.

## Introduction

### Orientation

Namibia wants to improve and develop its economy (PWC, 2016). According to the Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPPii, 2021), Namibia aims to improve performance, service delivery and economic advancement. Apart from organisations in the private sector, it is the responsibility of government ministries to fulfil the production and service functions (Biesele & Hitchcock, 2012). The public sector is the biggest employer and needs to satisfy customers' needs which are linked to most if not all sustainable development goals (SDGs). The poor performance of parastatals can cripple a country's economy (Linna et al., 2020). The public sector needs to maintain a knowledgeable working environment and use innovative processes to help increase the engagement and effectiveness of employees (Hess & Barcigalupo, 2010).

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) led to a global health crisis around the globe, with the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring it a pandemic (Munyeka & Munzhedzi, 2022). Many organisations are interested in evaluating, increasing and maintaining work engagement (Knight et al., 2017). When there is a lack of work resources and support systems in organisations, it influences job satisfaction negatively (Strydom et al., 2012), hindering the achievement of SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). A lack of job resources decreases

**Note:** Special Collection: HR Practices Aligned with SDGs.

decision-making processes and affects performance negatively (Ceschi et al., 2017). However, with the outbreak of COVID-19, organisations had to take on a novel approach to their day-to-day activities and prioritise employee well-being (Rozman et al., 2021), because the work environment was considered a risk for outbreaks (Ingram et al., 2021). Based on these changes, this study aims to assess if factors such as job satisfaction and burnout influence work engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is in line with the SDGs related to the reduction of hunger and poverty (SDGs 1 and 2), health and well-being (SDG 3), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and strong institutions (SDG 16).

## Purpose of study

In order for an organisation to prosper, it relies on engaged employees. Namibia has adopted the SDGs and cascaded these goals into the National Development Plans (NDPs) for implementation (NSA, 2021). Creativity and innovation are linked to work engagement (Bakker, 2017), resulting in significant organisational improvements (Grobler et al., 2012). Parastatals are expected to serve their citizens (Lawton et al., 2013) and improve livelihoods (Koma & Tshiyoyo, 2015). Work engagement enhances innovation and improves financial outcomes. When employees are present and actively engaged at work, they are more likely to contribute to innovation and drive positive financial results (Bakker, 2017). Engaged employees may be more beneficial for the organisation. To reduce the impact of burnout and the associated negative emotions towards the organisation, it is important to implement measures that can safeguard against burnout (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016). The success of the organisation depends on employees who are satisfied and engaged at work (SDG3 – health and well-being), and on decent work and economic growth (SDG8) (Moura et al., 2014). To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies have focussed on the factors that influence work engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic in Namibia. This study aims to assess the potential relationship between job satisfaction, burnout and work engagement. Additionally, the study seeks to understand how work engagement is experienced based on sex, age, tenure, rank, number of dependants, educational qualification and marital status.

## Literature review

### Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is the positive experience and appreciation that individuals have for their work role (Lussier & Hendon, 2013). Accomplishments are aligned to job satisfaction (Mullins, 2013). When an employee is unable to demonstrate their capabilities, performance may be hampered (Werner, 2016). Positive workplace events can encourage job satisfaction (Han et al., 2017). Satisfied employees are not going to leave their jobs (Bagraim et al.,

2016). This association confirms the negative relationship between job satisfaction and the intent to leave (Erdogan et al., 2012; Srimindarti et al., 2017). A dissatisfied employee can experience a decrease in enthusiasm for their work (Li et al., 2019). Research focussing on job satisfaction may help achieve SDG3 (health and well-being) and SDG8 (decent work and economic growth).

The privilege of satisfying relatedness needs, and experiencing healthy working relationships with supervisors and colleagues, enhances both job satisfaction and work performance (Armstrong, 2016). Job satisfaction serves as a motivator while enhancing the perceived meaningfulness experienced by employees (Johnson & Dowe, 2021). An employee's contribution towards organisational success is enhanced because of increased innovation and novel ideas which stem from their levels of organisational commitment (Malik et al., 2017).

In the public sector, job satisfaction is influenced by the environment (Vigan & Giauque, 2018). The performance management system has been considered inadequate in the Namibian public sector (Kaupa & Atiku, 2020), and job satisfaction is increased by the perception of how effective the performance management system is (Kakkar et al., 2020). If the public sector is able to improve management processes and productivity, countries should be able to achieve SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 16 (strong institutions).

Even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, work activities had to persist (Sapta et al., 2021). The public sector is not exempted from this. In this context, employees' job satisfaction is likely to be affected by working remotely and the various social interactions (Bullinska-Stangrecka & Bagienska, 2021). Research carried out during the pandemic such as by Sapta et al. (2021) found that satisfied employees are motivated, which ultimately enhances performance. Additionally, Bullinska-Stangrecka and Bagienska (2021) found that having positive employee relations contributes to the level of employee job satisfaction.

### Burnout

The experience of burnout is a lengthy process which erodes the coping capacity of employees gradually over a period of time (Procter & Procter, 2013). Burnout negatively affects performance because of relentless work, private expectations and diminished resources (Bagraim et al., 2016). Employees who experience burnout lack energy and are less likely to appreciate the goals they achieve or be proud of the work that they do (Cam & Ogulumus, 2019). Employees who experience burnout are on the verge of collapse (Procter & Procter, 2013). Working in an environment with relentless high expectations and constantly trying to achieve the best results can lead to burnout (Bagraim et al., 2016). Employees who have a

calmer relaxed demeanour are less likely to be affected by burnout because their own work expectations are aligned with their personality.

Burnout is characterised by exhaustion, professional inefficacy and cynicism. Employees who try to achieve more than what their resources allow, experience exhaustion. Employees may also become detached or pessimistic about different aspects of their work which is referred to as cynicism. Experiencing burnout and professional inefficacy, employees tend to feel less fulfilled in their work and are unable to deliver quality work (Cole et al., 2012; Cooper & Cartwright, 2009). Burnout specifically hinders the achievement of SDG 3 (good health and well-being).

The expectations at work (workload) contribute significantly to feelings of burnout. Work that requires a lot of physical energy, that is monotonous and/or urgent, can contribute to work overload (Cole et al., 2012). Burnout also stems from unclear expectations (role ambiguity), not being recognised for work excellence, experiencing role conflict and having different expectations with limited to no support. Employees can experience burnout when their lives are dominated by work activities and lack time to unwind or spend with family and friends (Warnich et al., 2015).

Burnout may result in behavioural outcomes including a lack of concentration and struggling to complete a task (Warnich et al., 2015). Employees experiencing burnout are likely to abuse substances or engage in compulsive physical exertion (exercise) (Warnich et al., 2015).

Burnout influences employee productivity and can lead to absenteeism. Absenteeism affects the organisation's performance negatively and costs the organisation additional funds to advertise for and fill the vacant position (the new employee may need training) (Lambert & Barton-Bellessa, 2015). Burnout leads to employee turnover. Employees who experience burnout are likely to experience physical and emotional challenges forcing them to resign from work (Lambert & Barton-Bellessa, 2015). Jalili et al. (2021) highlight that burnout is prevalent among healthcare employees working in the COVID-19 divisions. Factors such as the perceived COVID-19 threat, working in high-risk work environments and less specialised knowledge and/or training on COVID-19 are considered to enhance burnout (Galanis et al., 2021). Overall, the majority of research on burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic has focussed on health practitioners, highlighting the importance of this study.

## Work engagement

Work engagement can be defined as a psychological awareness when employees are working attentively, with liveliness and passion (Bakker, 2017). Organisations are constantly trying to attract the top talent within the industry that can advance the organisation through their capabilities. Top talents who are engaged at work take initiative, apply

themselves, are reliable and perform exceptionally (Bakker & Leiter, 2010).

Work engagement is characterised by vigour (positive energy) (Cooper & Cartwright, 2009), the physical aspect when employees are actively working (Geoffrey & Enkali, 2019). The other dimension is dedication (involvement) (Cooper & Cartwright, 2009); the emotional aspect that influences meaningfulness at work, inspires employees, and makes them feel honoured and stimulated (Geoffrey & Enkali, 2019). Lastly, absorption (sense of efficacy) (Cooper & Cartwright, 2009) is the feeling employees experience when they are fully focussed (Geoffrey & Enkali, 2019). Employees remain captivated by activities that are interesting, meaningful and are able to work endlessly (Bagraim et al., 2016).

An engaged workforce delivers on organisational expectations (Cesario & Chambel, 2017). Therefore, engaged public service employees may enhance service delivery (Levitats & Vigoda-Gadot, 2019) which can be linked, directly or indirectly, to all SDGs. Organisations benefit from engaged employees through higher levels of obligation, participation, passion and work outputs (Geoffrey & Enkali, 2019; Werner, 2016). Amid COVID-19, organisations prioritised work engagement by investing in activities such as virtual team building, virtual games, online competitions, online learning and development, among others (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). Even when faced with challenges, engaged employees remain flexible and tough (Kaltainen, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the work engagement levels of health professionals were high (Gomez-Salgado et al., 2020), emphasising the importance of job resources to mitigate the negative impact of job demands.

## Job satisfaction, burnout and work engagement

Employees who experience job satisfaction are involved and devoted to diminishing burnout (Ismail et al., 2013). Burnout depletes employee resources on all levels, reduces psychological meaningfulness and stifles work engagement (Rothmann & Welsh, 2013). The Job Demands-Resources model looks at two factors: job demands and job resources. Job demands are physical, social, organisational and psychological aspects of a job that require effort and skills that can deplete energy. Job resources are psychological, physical, social and organisational aspects of the job that help employees achieve goals and provoke learning, development and personal growth (Van Den Broeck, 2017). Organisations can improve work engagement by frequent planning, detailed personnel goals and making the needed resources available (Bakker, 2017). The demands are related to burnout, while the resources are related to work engagement and satisfaction (Salmela-Aro & Upadyadya, 2018). When job satisfaction is experienced, employees become committed, perform well and engage in their work (Lumley et al., 2011), diminishing burnout (Ismail et al., 2013).



## Work engagement and demographic variables

Employees of different ages did not report different levels of work engagement (D'Amico et al., 2020). In different studies, age influences work engagement (Masvaure & Maharaj, 2014; Sartono & Ardhani, 2015). D'Amico et al. (2020) reported significant differences regarding work engagement among male and female employees, with females reporting higher levels. Differences regarding work engagement and marital status were reported (Masvaure & Maharaj, 2014; Sartono & Ardhani, 2015). Limited studies investigated the differences in work engagement and biographical details in the Namibian context. Based on the literature discussed, the following hypotheses were developed:

- H1:** *There is a positive association between job satisfaction and work engagement of employees in Namibia.*
- H2:** *There is a negative association between job satisfaction and burnout of employees in Namibia.*
- H3:** *There is a negative connection between work engagement and burnout of employees in Namibia.*
- H4:** *The change in work engagement is different in relation to (1) sex, (2) age, (3) tenure, (4) marital status, (5) number of dependants, (6) educational qualification and (7) level of management of employees in Namibia.*

## Research design

### Research approach

This investigation relied on quantitative research which looked at the objectivity and the systematic way of using data (numbers) from a smaller group taken from a bigger population (Maree, 2016). The study was exploratory, making use of a survey to collect the data. Data collection took place between May and August 2021 while employees were still re-adjusting to the office after the repercussions of COVID-19. Surveys were utilised because they make it easier to reach respondents over long distances, are easy to administer and can be completed at a convenient time (Beins & McCarthy, 2018).

### Participants

The study focussed on public sector employees in the Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment Creation, the Ministry of Industrialisation and Trade, and the Ministry of Finance in Windhoek. The population consisted of  $N = 2106$  employees. By making use of the availability sampling technique, any employee willing and available participated. This sample consisted of employees in different levels of management and non-management positions. A total of 130 out of the 250 questionnaires were completed and included in the analysis (52% response rate).

### Research instrument

The first part of the questionnaire focussed on biographical details such as sex, age, tenure, marital status, number of dependants, highest qualification obtained and their management level. The second part used the *Job Satisfaction*

*Survey* (JSS) which contained 36 items and was developed by Spector (1994). The participants identified their responses varying from 1 (disagree very much) to 6 (agree very much). Examples of statements were 'I enjoy my co-workers' (co-workers); 'Raises are too few and far between' (pay); 'People get ahead as fast here as they do in other places' (promotion); 'My supervisor is unfair to me' (supervision) and 'I like doing the things I do at work' (Nature of work). Ngidi and Ngidi (2017) found acceptable Cronbach alpha related to pay  $\alpha = 0.81$ ; promotion  $\alpha = 0.73$ ; supervision  $\alpha = 0.65$ ; co-workers  $\alpha = 0.58$  and nature of work  $\alpha = 0.76$ . The third part of the questionnaire used the *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale* (UWES-9) to measure work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006). This is the shortened version of nine items which measure vigour, dedication and absorption (Goliath-Yarde & Roodt, 2011). Participants chose responses from 0 (never) to 6 (everyday). Example statements include 'At my job, I feel strong and vigorous' (vigour), 'I am immersed in my work' (absorption) and 'My job inspires me' (dedication). Travagianti et al. (2016) reported acceptable alphas for vigour  $\alpha = 0.77$ , dedication  $\alpha = 0.85$  and absorption  $\alpha = 0.78$ , while Pieters et al. (2019) reported reliability for vigour  $\alpha = 0.81$ , dedication  $\alpha = 0.81$  and absorption  $\alpha = 0.82$ . The fourth part focussed on the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) scale, comprising 22 statements that measure exhaustion, cynicism and professional inefficacy (Srivastava et al., 2019). Example items included for cynicism 'I have become less enthusiastic', for exhaustion 'I feel emotionally drained' and for professional inefficacy 'I can effectively solve problems'. The scale responses are from 0 (never) to 6 (everyday). Fong and Ng (2012) found a reliability of 0.86 for exhaustion, 0.81 for cynicism and 0.77 for professional inefficacy.

### Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was utilised to analyse the data (SPSS, 2020). Descriptive statistics was used to assess the mean and the standard deviation, and Cronbach alpha was used to assess the consistency of the tool. The Pearson correlation was used to identify the nature of the relationship between the variables. Mann-Whitney U-test and Kruskal-Wallis test were utilised to assess if work engagement was experienced differently based on the biographical variables.

### Ethical considerations

The University of Namibia ethics committee provided ethical clearance (ethical clearance number: FHSS/610/2021). Permission was obtained from the relevant ministries and all participants. A brief overview of the study was provided to participants, and informed consent was obtained in writing. Data were collected by making use of an online questionnaire and a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. These formats of the questionnaire were identical. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. Participants were not

required to write their names to maintain anonymity. The questionnaires were locked in a file cabinet, and the electronic data was stored on a password-protected drive. The data are only accessible by the researchers of this study and will be deleted and/or shredded after 5 years.

## Results

### Demographic results

The demographical analysis results are shown in Table 1.

The results showed that employees who responded were  $n = 130$ ;  $n = 50$  were males (38.5%) and  $n = 79$  were females (60.8%). Employees below 24 years old were  $n = 1$  (0.8%) and  $n = 30$  (23.1%) between 32 and 35 years old. Employees that worked for 3 or 4 years were  $n = 6$  (4.6%);  $n = 27$  (20.8%) worked for 5 or 6 years, and those that worked for 16 years or more were  $n = 27$  (20.8%). When it comes to marital status,  $n = 79$  (60.8%) are single and one missing response was recorded. Looking at the number of dependants (children), employees who have 1 or 2 dependants were  $n = 54$  (41.5%) and employees who have 10 or more dependants were  $n = 1$  (0.8%). The highest qualification obtained showed that  $n = 39$  (30%) graduated with Honours degrees, and  $n = 1$  (0.8%) obtained a PhD degree. The results showed that  $n = 95$  (73.1%) were not in management;  $n = 29$  (22.3%) in mid-level management positions;  $n = 4$  (3.1%) employed as part of senior management and the missing values are  $n = 2$  (1.5%).

### Descriptive statistics and Pearson rank order correlation

#### Descriptive statistical analyses

Table 2 shows that job satisfaction combined reported a mean = 57.88, s.d. = 51.69 and  $\alpha = 0.70$ . All dimensions of job satisfaction were found to be unreliable ( $\alpha$  below 0.7); these dimensions were excluded from further analysis. Vigour revealed a mean = 21.54, S.D. = 36.81 and  $\alpha = 0.90$ ; dedication revealed a mean = 26.15, S.D. = 44.36 and  $\alpha = 0.90$ . Absorption revealed a mean = 24.60, S.D. = 39.72 and  $\alpha = 0.75$ , while combined work engagement revealed a mean = 72.29, S.D. = 113.33 and  $\alpha = 0.94$ . Exhaustion showed a mean = 38.53, S.D. = 91.09 and  $\alpha = 0.93$ ; professional inefficacy showed a mean = 65.31, S.D. = 102.53 and  $\alpha = 0.91$ . Cynicism showed a mean = 29.75, S.D. = 69.76 and  $\alpha = 0.92$ , while combined burnout showed a mean = 133.58, S.D. = 252.65 and  $\alpha = 0.97$ .

#### Inferential statistical analysis results

A positive association was stated between job satisfaction and vigour ( $r = 0.03$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; almost no effect), dedication ( $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; medium effect), absorption ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; small effect) and work engagement collectively ( $r = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; small effect). A positive correlation was reported between combined job satisfaction and exhaustion ( $r = 0.03$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; almost no effect), professional inefficacy ( $r = 0.09$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ; small effect) and cynicism ( $r = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;

**TABLE 1:** Biographical details of sample.

Description	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	50	38.5
Female	79	60.8
Missing values	1	0.8
<b>Age (years)</b>		
Below 24	1	0.8
24–28	5	3.8
29–31	22	16.9
32–35	30	23.1
36–40	28	21.5
41–45	19	14.6
46–50	10	7.7
51 and older	15	11.5
<b>Tenure (years)</b>		
Less than 1	12	9.2
1–2	9	6.9
3–4	6	4.6
5–6	27	20.8
7–8	15	11.5
9–11	17	13.1
12–15	17	13.1
16 and more	27	20.8
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	79	60.8
Married	45	34.6
Divorced	4	3.1
Widowed	2	1.5
Missing values	1	0.8
<b>Dependants</b>		
None	27	20.8
1–2	54	41.5
3–4	37	28.5
5–6	9	6.9
7–9	1	0.8
10 and more	1	0.8
<b>Qualification</b>		
Grade 12	10	7.7
Certificate	8	6.2
Diploma	10	7.7
Degree	33	25.4
Degree (Hons)	39	30.0
MA degree	26	20.0
PhD	1	0.8
Missing values	3	2.3
<b>Management level</b>		
Non-managerial staff	95	73.1
Mid-level management	29	22.3
Senior management	4	3.1
Missing values	2	1.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100.0</b>

MA, Masters; PhD, Doctor of Philosophy.

small effects). A positive association was reported between combined job satisfaction and combined burnout ( $r = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; small effect).

This study presented a positive association between vigour and dedication ( $r = 0.78$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , large effect), absorption ( $r = 0.87$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; large effect) and combined work engagement ( $r = 0.93$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; large effect). Vigour reported a positive association with exhaustion ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; large effect),

with professional inefficacy ( $r = 0.66, p < 0.05$ ; large effect), with cynicism ( $r = 0.67, p < 0.05$ ; large effect) and combined burnout ( $r = 0.66, p < 0.05$ ; large effect).

Results indicate a positive association between dedication and absorption ( $r = 0.81, p < 0.05$ ; large effect) and combined work engagement ( $r = 0.93, p < 0.05$ ; large effect). Dedication also showed a positive relationship with exhaustion ( $r = 0.48, p < 0.05$ ; medium effect), with professional inefficacy ( $r = 0.51, p < 0.05$ ; large effect), with cynicism ( $r = 0.55, p < 0.05$ ; large effect) and with combined burnout ( $r = 0.53, p < 0.05$ ; large effect).

Results confirmed that absorption has a positive relationship with combined work engagement ( $r = 0.95, p < 0.05$ ; large effect). This study also reports that absorption has a positive relationship with exhaustion ( $r = 0.54, p < 0.05$ ; large effect), with professional inefficacy ( $r = 0.61, p < 0.05$ ; large effect), with cynicism ( $r = 0.62, p < 0.05$ ; large effect) and combined burnout ( $r = 0.61, p < 0.05$ ; large effect).

Work engagement combined reported a positive association with exhaustion ( $r = 0.56, p < 0.05$ ; large effect), professional inefficacy ( $r = 0.63, p < 0.05$ ; large effect), cynicism ( $r = 0.65, p < 0.05$ ; large effect) and combined burnout ( $r = 0.64, p < 0.05$ ; large effect).

Exhaustion reported a positive association with professional inefficacy ( $r = 0.87, p < 0.05$ ; large effect), cynicism ( $r = 0.84, p < 0.05$ ; large effect) and combined burnout ( $r = 0.95, p < 0.05$ ; large effect).

It was reported that professional inefficacy has a positive connection with cynicism ( $r = 0.92, p < 0.05$ ; large effect) and combined burnout ( $r = 0.97, p < 0.05$ ; large effect).

This study reported a positive relationship between cynicism and combined burnout ( $r = 0.95, p < 0.05$ ; large effect).

**Mann–Whitney U-test**

Table 3 shows the results of the Mann–Whitney U-Test. The results indicate that the variance in work engagement is

different for males and females (Chi-square = 0.974;  $df = 2$ ; Asym. Sig. = 0.974). H4.1: *The change in work engagement is reported inversely based on sex; Rejected.*

**Kruskal–Wallis test results**

The independent-sample Kruskal–Wallis test was performed to explore if work engagement is experienced differently based on the biographical variables. This analysis also assesses Hypotheses 4.2–4.7 of this study.

Table 4 indicates that the change in work engagement is experienced similarly in relation to age (Chi-square = 8.119;  $df = 7$ ;  $p = 0.32$ ). H4.2: *The adjustment in work engagement is reported differently based on age; Rejected.* The variance in work engagement is not experienced differently based on years in industry (Chi-square = 4.145;  $df = 7$ ;  $p = 0.76$ ). H4.3: *The adjustment in work engagement is different based on years in the industry; Rejected.* The variance in work engagement is not experienced differently based on marital status (Chi-square = 2.772;  $df = 3$ ;  $p = 0.43$ ). H4.4: *The variance in work engagement is experienced differently based on marital status; Rejected.* The variance in work engagement is not experienced the same based on number of children (Chi-square = 3.184;  $df = 5$ ;  $p = 0.67$ ). H4.5: *The adjustment in work engagement is experienced differently based on the number of dependants; Rejected.* The variance in work engagement is not experienced differently based on the

**TABLE 3:** Sex independent-samples Kruskal–Wallis test.

Variable	n	Mean rank	H	df	Asymptotic sig.
Sex (WE)	130	2.36	0.053	2	0.974

WE, work engagement; sig., significance;  $df$ , degree of freedom.

**TABLE 4:** Work engagement and biographical variables; independent-samples Mann–Whitney U-test.

Biographical variable	Significance
Age	0.32
Tenure	0.76
Marital status	0.43
Number of dependents	0.67
Highest qualification obtained	0.56
Management level	0.84

Note: Significance:  $\geq 0.05$ .

**TABLE 2:** Descriptive statistics and Pearson rank order correlation.

Item	Total		$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Mean	S.D.									
JS_COM	57.88	51.69	0.70	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
WE_VIG	21.54	36.81	0.90	0.03	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
WE_DED	26.15	44.36	0.90	0.47*+	0.78++	-	-	-	-	-	-
WE_ABS	24.60	39.72	0.75	0.18*	0.87++	0.81++	-	-	-	-	-
WE_COM	72.29	113.33	0.94	0.25*	0.93++	0.93++	0.95++	-	-	-	-
BO_EXH	38.53	91.09	0.93	0.03	0.58++	0.48*+	0.54++	0.56++	-	-	-
BO_EFF	65.31	102.53	0.91	0.09*	0.66++	0.51++	0.61++	0.63++	0.87++	-	-
BO_CYN	29.75	69.76	0.92	0.08*	0.67++	0.55++	0.62++	0.65++	0.84++	0.92++	-
BO_COM	133.58	252.65	0.97	0.07*	0.66++	0.53++	0.61++	0.64++	0.95++	0.97++	0.95++

JS\_COM, Job Satisfaction Combined; WE\_VIG, Work Engagement (Vigour); WE\_DED, Work Engagement (Dedication); WE\_ABS, Work Engagement (Absorption); WE\_COM, Work Engagement Combined; BO\_EXH, Burnout (Exhaustion); BO\_CYN, Burnout (Cynicism); BO\_EFF, Burnout (Professional Inefficacy); BO\_COM, Burnout combined; S.D., standard deviation.

\*, Statistically significant:  $p \leq 0.05$ .

\*+, Practically significant correlation (medium effect):  $0.30 \leq r \leq 0.49$ .

++, Practically significant correlation (large effect):  $r \geq 0.50$ .

highest qualification obtained (Chi-square = 4.909;  $df = 6$ ;  $p = 0.56$ ). H4.6: *The change in work engagement is experienced differently based on the highest qualification obtained; Rejected.* The variance in work engagement is not experienced differently based on the level of management (Chi-square = 0.355;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = 0.84$ ). H4.7: *The adjustment in work engagement is experienced differently based on the level of management; Rejected.*

## Discussion

### Outline of results

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between job satisfaction, burnout and work engagement of public sector employees in the Khomas Region. This study also aimed to assess if differences exist regarding work engagement among public sector employees based on sex, age, tenure, marital status, number of dependants, educational qualification and level of management. This study is linked to the reduction of hunger and poverty (SDG1 and 2), improving health and well-being (SDG3), establishing decent work and economic growth (SDG8) and strong institutions (SDG16).

This study found that job satisfaction reported a positive relationship with work engagement. These findings support H1 of the study. Sehunce et al. (2015) reported a positive association between job satisfaction and work engagement. Kazimbu and Pieters (2020) reported that job satisfaction predicts work engagement. Satisfied employees are more engaged at work. Satisfied personnel work harder and perform better (Ngwenya & Pelsler, 2020). Sartono and Ardhani (2015) found that job satisfaction is crucial in getting an engaged workforce for an organisation to perform. These findings add to the understanding and achievement of establishing decent work and economic growth (SDG8) and strong institutions (SDG16).

Job satisfaction reported a positive association with combined burnout (exhaustion, cynicism and professional inefficacy). This has shown that a satisfied employee can experience burnout. The findings of the study thus reject H2 of the study. Past research has shown that burnout is found to be related to job dissatisfaction (Klopper et al., 2012), although studies like Dwinijanti et al. (2020) found a positive relationship between burnout and job satisfaction. The possible justification for the positive relation stems from passion related to their work, unemployment and a lack of work opportunities outside the organisation. Employees may enjoy the work that they are doing; but considering the pressures from high levels of unemployment, limited options for alternative employment and reduced coping resources related to the COVID-19 pandemic, employees may experience burnout. This finding adds to the further understanding of burnout and how it hinders the achievement of improving health and well-being (SDG3).

This study found that work engagement has a positive association with burnout. This shows that an engaged employee may experience burnout. The findings reject H3 of this study. Burnout and work engagement are correlated (Demerouti et al., 2010). Schultz et al. (2012) found that engaged employees can experience one dimension of burnout which is exhaustion. Improved levels of work engagement result in increased performance (Aboramadan et al., 2021); however, Demerouti et al. (2010) noted that job resources buffer the impacts of burnout. When organisations do not facilitate changes or support work expectations with the needed resources, burnout is more likely to occur instead of performance. Based on the Job Demands-Resources theory and the General Adaptation Syndrome of work stress, employees' resources to cope can become diminished when the stressors are unrelenting or when the resources are not complementary. The COVID-19 pandemic was relentless and many employees failed to cope with the life and work demands.

Well-being is described by factors such as job satisfaction, burnout and engagement as they are all correlated (Narainsamy & Van Der Westhuizen, 2013). Results show that all three variables are related; this is similar to Schubert-Irastora and Fabry (2014) who noted that job satisfaction, burnout and work engagement are associated. Although, this study found positive correlations with job satisfaction, work engagement and burnout, these results are different from past research. Havens et al. (2018) found job satisfaction and work engagement to be positively related, but negatively related to burnout. Employee health and functioning at work are inversely influenced by poor levels of work engagement (Knight et al., 2017).

This study looked at demographic variables of sex, age, tenure, marital status, number of dependants, highest qualification obtained and level of management. The findings revealed that the variance of work engagement is not experienced differently based on sex, age, tenure, marital status, number of dependants, highest qualification or level of management. The findings of this study thus reject Hypotheses 4.1–4.7 of the study. Bartlett (2015) and Mvana and Louw (2020) reported that employees based on age and tenure relate to work engagement differently. Shukla et al. (2015) reported that men are less engaged compared to women, and married employees are more engaged. Furthermore, higher-ranking employees were more engaged than other colleagues. However, Kose (2016) noted that work engagement is the same across gender, age, marital status and education level.

### Practical implications

The main aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between job satisfaction, burnout and work engagement. A positive association was reported between job satisfaction and work engagement, job satisfaction and burnout and between work engagement and burnout.



## Implications based on literature

This investigation recommends that businesses utilise appraisals and reviews to evaluate job satisfaction, work engagement and burnout of employees. Regular evaluations and research of these job attitudes can inform the formulation of suitable strategies for the organisation (Louw et al., 2011). When an organisation is aware of the job attitudes of employees, it can suggest credible interventions that may enhance organisational outcomes (Pieters et al., 2020).

Job satisfaction was measured by focussing on satisfaction related to pay, promotion, nature of work, supervision and co-worker relations. This study thus recommends that a vibrant performance management system be implemented to identify employees' needs. Instead of using a performance management system as a tool to dismiss employees, it can be used to increase efficiency and highlight areas of improvement (Fatile, 2014). Receiving feedback emphasises the need for development. Organisations that provide feedback make employees feel understood and responsible for their own performance (Maylett & Wride, 2017). It is important to recognise and reward employees. Employees experience higher levels of motivation through incentives like pay or promotion opportunities (Macky & Wilson, 2013). Employees appreciate praise from employers; additional leave days; special recognition in meetings or having a floating trophy. An effective performance management system may also help with ensuring internal and external pay fairness. Paying employees competitive wages can advance retention strategies, enhance job satisfaction and enhance work engagement. These strategies may achieve SDG3 (good health and well-being).

Team cohesion and their level of engagement can be improved by team building (Pollack & Matous, 2019). There are cost-effective team-building activities like trivia or riddles, murder mysteries, blind retrievers, Pictionary, among others. Organisations can facilitate these team-building activities to enhance motivation, satisfaction (co-workers; supervision) and work engagement. Healthy relations among staff can act as a resource, asking for guidance or advice, and enhancing work engagement (Pieters et al., 2019). Team building initiatives may advance the well-being of employees (SDG3) and build resilient organisations (SDG16).

To enhance the nature of work, organisations can conduct a job analysis to ensure that all jobs cater for the different job characteristics to enhance motivation, meaningfulness, task effectiveness, accountability and satisfaction. According to the job characteristics model, all jobs need to cater to the need for autonomy, task variety, task significance, feedback and skill variety. Jobs that do not cater to these characteristics may be redesigned to enhance the positive work outcomes for employees. Pieters et al. (2019) noted that autonomy can be beneficial for enhancing work engagement and reducing turnover intention (Pieters et al., 2020).

Chitambu and Pieters (2021) found that emotional intelligence reduced the work stress of employees. Ingo et al. (2021) found that emotional intelligence reduces burnout. Organisations should consider offering interpersonal and emotional intelligence training to enhance work relations among staff and supervisors. Being kind towards each other helps decrease stress, enhances a supportive working environment and advances a helping culture (Wakeman, 2013). When engaging in healthier interactions with colleagues, it builds social capital and these interactions may become a resource in future for other work-related activities (SDG 3 and SDG 8).

## Implications based on results from this study

To reduce the positive association between work engagement and burnout, it is recommended that organisations provide employees with the needed skills, competencies and resources to execute their jobs. Based on the Job-Demands Resources theory, when employees are provided with the needed skills, competencies and resources, even when the job demands increase, their engagement levels will remain high instead of experiencing burnout. The experience of burnout could be associated with a lack of skills, abilities and/or resources. Burnout occurs when employees are constantly required to perform and their resources are depleted (Bagram et al., 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the requirements and expectations were constant and relentless for all employees and individuals. Ensuring that all employees are competent and have the needed skills (SDG 8) may also enhance job satisfaction, work engagement and reduce burnout (SDG 3).

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic or similar life-threatening occurrences, public organisations should implement wellness programmes and communicate the importance of employee health and well-being. Psychoeducation regarding the benefits and importance of workplace wellness should be provided. Both intrapersonal (mindfulness) and interpersonal strategies (social support) are needed to help prevent burnout (Ismail et al., 2013). Organisations need to understand that an investment in the health and well-being of employees is an indirect investment in the succession plans and longevity of the organisation which is linked to SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 16 (peace and justice and strong institutions).

All the different biographical groups reported similar levels of work engagement. This may indicate that the policies and procedures do not discriminate against employees based on these variables. These findings may also indicate that all employees are equally or similarly engaged in their work. This study aligns with the achievement of SDGs 3, 5 and 8. In combination, they strive to create safe work environments and a productive workforce that will influence the economy's growth (Howden-Chapman et al., 2017). This will then affect the achievement of the rest of the SDGs.



## Limitations and recommendations

The data collection happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards, people were traumatised and stressed which could influence the findings of this study. Future studies may also replicate this study after the COVID-19 pandemic to assess whether these novel findings are more directly related to work experiences during the pandemic. The English proficiency of the participants may have played a role in the understanding, interpretation and completion of the questionnaire considering that English is not their first language. Cross-sectional research was used; thus, no cause-effect relationship can be determined like with longitudinal studies. It is recommended that future studies utilise a qualitative approach to further understand the relationship between job satisfaction, work engagement and burnout.

Because of the nature and scope of this project, other variables excluded may play a role in the work engagement and burnout levels of employees. It is also recommended that future studies focus on other variables such as job resources, leadership and employee characteristics like resilience or hardiness. A longitudinal research study may be taken to further examine this topic, with the limitations and implications of this study taken into consideration. This study will contribute to the scarce literature relating the variables in the Namibian context. The findings can be used by public sector organisations to improve their work performance, employee well-being and working environment.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this investigation was to evaluate the association between job satisfaction, work engagement and burnout of public sector employees in the Khomas Region. The positive relationship between job satisfaction and work engagement was confirmed by this study. This study found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and burnout. This study also found a positive relationship between work engagement and burnout. This study discovered that the adjustment in work engagement is reported similarly based on sex, age, number of years in the industry, marital status, number of dependants, highest qualification or management level. All employees experience similar (insignificant differences) levels of work engagement regarding these biographical variables. In order for organisations to achieve the SDGs, HPP and NDPs, employee well-being needs to be advanced and decent work conditions need to be established. The findings of this study are linked specifically to the reduction of hunger and poverty, advancing health and well-being, establishing decent work and economic growth, and building strong institutions which form part of the SDGs.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

S.N.I. and W.R.P. contributed equally to the conceptualisation and execution of the study.

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

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