Does Workplace Friendship Strengthen the Relationship Between Psychological Capital and Job Burnout: Evidence from IT Professionals

Swathy P[*]
Anil Kumar V.V[**]

Abstract

The current study examines the interaction effect of both workplace friendship and psychological capital (PsyCap) on job burnout. Based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the study explores whether workplace friendship as a social resource, together with PsyCap, a personal resource comprising hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, can mitigate burnout. Data were collected from 450 IT professionals in Kerala using a multistage proportionate random sampling technique. The study found that both PsyCap and workplace friendship were negatively related to job burnout, indicating that employees with higher PsyCap and workplace friendship experience a lower level of job burnout. The interaction effect of workplace friendship and PsyCap was tested using OLS regression with the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). The results showed a significant interaction effect, suggesting that the negative relationship between PsyCap and job burnout strengthens as workplace friendship increases, while controlling for sociodemographic factors. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of fostering both positive interpersonal relationships and individual psychological strengths to enhance employee well-being in the IT industry.

Keywords: psychological capital, workplace friendship, job burnout.

[*] Research Scholar, St. Berchmans College, Chanaganacherry, Kottayam, Kerala, India, Email: swathyp22@gmail.com, Contact No.: +91 9072941389

[**] Research Supervisor, St. Berchmans College, Chanaganacherry, Kottayam, Kerala, India, Email: vvak.comnss@yahoo.co.in, Contact No.: +91 9496931150

1. Introduction

Job burnout has become a prominent issue in the modern workplace. It is characterised by mental or emotional exhaustion, increased cynicism, and decreased professional efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Burnout has been associated with adverse organisational outcomes, decreased job satisfaction(Tarcan et al., 2017), reduced job performance (Lemonaki et al., 2021), and higher absenteeism and turnover intentions (Chong & Monroe, 2015). Employees who are emotionally drained are likely to engage in detrimental behaviors towards their co-workers and the organisation (Banks et al., 2012).It can also put someone at an increased rate of physical as well as mental health problems (Tang et al., 2001; Zhong et al., 2009).The World Health Organisation (WHO) recognised burnout in 2019 as an occupational phenomenon, rather than a medical condition; however, this does not make it any less serious. The WHO (2019) defines burnout as "a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."

According to the job demands-resources (JD-R) model, employees experience both exhaustion and disengagement when faced with high job demands and limited job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). These job resources (social support, autonomy etc.) can buffer the impact of job demands on job burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Based on insights from conservation of resources (COR) theory, Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) expanded the JD-R model by including personal resources such as self-efficacy, organisational self-esteem, and optimism. The JD-R theory further posits that personal resources act as a protective factor in the face of occupational stress, referring to "the beliefs people hold regarding how much control they have over their environment" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

The literature indicates that PsyCap is a significant personal resource that can mitigate job stress and burnout (Abbas & Raja, 2015; Avey et al., 2009; Bitmis & Ergeneli, 2015). PsyCap is a higher-order construct that consists of hope, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience, which helps to cope better with burnout symptoms and improve mental health, job satisfaction and overall well-being (Spence Laschinger & Fida, 2014); Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2015). Although prior studies have established the negative association between PsyCap and burnout, less attention has been paid to the social context in which this relationship occurs. Workplace relationships, particularly workplace friendships, may serve as an important social resource that complements personal resources such as PsyCap. Workplace friendships refer to close, trusting, and supportive relationships among colleagues that foster psychological safety, belonging, and emotional support (Berman et al., 2002). COR theory suggests that persons with higher personal and social resources are better able to manage stressful situations (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993). Accordingly, we investigated the interaction effect of workplace friendship, a social resource, on the relationship between PsyCap and job burnout.

Furthermore, this study is based on a sample of IT professionals in Kerala, a southern state of India. The IT industry in Kerala has witnessed substantial growth in recent years, emerging as a major contributor to the state's economy and labour market. According to The Times of India (2024) export revenue from the IT sector recorded significant growth following the COVID-19 pandemic. The IT workforce in Kerala increased from 78,000 to 250,000 between 2016 and 2023, reflecting a 31% rise. However, this rapid expansion has also intensified work demands. IT employees are often required to perform in high-pressure environments marked by extended working hours, strict deadlines, and rapidly evolving technologies (Dhar & Dhar, 2010; Singh et al., 2011; Suganya et al., 2019). Prior studies have shown that such conditions are strongly associated with higher levels of job burnout, which, in turn, negatively affect employee performance and organisational efficiency (Azeem & Nazir, 2008; Rehman et al., 2015). By surveying IT professionals in Kerala, we aim to provide policymakers, organisations, and professionals with valuable insights and implications.

2. Literature Review and Theory

2.1 Psychological Capital and Job Burnout

PsyCap has been defined as "an individual's positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: (a) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort

to succeed at challenging tasks; (b) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (c) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (d) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success." (Luthans et al., 2007). "Self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997). In simple terms, self-efficacy is the confidence in one's ability to achieve a targeted goal. It is the level of confidence that one has in one's own abilities (Schunk & Dibenedetto, 2021). Optimism is not just about expecting positive events to occur, but also about understanding why they happen. It is the way one sees or perceives the setbacks or successes (Seligman, 1998; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It's not just a feel-good state but a significant contributor to long-term physical and psychological health (Petersen et al., 2008; Segovia et al., 2015). Hope is the "process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals" (Snyder, 1995). Hopeful people are more likely to snap back after a difficult situation or challenge because a person with a high level of hope shows positive emotions, including a strong sense of enthusiasm and passion, towards the achievement of their goals than a less hopeful person (Snyder, 2002). The term resilience refers to the ability to bounce back from adverse or challenging situations (Luthans, 2002).

Burnout is a colourful phrase and is defined as "a state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one's professional life" (Freudenberger, 1986). Maslach and Leiter (1997) suggested that burnout is "a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform." So, it is primarily characterised by three main components: exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy.

Emotional exhaustion refers to a state of feeling of being drained and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources, resulting from continuous exposure to stress (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Demerouti et al. (2001) described exhaustion as the result of intense physical, emotional (affective), and cognitive strain. Maslach and Leiter (2016) defined cynicism as "a negative, hostile, or excessively detached response to the job, which often includes a loss of idealism". An indifferent attitude towards one's job develops from excessive emotional exhaustion (Leiter, 1993). Bakker et al. (2004) used the term disengagement in the same sense while developing the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, a two-dimensional instrument to measure burnout. Demerouti (2008) described it as detaching oneself from one's work in a broad sense, the work object, and the work content. Professional inefficacy refers to a decline in feelings of competence and productivity at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Maslach, 2003).

While Maslach's (2003) definition of burnout includes emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of professional efficacy, evidence suggested that exhaustion and cynicism (disengagement) are the core dimensions of burnout (Bakker et al., 2004). Professional inefficacy is how a person thinks about himself or herself when he or she burns out (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). It is independent or least correlated with emotional exhaustion, cynicism, or depersonalisation (Sharma, 2002). Lee and Ashforth (1996) conducted a meta-analysis and found that there is a strong correlation between emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation or cynicism, but both emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation have a weak correlation with personal accomplishment or professional inefficacy. In line with these findings, the current study adopts a conceptual framework of job burnout comprising emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

Several empirical studies have investigated the relationship between PsyCap and burnout, supporting the hypothesis that PsyCap serves as a protective factor against burnout. Ali et al. (2019) reported that higher PsyCap directly reduces burnout among nurses, while Fu and Charoensukmongkol (2022) found that PsyCap helps Chinese expatriates adapt to cultural differences and workplace demands, thereby reducing tendencies toward burnout. Similarly, Rehman et al. (2017) and Moyer et al. (2017) found that individuals with elevated PsyCap levels were better able to manage occupational stress and resist burnout. Virga et al. (2020) further confirmed

that enhancing PsyCap can reduce burnout, which subsequently prevents secondary traumatic stress. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 23 studies by Orgambídez et al. (2024) also demonstrated a strong negative correlation (r = −.44) between PsyCap and job burnout among resident nurses, reinforcing its universal protective role. Parallel evidence from studies by Barratt and Duran (2021), Spence Laschinger and Fida (2014), Nel and Kotzé (2017), Sui et al. (2019), and Manzano-García and Ayala (2017) reinforces PsyCap's protective role in diverse work settings. Recent studies (Anwar et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024) also reaffirm that PsyCap buffers against burnout by enhancing resilience, engagement, and emotional regulation. Thus, PsyCap emerges as a vital personal resource that not only strengthens employees' coping abilities but also serves as a psychological buffer against the adverse effects of job burnout.

2.2 Workplace Friendship and Job Burnout

According to Berman et al. (2002), workplace friendship is "nonexclusive workplace relations that involve mutual trust, reciprocal liking and shared interests or values". Workplace friendship entails more than being in friendly interactions or mutual acquaintances. It is a voluntary interpersonal relationship between co-workers (Sias et al., 2012), focused on fostering the emotional and social goals of the persons involved (Dobel, 2001; Song, 2006). Such friendships serve as significant sources of emotional and social support (Sia, 2015). Friends at the workplace can provide emotional support by guiding and listening to one another during periods of organisational change and stressful situations (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Empirical evidence suggests that social support reduces anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout (Chen et al., 2020; Mutkins et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2020). In highly demanding professional environments, close friends at work can provide emotional support and guidance that may be needed to buffer stressful situations, as they, too, may have experienced them. Those who get the opportunity to make friends at the workplace feel better than others, are more satisfied, and are more involved in their jobs (Riordan & Griffeth, 1995). From an organisational perspective, workplace friendship has been shown to enhance employee engagement

(Balaban & Ozsoy, 2016), job satisfaction (Winstead et al., 1995), and organisational commitment (Lee et al., 2015), while reducing absenteeism and turnover intentions (Asgharian et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2023).

A growing body of literature highlights the role of workplace friendship in reducing burnout. Islam and Chaudhary (2023) asserted that employees who share close, trusting relationships with colleagues experience a greater sense of belonging and psychological safety, which buffer the negative impact of stressors on their well-being. Employees who maintain close, supportive friendships at work are less likely to experience emotional depletion, even under hostile or unsupportive leadership (Al-Kashab, 2024). Similarly, Doolittle (2021) noted that organisational and peer support significantly help alleviate burnout symptoms, underscoring the importance of fostering a supportive, friendly work environment. Oztokatli and Pehlivan (2020), in their study among healthcare professionals, found that workplace friendships are negatively correlated with occupational stress and burnout, suggesting that increased friendship among employees can reduce emotional fatigue. Earlier evidence by Kruger et al. (1995) also showed that employees with more friendships within their teams experience lower emotional exhaustion and greater personal accomplishment, as friendships promote open communication and collaborative problem-solving.

2.3 Sociodemographic Factors and Job Burnout

Prior research consistently shows that demographic factors play a significant role in job burnout. Studies have generally found that younger, unmarried, and less experienced employees are more vulnerable to burnout (Khan et al., 2015; Maslach & Jackson, 1984). For instance, Maslach and Jackson (1984) observed higher burnout among young, single, childless employees, while Khan et al. (2015) reported that younger and less experienced academicians experienced greater emotional exhaustion and disengagement. Longitudinal evidence from Hildingsson et al. (2024) also showed an increase in burnout among less experienced midwives. Similarly, Hamama (2012) and Green et al. (2014) found that burnout decreases with age and experience.

Findings on gender differences in burnout have been inconclusive, varying across various work environments. Tarcan et al. (2017) and Sreelatha et al. (2018) reported that female professionals experienced greater emotional exhaustion, whereas Vassos and Nankervis (2012) and Attafar et al. (2011) reported higher depersonalization among men. Marital status and family life also emerged as protective factors; unmarried and childless workers tended to report higher burnout (Demirci et al., 2010; Tarcan et al., 2016). Studies in various professions (e.g., Packirisamy et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2017) confirmed that burnout risk peaks in early or mid-career stages. Overall, the evidence highlights that burnout tends to be higher among younger, single, less experienced, and lower-income employees, with some variation by gender and occupation.
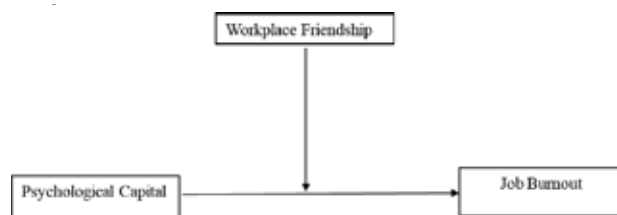
3. Current Study

Although the literature shows that both PsyCap and workplace friendship are associated with job burnout, no adequate research has examined the interaction effect of PsyCap and workplace friendship on job burnout. Based on the available evidence, it can be assumed that workplace friendships as social resources strengthen the relationship between psychological capital and job burnout. Sociodemographic variables pertaining to job burnout in the literature are also included in the model. On that basis we formulated the following hypothesis.

H1: The relationship between PsyCap and job burnout will strengthen as workplace friendship increases, conditional on sociodemographic factors.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model

4. Methodology

4.1   Participants and Procedure

The study population comprised employees working in Kerala's IT sector. To ensure comprehensive geographical representation, a multistage proportionate random sampling technique was employed. Kerala is divided into three regions—South, Central, and North. In the first stage major IT park from each region was selected: Technopark from South, Infopark from Centre, and Cyberpark from North. In the second stage, 10% of companies (115 out of 1,155) were randomly chosen in proportion to each park's size (49 from Technopark, 58 from Infopark, and 8 from Cyberpark). Of these, 44 companies consented to participate. In the final stage, 600 questionnaires were distributed proportionally among employees of the participating firms, accounting for potential non-respondents. A total of 483 questionnaires were returned, and after data screening, 450 valid responses were retained for analysis. The number of companies and the sampling strategy are summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Total number of IT companies selected from each IT park

IT Park	Total no: of companies	No: of companies selected
Technopark	490	49
Infopark	582	58
Cyberpark	83	8
Total	1155	115

Source: Kerala Economic Review, 2024

Table 2

Sampling Strategy

Name of the IT Park	No. of Companies responded	Total no. of employees in the responded companies	No. of employees selected
Technopark	21	6128	320
Infopark	19	5214	272
Cyberpark	4	147	8
Total	44	11489	600

Source: Primary Data

4.2 Measurement of Variable

4.2.1 Psychological Capital

The psychological capital of respondents was measured using the 24-item Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ), developed by Luthans et al. (2007). Responses measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha is 0.93, indicating good internal consistency.

4.2.2 Job Burnout

We adapted the scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (1996) to measure the burnout among respondents, including only the emotional exhaustion and cynicism subscales, which represent the core facets of burnout (Bakker et al., 2004). The reduced professional efficacy dimension was excluded because it is often regarded as a consequence rather than a defining symptom of burnout (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005; Shirom, 2003; Taris *et al.*, 2005). Responses measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*everyday*). The adapted two-dimensional scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, indicating excellent reliability.

4.2.3 Workplace Friendship

Workplace friendship was measured by using six items of the workplace friendship scale developed by Nielsen et al. 2000 to assess the workplace friendship among respondents. Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale suggests good internal consistency (α=0.76).

4.2.4 Covariates

The sociodemographic variables like age, gender, marital status, working experience, and monthly salary were used as control variables and coded as 0 –1 dummies.

4.3 Data Analysis

We used OLS regression analysis in the Process to test the interaction effect of PsyCap and workplace friendship on job burnout. Further, conditional analysis reveals the effect of PsyCap on job burnout at various levels of workplace friendship.

5. Results

Table 3 presents summary statistics for PsyCap, workplace friendship, job burnout, and covariates. The mean scores for PsyCap and workplace friendship were 79.64 (out of 120) and 20.92 (out of 42), respectively. The respondents' average burnout score was 35.12 (out of 50). Table 4 presents the Pearson correlations among PsyCap, workplace friendship, and job burnout. The results indicate that both PsyCap and workplace friendships are negatively associated with job burnout. Moreover, no issue of multicollinearity was detected among the independent variables.

Table 3

Summary Statistics on all Measures and Covariates

		Mean	SD	Min	
Psychological capital		79.64	15.37	45	117
Workplace friendship		20.92	4.10	8	30
Job burnout		35.12	13.65	10	70
Covariates	*n (%)*				
Age (1= ≤30 years)	325 (72.20)				
Gender (1=Male)	276 (61.30)				
Marital status (1=Married)	188 (41.80)				
Experience (1=≥5 years)	178 (39.60)				
Monthly salary (1=> ~50000)	223 (49.60)				

Table 4

Correlation Coefficients Between Psychological Capital, Workplace friendship, and Job Burnout

	Psychological capital	Workplace friendship	Job burnout
Psychological capital	-	.116*	-.430**
Workplace friendship	.116*	-	-.311**
Job burnout	-.430*	-.311**	-

*p < .05, **p < .01

Table 5 shows the interaction effect of PsyCap and workplace friendship on job burnout using ordinary least squares path analysis. Both PsyCap

and workplace friendship were mean-centered prior to the analysis. The findings indicate that PsyCap has a substantial negative relationship with job burnout (b1 =- .4178), implying that higher levels of PsyCap are associated with lower levels of burnout. Similarly, workplace friendship is negatively related with job burnout (b2 = -.6113), indicating that stronger workplace friendships correspond to lower burnout levels. Further, the interaction effect of PsyCap and workplace friendship on job burnout is significant (b3 = .0274), supporting the hypothesis that workplace friendship strengthens the negative relationship between PsyCap and job burnout, holding socio-demographic factors constant.

Table 5

Summary of Interaction Effect of Psychological Capital and Workplace Friendship on Job Burnout

Variable	Coefficient	SE	T	P	LLCI	ULCI
Psychological Capital	-.4178*	.0382	-10.9458	.0000	-.4928	-.3428
Workplace Friendship	-.6113*	.1378	-4.4360	.0000	-.8821	-.3405
Psychological Capital X Workplace Friendship	.0274*	.0066	4.1644	.0000	.0145	.0404
Age	-1.1965	1.4727	-.8124	.4170	-4.0909	1.6979
Gender	-3.1093*	1.1291	-2.7537	.0061	-5.3284	-.8901
Marital Status	.0127	1.3796	.0092	.9926	-2.6987	2.7242
Experience	-5.2436*	1.4822	-3.5377	.0004	-8.1566	-2.3305
Salary	-.1517	1.3516	-.1122	.9107	-2.8080	2.5046

R^2 = .3365, F (8,441) = 27.9553, p=.0000

R^2 Change =.0261, F (1,441) = 17.3426, *p*=.0000

*p < .05.

Table 6 shows the conditional effects of the PsyCap on job burnout at the mean workplace friendship, +/- SD from the mean workplace friendship. More specifically, the effect of PsyCap on job burnout is stronger when workplace friendship is low than when workplace friendship is high, further supporting the hypothesis. Figure 2 shows how scores on job burnout change in response to the various combinations of scores on PsyCap and workplace friendship. IT professionals with low PsyCap and low workplace friendship report the highest levels of burnout, whereas burnout is lowest when both PsyCap and workplace friendship are high. This indicates that the synergic effect of PsyCap and workplace friendship helps to reduce burnout.

Table 6

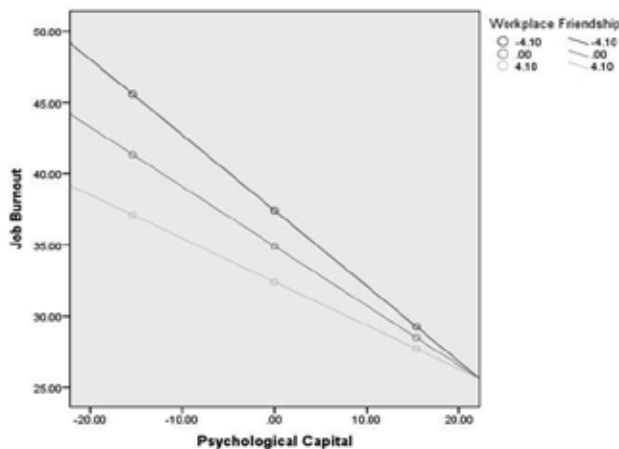*Conditional Effects of the Psychological Capital on Job Burnout at Values of Workplace Friendship*

Workplace Friendship	Effect	SE	T	LLCI	LLCI
-4.1003	-.5303*	.0549	-9.6576	-.6382	-.4224
.0000	-.4178*	.0382	-10.9458	-.4928	-.3428
4.1003	-.3053*	.0369	-8.2832	-.3777	-.2328

Note: Values of Workplace friendship are the mean and +/- SD from the mean.

*p <. 05.

Figure 2

Psychological Capital with Job Burnout by Workplace Friendship

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study explored the interaction effect of PsyCap and workplace friendship with job burnout. Firstly, as expected, we found that PsyCap significantly and negatively predicted job burnout among IT professionals, implying that individuals possessing higher levels of self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism are less susceptible to burnout. This finding was consistent with the previous studies (Bakri & Ali, 2015; Hassan & Ibourk, 2021; Rehman et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2012). The findings of our study also align with the propositions of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which emphasizes the protective role of personal resources in mitigating job stress, and the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018), which posits that individuals possessing strong personal resources are less likely to experience resource depletion. Both PsyCap and workplace friendship were negatively related to job burnout, suggesting that employees with higher PsyCap and workplace friendship experience a lower level of job burnout. These results are consistent with previous research (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Grover et al., 2018; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

Secondly, in line with the JD-R model and COR theory, workplace friendship conceptualized as a social resource negatively predicted job burnout, indicating that employees who share close, trusting, and supportive friendships with colleagues are better

equipped to regulate their emotions and foster a greater sense of belongingness, which buffers against the detrimental effects of job burnout

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that workplace friendship strengthens the negative relationship between PsyCap and job burnout. The prevalence of burnout was found to be lowest when both PsyCap and workplace friendship were simultaneously high, even after controlling for sociodemographic factors. The synergistic interaction of personal and social resources effectively mitigates job burnout.

The study underscores the pivotal roles of both PsyCap and workplace friendships in mitigating job burnout among IT professionals in Kerala. The findings reaffirm that individuals with higher levels of personal and social resources are better equipped to manage job burnout. By integrating insights from the JD-R model and COR theory, the study highlights the need for organizations to cultivate positive psychological strengths and supportive work relationships to foster a healthier and more resilient workforce.

7. Implications and Suggestions

The findings have significant practical implications for organisations, managers, and employees. The negative relationship between PsyCap and job burnout emphasizes the need to recruit persons with higher PsyCap. At the same time, organisations should conduct PsyCap interventions or training programs that help build employees' confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience, thereby reducing job-related stress and burnout. The significant role of workplace friendship on the relationship between PsyCap and job burnout underscores the importance of promoting interpersonal relationships in mitigating burnout. Organisations should encourage workplace friendships by promoting open communication, after-work recreation activities, informal get-togethers, fun team activities, and conducting icebreaker sessions for new employees. Promoting friendship both inside and outside the workplace improves overall well-being and work well-being (Craig & Kuykendall, 2019). The findings indicate that organisations should foster both PsyCap and workplace friendship to safeguard employees from stress and burnout, thereby improving their productivity.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

The present study is not free from limitations. Firstly, the current study employed a cross-sectional design; it was not feasible to establish the causal relationships among PsyCap, job burnout, and workplace friendship. A longitudinal investigation is recommended to validate the results of the current study.

Another limitation is that the investigation relied on self-reported measures to assess PsyCap, job burnout, and workplace friendship. Even though self-reports are widely used in behavioural and social science research, they may be susceptible to response biases. Future research may integrate multiple sources of data, such as supervisor and peer ratings, along with quantifiable performance metrics, to triangulate results and confirm the validity of the findings.

The samples were exclusively drawn from three prominent IT parks in the state of Kerala: Infopark, Technopark, and Cyberpark. IT companies functioning outside those IT parks were excluded from the scope of this investigation. The study has not made any comparative analysis based on the size of the company, such as small, medium, or large. Future studies should incorporate comparative analyses based on company size. This would provide valuable insights into how the organisational framework, structure, and scale affect the variables under examination.

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