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Burnout and the Emotional Mind: Investigating EQ and Self-Esteem as Predictors in a Young Adult Population

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Abstract: This quantitative study explores the relationships among burnout, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem among a sample of 200 young adults. Using standardized testing tools—the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale—the study utilized non-parametric statistical analyses because of the non-normality of data. The findings revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout, but no significant relationship between self-esteem and burnout. Further regression tests revealed that emotional intelligence predicted burnout and explained about 9.3% of the variance. In addition, the scores of burnout were significantly impacted by gender, with women exhibiting higher burnout scores. To the contrary of expectations, no moderating influence of self-esteem on the relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout was found. The findings of this study have widespread implications both at the societal and organizational levels and underscore the importance of developing emotional intelligence as well as confronting gender dynamics. Besides, moderation and mediation analyses were conducted using Process Models, which revealed that self-esteem did not function as a moderator or mediator. Ensuring rigorous testing of gender differences was the utilization of the Mann–Whitney U test. This article ends with an in-depth discussion of the pivotal role of emotional intelligence in burnout prevention, and proposes interventions in learning stress management and social skills as possibly more useful than interventions directed toward the sole enhancement of self-esteem.

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence, Burnout, Self-Esteem, Non-Parametric Analysis, PROCESS Model, Young Adults, Psychological Resilience, Gender Differences, Stress*

1. Introduction

International research has determined that approximately seventy-five percent of the people that one encounters in their everyday life are susceptible to burnout at some point during their career. That percentage, at 76%, is not only theoretical but also quantifiable as part of lived experience. The World Health Organization (WHO) has acknowledged the ruinous nature of burnout by including it as an "occupational phenomenon" in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). Burnout is defined by the organization in three dimensions of human experience: the state of energy depletion or exhaustion; a heightened psychological distance from work, which intensifies into cynicism and negative attitudes towards the job; and reduced professional efficacy. Underlying these definitions are millions of people who not only work suboptimally but also experience problems that reduce their health and relationships. Young adulthood is a phase of transitional vulnerability. The phase entails taking on new adult roles, such as attending college, securing the first job, and being part of close, romantic relationships. While these accomplishments are thrilling, they coincidentally also occur during phases marked by vast self-doubt, increased emotional arousal, and high levels of stress.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence cannot be swept aside as a fleeting fad in psychology. It involves our capacity to perceive, understand, and manage our own and other people's emotions. As opposed to IQ, which tests primarily cognitive functions, emotional intelligence takes into account our management of emotions, preparedness for mutual communication, and ability to grasp the nuances of mutual relationships. This theoretical model was initially created by psychologists Peter Salovey and John Mayer in 1990. They outlined four main components of emotional intelligence: accurate labeling of emotions, using emotions to make cognitive processes work, knowledge of emotions and their consequences, and masterful management of emotions. Based on this initial model, Daniel Goleman described five basic competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Reuven Bar-On suggested that emotional intelligence is linked to some personality features. Future research uncovered that people with high emotional intelligence are characterized by lower levels of anger, anxiety, and depression. This state is especially common among young adults, who often struggle with a complex combination of emotions, like anxiety resulting

from scholastic stress, vocational uncertainty, and daily problems; importantly, people with high emotional intelligence are more likely to perform constructive self-analysis and view challenges as opportunities rather than threats. A series of groundbreaking theories has accounted for the emergence and dynamics of self-esteem. Morris Rosenberg formulated self-esteem as a quite stable feature based on life circumstances, social interactions, and personal successes. Conversely, Mark Leary and Roy Baumeister suggested that self-esteem is a "sociometer"—an individual scale of the way we view the perception and acceptance of others towards us. Crocker and Wolfe believed that self-esteem differences rely upon the specific areas in which people regard themselves, for example, intellectual functioning, social relationships, or appearance.

Self-Esteem

People with high self-esteem try their best at life with confidence and determination. People who tend to have high self-esteem are more satisfied with their lives and less psychologically troubled. They have the ability to actively use effective coping mechanisms and recover faster from adversity. They have a very optimistic outlook and perceive opportunities rather than problems. On the other hand, low-self-esteem individuals often tend to suffer more from anxiety and depression. They will react to problems by putting to use the maladaptive coping mechanisms such as avoidance, self-blame, or ruminative cognitive activity. They become afraid to fail, hence lose the motivation and hinder individual as well as professional development. Self-determination theory asserts that high-self-esteem persons are more often motivated by intrinsic interest and satisfaction than by external praise, which promotes higher persistence as well as success.

Our social interactions have a profound impact on our self-esteem. Positive family and friendship relationships construct higher self-esteem, while rejection and bullying can destroy it. Early relationships with caregivers during childhood lay the foundation - secure relationships establish confidence and value, while insecure relationships can foster long-lasting feelings of inadequacy. With today's era of the digital age, social media adds a further layer of complexity, since constant comparisons with idealized images of others can destroy self-esteem and create unrealistic expectations.

Burnout

Burnout isn't feeling stressed or tired - it's a state of total emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion created by prolonged stress and chronic demands. It occurs through three core experiences: feeling drained and depleted emotionally; becoming cynical and detached from work or responsibilities; and feeling a diminished sense of personal accomplishment

and effectiveness. Young adults today experience several pressures that lead to burnout. The learning environment has grown more competitive nowadays, with high-stakes tests and the extreme pressure to win entry into highly coveted and reputed jobs. Individuals who are perfectionists are especially vulnerable, as they set very unrealistically high standards for themselves and fear any perceived failure. Early-career professionals typically work for long hours, face job insecurity, and also experience performance demands that can soon become overwhelming. Financial worries create another source of stress. This economic pressure compels them to multitask multiple tasks at the same time, sometimes working and studying at the same time or taking high-demand jobs with minimal financial security. Social media added to these pressures. Endless exposure to highly staged presentations of success, beauty, and wealth creates unrealistic expectations and unhealthy comparisons. Many young adults also experience an unhealthy work-life balance. They value productivity over well-being, ignoring self-care habits that can prevent burnout. Overwork, poor sleep, and a lack of restorative activities catch up with physical and mental well-being eventually.

Research Gap

Recent studies between 2015 and 2025 have identified significant gaps in our understanding of the interconnection between self-esteem and psychological well-being. Among the identified shortcomings is the paucity of longitudinal studies investigating changes in self-esteem across various life stages, such as career change and aging (Orth & Luciano, 2015). In addition, marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ individuals and disabled individuals, are underrepresented in the literature, and therefore, a limited knowledge base exists regarding the effect of social inequality and stigma on self-esteem (Martino & Gonzalez, 2025). The effect of digital media on self-esteem yields inconclusive findings; while some research suggests positive reinforcement, other research assigns it to heightened anxiety and body image issues (Valkenburg et al., 2017; Huang & He, 2025). Empirical investigations of the effect of self-esteem on curbing workplace burnout and improving employee well-being are also scarce (Cherniss, 2000; Esbach, 2025). The available pool of literature also suffers from a lack of specificity on the most effective therapeutic intervention in improving self-esteem across various cultural contexts (Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Banu, 2025). In addition, variables such as academic performance, gender differences, social relations, and the impact of physical health on self-esteem are poorly investigated (Lamghari et al., 2025; Sayers et al., 2025; Kodali et al., 2025; Madhavan, 2025). Finally, the predominance of research investigating Western perspectives indicates an

urgent need for cross-cultural research to ascertain how societal values affect self-esteem (Alzaareer, 2025).

1.1 Purpose

This research seeks to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence (EQ) and self-esteem, and burnout in young adults between the ages of 18-30. More specifically, however, it seeks to determine whether higher levels of emotional intelligence and self-esteem are related to lower levels of burnout. The research also seeks to determine whether burnout is gendered and whether self-esteem is a moderator of the effect of emotional intelligence. Utilizing a quantitative method, the research seeks to determine major psychological predictors of burnout and offer insights that can be used to inform effective interventions. The aim is to inform mental well-being support strategies within academic and professional settings.

1.2 Hypothesis

H1. High self-esteem young people are projected to have lower levels of burnout than those with low self-esteem because challenges are seen as opportunities and not threats.

H2. Individuals with high emotional intelligence will demonstrate higher coping mechanisms/strategies, reducing their risk for burnout in the academic and work settings.

H3. Self-esteem and emotional intelligence together will function as buffers, in that those high on both will be those who report lowest on burnout.

2. Review of Literature

The reciprocal dynamic between emotional intelligence (EI), self-esteem, and burnout has been the focus of growing academic attention over the past decade; however, findings have been inconsistent, especially concerning the nature and direction of these associations. A recent meta-analysis aimed at reconciling these differences drew on evidence from 59 SCOPUS and ScienceDirect studies with 16,084 participants aged 34.5 years on average and reported a statistically significant moderate negative correlation between EI and burnout—i.e., higher EI levels are generally linked with reduced levels of burnout symptoms (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). This review highlighted the necessity for additional research to ascertain which EI components exert the largest effects on burnout, as well as contextual variables mediating this relationship across different occupational and demographic groups.

Burnout is a state of psychological health resulting from chronic work-related stress, marked by emotional exhaustion, decreased professional efficacy, and depersonalization, through which individuals become emotionally distant from others and clients (Choi et al.,

2019). Emotional intelligence, in the ability model, is the capacity to recognize, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively (Mayer et al., 2016; Rivers et al., 2020) and is theorized as a buffer for burnout. Mixed models, such as trait emotional intelligence, also consider personality traits and emotional styles, such as self-regulation and assertiveness (Petrides, 2010). Convincing evidence is available for the role of emotional intelligence as a predictor of occupational performance through its interaction with burnout. In a sample of 1,197 Spanish professionals, emotional intelligence was positively related to work performance and inversely related to burnout. Mediation analysis revealed that burnout—more specifically, emotional exhaustion and decreased professional efficacy—was a mediating variable between emotional intelligence and job performance, even when sociodemographic variables were controlled (Moon & Hur, 2011). Each facet of emotional intelligence revealed the same pattern, demonstrating the multidimensional role of emotional intelligence in occupational outcomes and emotional resilience. Additional confirmatory results from a study of 311 professionals who offered support to individuals with intellectual disabilities in Spain also underscored the role of psychosocial factors. The results derived showed that job satisfaction, emotional intelligence—specifically emotion regulation—and social support negatively correlated with burnout. In contrast, psychosomatic complaints and work–family conflict positively correlated with burnout symptoms, together explaining over 35% of its variance. This implies that burnout is a multifaceted construct that is determined by both internal resources (e.g., emotional intelligence and job satisfaction) and external pressures (e.g., conflict and absence of support), thus providing support for targeted interventions (Magnano et al., 2017).

In educational contexts, studies of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers have identified a negative correlation between emotional intelligence (EI) and burnout. A particular study of 75 secondary school teachers identified EI as a strong predictor of the degree of burnout. Interestingly, both age and teaching experience were found to be positively correlated with EI and inversely correlated with burnout; however, gender differences in the degree of burnout were reported, but no differences were found in EI levels (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). The influence of self-esteem has also been investigated as a possible predictor of the development and impact of burnout. In a research study of police officers and healthcare professionals, it was established that self-esteem acted as a predictor and an effect of burnout but did not act as a moderator of the health consequences of burnout (Petrides, 2010). Therefore, the improvement of self-esteem may have remedial impacts on intervention programs to recover from burnout. In general, current literature in

this area indicates a high negative correlation between EI and burnout and that self-esteem is an important but complex factor. Future studies should seek to establish the exact components of EI that best predict resilience and long-term consequences of interventions to improve EI and self-esteem in preventing professional burnout across professions and cultures.

3. Methodology

This study employs a cross-sectional quantitative design to investigate the interaction of burnout, emotional quotient (EQ), and self-esteem among young adults. A cross-sectional design is considered appropriate because it allows data to be collected at one point in time, thus providing information on the interaction between these psychological factors without the requirement for long follow-up durations. This current study examines the correlation between burnout, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem among the sample population. Also, between-group differences based on demographic variables like gender and education level were compared. Because the variables are of a type that doesn't permit the use of parametric statistics and the data are not normally distributed, non-parametric statistical methods were applied.

3.1 Sample

The sample consists of 200 participants aged 18-30 who are currently pursuing higher education. The sample is representative of individuals from cities such as Delhi, Noida, Chandigarh, and Pathankot

3.2 Tools and Measures

Data was collected through an online Google Forms survey. The survey included:

- **Consent Form:** Informed participants about the study.
- **Demographics:** Collected data on age, education, gender, and area of residence.
- **Maslach Burnout Inventory:** Measures burnout across three dimensions a 7-point Likert scale including 22 items
- **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale:** A 10-item scale assesses global self-esteem and self-worth on a 5-point Likert scale.
- **Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale:** A 10-item scale on a 0-5 Likert scale assessing overall emotional intelligence across key traits.

4. Result

4.1 Data analysis

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the key variables.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 200)*

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
Burnout	10.00	82.00	53.10	16.95	-0.545
EQ	17.00	50.00	32.66	7.82	-0.179
Self-Esteem	10.00	40.00	22.16	5.23	0.170

Both Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were carried out for normality. The results showed that burnout scores failed normality ($p < .001$), and it was therefore reasonable to use non-parametric statistical analysis.

Mean MBI burnout scores were 53.10 ($SD = 16.95$), indicating moderate to severe burnout in participants. Negative skewness (-0.545) indicates a longer left tail, perhaps meaning more participants scored above the mean. Emotional intelligence averaged 32.66 ($SD = 7.82$), The near-zero skewness (-0.179) shows a fairly symmetric distribution of scores. while self-esteem scores averaged 22.16 ($SD = 5.23$), reflecting generally balanced emotional awareness and moderately low self-worth.

4.2 Correlational Analysis

Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to assess the relationships between burnout, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem, as it does not assume normal distribution and works with ranked data.(See Table 2)

Table 2: *Spearman Correlation*

Variables	Burnout	EQ	Self-Esteem
Burnout	1	-0.327**	-0.029
EQ	-0.327**	1	-0.036
Self-Esteem	-0.029	-0.036	1

Note: $p < .01$

Spearman correlations indicated a statistically significant, negative relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout ($\rho = -0.327$, $p < .01$), but no relationship between self-esteem and either variable studied. Spearman's correlation was used because the data were not normally distributed, thereby allowing ranked relationships without assuming linearity. A strong inverse correlation was also observed between burnout and emotional intelligence ($\rho =$

-0.327, $p < .01$), whereby scores of emotional intelligence were higher as the incidence of burnout was lower.

The correlation test showed that self-esteem correlated no significantly with burnout ($\rho = -0.029$) and with emotional intelligence ($\rho = -0.036$), i.e., these variables have no correlation in the sample under study.

Regression is capable of predictive association testing using non-normal data, particularly with rank-based or robust techniques.

Mann–Whitney U test

Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to examine differences in burnout scores across gender groups. (See Table 3)

Table 3: *Mann–Whitney U test*

Variable	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
EQ	4352.500	8357.000	-1.446	.148
SELFESTEEM	4581.000	10797.000	-0.893	.372
BURNOUT	3536.000	9752.000	-3.451	< .001

One of the interesting findings was the difference in burnout scores recorded by the male participants compared to female participants (3 vs. 4) ($U = 3536$, $p < .001$), which indicated female participants experienced more burnout compared to the male participants.

The analysis reveals no considerable Gender disparity in the aspect of emotional intelligence (EQ; $U = 4352.5$, $p = .148$), signifying comparability in emotional intelligence between both sexes. Statistical testing did not show a significant gender difference in levels of self-esteem among men and women ($U = 4581$, $p = .372$), i.e., no gender difference in levels of self-esteem.

Table 4: *Regression Analysis Predicting Burnout with Moderation*

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
(Constant)	88.903	15.740	—	5.648	< .001
Self-Esteem (X)	-0.185	0.566	-0.028	-0.328	.744
Emotional Intelligence (W)	-0.832	0.185	-0.305	-4.493	< .001
Interaction ($X \times W$)	0.036	0.234	—	0.154	.879

The moderation test (Model 1) indicated that emotional intelligence was a strong predictor of burnout ($B = -0.832$, $p < .001$), but self-esteem and the interaction term were not significant ($p > .05$). Emotional intelligence was found to be one of the strongest predictors of

burnout reduction ($B = -0.832$, $p < .001$), therefore validating its strong direct negative relationship with burnout measures.

Self-esteem was a poor predictor of burnout ($B = -0.185$, $p = .744$), i.e., it does not directly affect this particular model. The relationship between emotional intelligence and self-esteem was also not significant ($B = 0.036$, $p = .879$), indicating that emotional intelligence is not moderated by self-esteem.

Table 5: *Regression Analysis Predicting Burnout with Mediation*

Predictor	B	SE B	β (if reported)	T	p
(Constant)	88.903	15.740	—	5.648	< .001
EQ)	-0.8316	0.1851	-0.305*	-4.493	< .001
Self-Esteem	-0.1855	0.5663	-0.028	-0.327	.743

Mediation analysis (Model 4) indicated that emotional intelligence significantly predicted burnout ($B = -0.832$, $p < .001$), but not self-esteem ($B = -0.186$, $p = .743$), and no mediation effect.

Emotional intelligence had a strongly significant negative direct effect on burnout ($B = -0.83$, $p < .001$), implying that those scoring higher in emotional intelligence had lower instances of burnout. Emotional intelligence did not correlate strongly with self-esteem to a significant extent ($B = -0.19$, $p = .743$), and the two did not correlate to a significant degree in this research.

The indirect effect of emotional intelligence on burnout via self-esteem was not significant (CI included zero), which is in favour of the fact that self-esteem is not mediating this relationship.

5. Discussion

Burnout, often in the form of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, has been found to occur differently by gender (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In research, it is shown that women report more emotional exhaustion, while men report more on depersonalization (Purvanova & Muros, 2010). The current findings validate some such view; the Mann–Whitney U test revealed the difference between the genders in the burnout scores to be statistically significant, and females reported more burnout ($p < .001$). This is in line with previous studies showing gendered coping styles and appraisals for stress (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). The explanation for such a difference, as observed here, may lie in emotional labor, which is often allocated in a biased fashion by gender (Hochschild, 1983).

Women may report more interpersonal causes of stress or greater expectations for emotionally demanding tasks, and hence report more burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Gender roles may also govern emotional expression so that men reduce emotional strain due to social desirability (Simon & Nath, 2004). This could result in burnout reports from male respondents being underestimated. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is a moderating factor that must be taken into account in the conceptualization of burnout. Experiments have found that individuals scoring high on EQ are more effective in regulating emotional responses, stress reduction, and prevention of emotional exhaustion (Schutte et al., 2007). Notably, gender difference in burnout remained robust even after control for emotional intelligence and self-esteem, showing the role of gender as unique and independent of other psychological constructs.

We employed PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022) to carry out a moderation analysis to evaluate whether self-esteem is a moderator between emotional intelligence and burnout. The interaction term ($EQ \times SE$) was not significant ($p = .879$), indicating that the effect of emotional intelligence on burnout is consistent regardless of the level of self-esteem. This result is in accord with earlier work negating the buffering effect of self-esteem on stress outcomes (Orth & Robins, 2014). Therefore, self-esteem is not a conditional variable in the EQ–burnout relationship.

After the moderation analysis, a mediation analysis was performed with PROCESS Model 4 to assess whether self-esteem mediated between burnout and emotional intelligence. The indirect effect that was found was extremely low (0.0009) and statistically non-significant with a 95% bootstrapped CI that spanned zero (CI: -0.0298 to 0.0483). This indicates that emotional intelligence has no effect on burnout via self-esteem (Baron & Kenny, 1986), and further indicates that self-esteem is not an important mediating factor in this case (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Methodologically, non-parametric methods offer a consistent alternative when normality assumptions are not met, especially in psychological research where variable distributions, e.g., burnout and emotional response, are skewed (Sheskin, 2004). While parametric methods, e.g., t-tests, are based on the homogeneity of variance and normality assumption, non-parametric tests provide a conservative and assumption-free alternative (Nachar, 2008). In this regard, the Mann–Whitney U test ensured that the statistical conclusions about gender and burnout held even with the skewed distribution of burnout scores.

6. Conclusion

In summary, emotional intelligence was the best predictor of burnout, with a protective role in contexts with high levels of stress. Despite the non-significant findings on self-esteem, no mediation and moderation effects, the findings confirm the need to develop emotional intelligence among young adults. The study supports the argument that interventions aimed at developing emotional intelligence can better reduce burnout than interventions aimed at enhancing self-esteem. Second, the burnout gender differences identified in the study confirm the need for interventions tailored to specific gender differences. Future studies should strive to examine larger variables and longitudinal methods to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the burnout dynamics in diverse populations.

6.1 Limitations and Future Directions

This research offers useful information on the relationship between emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and burnout, but it is important to identify some of its limitations. First, the sample of participants was young adults, and this might restrict the external validity of the results to other populations or groups. Future research could expand the pool of participants to include individuals of diverse ages and occupational groups to increase external validity (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Future research could also employ objective measures of burnout, such as physiological measures, to offer a more complete picture of the phenomenon. Additionally, although emotional intelligence was found to be a significant predictor of burnout, self-esteem failed to demonstrate a significant effect, and therefore, other variables, such as coping mechanisms or work environment variables, may be more relevant.

More exploration of these other variables may provide a more balanced understanding of knowledge of burnout prevention (Brackett & Katulak, 2007). Finally, a longitudinal design would enable researchers to test for causality among these variables, as the present cross-sectional design does not permit conclusions about directionality (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012).

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