

The Modern Burn-Out: an Interdisciplinary Analysis



Image: <https://thehoneycombers.com/singapore/burnout-meaning-symptoms/>

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Abstract

Burn-out has become a significant health problem and is most common amongst the millennial and gen-z generations. This study attempted to understand the role meritocratic values play in the experience of burn-out (symptoms) in the modern workplace. Two hundred tweets were collected using search terms of burn-out on the platform Obi4Wan. The gathered tweets were coded using the grounded theory method in Nvivo. Analysis revealed the existence of a self-optimization mindset and the role feelings of fairness play in experienced burn-out (symptoms).

Key terms: burn-out, meritocracy, millennials, gen-z

Introduction

In 2019 the BuzzFeed article ‘How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation’ went viral. Peterson wrote about how millennials (individuals born between 1980 and 1997) are systemically becoming burned out, because of their financial situation and internalized mindset of optimization and it struck a nerve (Petersen, 2019; Dimock, 2022).

Petersen’s article (2019) isn’t the only or the first to highlight a mindset of internalized optimization and how it is causing burn-out amongst young workers. Tolentino described the modern entrepreneurial zeitgeist within the booming gig economy for The New Yorker as ‘dressed up cannibalism’ (2017). Kreider (2012) described the mindset and behaviors of millennials with regards to work as ‘The Busy Trap’: a self-imposed hysteria of work and obligations that make individuals feel anxious and guilty when they aren't working.

Burn-out has become a significant health problem: In 2020 in the Netherlands 1,2 million workers reported symptoms of burn-out (TNO, 2021). Burn-out is the most common amongst millennials and gen-z (individuals born between 1997 and 2012), of the four most recent generations today (Threlkeld, 2021; Dimock, 2022). According to a survey by Indeed:

59 percent of millennials reported experiencing burn-out symptoms, with gen-z following at 58 percent (Threlkeld, 2021). The costs of burn-out are estimated to be US\$ 1 trillion per year in lost productivity for the global economy (World Health Organization, n.d.)

Not only are the costs and loss of productivity a serious burden for economies, but the toll on the well-being of individuals is severe as well. Burned-out individuals have lost the enthusiasm they had for their jobs and instead feel exploited and exhausted by them. The more severe these feelings are experienced, the higher the risk of serious consequences (Bakker & de Vries, 2020). Mild burn-out cases alone have been linked to increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, Type 2 diabetes, and all-cause mortality (Ahola, 2007; Ahola et al., 2010; Bakker & de Vries, 2020).

Burn-out affects not only physical health negatively, but the psychological health of individuals as well: when employees have reported chronic cynicism and fatigue regarding their work they report severe psychological health problems (Shirom et al., 2005; Toker & Biron, 2012; Bakker & De Vries, 2020). These findings demonstrate the severity of the effects of burn-out and why it is vital to understand how to prevent and help individuals who suffer from it.

Understanding how burn-out is experienced in this modern era is the first step in understanding why burn-out has increased the last few decades at such abnormally high levels, which could make a useful contribution to relieving the problem.

While thousands of studies are published on burn-out every year, most studies are more descriptive than explanatory (Bakker & De Vries, 2020). Furthermore, the individual, managerial or organizational processes leading to burn-out are almost always the focus of the studies, neglecting to explain how and why burn-out is so prevalent in today's societies.

Outside academia there have been multiple publications that have identified a possible causal relationship between the new cultural mindset regarding work and meritocracy. Books

such as ‘The meritocracy trap’ by Daniel Markovits (2020), ‘Status anxiety’ by Alain de Botton (2004), and ‘The Tyranny of Merit’ by Michael J. Sandel (2020). Many non-scientific sociological articles have also been written on the subject of millennials and gen-z burning out yet it has not been specifically researched.

In order to make scientific progress on this subject, it is important to use methodologies that challenge the existing theories, to integrate them with important insights across different disciplines into a more comprehensive (model) of burn-out. The issue of burn-out in our society in this age is a product of processes that have been in the making for a longer time than the past handful of years since blogs and articles have started gaining popularity. It appears to be a systemic, not only an individual, issue and should thus be examined as such.

To achieve a comprehensive scope of the problem of burn-out in the modern age it will be placed in the context of relevant societal influences of the modern era, namely meritocratic values. Experiences and sentiments about burn-out will be gathered directly from those who suffer from them. Their insights into what they believe are factors causing or worsening their burn-out could be of tremendous value. That bottom-up data will be combined with a theoretical top-down framework based on relevant medical and psychological insights on burn-out and important sociological and economic factors. Together an integrated holistic approach will form that could hopefully help, prevent and reduce burn-out amongst the younger generations of workers.

Existing research

The WHO defines burn-out as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed and characterized by three dimensions 1) Exhaustion; 2) cynicism; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness (World Health Organization, 2019; Maslach,

1993; Maslach, 1998; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Leiter & Maslach, 2004). The exhaustion dimension marks the lack of sufficient energy of the individual to make a useful, lasting contribution at their job. The cynicism dimension signifies difficulty in dealing with other people and activities of their job. The efficacy dimension captures the self-evaluation the individuals make with regards to the value of their and quality of the contributions to their work (Maslach & Leiter, 2015).

Multiple causal models of burn-out have been created over the years. The early models were more transactional. The focus lay heavy in the relationship between the three dimensions of burn-out and were often described in sequential stages. Exhaustion was hypothesized to develop first because of high work demands, to be followed by detachment and negative reactions towards other people at work and the job itself (cynicism). If this continued then feelings of professional inefficacy would ensue (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Later the imbalance model was introduced with two distinct interpretations at the forefront: the Job Demands-Resources model and the Conservation of Resources model. Both have received confirmation in research studies (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The imbalance model also has three general stages: first there is an imbalance between work demands and the individual's resources, causing job stressors. Next there is individual strain manifesting in exhaustion and anxiety and finally the defensive coping mechanism that expresses itself in cynicism (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

A variation of the imbalance model has become one of the most dominant models on burn-out, the Areas of Worklife (AW) model. The model has distilled two decades of research on burn-out and identified a plethora of stressors ranging across many occupations in various countries. Six key domains of stressors have been identified: workload, control, reward, community and values (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Leiter & Maslach, 2004; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998) (see Table 1, 'area' and 'burn-out stressor'). Initial empirical support for the

AW model has been provided by both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Mismatches in the six areas between the individual and their job affect the level of experienced burnout, which in turn affects several other areas of the individual's life, such as their personal well-being, social behaviors, health and job performance. The greater the mismatch, the greater the likelihood of burn-out (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

A point of critique for the model is how narrow the stressors of the AW-model are defined. For instance, the stressors within the workload area are defined by the individual's job. The AW-model does not specify what constitutes a job, therefore within the context of entrepreneurialism or unpaid care work it is not clear whether individuals would be seen as 'having a job'. Within this study a job is more broadly defined, it can be regular employment, care work, school work, entrepreneurial or freelance work.

Table 1. AW-model areas of burn-out stressors.

Area	Burn-out stressor
Workload	Too high demands of the job causing the individual to deplete their capacity to meet them. In chronic conditions there are too little opportunities for rest and recovery.
Control	A lack of perceived capacity to influence decisions that affect their work, to have professional autonomy and to have access to resources that aid in meeting the job's demands.

Values	A mismatch of ideals and motivations between the individual and their job.
Community	Relationships between the individual and other people on the job that lack support and trust, and unresolved conflict.
Fairness	The perception that decisions at the individual's work are not fair or equitable. The quality of procedures and their own treatment during decision-making procedures are used by the individual to measure fairness at their work.
Reward	Perceived insufficient recognition or rewards for the individual's work. Rewards can be financial, institutional or social.

Maslach & Leiter, 2016

Both the transactional and the imbalance models provide insight into how burn-out is established in the individual. Although the models do highlight how the demands of the individual's job play a role it still remains unclear what other social factors, such as meritocratic values, influence burn-out. Organizational and individual models cannot sufficiently explain why the millennial generation in particular is experiencing burn-out at large. This study therefore aims to use the AW model's stressors to investigate whether they can lay bare problematic social structures in our modern societies.

Theoretical approach

Internalization of Optimization

At the start of the twentieth century there was a transition from an agrarian to industrial society (Breen, 2004; Thijssen & Wolbers, 2015). Industrialization changed the labor market: the new (economic) structure of the modern society required greater skills from workers to sustain the scientific and technological developments needed for economic growth (Blau and Duncan 1967; Kerr et al. 1973; Treiman 1970; Prix, 2014; Thijssen & Wolbers, 2015). Governments improved access to (higher) education (Waslander & Bosman, 1997; Thijssen & Wolbers, 2015) to meet the demands for high skilled labor, giving its citizens more opportunities for upward social mobility (Thijssen & Wolbers, 2015; Stroud & Brien, 2018).

In the modern society there were suddenly opportunities most individuals never would have had before. Meritocracy has been defined as a social system in which the advancement of an individual and the allocation of rewards in organizations and society are based on an individual's capabilities and performances, rather than nepotism, seniority, race, gender, or class (Bellow, 2003). Modern societies thus have meritocratic ideals instilled in their social fabric (Miller, 1996; Bell, 1976; Prix, 2014).

Parson described individuals of modern societies to be expected to be 'entrepreneurial trailblazers' because of their newfound freedom of social mobility (1971; Dillon, 2014). Modern individuals are to seek out and choose for themselves what role they wish to take on as adults and compete with other individuals who wish for the same one (Stroud & Brien, 2018).

This vision of modernity is mirrored in Petersen's article (2019) as she writes "I never thought the system was equitable. I knew it was winnable for only a small few. I just believed

I could continue to optimize myself to become one of them.” She writes of a mindset in which she feels the need to optimize herself to increase her desirability on the job market. By becoming more productive, she hopes to then gain the social position and rewards she seeks. She points out a mindset that seems to be pervasive in the younger generations.

Paradoxically, individuals feel the need to optimize themselves in order to secure the rewards they seek, even as meritocratic ideals imply that individuals will get fair rewards, based on their effort and merit. About this paradox, Yale law professor Daniel Markovits (2020), stated that meritocracy has caused individuals to work with crushing intensity and suffer exploitation in order to extract a return. According to Markovits, individuals are given a promise, in which hard work will lead to upwards mobility, only for that to end up being a fantasy.

Meritocracy could thus be the driving force behind the need to optimize; the option of being able to reach new heights because of newfound social mobility has given room to the belief that reaching one’s full potential is possible and the knowledge that the system is not always equitable makes self-optimization is necessary in order to be successful.

The meritocratic values that make up the self-optimization mindset overlap with some of the AW-model’s areas of burn-out stressors, which could explain the increase of experienced burn-out (symptoms) in the modern working individual. The stressors ‘workload’, ‘control’, ‘fairness’ and ‘reward’ can be linked by underlying meritocratic ideals (see Table 2).

Table 2. AW-model areas of burn-out stressors and meritocratic values.

Area	Burn-out stressor	Meritocratic value
Workload	Too high demands of the job	The efforts made by the

	causing the individual to deplete their capacity to meet them. In chronic conditions there are too little opportunities for rest and recovery.	individual for their job will result in proportional rewards based on their merit.
Control	A lack of perceived capacity to influence decisions that affect their work, to have professional autonomy and to have access to resources that aid in meeting the job's demands.	The individual perceives themselves as an actor who has the professional autonomy to generate their own upward mobility through effort.
Values	A mismatch of ideals and motivations between the individual and their job.	N/A
Community	Relationships between the individual and other people on the job that lack support and trust, and unresolved conflict.	N/A
Fairness	The perception that decisions at the individual's	Rewards are doled out proportional, based on the

	work are not fair or equitable. The quality of procedures and their own treatment during decision-making procedures are used by the individual to measure fairness at their work.	individual's effort and merit. The perceived appropriateness of the reward given versus their effort and merit are used by the individual to measure fairness at their work.
Reward	Perceived insufficient recognition or rewards for the individual's work. Rewards can be financial, institutional or social.	Rewards are given proportional to one's efforts and individual merit.

Maslach & Leiter, 2016

Effort-Reward Imbalance

The millennial and gen-z generations appear to be more pessimistic than its predecessors (Stroud & Brien, 2018). Data shows that a third of them stated that they would have rather grown up when their parents were children. The severity of the millennials and gen z' pessimism is unusual, especially with the technological advancements, social progress and the gains in social mobility of the last decades; all other generations before were more optimistic about their lives compared to their parents' (Stroud & Brien, 2018; Shrimpton et al., 2017).

The Effort-Reward imbalance model is where meritocracy and burn-out intersect: when individuals put in effort they believe that fair and appropriate rewards can be expected. When in reality there is perceived inequity between costs and gains individuals will experience that as stressful which will compromise their health and well-being over the long term (Siegrist, 2005; Kinman & Jones, 2007). The rewards can be monetary (appropriate salary), in esteem (sufficient respect, support) and job security or career opportunities (Kinman & Jones, 2007). Perceived insufficient rewards for an individual's work also fit the 'reward' and 'fairness' stressors for burn-out according to the AW model.

The negative effect of imbalance predicted by the ER-I model is to be even more severe amongst individuals who are excessively committed or over-committed to their job(s) (Kinman & Jones, 2007). The optimization mindset that the younger generations of workers hypothetically have internalized could categorize them as such, because over-commitment is described as 'a set of attitudes, behaviors and emotions that reflect excessive striving in combination with a strong desire to be approved of and esteemed' (Siegrist, 2001, p. 55; Kinman & Jones, 2007). The mindset of self-optimization encapsulates the excessive striving, because optimization is needed in order to receive rewards perceived by the individual as appropriate.

It is a common argument that the millennial and gen-z generations are seen as entitled or as having a poor work ethic when they express disappointment over their reward, especially by members of the baby boomer generation (Shrimpton et al., 2017). Since the ERI model predicts the negative stress effects based on the perception the individual has of their own efforts and what they deem as appropriate rewards for them the imbalance could validly be attributed to an inflated sense of entitlement.

However, the areas of their lives millennials and gen z'ers are most pessimistic about are: housing prices, a lack of stable employment opportunities, being able to own a home as

adults, and having a secure job (Shrimpton et al., 2017). Data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that unlike every generation before, people born since 1980 have not seen their income increase compared to people their same age a decade ago. The 1980 cohort has also accumulated significantly less wealth than generations before and have much lower home-ownership than previous war generations (1940-1945) (Cribb et al., 2016). The pessimism of the younger generations over their prospects is thus not unfounded.

The imbalance between effort and reward does not seem to be caused by self-entitlement, because financially millennials and gen z'ers appear to be significantly worse off than all other war and post-war generations when they were the same age and started working. The meritocratic ideals of modern society seem to be a false promise for the youngest two generations. The same efforts of the younger generations are not granting them the rewards their parents or grandparents would have gotten which could cause the effort-reward imbalance.

The ERI model has shown that this imbalance can cause significant negative effort for an individual's health and well-being. The AW model has furthermore found reward and fairness to be significant factors of burn-out, stating that insufficient rewards (such as financial ones) increase an individual's vulnerability to burn-out, because it devalues both their work and them as workers, and is closely related to feelings of inefficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Research question

This study seeks to answer the following question:

What role do meritocratic ideals play in experienced burn-out in the modern workplace?

Based on the literature the following relationships are expected: individuals who experience(d) burn-out feel the internalized need to optimize themselves for their work by trying to be as productive as possible, making sacrifices to their own well-being for their productivity and/or feel guilt when they aren't working. Further, the individual could feel that the efforts they have made for their work are not being or have not been appropriately and/or fairly rewarded.

Methods

Design

The design of the analysis was created to understand how and why individuals experience burn-out (symptoms) from the direct source: through gathering tweets the individuals have written about their own experiences with burn-out (symptoms). A qualitative content analysis was performed to discern whether the expected relationships between burn-out amongst millennials exist or not. Tweets from Twitter users were used as the content. This study is an abductive design, it combines completed theories and new data to form a new interdisciplinary integrated theory (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). The AW-model alongside the theories on modern burn-out formed the basis for the grounded theory method.

Field Site

Twitter is a social media platform with 166 million daily active users worldwide (Statista, 2020; Makita et al., 2020). Twitter users can post 'tweets', microblogs with a limit of 280-characters which allows them to communicate with other users via retweets, likes, replies or quote tweets (Berry, et al., 2017).

Twitter has established itself as a platform on which many of its users share and discuss mental health, making it a highly suitable site to gather more naturalistic accounts of individuals' experiences of burn-out (Berry et al., 2017; Makita et al., 2020). Research has been done on tweets about a number of mental health topics, such as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health (Zhang et al., 2022) and even the discourse on mental health itself on the platform (Makita et al., 2020). The platform is especially popular with the younger generations, with over 40 percent of its users being of the millennial generation, and gen-z making up roughly 24 percent. All public users of the social media platform Twitter.com who wrote tweets in English were included in the study population.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using the online tool Obi4Wan to gather tweets using their software. Tweets were collected using seven search queries each with specific terms to search for. The queries were based on the theoretical framework, the AW model, and the three dimensions of experienced burn-out (see Appendix 1). The data was cleaned of URLs, retweets, and spam by adding caveats to the search terms (see Appendix 1). The search terms were then tested and refined until each query yielded at least 10 tweets and met the selection criteria within a reasonable amount. The sample of tweets dated from 01.03.2021 to 01.03.2022. This timespan coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, but any tweets implying significant influence of the pandemic on their experienced burn-out (symptoms) were coded under 'alternative explanations'. The final sample held in total 200 tweets. The tweets were then downloaded as an excel file and uploaded as a word document without the usernames to NVivo to be coded for content analysis.

The content of the tweets can contain embedded media besides text, such as videos, photos, gifs, emojis, audio, links to other websites, or other tweets in a conversational thread

(Goodman & Light, 2016; Makita et al., 2020). The embedded media could potentially have significance in understanding the tone and meaning of the post, therefore when present the embedded media was included. Links to other websites were excluded because the meaning of the tweet could not be discerned without leaving the platform. Any sexually explicit or commercial content was also not included.

From the sample, only tweets that met the following criteria were selected: tweets that a) referenced burn-out or described one of the three dimensions of burn-out b) described in some form the users' experience of their burn-out, its symptoms or its effects c) were written in English d) were open to the public. Since burn-out diagnosis cannot be confirmed of Twitter users, this study aimed to understand the experiences of individuals with general burn-out symptoms.

Ethics

Data management

This study was granted permission from the faculty's ethical review board. All gathered data was managed in accordance with the data protocols of the faculty of social and behavioral science of University Utrecht.

Privacy

Twitter is a public platform on which its users are aware that what they post is open to the public unless they have their accounts set to the private setting, therefore the public tweets did not require informed consent to be collected. However Twitter is not a platform with a scientific purpose, but a social one and its users might not be (acutely) aware that their posts could be used for scientific purposes. To protect the users' privacy all biographical information that could be used to identify the user (their usernames, @handles, information

mentioning their private lives, were removed. Mentions of public figures or institutions were not excluded. Furthermore, users have the option on Twitter to make their account 'private', those users' tweets are only visible to those they have allowed to follow them. Therefore none of the protected users' tweets have been collected.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The tweets were coded in three phases. The first phase was the 'open coding' phase in which each selected text of a tweet was cataloged under a code. Each code served as a label to signify the content of the tweet. For example, 'Feelings of guilt for not meeting work demands'. Each tweet created a new code or was coded into an existing fitting one.

The next phase, the 'axial coding' phase, organized the codes into overarching categories (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). Through this phase a larger structure revealed underlying patterns within the users's experienced burn-out (symptoms). This phase occurred alongside the open coding phase; when new batches of tweets were cataloged they were coded into existing, fitting categories or created new ones. Previously coded tweets were reevaluated on their compatibility with their original category versus the newly made ones, creating an iterative process of constant comparison that ended once theoretical saturation occurred.

Finally, during the selective coding phase, in which the underlying themes of the categories were analyzed to confirm whether the expected relationships had significant support for them and if any meaningful relationships outside the expected relationships had become apparent (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). The created categories of codes were coded under another, all encompassing category, that captured the relationship between the remaining categories and formed the foundation for an integrated theory (see Table 3).

Table 3. Coding framework

Core category	Categories	Description of the sub-categories
Meritocracy	Optimization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Optimization</i>. The user feels as though they could or should be working more or better. 2. <i>Guilt</i>. The user feels guilt when they cannot meet their work' demands.
	Workload	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. <i>Work demands</i>. The user feels their ability to meet the demands of their work have been exceeded. 4. <i>Rest and Recovery</i>. The user feels a lack of rest and/or insufficient time to

		recover from their work.
	Fairness	<p>5. <i>Rewards</i>. The user feels that the efforts they have made for their work have not been appropriately recognized or rewarded.</p> <p>6. <i>Work culture</i>. The user feels that the culture of their work environment is toxic.</p>
	Alternative explanations	<p>7. <i>Other</i>. Explanations outside the aforementioned categories</p>

Results

Tweet features

A large portion of the tweets were not included, (49 percent) however most tweets described experiences surrounding burn-out that made them suitable for more than one category and sub-category and were therefore coded more than once.

Meritocracy surfaced as the main category of the three categories: optimization, workload, and fairness which each had two sub-categories. A fourth category was dedicated to alternative explanations (see table 3). Two themes were derived from the gathered tweets: meritocracy resulting in feeling the need to self-optimize and meritocracy resulting in feelings of unfairness.

Theme 1: Meritocracy resulting in feeling the need to self-optimize

Optimization

Within the workload category users expressed various attitudes and feelings about their productivity. Some users expressed feeling the need to continue working and having trouble stopping, even when they felt their internal resources depleting. These users' statements wrote about their drive to work as internally motivated but also partially external. Their statements revealed a lack of agency; the drive to keep working was not wholly within their control.

I didn't drink even decaf coffee today due to being triggered so early in the am. My body is beaten & exhausted. I wanted to nap before doing more work, but I feel like I have to keep driving through and it SUCKS.

Other users described their drive to work as completely internally motivated, because the individuals expressed that they felt the drive even when their responsibilities or job did not demand them to keep working.

in December i was starting to feel burnt out from work but didnt wanna slow down or take a break cus fuck it ill sleep when i die 🙄 lmao then boom out for two weeks w COVID worked one week then out for another week due to fam emergency

The posts within this category demonstrate that the users prioritized their productivity either willingly or unwillingly above their own physical and mental well-being. To achieve their (internal) work demands the users sacrificed the time in which they could rest and recover from work in order to be more productive. The users thus describe feeling the need to self-optimize for their work, which for both had an exacerbating effect on their burn-out (symptoms).

Guilt

Guilt over work or productivity was a prominent theme in the data. Multiple users described a disappointment with the quality of their produced work, expressing both that the joy for their work had started to wane due to pressure to perform and feelings of guilt when they felt the quality of their work would be a disappointment to their clients, customers, or followers. Users within this category were often creators, e.g., streamers, artists, content creators.

i'm taking two days off streaming. i'm burnt out. i don't feel excited to stream and i don't want to do that to you guys. i want to be able to make the best content possible. i'm sorry.

Other users wrote about guilt that they described as being externally forced upon by their employers or social network when they were not being productive.

I deliberately planned a 2 month gap between ending my current contract and starting my new job so that I could take an extended period off to recover from burnout. Why do I feel guilty telling people I m not going to be doing any academic work while I m not being paid??

Tweets within this category demonstrated a specific mechanism: when the users were not working they felt guilt over their lack of productivity. Regardless, that both tweets also mentioned that they were hindered from doing work by burn-out. This mechanism fits within the self-optimization mindset, since productivity takes priority over the individual's well-being. Further, when the productivity target is not being met the individual feels guilty, because their failure to be as productive as desired is seen as within their control. This guilt appears to have a distressing effect on the users, which can only worsen their burn-out (symptoms).

Theme 2: Meritocracy resulting in feelings of unfairness

An important trend amongst the tweets was found in which many users were frustrated with unfair treatment surrounding their work. Tweets within this category contain the observations of the users on what they believe causes or worsens burn-out (symptoms) personally or in general. The tweets were either critiques on the systemic lacking rewards or the toxicity of work culture at their place of employment.

Lack of rewards

Disappointing rewards were mentioned frequently, with users advocating for systemic change within the fields they work in or more broadly.

teachers have been saying for 3 years now how overworked & disrespected they feel AND have been offering plenty of thoughtful, reasonable solutions that no one cares to listen to spare me the “why are teachers leaving the profession in droves” thinkpieces at this time

The popularity of Reddit s Antiwork sub suggests how much people dread their jobs because they feel overworked & underappreciated. The community has grown from 100k to 1 million subscribers during the pandemic. Covid has surely exposed fault lines in the modern work culture.

The tone of these tweets reveal frustration over the, by them perceived as unfair, compensation for workers. This frustration fits the meritocratic values of reward and fairness. Meritocracy dictates that hard work pays off, yet these users state that many people do not get fair and appropriate compensation for their work and have become frustrated as a result. The discrepancy between effort and reward is, according to the ERI model, highly stressful which is further supported by the AW-model, which states that disproportionate rewards are one of the stressors of burn-out.

Toxic work culture

Tweets within this category refer to all posts that express frustration about the physical conditions of the users' job and/or the work demands or attitudes from the person, company, or institution that employs them. Various complaints were made by users about

feeling forced into feeling guilty by their employers when they had valid reasons not to (want to) work.

*the most fked up thing work has done to me is making me feel guilty when i end work on time
(whatever that is) but i see other ppl hustling till 9/10+*

Other users pointed out that they felt as if they or others were pressured into working continuously and/or that time to rest and recover from their work were discouraged.

*Btw making people feel like they can't rest and continuously work only bc they're dumb
wasted their time etc is not ok. Everyone deserves rest, do not push someone to have a
burnout and be unable to work entirely. They are doing good. Support them*

The tweets within this category express strong feelings of unfairness, the users highlighting elements of modern work culture that they do not find justified. The tweets describe topics that have come forth in Theme 1 as well: the users mentioning feeling guilty over a loss in productivity and the need to continuously work at the cost of the worker's well-being.

However, these users point these topics out as being caused by their work or modern work culture. The toxic elements of modern work culture apply to many different aspects that impact burn-out: lack of rest and too high work demands are both burn-out stressors of the AW-model's work demands area. The feelings of injustice surrounding toxic work culture fall into the fairness area of meritocratic values, because the users expressed feeling treated unfairly.

Alternative explanations

Some experiences shared about burn-out (symptoms) by users that did not fall into the former two themes were coded under ‘alternative explanations’. Two factors emerged that were significant and could play a role in how and why individuals experience burn-out (symptoms).

Other mental health disorders

Whenever users tweeted about burn-out (symptoms) alongside mentions of other mental disorders they were coded into this category.

As I carry on sorting this flat of mine at this late hour, I have memories of my therapist saying: remember you deserve rest. Me: I do. My ADHD brain: yeah when she's dead because we are in the zone & we hold on to that fiercely! It does feel good but got to watch for burnout.

Autistic people need to feel able to be themselves and drop the mask around neurotypical people. Burnout from masking too much for too long is deadly. This is vital

Users within this category mentioned other mental disorders and that those played a significant role in their experienced burn-out in a variety of ways. The users described the role of their other mental disorder as a cause, trigger or a catalyst for how they experienced burn-out (symptoms). Therefore it is unclear if meritocratic values also play a role in how these individuals experience burn-out (symptoms).

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned several times in the sample and whenever the tweets mentioned COVID-19 as a factor impacting how they experienced burn-out (symptoms) they were coded into this category.

After 10 days off I do not feel rested or recharged for next week. I feel worse. I'm already dreading having to go back into this healthcare COVID shit show and dealing with burned out customers that want nothing to do with me. 2022 will be a year of change.

Anyone else experiencing severe burnout at the moment? I m going to call it Pandemic Fatigue rather than burnout. If it weren t for COVID aanxiety I don t know if I would be feeling like this. Feel like the last 2 years have just been one long week without end.

Within the COVID-19 category the users posted about the pandemic as being the cause or a worsening factor for their burn-out (symptoms). Therefore the influence of meritocracy on their burn-out (symptoms) was impossible to ascertain.

Discussion

Principal findings

The aims of this study were to find out what role meritocratic values play in experienced burn-out (symptoms) in the modern workplace. A main finding of this study is that some individuals who experience burn-out (symptoms) feel a constant need to be productive and/or feel guilt when they feel that they are not being productive (enough).

Previous research on burn-out has revealed workload to be a significant possible stressor, however in the AW-model workload is defined by the demands of the individual's job. This study has found that the workload the individual demands of themselves, regardless of the demands set by their place of employment, is also a possible stressor. The individual's work demands of themselves can still lead to their demands depleting their capacity to meet them. Further, the need for productivity allows for little to no rest and recovery, since productivity takes priority, which supports the expected self-optimization mindset.

Another relevant finding was the discovery of strong feelings of unfairness amongst individuals with burn-out (symptoms). The expectation that meritocratic values would create feelings of dissonance amongst the users, because of a discrepancy between their efforts and rewards were found in the data.

Elements of toxic work culture such as employers making their employees feel the need to work continuously or that rest should be sacrificed for the sake of productivity are significant burn-out stressors in the workload area of the AW-model. In addition, the feeling of being treated unfairly could be a possible stressor too. Fairness is a known burn-out ear of stressors as well, but is too narrowly defined.

The definition includes only feelings of fairness about decisions at the individual's work and whether the individual feels treated fairly during the decision making process. From the data it becomes clear that treatment of the individual mattered also outside the decision making process, that the work culture as a whole impacted feelings of fairness as well.

Meritocratic values seem to be the foundation for what individuals deem as fair and appropriate expectations for rewards and treatment for their efforts. The frustration and outrage expressed at the unfairness by individuals at their place of work appeared to be the result of that expectation of justice not being met. These findings have led to the following theory:

The role of meritocratic values on burn-out is, according to the findings of this study, twofold: 1.) Meritocratic values create an ideal for self-optimization, in which an individual can optimize themselves to become more productive. When the individual fails to meet their own required level of productivity they sacrifice their own rest and recovery time to meet the demands of their (self-imposed) work demands. This mechanism is expected to lead to burn-out (symptoms) or worsen existing ones. 2.) Meritocratic values create a standard of what rewards are appropriate and just for the effort made by the individual based on their merit. When those rewards and the individual's treatment at work does not meet the individual's standard of fair and appropriateness, they appear to become distressed, which worsens the experienced burn-out (symptoms).

Meritocratic values thus appear to play a significant and exacerbating role in experienced burn-out (symptoms). This theory applies only to individuals who are not currently diagnosed with other mental disorders and who are experiencing burn-out (symptoms) either caused by or worsened by stressors outlined in the addendum of the AW-model's areas: workload, rewards, control and fairness (see Table 4). Finally, the extent to which the meritocratic values influence the individual's burn-out experience is still unclear. More research is needed to gauge how impactful the values are to the burn-out experience.

Table 4. Updated AW-model areas of burn-out stressors.

Area	Burn-out stressor	Addendum
Workload	Too high demands of the job causing the individual to deplete their capacity to meet them. In chronic	Too high demands of productivity of the individual from themselves, causing the individual to

	<p>conditions there are too little opportunities for rest and recovery.</p>	<p>deplete their capacity to meet them. In chronic conditions the individual allows themselves too little opportunities for rest and recovery.</p>
Control	<p>A lack of perceived capacity to influence decisions that affect their work, to have professional autonomy and to have access to resources that aid in meeting the job's demands.</p>	<p>The individual perceives themselves as an actor who has an unrealistic level of professional autonomy over their own productivity.</p>
Values	<p>A mismatch of ideals and motivations between the individual and their job.</p>	<p>N/A</p>
Community	<p>Relationships between the individual and other people on the job that lack support and trust, and unresolved conflict.</p>	<p>N/A</p>
Fairness	<p>The perception that decisions at the individual's</p>	<p>The perception that treatment of employees at</p>

	work are not fair or equitable. The quality of procedures and their own treatment during decision-making procedures are used by the individual to measure fairness at their work.	the individual's work are not fair or equitable. The quality of their own treatment during decision-making procedures and day to day practices, alongside how equitable their rewards are, are used by the individual to measure fairness at their work.
Reward	Perceived insufficient recognition or rewards for the individual's work. Rewards can be financial, institutional or social.	

Findings in context of other research and theory

Previous research has found that burn-out (symptoms) are influenced by stressors in six different areas. This study has found stressors connected to burn-out in some of the same areas, but these stressors fall outside of the parameters for the areas as defined by the AW-model. The findings of this study show cause for reconsideration regarding the parameters of the AW-model's reward, fairness, control and workload areas (see Table 4).

The addendum to the definitions allows for more types of work and important contextual factors to be included in the analysis of burn-out. Burn-out is a complicated

disorder, by including more types of work a more realistic view of the actual workload of an individual can be analyzed. A more accurate picture of individuals' feeling of fairness surrounding their work will become clear by including not only the procedural aspects to measure feelings of fairness, but day to day interactions and the feelings about larger systemic issues as well. Individuals do not work only for their employer, but the organization that employs them and possibly the institution that surrounds it also. Broadening the parameters of the burn-out area's allow for contextual information that could prove insightful in understanding burn-out and how it has changed and is changing through the ages.

Strengths & Limitations

There were strengths and limitations to this study which should be considered for future research. First, using the grounded theory method was a significant strength in the study design, because it allowed for open exploration of the data without seeking confirmation of the expected relationships. Important mechanisms were discovered in how individuals experience burn-out, such as that some individuals feel an internal need to continue working whereas others feel that need forced upon them by their employer(s). The use of Twitter data was another strength for the study, because the tweets describing experienced burn-out (symptoms) were made by the individuals experiencing them themselves. It also allowed for observations from the individuals on what they believed cause burn-out (symptoms) with themselves or others. The tweets of the unfairness theme especially showed how the users often believed the cause behind burn-out (symptoms) to be systemic.

Further, the Obi4Wan platform performed well and made gathering tweets relatively painless. However, the sample still contained a large amount of tweets that were unusable even with the caveats written into the search terms. It is not in the nature of tweets to give

information in a manner that is most suitable for research purposes, since the users posts are not made with the intent to answer specific research questions as with a survey or interview. The data was still valuable because it gave an intimate account of experiencing burn-out, but it made the percentage of usable tweets quite low. Although it is unavoidable to have a sample in which there is no data that does not suit the study, the percentage was lower than expected and therefore this exact study design would not be recommended for further similar research for the sake of efficiency. A pilot of this study's design could have warned of this design flaw before starting data collection, however the data that was gathered was still relevant enough that, even with the low percentage of useful tweets, this study's design is not deemed unsuccessful.

Implications and recommendations based on findings

This study's findings (and subsequent created theory) suggest that there could be a specific underlying mechanism of factors that contribute to burn-out amongst individuals working in the modern work environments. If this theory is correct then that could have serious implications for work environments and policies that have an effect on work culture.

Larger policies that impact rewards could prove fruitful since this study has found the lacking rewards to be a burn-out stressors, as well as feeling of unfairness about disproportionate rewards. Minimum wages being raised would be an example of positive change in this area.

Interventions designed to prevent or treat burn-out should pay attention to the treatment of employees by employers. To curb the internalization of a need to keep working, workplaces should enforce healthy work boundaries in shifts and keep overtime to minimum, especially when it is unpaid.

The findings of this study suggest that a mindset of self-optimization exists, however more research is needed to validate. Within this study a causal relationship between the mindset and meritocratic values could not be determined, therefore more research of that relationship is needed as well. In-depth interviews would be a good follow-up to this study, to determine whether the self-optimization mindset stems from meritocratic values.

Concluding statements

Parson (1971) described individuals of modern societies to be expected to be ‘entrepreneurial trailblazers’, but in the modern workplace that sentiment might have been taken too far. This study aimed to understand why burn-out has become such a pervasive problem in our society, especially amongst the younger generations, by attempting to understand what role meritocratic values play in experienced burn-out (symptoms) in the modern workplace. Meritocracy has possibly created a mindset in which individuals feel they have to continue self-optimizing to reap rewards that they are statistically less likely to get than their parents and grandparents. As a result the self-optimizing and lacking rewards have an aggravating effect on individuals experiencing burn-out (symptoms).

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Appendix 1. Search queries Obi4Wan.

("burnout" OR "burn-out" OR "burnt out" OR "burn out" OR "burnt out" OR "burned out" OR "burning the candle at both ends" OR "working myself to the bone") AND (feel) NOT ("https" OR "http" OR "game" OR "games" OR "genshin" OR "www." OR RT) AND lang:EN AND posttype:STATUS

("exhausted" OR "dog tired" OR "tired to the bone" OR "bone-weary" OR "bone weary" OR "on my last legs" OR "worn out" OR "drained" OR "depleted" OR "no time to rest" OR "no rest") AND (feel) AND (work) NOT ("https" OR "http" OR "game" OR "games" OR "www." OR RT OR "you" OR "yall" OR "y'all") AND lang:EN AND posttype:STATUS

("guilt" OR "guilty" OR "cynical" OR "cynicism" OR "meaningless" OR "disillusioned" OR "lost passion" OR "demotivated" OR "no motivation" OR "discouraged" OR "obligated") AND (feel) AND (work) NOT ("https" OR "http" OR "game" OR "games" OR "genshin" OR "www." OR RT) AND lang:EN AND posttype:STATUS

("hustle culture" OR "gig economy" OR "grind culture" OR "work culture" OR "antiwork" OR "anti work" OR "working tirelessly" OR "working non-stop" OR "working non stop" OR "work non stop" OR "work non-stop" OR "always working" OR "always available" OR "always grinding" OR "always grindin") AND (feel) NOT ("https" OR "http" OR "www." OR RT OR "anime" OR "genshin") AND lang:EN AND posttype:STATUS

("underappreciated" OR "under-appreciated" OR "not appreciated" OR "lack of appreciation" OR "unappreciated" OR "putting in effort" OR "efforts" OR "worthless" OR "not valued" OR "isn't valued" OR "worthwhile" OR "worth it") AND (feel) AND (work) NOT ("https" OR "http" OR "www." OR RT OR "anime" OR "genshin" OR "streamers" OR "stream" OR "thread" OR "events") AND lang:EN AND posttype:STATUS

("I strive" OR "am striving" OR "I'm striving" OR "i'm striving" OR "I'm striving"
OR "I'm strivin" OR "my potential" OR "best I can" "best I can be" OR "best version of" OR
"best version of myself" OR "improve myself" OR "work on myself") AND (feel) NOT
("https" OR "http" OR "game" OR "games" OR "www." OR RT) AND lang:EN AND
posttype:STATUS

("workload" OR "work load" OR "study load" OR "studyload" OR "study-load " OR
"uni work" OR "uni work load" OR "uni study load" OR "uni work" OR "work-load " OR
"overworked") AND (feel) NOT ("https" OR "http" OR "game" OR "games" OR "genshin"
OR "www." OR RT) AND lang:EN AND posttype:STATUS