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# Exploring the Causes of Job Burnout Among Academic Leaders at Saudi Higher Educational Institutions

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***Abstract***

*This qualitative study examines the internal and external factors that influence job burnout among higher-education academics within the peculiar sociocultural and institutional environment of Saudi Arabia. Although "burnout" is a well-established subject of enquiry, its contributing factors remain underexplored in the Saudi context. Participants were recruited from five Saudi state universities using purposive snowball sampling; a diverse sample allowed for the inclusion of academics with different expertise and experiences. On-site or telephonic semi-structured interviews (lasting between 2 and 2.5 hours to minimize participant fatigue) further enriched data collection. These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes. Based on the job demands–resources theory, Maslach's three-dimensional model (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment), and data analyses, the findings provided new knowledge about how the interaction of culture, institution, and personal factors contributes to burnout. The study recommends culturally sensitive interventions to reduce burnout and improve well-being among academics. By framing these results in the context of Saudi Arabia's fast-changing higher-education sector, these findings add to the corpus of literature on burnout.*

***Keywords:*** *Academia, Burnout, Higher Education, Jobs Demands–Resource Theory, Maslach.*

## Introduction

Social psychologist and a pioneer in the study of job burnout, Christina Maslach, in her seminal work *Burnout: The Cost of Caring* (1982), describes job burnout as a psychological syndrome that presents as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment; it has been observed among workers across occupational industries. Burnout has its roots in the complex interaction between psychosocial–environmental factors and individual characteristics, and it has become a major concern within academia, especially among higher-education leaders (Ge, Yu, et al., 2022). Leaders in academia have distinctive responsibilities, including faculty and student management, strategic decision-making, and conflict mediation, that heighten the emotional and cognitive burden of their job (Graizi et al., 2021).

The external pressures and associated burdens of academic work (e.g., heavy workloads, long hours, pursuit of funding opportunities, and work-life balance struggles) further increase burnout risk among academics (Flynn & Ironside, 2018). Coupled with these general issues are specific sociocultural and institutional features of Saudi Arabia that further elevate stress and job burnout, such as highly hierarchical organizations, the exponential growth of higher education, and cultural imprinting regarding power and leadership.

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Despite the rich and exhaustive corpus of literature on the phenomenon of burnout, few studies have explored this issue in Saudi Arabia, especially in academia and in the specific sociocultural and institutional context of the country. Burnout has disastrous consequences on academic institutions, people, and the quality of education in the Kingdom's higher-education system. The current study investigates the lived experiences of academics in Saudi higher-education institutions to reveal how the internal and external conditions, as determinants, influence their experiences of burnout. Identifying these determinants should help formulate appropriate interventions to alleviate burnout and support the well-being of academics.

This qualitative investigation addresses how Saudi academia's job burnout is conceptualized by senior academics (i.e., deans, vice deans, and department heads). Building on the job demands–resources (JD–R) framework and Maslach's three-dimensional model, I investigate the interplay of illness and societal-level factors contributing to burnout. The analysis casts light on various elements in the intertwined setting in which these academics find themselves through studying their lived experience. Accordingly, a picture forms of the complex relationships between these elements, which should help in creating individualized and culturally attuned interventions against burnout. Hence, I pose the following questions:

RQ1. How do academics in Saudi higher educational institutions define and experience job burnout within their specific sociocultural and institutional context?

RQ2. What are the primary internal and external factors that influence the experience of burnout among academics in Saudi Arabia?

RQ3. How do these internal and external factors interact to shape the experience of burnout among academics in Saudi Arabia?

## Literature Review

Job burnout has been observed in all occupational fields, and Maslach (1982) identifies three major dimensions that define it: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism), and lack of personal accomplishment. It occurs from long exposure to repeated workplace stressors (Maslach et al., 2001), we have evidence of its effects on individuals across time periods, cultures, and languages (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Generally, burnout results from an interaction of both individual and organizational determinants or factors (Ge, Zhang, et al., 2022). Though these factors are universal, the cultural and institutional setting in which an individual works can intensify or mediate the effect of burnout. This is the case especially for academics, especially those in higher-education institutions, which is characterized by unique and complicated challenges.

### Core Factors of Academic Burnout

Burnout has both internal and external factors. The internal factors pertain to a person's personality traits as well as their ability or capacity to manage stress and psychological assets, and are often categorized as follows: low job engagement, indicative of a narrative of insufficient excitement and devotion to work (Ge, Zhang, et al., 2022); low self-efficacy or lack of belief in ability to succeed (Ge, Yu, et al., 2022); low core self-evaluation (i.e., low self-esteem, low confidence); and personality, in that certain personality types may be more prone to burnout, particularly individuals with high neuroticism and perfectionism (Ge, Zhang, et al., 2022).

The external factors refer to work environment and organizational culture and job demands, and broadly include the following: workload, such as excessive teaching, administrative, and

research workload leading to fatigue (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998); lack of control and autonomy, where rigid bureaucratic structures attenuate independence, academic freedom, and discretionary decision-making power, making individuals feel helpless and frustrated (Maslach et al., 2001); lack of a reward systems, leading to insufficient recognition, limited opportunities for career progression, and perceptions iniquitous reward systems that reduce motivation (Lee & Ashforth, 1996); poor work–life balance from undue pressures to excel, in both professional and personal domains (Demir et al., 2019); toxic organizational culture, leading to poor interpersonal communication and support (Glisson & Hegde, 2014); ineffective leadership style that manifests as a lack of mentors and insufficient supervisor support, leading to feelings of isolation (Sorsa et al., 2021); an imbalance between the job demands and resource; long working hours that aggravate work–life balance (Ge, Yu, et al., 2022); and finally, insufficient structural resources, such as an understaffed institution or department and lack of equipment

**Burnout among Saudi Academics**

Burnout among academics in the Kingdom may be shaped by a complex web of cultural expectations, societal norms, and institutional policies that interweave within the higher-education landscape. First, the hierarchical culture of Saudi Arabia, with its emphasis on respecting authority (Ali, 2010), can restrict independence and heighten the external pressure to adhere to social norms (Maslach et al., 2001). Traditional gender roles and family expectations (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000), especially for women, also compromise work–life balance (Mafishiraz, 2023a). Although collectivist culture can offer support, it can also create pressure to conform and avoid conflict (Hofstede, 2001), which prevents open communication.

Second, as highlighted in by the Ministry of Education (2023), the expansion of higher education in the Kingdom has further exacerbated the pressure on academics. Autonomy is also limited in the introduction of changes; decision-making is centralized, and bureaucratic structures are manifest (Altbach & Reisberg, 2007). The limited resources of some universities (Al-Khasawneh, 2012) serve as an additional burden on academics.

I investigate how these cultural, social, and institutional elements influence the operational and psychological interaction of job demands and resources to construct the burnout experience among Saudi academics. By exploring the distinct context in which these academics operate, and their specific stressors and mitigators, I seek to propose useful interventions and support mechanisms.

**Need for Intervention**

Burnout is both widespread and harmful, and its manifestation makes clear the imperative for pre-emptive strategies and early recognition in the workplace (Lizano, 2015). Understanding that some groups are especially susceptible to burnout, we must tailor our efforts accordingly. For instance, women increasingly and simultaneously juggle multiple, interconnected domestic and professional roles, which greatly predisposes them to burnout (Mafishiraz, 2023b). Therefore, they require adequate resource to navigate the burgeoning demands of their organizational roles.

Moreover, employees with limited autonomy or control in their demanding roles or in higher stress occupations may be at an increased risk of burnout (Restrepo et al., 2015). Companies need to identify such high-risk roles in advance and establish mechanisms to curb burnout specific to these roles/job structures and occupational categories.

Finally, burnout is costly for both individuals and organizations. For organizations, high absenteeism, decreased productivity, and high turnover (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993) erode capital. Burnout also reduces job performance and satisfaction, and increases turnover intentions (Brewer & Clippard, 2002; Corbeanu et al., 2023). In terms of physical health, it has been implicated as a cause of cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal pain, and gastrointestinal disorders (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). On the psychological front, it can lead to insomnia, depression, and anxiety, as well as make people more susceptible to the use of psychotropic medications (Ahola et al., 2006; Shirom & Melamed, 2005).

Some promising interventions against burnout have emerged. Mindfulness practices, for instance, have been shown to be effective in decreasing burnout for medical professionals and educationalists (Luken & Sammons, 2016). These interventions might be beneficial for other groups of occupations with different stressors. Investing in preventive measures and ensuring access to effective interventions can help organizations promote a culture of well-being and prevent burnout.

## Theory

This study builds on two well-known theoretical frameworks to develop a holistic understanding of job burnout among Saudi academics: the JD–R model and Maslach's three-dimensional model of burnout.

### Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model

The Job Demands-Resources (JD–R) model was developed by Demerouti et al. (2001) to explain burnout in terms of job demands (e.g., high workload and time pressure) leading to strain. However, job residues resources (e.g., social support, autonomy, and feedback) can mitigate the adverse impacts of these demands and enhance well-being and engagement. As I focus on the role of specific demands and resources inherent to higher-education institutions, this theoretical framework is particularly relevant to understanding job burnout in Saudi institutions. For instance, academics have heavy workload and low autonomy (Flynn & Ironside, 2018), which we can investigate as determinants of burnout within the JD–R model. These factors can simultaneously reveal the way supportive leadership and access to resources buffer against burnout. To summarize, I employ the JD–R model to (a) examine the interaction between job demand and resources in the Saudi academic context; (b) examine the potential moderating effects of available resources, or lack thereof, on the relationship between job demands and burnout as an academics; and (c) identify areas of potential intervention through focus on goods or services the demand of which needs to be reduced or the resources that need to be enhanced.

### Maslach's Three-Dimensional Model of Burnout

Maslach's model (Maslach et al., 1996) conceptualizes burnout as a syndrome consisting of three interrelated dimensions: (a) emotional exhaustion, that is, an overwhelming sense of being overextended and drained emotionally; (b) cynicism (depersonalization), that is, an indifferent, negative attitude toward ones work and others engaged in such work; and (c) decreased personal accomplishment, that is, a drop in positive feelings or increase in negative feelings toward one's job. The model helps us explore the different dimensions of burnout as well as the diverse ways in which and the degree to which these burnout symptoms may manifest among academics in the sociocultural and institutional context of Saudi universities.

## Methods

### Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher has extensive experience in the Saudi higher-education milieu. As a faculty member and dean of the Deanship of Development and Quality, I know how my insider status affects data interpretation. However, this background promotes easier access to participants, increased rapport, and better knowledge about the cultural dynamics at play, despite the ethical implications, especially power differentials and biases in interpreting data (Mercer, 2007; Unluer, 2012a). To address the latter concerns, the researcher was open and transparent about her positionality and biases, and sought to build trust and open dialogue with the participants. The researcher practiced ongoing reflexivity as the research process unfolded to challenge her biases (Unluer, 2012b) and preconceived notions of the data that was continually generated. Such continued reflexivity was essential to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

### Ethical Considerations

This study follows a qualitative research methodology in fulfillment of ethical considerations. First, participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. To preserve participants' identities, all identifying information was removed prior to analysis and reporting. Second, participants were provided with written informed consent after they received a detailed description of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits, and were informed that they could exit the study at any time without penalty.

### Research Design and Data Collection

I implemented a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to obtain rich, thick data related to participants' experiences with job burnout (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Roulston, 2010). This approach helps elicit themes and insights pre-defined through a literature review and open questions in conversations.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic, the native language of the researcher and participants, which allowed for ease of expression of perspectives and views. Transcriptions were translated from Arabic to English, and the places of the interview were set in private locations (at university or by phone) for the sake of the participants' comfort. The interviews lasted about 2 to 2.5 hours, which facilitated extensive discussion. Save few exceptions, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. A professional transcription service was used to transcribe these recordings verbatim to accurately represent the data. Data collection occurred over a five month period from May 2023 to September 2023, from recruitment to interviews of participants.

### Sampling Strategy and Data Analysis

A purposive snowball sampling method was used to recruit 25 participants, including male and female senior academics: deans, vice deans, and department heads from five state universities in Saudi Arabia. This approach was selected for its ability to access participants with pertinent experience and understanding of the phenomenon in question, especially in contexts where trust has to be formed and access is difficult (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Guest et al., 2020; Wellington, 2015).

Data saturation was achieved with a sample size of 25 participants, deemed suitable for a qualitative study. Saturation in qualitative research occurs when subsequent data collection no

longer offers new themes or insights (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018). In this study, saturation occurred after interviewing 25 participants, as the analysis of later interviews did not yield any significantly new themes regarding the causes of job burnout among academics of higher-education institutions.

The participants were drawn from various departments and levels of seniority within the sampled universities to ensure a diverse sample. Using a snowball sampling technique, initial participants were prompted to recommend other peers willing to share their experiences; this allowed me to capture a wider range of experiences. For qualitative research, this snowball technique offers a strengths-based method of exploring a phenomenon within a population, as it relies on existing participants; social networks to help identify other relevant individuals (Parker et al., 2019).

Interviews transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis. Data were analyzed according to Braun and Clarke's (2013) framework for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a commonly employed method for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within data in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It involves a six-phase process, which includes familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The inductive nature of the approach led to insights emerging from the data that were related to the research questions, thus adding greater rigor and validation to the findings.

This involved manual coding, data category development, and pattern recognition of the data to produce major themes and interpretations. Table 1 presents the demographics of participants.

## Results

All 25 participants in the study were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities: University (U) + University letter (A/B/C/D/E) + Leader type (L) + Leader position (LD, LVD, LHOD) for dean, vice dean, and head of department, respectively) + Participant number (1/2/3) + Interview date. For example, "UALD3, 05/2023" indicates the participant is a dean (LD) at University A (UA), and is the third participant interviewed in May 2023. This process ensures uniformity across the study and allows us to identify the participant without compromising their anonymity. Table 2 presents the process of pseudonymizing the participants.

The findings reveal a complex mix of causes of burnout, which can be summarized in three points. First, Saudi academics have a multidimensional understanding of burnout that includes emotional, physical, and social factors, each influenced by both culture and religion. Second, the study implicated both internal factors (e.g., perfectionism, work–life balance issues, absent agency, and imposter syndrome) and external factors (e.g., busy schedules, institutional barriers, and sociocultural pressures). Third, the interaction between different factors creates a cycle of burnout that reinforces itself through cultural and gendered influences. I address each research question below; accordingly, Tables 3 and 4 describe job burnout within the context of Saudi and the external/internal factors of burnout among the participants, respectively. Table 5 describes the interplay of the external and internal factors of burnout.

RQ1. How do academics in Saudi higher educational institutions define and experience job burnout within their specific sociocultural and institutional context?

I investigated how the sampled academics conceptualize and experience job burnout within their local culturally and institutionally specific locale (Table 3).

First, participants had a nuanced perspective of burnout, identifying it as broader than emotional

exhaustion (feeling drained and depleted), cynicism (a negative detached attitude), and reduced personal accomplishment (a feeling of ineffectiveness and incompetence). They also identified burnout with loss of meaning and passion in their work. Cultural and religious factors shaped their perceptions, with some seeing burnout as a weakness or lack of faith.

Second, participants described burnout as manifested by physical (fatigue, sleep disturbances, headaches) as well as emotional (frustration, anxiety, detachment) symptoms and social withdrawal. Similar cultural scripts promoting emotional silence were apparent, with many feeling the need to put on a brave face and strong front, which may result in somatization (psychological distress converting to physical symptoms).

Third, participants described a culture in which admitting to burnout was taboo, in part because of cultural expectations around strength and perfectionism, and in part because of fears of damage to their career. There were also gendered expectations, whereby women felt the additional pressure of having to validate themselves but also juggle greater work–life demands.

RQ2. What are the primary internal and external factors that influence the experience of burnout among academics in Saudi Arabia?

I examined the primary internal and external factors associated with burnout among participants. Evident is the conflict of personal characteristics such as perfectionism and unhealthy work–life balance, and how it interacts with the constraints of the institution and the broader sociocultural background. To reflect the subtler complexities of these contributing factors, Table 4 captures the experiences of participants in detail.

RQ3. How do these internal and external factors interact to shape the experience of burnout among academics in Saudi Arabia?

In Table 5, I tabulate the interactions between internal and external factors of burnout among participants. The interviews illustrate that the individual-rationalization approaches as well as their oppositional-formalist alternatives fail to account for how combining unique individual predispositions and psychological needs with the instrumental bureaucratic challenges and forces of sociocultural constraints produces a conflated, multifaceted, and stratified experience of burnout. The information presented in Table 5 grants profound insights into the distinct challenges confronting academics within Saudi Arabia.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study adds to the existing literature on the complex interplay of burnout among Saudi academics. It offers salient insights into the external and internal determinants of burnout and their interplay within a unique cultural demographic, thus helping guide tailored interventions for academics' well-being.

### Manifestation and Experience of Job Burnout

In this study, I employed a phenomenological approach to explore job burnout as defined and experienced by academics in Saudi Arabia according to their specific sociocultural and institutional context. While the identifying features of burnout, namely, emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished personal accomplishment, were consistent with validated definitions (Maslach et al., 2001), culturally and faith-specific influences also refine the conceptualization of burnout.

*Sabr* [patience], for example, has a multiplicity of meanings, which may influence how

academics perceive and respond to burnout, even to the extent of making help-seeking behavior undesirable. Thus, cultural norms that prioritize strength and resilience buttress the muzzling of emotions and reluctance to talk about, or even admit, the struggles of burnout. Matsumoto, Yoo, and Fontaine (2008) discuss this tendency of suppressing emotional expression in collectivistic cultures. This finding also conforms to Henderson et al.'s (2013) study on mental health stigma in high-level professions.

In Saudi Arabia, women are segregated from men, including in academia, whether students or staff. Although such segregation may have deleterious effects for women accustomed to working in non-segregated societies, the study still finds that female academics in Saudi Arabia are challenged with even higher expectations than their male counterparts, while also juggling domestic responsibilities; this makes them more prone to burnout. Eagly and Carli (2007) also confirm similar findings on the varied stressors affecting women in leadership positions.

**Discussion on the Primary Internal and External Factors of Burnout**

The findings of this study highlight complex interactions between individual attributes, institution-related issues, and sociocultural expectations that foster burnout. The internal factors—perfectionism, work–life unbalance, perceived lack of control, and imposter syndrome—align with established predictors of burnout in other fields. Moreover, aspects of Saudi culture may exacerbate these internal factors. In cultures where appearances and honor are paramount, perfectionism may be common; thus, Saudi academics may have a stronger drive against being perceived as failing or weak. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) similarly find that the stigma against mental health problems affects help-seeking behavior in Arabian societies.

Another finding is that women in leadership roles felt pressured to exhibit strength and competence as part of a gendered expectation, even if they felt overwhelmed and fatigued, which is in line with Matsumoto, Yoo, and Nakagawa's (2008) work on emotional regulation in collectivist cultures, where people may choose to repress their emotions to maintain social harmony and prevent conflict.

The external factors—excessive workloads, bureaucracy, and insufficient resources—are challenges academics face around the world. Yet it is particularly pertinent in the Saudi context, where the rapid pace of reforms in the education sector, low institutional autonomy associated with their hierarchical nature, and traditional norms of family and social obligations may compound the challenges. As part of a dynamic human capital development agenda, the internationalization of Saudi higher education is likely to exacerbate stress among academics, who will be required to multi-task, face heightened performance demands, and work within a growing bureaucratic ethos, demands despite belonging to resource-poor institutions. The JD–R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) also predicts burnout as a natural conclusion of high job demands and low resources.

**Discussion on the Interplay of Factors of Burnout**

The findings expose a "perfect storm" for burnout among Saudi academics, owing to the interplay of individual, institutional, and sociocultural vulnerabilities. Internal characteristics such as perfectionism, need for control, and work–life imbalance make academics vulnerable to the harmful interactions of external stressors on their well-being. In Saudi Arabia, where social pressure to succeed and persevere is high, these internal deficits may be even more exacerbated, in line with Zuckerman's (1998) vulnerability–stress model of burnout. A culturally specific understand of an individual's predisposition to burnout is necessary.

External factors—from heavy workload and bureaucratic obstacles to insufficient resources—can induce and intensify internal vulnerabilities as well. In Saudi Arabia, rapid educational change, hierarchical organizational structures, and cultural emphasis on family and social obligations compound these challenges. Considering the JD–R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), it is important that institutions match resources to demands and implement strategies that eliminate or alleviate the conditions of burnout.

Finally, as discussed in section 6.2, Saudi women must navigate both modern professional and traditional domestic obligations, while also battling a gender bias. More research is necessary to understand this phenomenon and propose strategies in the context of Saudi Arabia.

**Limitations**

This study has some limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Saudi academics. Future studies could consider a larger and more diverse sample.

Second, despite presenting the rich experiences of the participants, the study does not offer empirical evidence on the extent or magnitude of academic burnout. Quantitative methods could supplement these qualitative findings for a more complete picture of this phenomenon.

Third, the study focused on academics holding higher positions, such as deanship. Future studies could examine the experiences of a broader range of academics, such as department chairs or program coordinators as well as other lower levels of management.

Finally, the findings may not be easily transferrable to other cultural or institutional contexts. Future studies could examine burnout in other countries, especially in the Arab region, to investigate similarities and differences across cultures.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, institutions are recommended to prioritize work–life balance policies, such as flexible work arrangements, generous leave policies, and a culture that values personal well-being. They must allocate sufficient resources, including funding, staffing, and technology, to ease workload pressures and empower academics to effectively fulfill their responsibilities. An open communication culture should be established to develop a supportive and inclusive environment for academics where they are free to talk about their challenges and request help without being judged or facing adverse outcomes. A key strategy is to raise awareness among academics about mental health issues, challenge associated stigmas, and promote help-seeking behaviors. Institutions could also offer leadership development programs that equip academics with the skills and strategies to manage stress, navigate challenges, and build resilience in a changing environment. They must enable shared governance and participatory decision-making models that can help academics feel a greater sense of agency and control. A key strategy is to embed policies and practices that serve the cause of gender equity and eliminate gendered expectations and biases that put women academics at greater risk of burnout. Finally, institutions must research the causes of burnout among academics in Saudi Arabia, especially in the context of the country's cultural and religious framework and the specific role of gender; they should also empirically evaluate, verify, and validate the success of interventions. This way, higher-education institutions can reduce stress, increase resource availability, and promote a positive social climate (Allen & Martin, 2017), while also encouraging open communication about mental health and addressing stigma (Altbach & Reisberg, 2007).

The implications therefore will be a progressive ripple result, molding academics to guide the higher-education sector to prosperity in Saudi Arabia. This study is a first step in examining academic burnout as a complex phenomenon; future studies should focus on providing a deeper understanding of the factors related to this phenomenon and exploring culturally appropriate interventions that could help enhance the well-being of academics.

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**Tables**

| ***No.*** | ***University*** | ***Designation*** | ***Gender*** | ***Age range*** | ***Academic rank*** | ***Years of experience*** | ***Department / field*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | A University | Dean | M | 30–40 | Associate Professor | 10+ | Engineering |
| **2** | | Dean | F | 41–50 | Associate Professor | 20+ | Education |
| **3** | | Vice Dean | M | 30–40 | Associate Professor | 10+ | Medicine |
| **4** | | Vice Dean | F | 30–40 | Assistant Professor | 10+ | Science |
| **5** | | Head of Department | M | 41–50 | Associate Professor | 20+ | Business |
| **6** | B University | Dean | F | 30–40 | Professor | 10+ | Humanities |
| **7** | | Dean | M | 41–50 | Associate Professor | 20+ | Social Sciences |
| **8** | | Vice Dean | F | 30–40 | Professor | 10+ | Law |
| **9** | | Vice Dean | M | 41–50 | Assistant Professor | 20+ | Arts |
| **10** | | Head of Department | F | 51–60 | Professor | 20+ | Computer Science |
| **11** | C University | Dean | F | 30–40 | Professor | 10+ | Education |
| **12** | | Dean | M | 51–60 | Professor | 20+ | Business |
| **13** | | Vice Dean | F | 51–60 | Professor | 20+ | Medicine |
| **14** | | Vice Dean | M | 41–50 | Assistant Professor | 20+ | Computer Science |
| **15** | | Head of Department | F | 30–40 | Associate Professor | 10+ | Education |
| **16** | D University | Dean | M | 30–40 | Assistant Professor | 10+ | Education |

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| **17** | | Dean | M | 41–50 | Professor | 20+ | Business |
| **18** | | Vice Dean | M | 51–60 | Professor | 20+ | Law |
| **19** | | Vice Dean | F | 30–40 | Assistant Professor | 10+ | Humanities |
| **20** | | Head of Department | F | 41–50 | Professor | 15+ | Science |
| **21** | E University | Dean | M | 30–40 | Assistant Professor | 10+ | Education |
| **22** | | Dean | F | 41–50 | Associate Professor | 15+ | Medicine |
| **23** | | Vice Dean | M | 41–50 | Professor | 15+ | Computer Science |
| **24** | | Vice Dean | M | 30–40 | Associate Professor | 10+ | Business |
| **25** | | Head of Department | F | 30–40 | Assistant Professor | 10+ | Law |

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| ***Element*** | ***Code*** | ***Example*** | ***Explanation*** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **University** | U | UA | "U" represents university, followed by the letter assigned to each university (A, B, C, D, or E) |
| **Participant type** | L | L | "L" designates the academic |
| **Position** | LD: dean<br>LVD: vice dean<br>LHOD: department head | LD | Abbreviation for the academic's position |
| **No. of participants** | 1, 2, 3... | 3 | Sequential number assigned to each participant within their university and role |
| **Interview date** | | May 11, 2023 | Date of the interview |

Table 2. Pseudonym Structure

| **Factor** | **Subtheme (n)** | **Illustrative quotes** |
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| **Definition of burnout** | | Burnout is like being on a treadmill, temporal motion, going through the motions, tired, cynical, feeling like nothing I do really matters.<br>**UALD1, pers. comm., May 11, 2023** |
| | Loss of meaning (12) | I'd get so thrilled with my research. Now I do it and I feel it's just another box to tick off. I've lost that spark.<br>**BULD6, pers. comm., June 5, 2023** |
| | Cultural and religious influences (15) | Burnout? We could call that a failure of *sabr* [patience] here. They want us to keep quiet about it.<br>**DULVD18, pers. comm., Aug. 22, 2023**<br><br>It's a test from Allah. When we are tired, we have to have faith and keep on walking.<br>**EULHOD25, pers. comm., September 30, 2023** |
| **Burnout experiences** | Signs and symptoms (23): Physical and emotional | I'm so tired, even though I slept all night… My head hurts all the time, my body is tense.<br>**AULVD3, pers. comm., May 11, 2023** |
| | Emotional suppression (18) | I'm not allowed to show them how overwhelmed I get. I have to show strength and confidence even when I'm falling apart inside.<br>**BULHOD5, pers. comm., June 5, 2023** |
| | Somatization (8) | I had been having terrible stomach issues for months. The doctor could find nothing physically wrong. It came to me: it was that all the work stress.<br>**CULVD14, pers. comm., July 18, 2023** |
| | Social withdrawal (11) | I just want to be alone. As far as maintaining the facade of socializing, I am absolutely out of steam. I feel alone on this island.<br>**CULVD14, pers. comm., July 18, 2023** |
| **Cultural and social context** | Stigma and refusal to identify (17) | As a leader I need to be strong, yes. In our family, demonstrating weakness, asking for help, acknowledging you are in a bad place, is just not done. I would lose the confidence of the people.<br>**DULD16, pers. comm., July 15, 2023**<br><br>I know that if I say I'm burnt out, people are going to think I can't handle my role.<br>**UPTED11, pers. comm., July 17, 2023**<br><br>It could hurt my career. |

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| | | **EULVD23, pers. comm., September 30, 2023** |
| | Gendered expectations (9) | I feel like, as a female leader, I have to continue to earn my stripes. I've got to work that much harder for me to be taken seriously.<br>**AULD2, pers. comm., May 11, 202** |

Table 3. Sociocultural and Institutional Context of Job Burnout among Saudi Academics

| ***INTERNAL FACTORS*** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***Theme*** | *Subtheme (n)* | *Illustrative quotes* | *Analysis: What is Causing Burnout?* |
| **Personal predispositions** | Perfectionism (15) | I am under scrutiny for everything I do, and I must be perfect or be declared incompetent.<br>**UALD2, pers. comm., May 11, 2023** | This response summarizes the pressure of perfection and fear of making mistakes. (Graizi et al., 2021). especially discuss perfectionism as setting of high, unrealistic standards and fear of failure.<br><br>In Saudi Arabia, social appearances, especially the appearance of being perfect, are materially valued, with even fatal consequences. This makes academics vulnerable to chronic stress |
| | Workaholism (18) | I'm on call 24/7, I'm on call at night, I'm on call on the weekends. I could never quite turn it off.<br>**EULD1, pers. comm., June 5, 2023** | This response indicates the inability of academics to claim personal time and an insensitivity to fatigue arising from unhealthy working conditions. Regarding such workaholism, (Lizano, 2015). argue that professional over-enrichment leads to disregard and neglect of well-being. |

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| | | | This work–life imbalance is exacerbated in the Saudi context, where academics are expected to be available 24/7 |
| | Imposter syndrome (8) | It is not my first time, but even now, I feel like I do not deserve to have this place. **DLHOD5, pers. comm., August 18, 2023** | This response exemplifies imposter syndrome (Demir, Uruç, & Özdemir, 2019). wherein individuals have trouble believing in their accomplishments and live in fear of being revealed as a fraud, even when their qualifications suggests otherwise. This belief can fuel anxiety, self-doubt, and a never-ending need to prove oneself, contributing to burnout.<br><br>In Saudi Arabia, perceptions of leaders are shaped by their performance and their social status, which pressures people to meet unrealistic expectations, thus amplifying feelings of inadequacy or imposter syndrome. Academics often work hardest to tackle the loneliness of command, a peril suggested by deceptively positive quotations such as this one. Even successful academics suffer from self-doubt and fears that |

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| | | | they are not "good enough." |
| | Neuroticism/ negative affectivity (13) | I tend to overthink… and get anxious over things, even small ups and downs or challenges. It's like my brain is always preparing for the worst case scenario, and it can be exhausting. I struggle to unwind and unplug, even outside work. These constant negative and anxiety-driven thoughts definitely wear me down and contribute to burn out. **CULVD1, pers. comm., June 28, 2023** | This response indicates that personality traits affect burnout risk. People with high neuroticism, who are prone to anxiety and worry, are more prone. When they encounter problems at work, their negative thought patterns can magnify, increasing the sense that they are constantly under attack, and making them emotionally drained.<br><br>In Saudi, where the academic environment can be especially demanding, this negative affectivity may heighten burnout risks. The struggle of battling such negativity itself may cause one to fail to meet this level of challenge, which contributes to emotional exhaustion. |
| | Identifying with work (17) | So much of who I am and what I do is my work. It's not just a job to me; it's my identity. I care about what I do, and I put a lot of myself into my work. It's difficult for me to disconnect from my job, so I often feel like I have to be "on" when I'm not even working. That constant pressure and not being able to | This response illustrates how over-identifying with work plays a role in burnout, as the line between professional and personal lives starts to blur, and the person is not able to "switch off" even outside work.<br><br>This over-identification with work can be even stronger in Saudi contexts, where dedication to work and |

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| | | disconnect can feel overwhelming and increase burnout. **AULHOD3, pers. comm., November 8, 2023** | professional achievement is often the ultimate goal of life and living. Thus, academics, who seem to over-identify with their roles, find it harder to separate work from life, which increases their risk of a complete breakdown. |
| **Psychological needs** | Lack of autonomy/ control (12) | You're the one who is actually doing the work out there on the ground, and it's demoralizing when decisions come from the top down. **BULVD3, pers. comm., July 12, 2023** | This response underscores the frustration and the powerlessness that academics feel when decisions are made without their consultation or involvement, leading to a sense of disengagement and unappreciation.<br><br>The need for autonomy and control may be especially significant in Saudi Arabia's hierarchical culture, where decision-making is more centralized. Academics are more likely to experience burnout if they feel they lack agency in their roles |
| | Need for recognition/ appreciation (15) | It's discouraging when you work so hard and no one recognizes or appreciates that. It makes you question the worth of your work. **AULD5, pers. comm., August 5, 2023** | This response emphasizes the value of recognition and gratitude in a professional environment, and a lack thereof gives way to loss of purpose. When people feel that their input and performance does not hold value, |

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| | | | failure and absence of motivation follows.<br><br>In Saudi, academic leadership can be intense, trajectory-altering work, involving long days and weeks, and within that context, there is great cumulative power in formally articulating gratitude, recognition, and appreciation. The implication, of course, is that academics who feel undervalued may be all the more susceptible to burnout. |
| | Need for belonging/ connection (10) | I feel some loneliness and alienation from my coworkers. It's a lack of teamwork and cooperation. **CULHOD2, pers. comm., September 10, 2023** | This response highlights the need for social connection and belonging in the workplace. Being solitary or distant from colleagues can lead to feelings of loneliness and feelings of being unsupported.<br><br>Saudi Arabia is characterized by strong sociality and collectivism, so the need for belonging may be even more salient. Academics who experience isolation may be especially sensitive to burnout. |
| | Need for justice/ fairness (8) | It seems as if the manner in which leadership posts are nominated is unjust. It's demoralizing to see that people who are less qualified get | This response shows that perceived injustice and unfairness affect the well-being of academics. A belief that decisions are made arbitrarily or policies |

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| | | promoted with connections… not merit-based. **DULVD4, pers. comm., October 4, 2023** | are applied inconsistently can foment anger, distrust, and a sense of demoralization that can heighten burnout.<br><br>This need for justice and fairness may be especially relevant in Saudi Arabia, where fairness and respect for authority are critical cultural values. Thus, academics who perceive injustice are at greater risk of becoming weary. |
| ***EXTERNAL FACTORS*** | | | |
| ***Themes*** | *Subtheme (n)* | *Illustrative quote* | *Analysis: What is Causing Burnout?* |
| **Institutional obstacles** | Immoderate workload/ time pressure (22) | I have so many deadlines; I have so many things that are expected from me.<br><br>It takes time to become an overnight sensation. **CULVD2, pers. comm., September 20, 2023** | This response summarizes the nature of work of academic administrators and the constant competing deadlines, meetings, agendas, and responsibilities. The constant push to work harder and be better contributes to chronic stress, fatigue, and overload.<br><br>Higher education in Saudi Arabia is rapidly expanding. Academics are often tasked with managing large-scale growth and change; the pressure of such ambitions is sharper. Academics who feel as though they are perpetually overwhelmed may be |

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| | | | particularly susceptible to burnout. |
| | Poor working conditions/ inadequate resources (14) | We are always being asked to do more with less. It's hard to maintain quality. **AULHOD3, pers. comm., November 8, 2023** | This response highlights the struggle that arises from limited resources and support (e.g., insufficient funding, low staffing levels, lack of equipment or technology, and limited available professional development). When academics are expected to accomplish lofty objectives under resource constraints, stress and frustration are natural consequences.<br><br>Many Saudi universities may be resource-constrained, given that academics feel unsupported and under-resourced, making them vulnerable to chronic fatigue. |
| | Role ambiguity/ conflict (15) | I don't understand the expectations for my role. I have no idea what my direct president wants from me, and [I] often feel like I'm flying blind. **AULD5, pers. comm., August 5, 2023** | This response indicates that insufficient information contributes to role ambiguity (i.e., lack of clarity about one's responsibilities) and, eventually, role conflict (i.e., conflicting demands by two or more persons/groups). The resulting confusion can be highly stressful and inspire feelings of dissatisfaction.<br><br>In Saudi Arabia's hierarchical culture, roles and |

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| | | | responsibilities are sometimes loosely defined and conflicting demands are not uncommon, which leaves academics with no clarity regarding their job. |
| | Negative work environment/culture (19) | There is a lot of negativity and gossip in my department… [It's] a toxic culture where everyone complains behind your back. It creates an environment of distrust and lack of support, which is difficult… going to work every day [feeling] unmotivated and negative. **BUHOD1, pers. comm., July 12, 2023** | This response shows how a negative environment at work damages mental well-being. Unpleasant offices where drama, skepticism, chaos, and hostility are unaddressed create an unsafe, stressful, and unproductive environment.<br><br>In Saudi Arabia, avoiding conflict and cultivating harmonious relationships are well-regarded cultural values. An environment that instead breeds toxicity may be especially jarring and emotionally draining, especially when it hinders professional duties and goals. |
| | Lack of support for work–life balance (18) | It's kind of a culture of overwork at my institution. They're always expected to be "on." There are no standard working hours and there is no such thing as taking holidays… takes a toll on my personal relationships. This absence of work–life balance support is a | Organizational support for work–life balance is critical to preventing burnout. When institutions have no flexible work options or reasonable vacation leaves, employees become overstressed and feel a reduced sense of personal achievement. |

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| | | leading contributor to burnout. **DUALD1, pers. comm., December 15, 2023** | Such work–life imbalance may be especially harmful in Saudi Arabia, where traditional gender roles and family expectations persist, and can easily clash with unreasonably demanding professional expectations. |
| **Management & leadership practices** | Ineffective/ abusive management (19) | The bureaucracy is a nightmare here. It feels so time-consuming and labor intensive. **DULD1, pers. comm., October 28, 2023** | Change entails risk, and risk requires change. However, bureaucracy is averse to change. Bad leadership often fails to restructure processes to increase efficiency, reduce needless complexity, and empower employees.<br><br>Saudi Arabian institutions are characterized by highly bureaucratic decision-making within a rigid hierarchical structure. Academics thus hit numerous roadblocks when navigating bureaucracy, leading to a sense of disillusionment. |
| | Lack of communication (15) | Our leadership team has zero transparency, and they seldom keep us in the loop when they make major decisions… it leads to confusion, frustration, and mistrust. This lack of communication makes it challenging to do our jobs well, and leads to being | This response demonstrates how poor communication and lack of transparency can affect the mental and physical well-being of academics. Stress and burnout are both exacerbated when academics are either completely in the dark about critical decision or they feel excluded |

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| | | stressed and burned out. **BUALD1, pers. comm., December 15, 2023** | from the decision-making process.<br><br>Given the hierarchical nature of Saudi society, which may feature a top-down communication model, the issue of open and transparent communication could demand special attention. Academics who are cut off from communication channels may be more prone to burnout. |
| | Insufficient involvement/ voice of employees (16) | My thoughts and the things I want to say don't matter. Decisions are made at the top, without any regard for how we help get things done. It is demoralizing and I feel like a cog in the machine. So the experience of voicelessness and inaction explains the sense of disconnection and burnout. **EUVD1, pers. comm., August 8, 2023** | This response summarizes the frustration and disengagement among academics over their powerlessness. They may feel that their contributions are not valued, causing a disconnect between them and the institution.<br><br>Given that Saudi Arabia has an authoritarian culture, where hierarchy is predominant and decisions are centralized. As academics feel that their opinions and thoughts are not appreciated, it is crucial that they are made to feel more involved and their voices carry import. |
| | Unfair/ inconsistent policies and practices (18) | There is favoritism and inconsistency in the way policies are applied in my | This response shows that when people perceive that policies are not enforced equally |

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| | | department. Nothing feels worse than people getting promoted or rewarded not on merit or hard work but based on who they know. This perceived injustice breeds resentment and distrust, and yes, it contributes to burnout. **CUALD2, pers. comm., January 22, 2024** | or that choices are made based on favoritism rather than merit, they tend to become resentful. A demoralized workforce eventually breeds discontent and cynicism.<br><br>This need for just and consistent policies also resonates in Saudi Arabia, where fairness and respect for authority are highly esteemed virtues. Academic leaders with a strong sense of fairness may be at a greater risk of burnout when they feel compelled to work despite unfair practices. |
| ***SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS*** | | | |
| ***Theme*** | *Subtheme (n)* | *Illustrative quote* | *Analysis: What is Causing Burnout?* |
| | Economic pressures/ job insecurity (17) | I'm always afraid I'm going to lose my post. The economy is shaky, and there have been budget cutbacks and layoffs at other universities. There's so much pressure for me to perform, to prove my worthiness, and that adds more stress and anxiety. A constant fear of losing the job is also adding to burnout. **DUHOD2, pers. comm., September 18, 2023** | This response captures the effect of economic pressures and job insecurity on the well-being of academics. The resulting stress and anxiety can lead to burnout, especially when combined with the persistent fear of not attaining high.<br><br>Given the rapid expansion and transformation of Saudi Arabia's higher-education sector, it is expected that academics may feel intense job |

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| | | | insecurity and pressure simultaneously. |
| | Technological development/ information overload (15) | I'm drowning in information. There is so much new technology to learn, and so many demands on us to keep up, that it feels crushing. I literally spend hours a week trying to keep up, and it's exhausting. **DUVD3, pers. comm., September 25, 2023** | This response highlights the disruption caused by rapidly evolving technologies and the need for streamlining information. As new technologies emerge and client and customer expectations shift, there is pressure to keep pace, leading to information fatigue<br><br>This challenge of "keeping up with the times" is especially felt by Saudi academics as they face a rapidly expanding, technologizing, and modernizing higher-education sector. |
| | Shift in social expectations/ norms (18) | There's so much pressure to be "on" all the time. Social media and technology have blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, and it can be difficult to switch off. And I feel like it's required that you always be available, always be responsive, which is taxing and can lead to burnout. **DULVD4, pers. comm., October 4, 2023** | The demand of constant connectivity and availability, in addition to the dissolution of barriers between work life and private life, may be overwhelming and exhausting.<br><br>For academics in Saudi Arabia, social expectations and norms are changing at a rate which belies the traditional long timeframes at which cultural and religious values used to shift. The pressure of quickly adapting to change while also achieving |

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| | | | work–life balance becomes debilitating. |
| | Cultural values/ work ethic (16) | In our culture, we really value hard work and being dedicated… [it] often means cutting corners on personal time in the name of your career. I value hard work, but when the pressure to build and achieve becomes so prevalent, it can get out of balance and lead to burnout. **EULHOD25, pers. comm., September 30, 2023** | This response shows cultural values and work ethic determine the experience of burnout. "Workism" is a defect in ambition and productivity that appears in cultures in which hard work and passion are glorified, compelling people to sacrifice their well-being for longer work hours.<br><br>In Saudi Arabia, commitment to work and achievement is highly valued, and thus, the pressure to produce more and achieve higher strains academics. These values, when internalized, become hard to switch off and dysfunctional. |
| | Family/ social responsibility (16): | I'm being pulled in so many different directions—a leader, a wife, a mother, a community member. It's exhausting. **BUALD1, pers. comm., December 15, 2023** | This response shows how academics are expected to juggle multiple changing and demanding roles, giving a sense that they must operate in the past, present, and future all at the same time<br><br>In Saudi, where women are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles as well as adopt modern work responsibilities as well, burnout could be felt more acutely by female academics. |

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| | Cultural norms of strength/ stoicism (17) | You cannot show weakness as a leader in our culture. You're supposed to be strong, and to know it all. **CUALD2, pers. comm., January 22, 2024** | This response shines a light on the cultural imperative to stay resilient and unemotional, especially in leadership positions. It can create a barrier to help-seeking behaviors, especially when there is a fear of being seen as a "loser" or "whiner."<br><br>Emotional repression in the face of insurmountable burdens is even more pronounced in Saudi culture, which values stoicism, fortitude, and a positive social image. Academics who embrace these cultural beliefs may suppress their emotions, avoid requesting help, and aggravate their burnout. |

Table 4. External and Internal Factors of Burnout among Saudi Academics

| ***THE VULNERABILITY CYCLE*** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***Theme*** | *Subtheme (n)* | *Illustrative quotes* | *Analysis: Interplay of Factors Causing Burnout* |
| **Indications of internal predispositions** | Perfectionism (15) | I experience tremendous pressure to excel in every aspect of my deanship—research, teaching, administration. It always puts pressure on me to hold onto this perfect image, particularly when I see my coworkers doing great things. **UALD1, pers. comm., May 11, 2023** | This response indicates internal pressure to keep up a perfect persona, and the fear of being considered incompetent (i.e., perfectionism) that fuels burnout. The comparison with colleagues implies a competitive environment that can amplify those feelings.<br><br>This desire for perfection can run very deep, and, when coupled with an environment |

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| | | | in which social status is highly prized (as in Saudi culture), lead to an overwhelming pressure to appear perfect or at the top of your game all the time. Such internal pressure, compounded by external factors such as high workload demands and low resources, can create a vicious cycle of vulnerability. |
| | Need for control (12) | It is hard for me to trust people to do things, because I'm not sure they do it the way I like. It leads me to take on more than I should, that I feel overwhelmed and fatigued.<br>**BULD2, pers. comm., July 5, 2023** | The response is an example of the challenge of micromanaging or the inability to delegate, which intensifies fatigue. It can be due to perfectionism, lack of trust, or fear of losing control.<br><br>When the need for control is amplified elsewhere, such as through bureaucratic red tape or insufficient collegial or managerial support, individuals may feel they have to take on responsibility for absolutely everything. Eventually they are left demoralized and burnt out. |
| | Work–life balance (18) | As a member of my faculty… I will always be expected to be available to [students] beyond my hours. If I take time off for myself or my family, I feel guilty.<br>**EULVD3, pers. comm., August 15, 2023** | This response exposes the demand on the time of academics, who are wracked with guilt when they do prioritize their own needs. For such individuals, work–life balance is elusive.<br><br>This challenge of maintaining a healthy work–life balance might be more pronounced in Saudi Arabia, especially considering the |

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| | | | distinct cultural expectations and family responsibilities placed on both men and women. The constant pressure of requiring to be available and guilt of needing personal time lead to burnout. |
| **External factors as triggers** | Heavy workloads (22) | The demands are relentless. I have a ton of deadlines, meetings, and obligations competing for my attention... It feels like I drown in this sea of work. **DULVD2, pers. comm., September 10, 2023** | This response clearly illustrates the impact of a heavy, constant workload on the psyche of staff and failure to balance increasing responsibilities. The resulting exhaustion, cynicism, and loss of accomplishment is compounded by the internal pressure of being perfect and always being in control. |
| | Bureaucratic barriers (19) | The bureaucracy here is unbelievably frustrating. Everything here seems to require a mountain of paperwork and approval. **AULVD2, pers. comm., October 5, 2023** | This response explains the intractable annoyances that sap energy for personal or private activities. Although bureaucracy is expected to provide order and process, excessive paperwork and procedure makes academics feel as though they are hostage to the system. They may feel their ability to influence has been usurped—even if for good reason. A completely loss of control, or at least a sense of it, coupled with bureaucratic hurdles, whether for good or bad, can lead academics to become reactionary or simply paralyze them through disillusionment. |
| | Lack of resources/ support (14) | I don't have the resources or the support to be able to do my job the way I | This quote represents a significant contributor to job burnout, that is, academic leaders feel burnt out when |

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| | Workload imbalance/ overload (7 of 14) | should be able to do it. They expected me to be building bricks without straw. **EUVD1, pers. comm., August 8, 2023** | they have insufficient resources and support, which fosters feelings of being overwhelmed and failing to fulfill expectations. This could include anything from insufficient budgets to understaffing to poor professional development access. This quote can be used as a metaphor for the frustration; however, this means many scholars become traditional and mainstream in their practices, which leads to "making bricks without straw. |
| | | We are constantly being asked to do more with less. **CULHOD1, pers. comm., November 15, 2023** | This response highlights the plight of unequal workload, that is, when demand increases but resources do not, stretching academics to their breaking point.<br><br>Such workload, combined with the internal pressure of one's own duty to maintain work ethic and control their professional life, may sap academics' energy, waste time, and lead to a burnout. |
| | Lack of recognition/ value (7 of 14) | It demotivates me; I wonder if what I'm doing is any good at all. **CUALD2, pers. comm., January 22, 2024** | This response underlines the discouragement that stems from not being recognized and supported, and ultimately feeling worthless. The result is self-doubt and the feeling of being an "imposter," which may lead academics to disengage from work. |
| **Sociocultural influences** | Cultural expectations (17) | I feel like I can't show any weakness at work. The last thing I can do | This response indicates the pressure of maintaining an illusion of strength and |

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| | | is fall off. I have to be a rock for my team, when I'm crumbling inside. **BUHOD1, pers. comm., July 12, 2023** | power, especially in leadership positions, to avoid being perceived as vulnerable and risk burnout. Societal norms that value strength and stoicism can stigmatize help-seeking behaviors and foster an isolation complex in individuals suffering from burnout. Wearing a mask can be even harder if such academics are already grappling with internal weaknesses such as being a perfectionist or someone who needs control. |
| | Gendered expectations (9) | As a woman in a male-dominated field, I am constantly being examined. I have to work double time to be validated and taken seriously. **EULD2, pers. comm., August 22, 2023** | This response reflects the already well-documented additional burden on women, who are often held to a higher standard of competence. Women still experience gendered expectations and may feel that they are always required to overperform to be taken seriously. This can cause more stress and fatigue. |
| | Mental health stigma (15) | Burnout feels like a kind of surrender, almost. It's not something we talk openly about in our culture. **DUHOD2, pers. comm., September 18, 2023** | This response highlights the stigma of mental health, which does not allow academics to seek help when they begin to experience symptoms of burnout. In extreme cases, they may even avoid admitting that they are struggling, which could lead them to feel lonely and worsen their condition. |
| | Fear of shame (12) | If I say I'm struggling, I worry that's going to reflect badly on my family… It's going to taint my reputation. | This response reveals the fear of shame that underlies the inability to admit any struggles, especially in a collectivist culture where one's difficulties may be |

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| | | **CUVD1, pers. comm., June 28, 2023** | perceived as an indictment against their family or society. This fear of humiliation can also inhibit help-seeking behaviors. |
| ***BREAKING THE CYCLE*** | | | |
| ***Theme*** | *Subtheme (n)* | *Illustrative quote* | *Analysis: Interplay of Factors Causing Burnout* |
| **Vicious cycle of burnout** | Reduced efficiency (20) | I'm so stressed out I'm doing stupid things in a way that just builds the stress and makes me feel even less capable. **AUVD1, pers. comm., May 25, 2023** | This response exemplifies the negative effects of burnout on performance; academics in this state have lower output, make more mistakes, and continue to spiral under crippling self-doubt. The vicious cycle of poor performance, weakening self-image, and emotional dejection solidifies the burnout. |
| | Emotional reactivity/ withdrawal (16) | I tend to get irritable and distant with people because of burnout. It's like a downward spiral. **BUVD2, pers. comm., July 19, 2023** | This response details the psychological effects of burnout (e.g., cynical attitude and social withdrawal) in a way that underscores the interpersonal and relational cost of burnout. Emotional reactivity and withdrawal in the workplace can compromise relationships with coworkers, family, and friends, which can affect the development of a social support group that would ideally help academics cope with professional stress. |
| **Coping strategies and support** | Individual strategies (18) | I've begun using mindfulness practices and setting boundaries between work and personal life. It has been a lifesaver for my mental health. **BUVD2, pers. comm., July 19, 2023** | This response highlights the need for personal psychological strategies to combat the negative impacts of burnout. Practicing self-care and setting work–life boundaries are critical for managing stress and avoiding complete burnout. |

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| | Institutional support (14) | I also need to figure out how to be better about managing my time and taking care of myself, and the institution needs to help me by getting out of its own damn way. **EUVD1, pers. comm., August 8, 2023** | This response signifies the importance of personal and societal action against burnout. Whereas individuals can adopt personal coping strategies, institutions must establish an environment that prevents burnout or supports at-risk employees. Adequate resources, work–life balance, a positive work environment, regular training, and support programs should be part of the institution's offering. |
| | Cultural shift (11) | We're looking for a culture that promotes open and honest dialogue about mental health; that empowers people to get help [and] to feel comfortable seeking help without being stymied by a stigma. **DUVD3, pers. comm., September 25, 2023** | This response impresses the need for addressing the cultural stigma against mental health crises. Dialogue is imperative and so is normalizing help-seeking behavior, whether in private capacity or through formal means. Awareness of mental health issues and contesting stereotypes should be part of this change. |

Table 5. The Interplay of Internal and External Factors in Shaping Burnout Among Academic Leaders in Saudi Arabia