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# Perceived Organizational Politics and Emotional Exhaustion: The Role of Social Exchanges among Higher Education Institutes

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**ABSTRACT**

Drawing on Social Stressors' theory and the Social Exchange theory, current study investigates the impact of Perceived Organizational Politics (POP) on Emotional Exhaustion (EE). The moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Trust in Organization TIO) was tested in the aforementioned relationship. A cross-sectional research design was adopted for the present study. Using purposive sampling techniques, data were collected from a sample of 274 faculty members from public sector universities of Islamabad, Pakistan. Moderated Regression analysis was carried out using SPSS software to test study hypotheses. Findings revealed POP, POS and TIO predicts Emotional exhaustion. The moderating impact of POS was found in POP and EE relationship, however, TIO could not significantly moderate the said relationship. Management of universities need to put efforts for controlling Organizational politics in the workplace. Supervisors need to be trained for providing support to the teachers perceiving politics in university.

| **Keywords:** | Emotional Exhaustion, Perceived Organizational Politics, Perceived Organizational Support, Trust in Organization |

## Introduction

Politics is a major issue in the work environment (Atshan et al., 2022) and has been interpreted by Vigoda-Gadot, (2007) as an individual's perception regarding the members of organization who may be involved in political actions and activities which can harm the perceiver. According to Vigoda, (2002) organizational politics is a combination of power, influence and behavior that is directed towards own interest. Perceiving politics can bring harmful outcomes such as stress, emotional exhaustion (Ferris et al., 2019), and turnover intention (Harris, Andrews & Kacmar, 2007; Vigoda, 2002) specially in academia (Malik et al., 2019). Politics within universities can have adverse impacts on the teachers' mental health.

Literature have proposed factors that can moderate the POP and its negative outcomes on employees such as employees' conscientiousness and self-monitoring (Chang et al., 2012) and psychological empowerment (Atta et al., 2012). Present study is concerned with social exchange relationships mainly perceived organizational support (POS) and trust in organization (TIO) that could mitigate the negative impact of POP on EE. According to Eisenberger et al., (2001) perceived organizational support (POS) can be described as perception of employee to have supportive behavior of his colleague or supervisor and it helps create positive relation between employee and employer thus acts as part of exchange relations. Wong, Ngo, and Wong, (2003) described trust as a reciprocal behavior in the context of social exchanges i.e if organization provides job security, work autonomy, or take care of the well-being of employees, in turn employees trust organization's decisions, put

their energies positively to help increase productivity of organization and are more satisfied and committed to job (Jeong & Kim, 2022).

In previous literature the impact of organizational politics has been studied among employees from telecom sector, production companies, banks, and other retail organizations (Richardson, Yang, et al., 2008; Cropanzano, etal, 1997; Abbas, et al 2014). However, academia has been largely ignored especially in Pakistan and limited work has been done on the outcomes of POP among teachers in western context (Khattak et al., 2021). It has been suggested to investigate the impact of POP among teachers in their work environment (Malik et al., 2019). As suggested by Blasé, (1988) POP adversely affects work motivation, involvement and job satisfaction of the perceiver, such outcomes may have harmful effects on students and overall learning work environment (Jennings, & Greenberg, 2009; Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2004). Present study extends the POPs literature by examining whether POS and TIO reduce outcomes of POP on emotional exhaustion among university faculty members.

The present study is based on the social stressors' theory of Aneshensel, (1992) in which stressful antecedents (like POP) can cause the psychological disorders namely exhaustion and burnout. The present model is also aligned with the social exchange theory defined by Cropanzano and Mitchell, (2005) as the type of transactions in the organization which is based on strong interpersonal relationships in which employer take care the well-being of employees and in turn employees feel duty to give their best efforts for the success of organization. Such as the role of POS and TIO assumed to play a buffer role and may help reducing the negative impact of POP on EE.

## Literature Review

### Perceived Organizational Politics (POP) and emotional exhaustion

Study of organizational politics in literature appeared since 1960's when a group of people define it as usage of power and influence (Gandz & Murray, 1980) to attain personal or organizational objectives. Ferris et al. (2002) described it as negative feelings of employees who perceive other organizational members engaged in self-serving activities. Many researchers postulated that POP has mainly negative consequences as discussed by Li et al., (2013) politics in the organization brings lot of uncertainties and risks. Efforts to cope with political situation results in depletion of emotional resources thus exhausting a person emotionally (Karatepe & Karatepe, 2009; Maslach & Goldberg 1999; Murtaza et al., 2022). Goodman and Boss (2002) as well as Harris et al. (2005) found emotional exhaustion to be one of the basic stress related outcomes of POP. Same results have been postulated by Rosen, Harris, and Kacmaret al., (2009) that due to politics perceived by employees in the organization they may become emotionally exhausted and face severe anxiety. In the line with previous studies and social stressors theory (Aneshensel, 1992), present study hypothesized that ;

H1: POP significantly and positively predicts EE.

### Social Exchanges at work

In the work environment where politics often leads to harmful consequences such as stress and emotional exhaustion there are some factors which may play significant role in lessening the impact of perceived politics. The factors studied frequently in this scenario are the social exchange relations within the organizational settings. In the work environment exchange relations are clearly depicted as POS and trust in organization as Settoon, et al (1996) closely examined social exchange relations at two different levels such as exchange relations between employee and organization and the other is social exchange relations among employee and supervisor. Social support is important because employees

who have the feelings of support from social relations at workplace such as support from co-worker or supervisor are likely to have reduced effects of politics and emotional exhaustion (Cropanzano et al., 1997). Similarly, trust in the organizational set up reduces the intensity of stress responses of employees (Poon, 2006). Leaders or supervisors also play major role in either reducing or increasing the effects of politics on employees as posited by Kimura, (2013) that leader-member exchange relations can mitigate the negative effects of POP.

## Moderating role of Perceived organizational support (POS)

POS has been described as feelings of employees when they perceive that the organization cares about their well-being and they are important part of it (Eisenberger et al., 1986). He et al., (2014) elaborated that while perceiving organizational support person identifies himself as being part of social circle or has social membership. Employer support, appropriate rewards and favorable job conditions are the main antecedents of perceiving support from organization which brings positive job outcomes (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In the scenario of facing emotional exhaustion, Ducharme, et al (2007) considers coworker support as a protective factor in lessening the effects of emotional exhaustion. As investigated in an empirical finding (Kickul, & Posig, 2001), Supervisor's support plays a major factor in mitigating the impact of POP on employee's mental health. In situation of role conflict and when employees face time pressure supervisor's support plays a major role by providing relief to employee. POS help employees in coping with stress caused by POP. Workplace stress is reduced when employees perceive that there are some supportive elements in the organization like a supportive coworker (Richardson, et al., 2008). Thus, in the light of above arguments, it is hypothesized that:

H2: POS significantly moderate the relationship between POP & EE such that with high POS the said relationship is weakened.

## Trust in Organization

Mayer, et al, (1995) defined trust as "Willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). In line with this, Tan and Lim, (2009) defined TIO as the employees' willingness to become vulnerable to the actions of their organization. At workplace there is interdependency among workers for attaining personal or/and organizational goals, therefore there is a need of trusting relationships among co-workers and between supervisor-employee. Trust has been considered as favorable construct in the workplace as it brings positive results (Cook, & Wall, 1980). In the environment where workers perceive negative elements as injustice, unfairness, lack of support or politics, leading to risk of low performance, negligent and deviant behaviors, turnover intentions and emotional exhaustion, trust plays buffering role in mitigating these effects. In high trust climate, employees are less likely to perceive politics when some co-workers behave opportunistically to get promotions or special favors from top management while, in case of lower level of trust there are more chances of perceiving politics in the organization because employees perceive it as a threat to their work life and well-being (Poon, 2003). Following hypothesis has been formulated based on past literature that in the perceived political environment trust may reduce the impact of POP on EE.

H3: Trust significantly moderates the relationship between POP & EE such that with high trust the relationship weakens.
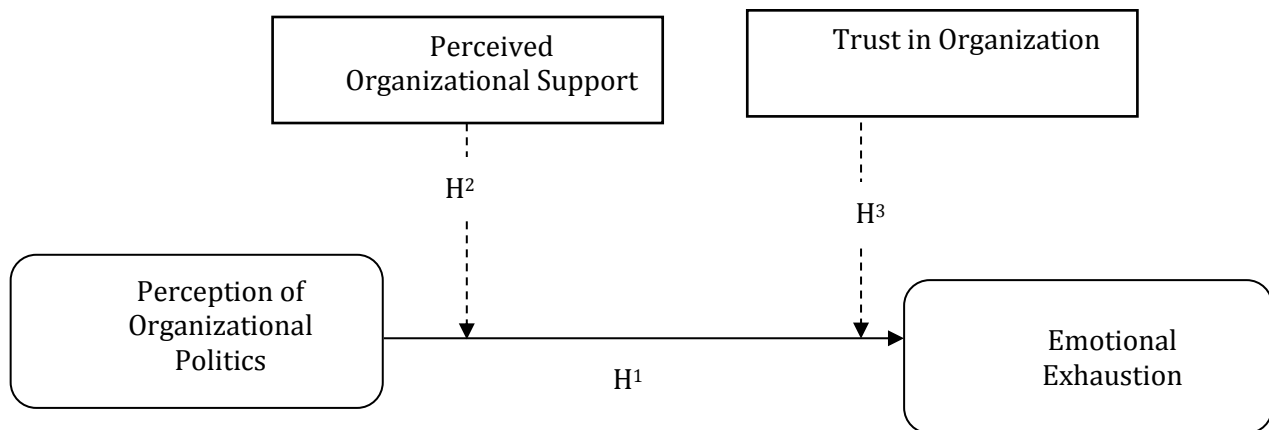
Fig 1: Conceptual framework of the study

## Material and Methods

### Population and sample size

Data for present study were collected from the teaching faculty of six public sector universities of HEC located in Islamabad. Cross-sectional design and purposive convenient sampling technique was used for present study. Data were collected by onsite administration of questionnaires during working hours. Participants were assured about confidentiality of their responses, they were also given surety that they have the right to withdraw from this research if they feel so. Questionnaires were in English language, as the targeted population was highly educated and also the medium of instruction in all higher education institutions of Pakistan is English. After obtaining their consent for participation in the research, a cover letter indicating the purpose of study and explaining ethical protocols of research, the socio-demographic sheet (for obtaining information about gender, age, education, marital status, and total work experience) and four questionnaires (POP, EE, POS, and TIO) were given to them. Sample size was determined as suggested by Kline, (2005). A total number of 300 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 274 were received back, making response rate as 91.33 percent.

### Sample Characteristics

The sample include 46.4 % (n = 120) males and 53.6% (n = 154) females. Sample was a reasonable blend of different age groups. It also included participants with high qualifications being the university teachers as most of them were holding MS or PhD degrees and few were having MA/MSc degrees. Similarly, mostly were married and few were unmarried. Regarding total work experience most of them have 6-10 years of experience at the university.

### Measures

All the study variables were measured using self-reported questionnaires and assessed by using 5-point Likert-scale with the anchors 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neither disagree nor agree, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree.

**Perceptions of Politics scale (POPs).** POPs was measured using a 15-item scale by Kacmar and Carlson (1997). The alpha reliability for this scale was 0.87 (Kacmar & Carlson,

1997) and for present study it was 0.94. Emotional Exhaustion EE was measured with the nine–items of emotional exhaustion, a sub scale of Burnout scale (Maslach & Jackson,1981). The reliability estimate for this measure was 0.89 (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and present study shows 0.81 alpha reliability for this scale. For assessing **Perceived organizational support (POS)** an Eight-item scale of Perceived organizational support (POS) modified by Shanock and Eisenberger, (2006)  from the original source (Rhoades, et al. 2001) was used in this study.   The reliability score of this was 0.90 in previous study (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) and it was 0.87 for the present study. **Trust in Organization (TIO)** was measured by 12-item Interpersonal trust at workplace (Cook & Wall 1980). The alpha reliability for this measure was 0.92 in past study (McCauley & Kuhnert, 1992) whereas for present study it was 0.88.

**Control Variables**

In present study age, gender, work tenure (Byrne, 2005), education (Vigoda, 2002) and marital status (Jamil, et al. 2013) were statistically controlled on account of their possible impact on POP.

**Moderated Regression Analyses**

Moderated regression analysis was conducted to test the moderating role of POS and TIO between POP and EE relationship. Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommendation, first, main effects were tested, followed by interaction effects. POP, POS and TIO were centered before interaction terms (Cohen,et al, 2003). In all regression analyses, the control variables (gender, age, education, marital status, and total work experience) were entered prior to predictors and interaction terms.

**Results and Discussion**

**Table 1**
**Descriptive statistics and Alpha Reliability values for all variables**

| Variables | $M$ | $SD$ | Alpha Coefficient | Skewness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| POP | 3.12 | .88 | .94 | .26 |
| EE | 3.44 | .70 | .81 | .44 |
| POS | 2.88 | .78 | .87 | -.13 |
| TIO | 2.83 | .75 | .88 | -.11 |

*Note.* POP = Perceived organizational politics, EE = Emotional Exhaustion, POS = Perceived organizational support, and TIO = Trust in organization*.*

Table 1 is reflecting the means, standard deviations, reliability estimates and skewness for all the study variables. The reliability coefficients ranged from 0.81 – 0.94 which is acceptable for research purposes (Nunnally, 1978).

**Table 2**
**Pearson correlation among Scales**

| Scales | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. POP | - | .43** | -.53** | -.79** |
| 2. EE | | - | -.12** | -.29** |
| 3. POS | | | - | .81** |
| 4. TIO | | | | - |

* p < 0.05   and  ** p < 0.01

*Note*. POP= Perceived organizational politics, POS= Perceived organizational support, TIO= Trust in organization, EE= Emotional exhaustion.

Table 2 shows correlations among the study variables. POP has a significant positive correlation with EE (r = .43, p < .00). Relationship of POP with both POS and TIO was negative but significant (r = –.53, p < .00) (r = –.79, p < .00). POS and EE (r = –.12, p < .03) and TIO and EE (r = –.29, p < .00) were also significant.

All analyses were performed using SPSS 20 (2007).

**Table 3**
**Moderated Multiple Regression analysis of POP and POS as predictors of EE**
**Emotional exhaustion**

| Predictors | B | $R^2$ | $\triangle R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Step 1 | | | |
| Control variables | | .02 | |
| Step 2 | | | |
| POP | .43 | .18 | .18 |
| POS | -.12 | .01 | .01 |
| Step 3 | | | |
| POP× POS | -.11 | .21 | .01 |

*Note.* *POP= Perceived organizational politics, *POS= Perceived organizational support.

Table 3 indicates the direct effect analysis. The relationship between POP and emotional exhaustion was significant (B =.43, p < .00) thus support hypothesis 1 which claimed that there will be positive and significant relationship between POP and emotional exhaustion. Table 3 also exhibits the results of moderated regression, which was conducted to test the moderating role of POS in POP and EE relationship. First control variables (gender, age, education, marital status, and total work experience) were entered, in the second step POP and POS were regressed on EE simultaneously followed by third step in which interaction term (POP×POS) was regressed on EE (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

Hypothesis 2 was supported which anticipated mitigating impact of POS in the relationship between POP and EE. Results revealed that POS significantly moderates the relationship between POP and EE as for interaction of POP× POS was significant (p < .04) thus provide support for H2.

**Table 4**
**Moderated Multiple Regression analysis of POP and TIO as predictors of EE**
**Emotional exhaustion**

| Predictors | B | $R^2$ | $\triangle R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Step 1 | | | |
| Control variables | | .02 | |
| Step 2 | | | |
| POP | .43 | .18 | .18 |
| TIO | -.29 | .08 | .08 |
| Step 3 | | | |
| POP×TIO | -.07 | .20 | .00 |

*Note.* *POP= Perceived organizational politics, *TIO= Trust in organization.

Table 4 depicting results of moderated regression analysis conducted to test moderating role of Trust in organization (TIO) in POP and emotional exhaustion relationship. First control variables (gender, age, education, marital status and total work experience) were entered and in the second step POP and TIO were regressed on emotional exhaustion simultaneously. In third step of moderation interaction term (POP×TIO) was

regressed on emotional exhaustion. Results shows that TIO did not significantly moderate the relationship between POP and emotional exhaustion, thus indicating lack of support for hypothesis 3 which anticipated that trust will significantly moderates the relationship between POP & emotional exhaustion.

Present study was conducted to test the relationship between POP and EE as well as to investigate the moderating role of POS and TIO in the above relationship. Hypothesis 1 of this study was supported, which anticipated a significant positive relationship between POP and EE. These results are in line with past studies (e.g., Rosen, Harris & Kacmar, 2009; Vigoda, 2002; Chang, Rosen and Levy, 2009; Ferris et al., 1996; Valle and Perrewe, 2000; Ferris et al., 2002) that investigated negative outcomes of POP. Our findings show that university faculty members are emotionally exhausted due to POP,

It was also hypothesized in the present study that POS will act as a moderator and help to reduce emotional exhaustion state in a political work environment, results support the hypothesis 2. It means that in a politically perceived environment, POS work as a positive factor reducing the negative impact of politics. Many of the past literature also revealed similar results that POS act as a positive factor which reduces negativity and stress related to job outcomes as suggested by Eder and Eisenberger, (2008)

Hypothesis 3 of the present study proposed trust in organization (TIO) as moderator, but it was rejected and did not provide support for hypothesis. Results show that in a politically perceived environment trust in organization did not act as a moderato. Reason behind these findings may be that people trust less on each other and on management of their university because of their perception of politics in the teaching environment which induces stress and emotional exhaustion. Although past literature indicated trust as a positive construct and one of the aspects of social exchange relationships as proposed by Cook and Wall, (1980) that people are bound to reciprocate the supportive behavior by helping each other in trouble. Findings of the present study did not match with the above-mentioned previous work of authors from western culture. During survey it was also found that teachers trust their colleagues to some extent but overall, when they perceive politics in the university environment, they tend to have less trust on their management because they observe biased decisions and irrelevant policies being applied in the workplace.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study found significant positive impacts of POP on EE which means that the effects of POP on emotional health of university teachers are detrimental. These effects can be mitigated through providing proper support to teachers by their co-workers or heads as found that POS plays a moderating role and lessen the harmful effects of politics among faculty members, however, the mitigating impact of TIO was not found in the present study. The lack of trust resulted in violation of the psychological contract between teachers and management of university which causes stress and exhaust teachers emotionally.

## Recommendations

Teachers play very important role in the field of education therefore, the phenomenon of organizational politics need to control in the educational institutions. This research also gives insight for the management of universities to realize the adverse impacts of POP on employees/teachers. Universities should conduct surveys to assess POP among teachers in the universities, stress management workshops may also be conducted to address the emotional health of the teachers. Universities need to establish Counselling cell where teachers may share their perception about politics, they may be provided professional help in

handling such stressor in the workplace. Universities need to plan strategies for providing maximum support to employees reporting distress on account of organizational politics. Efforts by universities in addressing organizational politics will build trust in universities among university teachers.

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