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Conflict Management Strategies as Moderators of Burnout in the Context of Emotional Labor

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between emotional labor and burnout, focusing on the moderating role of conflict management strategies. A total of 233 employees from diverse sectors in Portugal participated in this cross-sectional investigation. We employed the Emotional Labor Scale (ELS) and the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) to quantitatively assess emotional labor and burnout levels. Additionally, the study examined conflict management practices in the workplace using the Conflict Management Strategies Assessment Scale (ROCI-2). The findings reveal that participants reported high emotional labor and burnout levels and a positive correlation between these constructs. As expected, conflict management strategies were found to moderate this relationship. Additionally, participants reported employing collaborative approaches as the most frequent conflict management strategy. These results underscore the urgent need for organizations to implement targeted conflict management training programs and psychological and emotional support initiatives to alleviate the adverse effects of emotional labor on burnout. By fostering healthier workplace environments, organizations can enhance employee well-being and productivity.

Keywords: conflict management strategies; burnout; emotional labor



Academic Editor: Tom Webb

Received: 7 January 2025

Revised: 8 February 2025

Accepted: 12 February 2025

Published: 6 March 2025

Citation: Rodrigues, A.; Francisco, M.; Oliveira, Í.M.; Leite, Â.; Lopes, S. Conflict Management Strategies as Moderators of Burnout in the Context of Emotional Labor. *Societies* **2025**, *15*, 63. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15030063>

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1. Introduction

The workplace demands are increasingly complex due to globalization, technological advancements, and evolving job expectations that require employees' greater emotional and cognitive efforts [1].

In this regard, it is essential to understand individuals' challenges in the professional context that may contribute to the deterioration of the individual's well-being [2]. Burnout constitutes one situation of well-being deterioration, becoming a growing concern for employees and organizations [3]. It is a complex phenomenon resulting from various factors' interaction [4]. Burnout represents an individual's reaction to sustained occupational stress [5]. Empirical studies have shown that the fundamental characteristics of burnout include exhaustion and disengagement [6]. Emotional exhaustion is the feeling of having physical and emotional depletion resulting from work demands [6]. Conversely, disengagement is characterized by how individuals distance themselves from their work. It reflects an attitude of detachment, disinterest, or lack of connection with the tasks, goals,

and values of one's job [6]. Professionals suffering from burnout experience a decrease in motivation and productivity, which can lead to negative consequences for both individuals and organizations, such as high rates of absenteeism, turnover, and a reduction in work quality [7].

Other factors that influence well-being and performance in the workplace include emotional labor and conflict management [8–11]. Emotional labor refers to the effort required to manage emotions and emotional expressions in the workplace, particularly in roles that involve public interaction [12]. This concept was first introduced by Hochschild [13], who described the efforts of workers to display the emotions desired by their organizations, irrespective of their genuine feelings [14,15]. Some studies emphasize the effects of emotional labor strategies on burnout [16–18].

Conflict management is another fundamental element that significantly impacts individuals' well-being through its relationship with burnout. When conflicts are not addressed effectively, they can adversely affect organizational climate, collaboration, and productivity. Therefore, developing conflict management skills is essential to fostering a healthier and more harmonious work environment [10]. Conflict management encompasses individuals' specific behavioral patterns when confronted with conflict [19]. Effective conflict management seeks to minimize the negative repercussions of conflicts while enhancing positive outcomes, thereby contributing to a healthier, more innovative, and more productive work environment [20,21]. Considering the impact of emotional labor and conflict management on individuals' well-being, this study explores how these factors relate to burnout as an indicator of well-being deterioration. To the best of our knowledge, this research innovates by examining these three variables within a unified conceptual framework. Furthermore, it enhances our understanding of the moderating effect of conflict management strategies in mitigating emotional labor's impact on burnout. Consequently, this study carries substantial theoretical implications for the field. Additionally, the insights derived from this research will enable us to propose practical human resource management recommendations to cultivate healthier and more sustainable workplace environments.

1.1. Emotional Labor and Burnout

Emotional labor refers to the effort, planning and control required to express the emotions desired by the organization during interpersonal interactions [22]. This concept, introduced by Hochschild [13], describes employees' work managing emotions to achieve organizational objectives. Emotional labor is a requirement in many occupations, especially those with direct contact with customers or other employees [9]. Emotional labor concerns other constructs such as emotional demands, deep acting, and surface acting [23]. Emotional demands refer to the expectations of the organization or occupation about which emotions the employee should display and with what intensity to influence the behaviors and affective states of customers and colleagues [24]. Emotional demands can include expressing positive emotions, such as calm and friendliness, or concealing negative emotions, such as irritation or frustration [24]. Deep acting involves consciously and intentionally altering one's internal feelings to externally express emotions congruent with the job demands [15]. Deep acting requires strong involvement and identification with the profession to change internal states and maintain compliance with emotional display rules [14]. Reappraisal is one of the main mechanisms of deep acting [24]. Surface acting involves manipulating facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice to simulate the emotions desired by the organization without feeling those emotions [15]. Surface acting is "faking" emotions, adapting expressions to organizational rules without changing internal feelings [25].

Several studies have established the relationship between emotional labor and its impact on well-being and job performance. According to a meta-analytic regression analysis conducted by Hülshager and Schewe [26], emotion–rule dissonance, surface acting, and deep acting play a crucial role in predicting well-being and performance outcomes. Furthermore, their mediation analysis supports theoretical models of emotional labor, demonstrating that surface acting partially mediates the relationship between emotion-rule dissonance and well-being.

Consistent with these findings, Kammeyer-Mueller et al. [27] provide further evidence that surface-acting emotion regulation strategies are associated with job-related outcomes, including lower job satisfaction and higher levels of stress and exhaustion. However, they do not have a direct impact on job performance. In addition, deep-acting strategies correlate with well-being, job satisfaction, and overall job performance. These findings underscore the relevant effects of emotion regulation strategies in workplace settings and highlight important implications for research and organizational practices.

Thus, it becomes evident that emotional labor can have significant implications for employee's well-being and health [28,29]. Specifically, the continuous effort required to regulate emotions following organizational demands has been linked to an increased risk of burnout [14,30]. Additionally, the perception of distributive justice plays a critical role in shaping employees' emotional responses to such demands. When employees attribute responsibility for emotion regulation to external sources, such as clients, they are more likely to perceive the effort as unjust, exacerbating emotional exhaustion [28,29]. Conversely, when responsibility is self-attributed, employees may perceive the effort as more justified, mitigating the adverse effects. This suggests that structural and organizational factors, such as fairness perceptions and accountability attributions, significantly mediate the relationship between emotional labor and emotional exhaustion [28,29]. Furthermore, a lack of overall justice can intensify the negative consequences of emotional labor, reinforcing the need for organizations to consider fairness perceptions in emotional regulation strategies [28,29].

The expanding body of research in the literature further underscores that emotional labor is a critical occupational stressor across various professions, intensifying the risk of burnout and associated health consequences [14,30]. Indeed, Jeung et al. [9] provided insights that emotional labor is a significant job stressor contributing to burnout, particularly among employees with specific personality traits, such as low self-efficacy and Type A behavior patterns. Further, Ozbey and Gelmez [31] confirmed a statistically significant relationship between emotional labor and burnout in industries with high interpersonal interaction demands, such as the hospitality sector. Studies by Çağlıyan et al. [32] reinforced this relationship, highlighting that burnout is often accompanied by reduced job performance in healthcare environments.

Additional research emphasizes mediating factors influencing the link between emotional labor and burnout. Zaghini et al. [33] demonstrated that work-related stress mediates this relationship, particularly in emotionally demanding occupations like nursing, leading to adverse effects on mental health and job satisfaction. Similarly, Noor and Zainuddin [18] found that work–family conflict mediates the effects of surface acting on burnout, especially among female teachers balancing occupational and domestic responsibilities. Meanwhile, Moon and Shin [34] indicated that resilience moderates the emotional labor–burnout relationship, suggesting interventions to strengthen resilience as potential mitigation strategies.

Occupation-specific studies further underscore the relationship between emotional labor and burnout. Kariou et al. [22] conducted a systematic review that confirmed the association between emotional labor and burnout in primary and secondary school teachers, emphasizing the role of surface acting as a primary predictor of burnout. Likewise, Joffe

and Peters [12] demonstrated that surface-acting predicted burnout among psychologists. Pandey and Singh [35] found that surface-acting was linked to increased burnout.

Theoretical models further elaborate on these dynamics. Brotheridge and Grandey [36] differentiated between job-focused and employee-focused emotional labor strategies, showing that surface acting predicts depersonalization. Celiker et al. [25] supported these findings in a meta-analysis, concluding that surface acting has stronger associations with burnout than deep acting, exhibiting weak negative correlations with emotional exhaustion.

Overall, studies confirm the link between emotional labor and burnout. Hence, we present the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Emotional labor has a positive relationship with burnout.

1.2. Conflict Management Strategies and Burnout

Conflict management strategies refer to individuals' specific behavioral patterns when dealing with conflict [37]. These strategies can be differentiated based on two dimensions: concern for one's interests and concern for the interests of others [38]. According to Rahim's model [39], based on this dual concern model, five conflict management strategies can be identified: commitment, competition/domination, avoidance, accommodation, and collaboration/integration. The commitment style involves a moderate level of concern for both one's interests and the interests of others [11]. The parties compromise on some aspects to reach a mutually acceptable solution [40]. This style is often used in practice and is a "give and take" approach [11,41]. The competition/domination style reflects a high concern for one's interests and a low concern for the interests of others [11]. This style is characterized by the imposition of one party's opinions and ideas on another, often with a "win-lose" orientation [21,40]. It is an aggressive style that seeks favorable solutions only to oneself [21]. The avoidance style demonstrates low concern for both one's interests and the interests of others [38]. This style is characterized by withdrawing from conflict, ignoring the issue, and avoiding discussion [21]. It can be helpful in situations where time is needed or when the conflict is trivial [41]. However, this style may be associated with higher stress levels [11]. The accommodation style shows low concern for one's interests and high concern for the interests of others [38]. Those who adopt this style tend to minimize differences and emphasize common ground to satisfy the other party's concerns [21]. It is a passive and self-sacrificing approach, where one party gives in to the wishes of the other [40]. The collaboration/integration style is characterized by a high level of concern for both one's interests and the interests of others [38]. People who adopt this style seek collaborative solutions, exchange information, and examine differences to resolve conflict in a way that satisfies all involved [40]. This style promotes communication and interpersonal relationships [42].

While individuals may employ various conflict management strategies, it is crucial to recognize that no single style is inherently superior to others [20,41]. The selection of an appropriate strategy is context-dependent and influenced by the nature of the relationship between the involved parties [20]. Moreover, individuals may adapt their conflict management styles based on the circumstances, timing, or the individuals they interact with [43]. For instance, direct and assertive approaches are more commonly adopted when interacting with subordinates or peers than with organizational superiors [43].

Overall, greater utilization of suitable conflict management strategies is associated with enhanced well-being. Studies confirm that solution-oriented strategies, such as collaboration and integration, are associated with lower levels of burnout due to their emphasis on problem-solving and mutual benefit [44,45].

Beyond organizational support, factors such as psychological capital and professional experience may act as moderators of the impact of emotional labor on burnout [30,46].

Empirical evidence supports this relationship, demonstrating a negative correlation between effective conflict management strategies and burnout (e.g., [10,11]). Precisely, non-confrontation styles, such as avoidance, may lead to higher stress levels and burnout, whereas solution-oriented approaches mitigate these risks [47]. Consequently, fostering conflict management skills is essential for promoting well-being and mitigating burnout [11]. Thus, we posit the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The use of conflict management strategies has a negative relationship with burnout.

1.3. The Moderating Role of Conflict Management Strategies

Previous research has highlighted a positive relationship between emotional labor and burnout (e.g., [9,22]). This connection arises because emotional labor involves the ongoing effort to manage and regulate emotions to align with organizational expectations [24]. The sustained use of emotional resources can deplete an individual's capacity to cope, thereby increasing vulnerability and negatively affecting well-being. The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [48] provides a theoretical framework to explain this phenomenon, suggesting that individuals with limited resources are more susceptible to further resource depletion. This loss cycle not only exacerbates existing vulnerabilities but also heightens the risk of additional resource losses. Consequently, the emotional demands associated with emotional labor can significantly elevate the risk of burnout by progressively depleting emotional and psychological resources.

This study proposes that conflict management strategies can moderate how work-related emotional demands contribute to burnout. This moderating role is grounded in the premise that regardless of the specific style employed (i.e., commitment, competition/domination, avoidance, accommodation, or collaboration/integration), engaging in a conflict management strategy reflects an effort to address conflict situations [37]. Effectively managing conflict can enhance individuals' sense of efficacy, boost morale, and support overall well-being [10]. Thus, conflict management strategies may buffer the positive relationship between emotional labor and burnout [11,43].

In other words, conflict management strategies may act as a protective factor, mitigating the potentially harmful effects of emotional labor on burnout [11,43]. This leads us to formulate the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). Conflict management strategies have a moderating effect on the relationship between work-related emotional demands and burnout.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Data Collection Procedure

Following our research objectives, the current study utilizes a non-experimental, exploratory, and correlational design. Data collection was facilitated through an online questionnaire administered via the Qualtrics platform. The research sample was obtained through a convenience sampling approach, which is inherently non-probabilistic. We presented this study to companies across various sectors in Portugal, encompassing both industrial and service industries as well as public and private organizations. The inclusion criteria for participation were being over 18 years old and employed. Following their acceptance to participate, these companies received an email containing the link to the online survey, which they subsequently forwarded to their employees.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the development of this study. To ensure confidentiality, access to the collected data was restricted solely to the research

team. Furthermore, no personal information that could compromise the anonymity of respondents was collected, such as participants' names or company identifiers. Importantly, no financial or other incentive was offered to participate in this study.

2.2. Participants

The sample included 233 participants aged between 18 and 65, with approximately 34 years old on average ($SD = 11.68$). Of the participants, 123 were female (52.8%), 107 were male (45.9%), and 3 chose not to answer. Most had been employed for up to 5 years (50.6%) and worked between 8 and 12 h daily (63.9%). In terms of academic qualifications, most participants had completed secondary education (38.6%), a bachelor's degree or equivalent (28.8%), and a master's degree (19.3%). Most of them (85%) work in companies located in the country's northern region.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Sociodemographic Questionnaire

The sociodemographic questionnaire collected information on gender, age, length of time working for the organization, and level of education.

2.3.2. Oldenburg Burnout Inventory

To assess burnout, a translated and adapted version of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI, [6,49]) was used, consisting of 16 items distributed in two dimensions. Exhaustion was measured through eight items (e.g., "There are days when I feel tired when I get home from work"). Disengagement was also measured through eight items (e.g., "I often talk about my work negatively"). Participants were asked to respond to the items using a Likert-type response format ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neither Agree nor Disagree, (4) Agree, and (5) Strongly Agree. In the present study, Cronbach's Alpha was 0.72.

2.3.3. Conflict Management Strategies Assessment Scale (ROCI-II)

To assess conflict management strategies, we used the Scale for the Evaluation of Conflict Management Strategies (ROCI-II), created by Rahim [39] and adapted for the Portuguese population by Dimas [50]. The ROCI-II consists of 28 items distributed over five dimensions corresponding to five conflict management strategies: commitment (e.g., "To solve an impasse, I try to find a solution of compromise"), competition/domination (e.g., "I use my influence to ensure that the ideas I defend are accepted"), avoidance (e.g., "I avoid open discussions with other members about our differences"), accommodation (e.g., "I seek to satisfy the needs of others more than my own"), and collaboration/integration (e.g., "I try to find solutions that satisfy everyone's expectations"). Participants are asked to assess the items using a Likert-type response format ranging from 1—Never happens to 7—Always happens. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha value was 0.91.

2.3.4. Emotional Labor Scale (ELS)

The Emotional Labor Scale (ELS) was used to measure emotional labor. The ELS has shown evidence of validity and was initially developed in English by Brotheridge and Lee [23]. The Portuguese version was validated by Castanheira and Chambel [51]. The instrument consists of nine items divided into three dimensions. One dimension refers to the emotional demands of work and comprises three items (e.g., "Express intense emotions"). The other two dimensions pertain to emotional regulation strategies, namely deep action, which involves modifying the felt emotion to align with the expressed emotion required by the professional role (consisting of three items, e.g., "Try to experience the emotions that I must show"), and surface action, which involves expressing an emotion

required by the professional role that does not align with the felt emotion (consisting of three items, e.g., “Pretend to have emotions that I do not have”). Participants are asked to answer the items using a Likert-type response format ranging from 1—Never to 5—Always. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha value was 0.76.

2.4. Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28. The analysis involved two phases. In the first phase, descriptive statistics, such as measures of central tendency, were used, considering the variable type. In the second phase, inferential statistics were used, considering the sample distribution and the variable type. Before starting our analyses, we assessed the normality of the variables using the Shapiro–Wilk test, which is well-regarded for its ability to detect deviations from normality. In addition to this statistical test, we performed graphical assessments, including histograms and Q–Q plots, to visually examine the data distribution. The results of these evaluations show no significant deviations from a normal distribution, confirming that it was appropriate to use parametric tests in our subsequent analyses [52]. Parametric tests, specifically Pearson’s test, were used to study the correlations among the variables. Additionally, Hayes’ PROCESS macro for SPSS was employed to study the moderating role of conflict management in the relationship between burnout and emotional labor.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations of the studied variables. The results indicate that participants perceived their professional activity as emotionally demanding ($M = 27.85$; $SD = 6.16$), with a minimum value of 9 and a maximum of 45. Regarding the “Emotional Demands at Work” dimension, participants demonstrate high levels ($M = 10.22$; $SD = 2.59$), with a minimum value of 3 and a maximum value of 15. Concerning the dimension of “Emotional Regulation Strategies”, the values indicate that participants demonstrated moderately high scores ($M = 17.62$; $SD = 4.89$). This dimension is divided into “Surface Acting Strategies” and “Deep Acting Strategies.” Both present moderate values reported by participants. The first sub-dimension pertains to surface acting strategies ($M = 8.18$; $SD = 3.15$). Regarding the sub-dimension of deep acting strategies ($M = 9.44$; $SD = 2.93$), the minimum value for both sub-dimensions is 3, and the maximum is 15.

Regarding conflict management strategies (Table 1), the results indicate that the conflict management strategies most utilized by participants during their professional activities are integrating/collaborating strategies ($M = 38.24$; $SD = 8.04$). It should be noted that a lower score does not imply the absence of conflict management strategies but rather a lower reliance on structured conflict resolution techniques.

As is possible to observe in Table 1, using the value of 80, which corresponds to the maximum score that the OLBS can achieve, the results indicate high levels of burnout perception among participants ($M = 51.56$; $SD = 8.11$), with a minimum value of 16 and a maximum value of 80. Regarding the dimensions of burnout (disinvestment and exhaustion), participants also reported high values, with a minimum value of 8 and a maximum value of 40. In the dimension of “Disengagement”, the scores were ($M = 25.77$; $SD = 4.43$), and in the dimension of “Exhaustion”, the scores were ($M = 25.78$; $SD = 4.8$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
ELS Total	9	45	27.85	6.16	0.36	1.36
ELS—emotional demands at work	3	15	10.22	2.59	0.01	−0.22
ELS—emotional regulation strategies	6	30	17.62	4.89	0.10	0.72
ELS—surface acting	3	15	8.18	3.15	0.10	−0.52
ELS—deep acting	3	15	9.44	2.93	−0.09	−0.05
ROCI Total	29	196	123.11	24.30	−0.95	4.60
ROCI—integrating/collaborating	7	49	38.24	8.04	−1.46	3.47
ROCI—obliging/accommodating	7	42	25.22	6.33	−0.31	0.81
ROCI—dominating/competing	5	35	16.84	6.34	0.40	0.32
ROCI—avoidance	6	42	24.55	7.51	−0.09	0.12
ROCI—compromising	4	28	18.35	4.65	−0.72	1.38
OLBI Total	16	80	51.56	8.11	0.46	4.72
OLBI—disengagement	8	40	25.77	4.43	0.56	3.52
OLBI—exhaustion	8	40	25.78	4.80	0.06	1.83

Note: Min.—minimum; Max.: maximum; SD—standard deviation; ELS—Emotional Labor Scale; ROCI—Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory; OLBI—Oldenburg Burnout Inventory.

As can be observed in Table 2, the results indicate a positive ($r = 0.49$) and significant ($p < 0.01$) association between emotional demands at work and burnout. In this sense, the results demonstrate that the greater the perception of emotional demands at work, the higher the levels of burnout among participants. Additionally, it is possible to observe a negative ($r = -0.16$) and significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship between conflict management strategies and burnout. Thus, the more the participants use conflict management strategies (regardless of the styles used), the lower the levels of burnout among participants.

Table 2. Correlations.

	1.	2.
ELS Total		
ROCI Total	0.04	
OLBI Total	0.49 **	−0.16 *

Note: ELS—Emotional Labor Scale; ROCI—Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory; OLBI Oldenburg Burnout Inventory; **: $p < 0.01$; *: $p < 0.05$.

3.2. Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis testing was conducted with model 1 of the Process tool [53], supported by the SPSS program. The model tested considered one independent variable (i.e., emotional demands at work), a moderator variable (i.e., conflict management strategies), and a dependent variable (i.e., burnout). As anticipated, the results reveal a positive and significant relationship between work-related emotional demands and burnout ($\beta = 0.49$, $t = 8.19$, $p < 0.01$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, a negative and significant relationship was identified between conflict management strategies and burnout ($\beta = -0.19$, $t = -3.16$, $p < 0.01$), which supports Hypothesis 2. Regarding the moderating effect of conflict management strategies on the relationship between work-related emotional demands and burnout, the interaction term between the independent and moderator variables was significant (effect = 0.55, SE = 0.07, $t = 7.43$, CI: 0.41 to 0.70). Implementing conflict management strategies seems to reduce the adverse effects of work-related emotional demands on the rise of burnout among individuals (Figure 1). This finding supports Hypothesis 3.

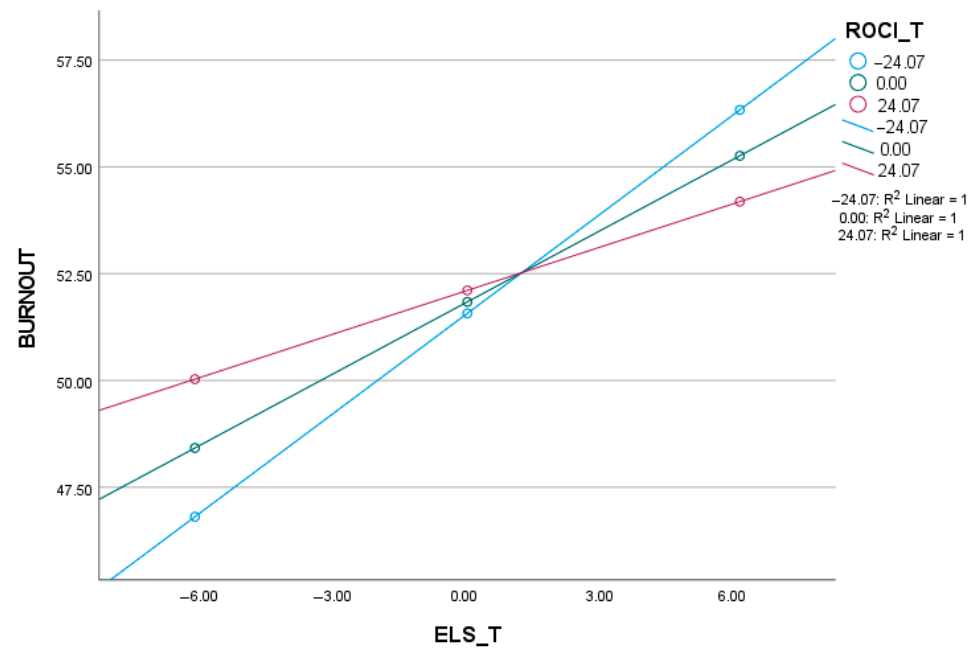


Figure 1. The moderating effect conflict management strategies. (Note: ELS_T—work-related emotional demands; ROCI_T—conflict management strategies).

4. Discussion

This study explored the relationships among emotional labor, conflict management strategies, and burnout, emphasizing the moderating role of conflict management strategies in mitigating the effects of emotional labor on burnout. The findings align with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [48], which posits that individuals strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that stress arises when these resources are threatened or depleted. By integrating COR theory, this study reinforces the notion that emotional labor represents a substantial drain on emotional and psychological resources, potentially leading to burnout when coping mechanisms are insufficient.

The findings provide significant insights into these constructs, offering theoretical and practical implications for organizational settings.

Consistent with prior research, the results confirm a positive association between emotional labor and burnout, supporting Hypothesis 1. Employees experiencing higher emotional demands in the workplace are more likely to report increased burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion and disengagement.

This observation is theoretically grounded in COR theory, which suggests that individuals deplete their emotional resources to meet organizational demands, leaving them vulnerable to further stress and exhaustion [48]. Similar conclusions were reached by Jeung et al. [9] and Kariou et al. [22], who identified emotional labor as a significant predictor of burnout across various professional contexts. Further supporting this view, Noor and Zainuddin [18] also observed a relationship between emotional labor and burnout.

In addition, the study found a negative relationship between conflict management strategies and burnout, confirming Hypothesis 2. Participants who frequently utilized conflict management strategies, irrespective of style, reported lower levels of burnout. This finding builds on COR theory by suggesting that conflict management strategies can function as resource-preserving mechanisms. Effective strategies like collaboration and integration allow individuals to regain control and efficacy, protecting their emotional resources and reducing stress. Evidence from previous studies (e.g., [10,11]) supports this argument, indicating that conflict resolution skills enhance resource management and psychological resilience. Similarly, Carlson et al. [54] emphasized that emotional labor

mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and burnout, highlighting the role of conflict management in mitigating this stress cycle.

Notably, the moderating role of conflict management strategies in the relationship between emotional labor and burnout was also supported, validating Hypothesis 3. From a COR perspective, conflict management strategies act as resource-enhancing mechanisms that buffer the negative effects of emotional demands. Specifically, integrating strategies provides opportunities to replenish depleted resources by fostering supportive interactions and promoting problem-solving [44]. Conversely, avoidant strategies may exacerbate resource depletion, reinforcing the harmful impact of emotional labor [47]. Prentice [55] further supports this, demonstrating that emotional intelligence can moderate emotional labor's effects on burnout, suggesting that resource-focused approaches enhance coping capacity.

These findings underscore the theoretical relevance of COR theory, highlighting how resource-oriented strategies, such as collaboration and integration, reduce burnout risk by preserving and enhancing emotional resources.

These results carry significant practical implications. Organizations should prioritize training programs that enhance employees' conflict management skills, equipping them with tools to preserve emotional resources and reduce burnout risk. Such initiatives could include workshops on collaborative problem-solving, emotional regulation techniques, and resilience-building strategies grounded in COR theory. Furthermore, organizational policies should be designed to mitigate excessive emotional demands by fostering supportive work environments and providing access to psychological resources. By doing so, organizations can help employees preserve their emotional resources, reduce burnout risk, and improve overall well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted exclusively of Portuguese employees, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Given that cultural values and workplace norms influence emotional labor and conflict management practices, future research should expand the geographical scope to include non-European contexts, such as Asia, North America, and Africa, enhancing the cultural and contextual relevance of the results [18]. Incorporating cross-cultural comparisons could offer deeper insights into how cultural dimensions moderate the relationships examined.

Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. While this approach identifies associations, it cannot capture the temporal dynamics or long-term effects of emotional labor, conflict management strategies, and burnout. Longitudinal studies are recommended to establish causality and examine how these relationships evolve. Such studies could also investigate how emotional demands and resource availability fluctuations influence burnout trajectories, as suggested by the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [48].

Finally, the reliance on self-report measures raises concerns about common method bias and social desirability effects. Future studies could incorporate multi-method approaches, including objective well-being indicators such as physiological markers (e.g., cortisol levels) or observational assessments, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. Experimental designs or diary studies capturing momentary assessments could further enrich findings by examining real-time emotional fluctuations and coping strategies.

By addressing these limitations, future research can strengthen the theoretical framework and practical applications of conflict management strategies as protective mechanisms against burnout in emotionally demanding work environments.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study underscores the pivotal role of conflict management strategies in buffering the adverse effects of emotional labor on burnout. Anchored in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [48], the findings highlight how resource-preserving mechanisms, such as effective conflict management, can mitigate the emotional depletion caused by workplace demands. By integrating these strategies into organizational practices, employers can foster healthier and more sustainable work environments, ultimately enhancing employee well-being and productivity. Recognizing these dynamics, organizations should prioritize training programs that develop employees' conflict resolution skills and emotional resilience, equipping them to manage stress more effectively.

Finally, this research highlights the need to explore further cross-cultural variations in conflict management effectiveness and the long-term impact of these strategies. Future studies should investigate how different cultural frameworks influence the role of emotional labor and conflict management strategies in shaping employee outcomes [18]. Such insights will further refine interventions to reduce burnout and enhance workplace well-being.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.R., M.F. and S.L.; methodology, Í.M.O. and Â.L.; validation, Â.L. and S.L.; formal analysis, Í.M.O. and Â.L.; investigation, A.R. and M.F.; data curation, Í.M.O.; writing—original draft preparation, A.R. and M.F.; writing—review and editing, Â.L., Í.M.O. and S.L.; visualization, S.L.; supervision, S.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Portuguese Catholic University Scientific Council (UCP-2024-075) on 8 January 2024.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author, S.L., upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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