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Exploring the Impact of Contextual Conditions on Psychological Safety, Level of Team Virtuality, and Burnout: Does it Help to Have a Choice?

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Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, teams have experienced an unprecedented reliance on remote work. Some employees have become well-accustomed to these practices; indeed, many are reluctant to relinquish the associated flexibility these practices afford (Parker, 2022). However, many others have struggled with the intrusion of the office into their homes, resulting in decreased employee well-being (Campbell & Gavett, 2021), and leading one scholar to refer to this phenomenon as an epidemic of burnouts (Roulet, 2020).

Bunjak et al. (2021: 1) recently noted that "despite burnout being an ever-pressing matter in contemporary work spaces, the understanding of the link between job demands and burnout remains limited…". We extend their work and address this gap by examining the following research question: For teams that experience varying levels of both team virtuality and psychological safety, how does having a choice of communication medium impact team members' experience of burnout? Following Kirkman and Mathieu (2005), we define team virtuality as the extent to which teams rely on virtual tools to complete their work, the amount of informational value provided by these tools, and the level of synchronicity in team member interaction. We offer a conceptual model and five propositions that examine how giving team members a choice of communication medium may provide a lever for reducing burnout in virtual teams.

We draw upon research by Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) and include four of their antecedents to team virtuality in our model (see Figure 1). We extend their work by arguing that these four contextual conditions will also serve as antecedents to the level of psychological safety experienced within a virtual team. We define psychological safety as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 1999: 354), and argue that:

> *P1a: As the number of boundaries crossed increases, psychological safety likely decreases.*
>
> *P1b: As the proportion of co-located team members decreases, psychological safety likely decreases.*
>
> *P1c: As team size increases, psychological safety likely decreases.*
>
> *P1d: To the extent that time available for task completion decreases, psychological safety likely decreases.*

(A complete rationale for these propositions will be included in the full paper.)

Importantly, we propose that both the level of team virtuality and the level of psychological safety in a team will impact the experience of team member burnout. We define burnout as a response to extended exposure to workplace stressors (Maslach et al., 2012) characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficiency (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), and argue that:

> *P2: As the level of team virtuality increases, burnout will likely increase.*
>
> *P3: As the level of psychological safety decreases, burnout will likely increase.*

That is, we propose that psychological safety and team virtuality will independently impact burnout. Additionally, we argue that a single moderator—choice of communication medium—will impact the relationship of both team virtuality and psychological safety on burnout. In line with Karasek's (1979) buffer hypothesis, we argue that increased choice regarding how one's work is done will result in the ability to cope with the increased task demands associated with higher levels of virtuality, resulting in less burnout. Further, we argue that having a choice among communication mediums will result in greater self-efficacy, such that despite feeling less psychologically safe due to the existence of multiple boundaries, less team member co-location, greater team size, and less time for task completion, the choice of communication medium may provide team members with a way to stay productively engaged, diminishing the likelihood of burnout. Hence, we argue that:

> *P4: Choice of communication medium will moderate the positive relationship between team virtuality and burnout, such that this relationship will be weaker when team members have a choice of communication medium.*
>
> *P5: Choice of communication medium will moderate the negative relationship between psychological safety and burnout, such that this relationship will be weaker when team members have a choice of communication medium.*

A key contribution of this research is our examination of how various contextual conditions likely contribute to the experience of burnout in virtual team members. We suggest that two channels through which this may occur are high levels of virtuality and low levels of psychological safety. Further, we explore choice of medium as a possible lever to decrease the impact of high levels of virtuality and reduced psychological safety on burnout. In the full paper we will also discuss practical implications and directions for future research.

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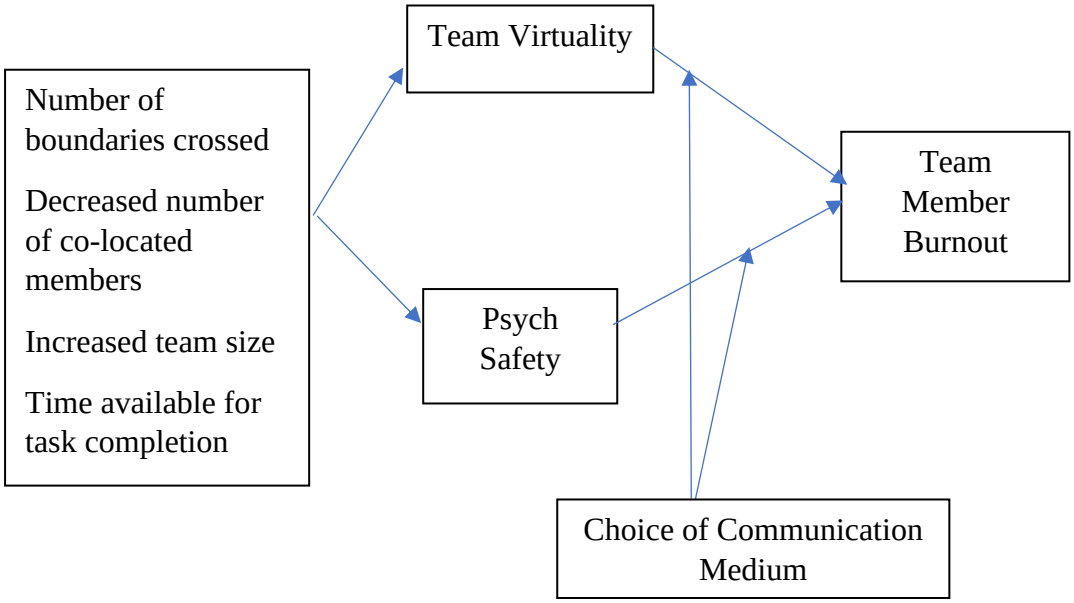
Figure 1


Team Virtuality
Number of boundaries crossed
Decreased number of co-located members
Increased team size
Time available for task completion
Team Member Burnout
Psych Safety
Choice of Communication Medium