



# Understanding entrepreneurial disengagement: Exploring the role of team vision and emotional support

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## ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurs often encounter challenges during their entrepreneurial journeys that may lead to disengagement from their business ventures. While the concept of disengagement has been extensively studied in the human resource management literature, there remains a relative lack of understanding regarding entrepreneurial disengagement. This study, grounded in the psychological theory of engagement and the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, focuses on physical disengagement and investigates whether emotional disengagement precedes it.

Moreover, recognizing the significance of entrepreneurs' comprehension of their team vision, we hypothesize that team vision serves as an antecedent to both emotional and physical disengagement. Specifically, we investigate whether emotional disengagement mediates the relationship between team vision and physical disengagement. Building on JD-R theory, we examine the moderating roles of family emotional support and social networks' emotional support in this mediation relationship.

Our findings, utilizing data obtained from 184 entrepreneurs in the UK, indicate that emotional disengagement fully mediates the relationship between team vision and physical disengagement. Interestingly, our results suggest that while social networks' emotional support moderates this mediation relationship, family emotional support does not. These insights carry significant theoretical and managerial implications for understanding and addressing entrepreneurial disengagement.

## 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurs dedicate their emotional and physical resources to their ventures (Cardon et al., 2020). However, this dedication can diminish as they encounter various challenges and obstacles. This phenomenon, known as disengagement (Afrahi, 2019), entails investing less emotion, time, and energy in the business, leading to emotional distance and withdrawal despite remaining involved in the financial running and decision-making (Kahn, 1990). Disengagement can have significant implications for the continuation and growth of business ventures (Rastogi et al., 2018) and can even lead to discontinuity (Wicker and Davidsson, 2015). Existing research indicates that the psychological

process of entrepreneurs disengaging from their businesses could influence entrepreneurs' exit from their firms. Despite its importance, disengagement has been relatively understudied, particularly within entrepreneurship (Cacciotti et al., 2020; Lattacher and Wdowiak, 2020). Moreover, research often simplifies the entrepreneurial exit process, considering it an isolated event (Morris et al., 2018). Therefore, research has called for the exit not to be viewed as merely a dichotomous outcome but rather as a multifaceted process involving psychological disengagement.

Disengagement can manifest in emotional and physical forms and is often considered a cognitive choice (Kahn, 1992; Kahn and Heaphy, 2013). Entrepreneurs' emotional disengagement refers to feeling

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emotionally distanced from their entrepreneurial activity (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2020), while physical disengagement is characterized by reduced effort, absenteeism, and a lack of dedication (Truss et al., 2013). Previous research has highlighted the necessity of investigating the relationship between these different types of disengagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Kahn, 1990).

In this research, we focus on physical disengagement and aim to understand the antecedents and contingency factors that contribute to increasing physical disengagement. Specifically, we examine the role of emotional disengagement and investigate whether it is a precursor of physical disengagement. Prior studies have shown that entrepreneurs may decide to exit their business if their vision for it has not been achieved (DeTienne et al., 2015). Vision carries significant meaning for entrepreneurs in sustaining their business endeavors (Kahn, 1990). When the entrepreneur's vision is not congruent with that of the team, the result may be business failure (Preller et al., 2020). We refer to entrepreneurs' understanding of the clarity, sharedness, achievability, and worthiness (Anderson and West, 1998) of their business objectives as a team vision. Based on the psychological theory of engagement (Kahn, 1990; Kahn and Heaphy, 2013) and the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001b), we investigate whether a lack of team vision is associated with increased entrepreneurs' emotional and physical disengagement. Furthermore, we scrutinize whether the relationship between team vision and physical disengagement is channeled through emotional disengagement. Our primary research question is: "Does emotional disengagement mediate the relationship between team vision and physical disengagement?"

Prior studies have revealed that disengagement is a context-dependent variable, necessitating further research to understand why and under what conditions entrepreneurial disengagement occurs (Johnson et al., 2022; Toft-Kehler et al., 2016), especially in entrepreneurship. In this research, we focus on the moderating role of emotional support in mediation relationships. Emotional support has proven instrumental in the entrepreneurial process (Arregle et al., 2015; Edelman et al., 2016), allowing entrepreneurs to persevere through difficult situations by boosting their optimism (Baron, 2008) and helping them maintain their entrepreneurial identity (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010). Emotional support can be provided through social interactions with various sources, such as family and social networks (Zhu et al., 2017), and it can influence how entrepreneurs assess their surroundings (Allen and French, 2023; French et al., 2018). While some scholars have studied emotional support as a general construct (Klyver et al., 2018), others have focused on either family (Arregle et al., 2015) or social (Kim et al., 2013) emotional support. Most studies, however, implicitly assume that emotional support is homogeneous across different sources (Agneessens et al., 2006; Klyver et al., 2020) and do not distinguish between the various types of emotional support, such as family or social support. A few studies that have simultaneously investigated other sources of emotional support have revealed varying impacts of the emotional support of family and social networks (Klyver et al., 2020).

Moreover, while the significance of family support (Tasavori et al., 2018; Werbel and Danes, 2010; Zaefarian et al., 2016) and support from social networks (Ahmadi and Soga, 2022; Arregle et al., 2015) in various stages of entrepreneurship has been well documented, the specific relationship between family and social networks' emotional support and the entrepreneurs' disengagement process requires further investigation. This research seeks to address the above gaps. Building on the JD-R theory (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001b), we examine whether emotional support from family and social networks (e.g., friends) has homogeneous or heterogeneous moderating impacts on the aforementioned mediation relationship.

Based on the analysis of data collected from a survey of 184 entrepreneurs in the UK, our findings offer several important contributions. First, this research enriches the entrepreneurship literature by addressing entrepreneurs' disengagement, a relatively underexplored area (Afrahi, 2019). We also provide new insights by highlighting the role of

team vision and emotional disengagement in explaining entrepreneurs' physical disengagement. Additionally, we examine whether family emotional support and social networks' emotional support play similar roles in moderating these relationships. Our research contributes to the theory of psychological engagement by exploring emotional disengagement as an antecedent of physical disengagement, addressing the call for a deeper understanding of these aspects of disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022; Kahn, 1990). Furthermore, we advance the JD-R theory (Demerouti et al., 2001b) by investigating family and social networks' emotional support as job resources in the entrepreneurs' disengagement process. Lastly, our research enhances the human resource management literature (Rastogi et al., 2018) by offering new perspectives on different aspects of disengagement (emotional and physical), illustrating their differences, and identifying their predictors and contingent factors. Together, our findings inform strategies to support entrepreneurs through periods when they may be emotionally and physically disengaged and offer the prospect of reducing premature venture exits.

To address the identified gaps in entrepreneurial disengagement research, we first build a theoretical foundation on the psychological (Kahn, 1990) and JD-R engagement theories (Bakker et al., 2023). On this foundation, we develop a series of hypotheses proposing that emotional disengagement mediates the relationship between team vision and physical disengagement and that emotional support from family and social networks moderates these relationships. Next, the research methodology and findings are presented. We then discuss the implications of our findings for entrepreneurship theory and practice, along with directions for future research.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical background

### 2.1. Literature review

The concept of work engagement has received considerable attention in the management literature (Markoulli et al., 2017), whereas work disengagement has been relatively underexplored (Rastogi et al., 2018). This represents a significant gap, given that scholars have highlighted the theoretical and practical distinctions between engagement and disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022). Several theoretical frameworks have been utilized to study disengagement, including the psychological theory of engagement (Kahn, 1990), JD-R theory (Demerouti et al., 2001b), burnout theory (Maslach and Jackson, 1981), and coping theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Drawing on these theories, researchers have examined various factors across different contexts and countries predicting employee and entrepreneur disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022; Rastogi et al., 2018).

For example, Parkinson and McBain (2013) conducted qualitative research by interviewing managers and employees from 10 large UK public and private sector organizations, revealing that poor communication significantly contributes to employee disengagement. Similarly, Azeem et al. (2020) studied the impact of psychological contract violations on work disengagement in banking sector organizations in Pakistan. They found that employees who perceive their organizations have broken promises are more likely to feel disengaged and leave—explored how to re-engage older workers in Canada, illustrating that organizations should focus on supportive management, organizational culture, and career development to increase the commitment of disengaged employees.

Building on the JD-R theory, Bakker et al. (2004) suggested that a lack of job resources, such as autonomy, development opportunities, and social support, leads to disengagement. In contrast, job demands, such as workload, emotional needs, and work-home conflict, contribute to exhaustion, leading to work disengagement. Boyd et al. (2014) examined how employees in a large retail organization manage perceived increases in job demands due to staff reductions, emphasizing the role of psychological resources (such as self-efficacy) and coping strategies

(such as disengagement) in adapting to these changes. Their study also investigated how the perceived availability or lack of job resources (such as social support, decision authority, and organizational justice) affects employees' ability to cope with increased demands. In entrepreneurship, Afrahi and Blackburn (2019) it was found that factors such as entrepreneurs' experience, self-doubt, vision for the business, and firm size impact emotional disengagement, which in turn predicts the exit strategy entrepreneurs choose. A summary of the reviewed literature is provided in Appendix A.

As illustrated in the reviewed literature, most prior studies have primarily focused on employee disengagement, rarely examining entrepreneurial disengagement (for an exception, see Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019). Furthermore, many of these studies have not differentiated between various types of disengagement, such as emotional and physical (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004). This research, grounded in the psychological theory of engagement and the JD-R theory, aims to address this gap. Additionally, while many studies have explored individual, job-related, and organizational environment factors (Afrahi et al., 2022), our research contributes to the literature by highlighting the significance of an important organizational aspect (team vision) in the context of entrepreneurial businesses. In Sections 2.2 and 2.3, we provide an overview of the theoretical perspectives of this research.

## 2.2. Psychological theory of engagement

The psychological theory of engagement (Kahn, 1990, 1992; Kahn and Heaphy, 2013) posits that disengagement from work is a personal choice influenced by psychological resources and the sense of meaningful work. It represents individuals' decision to withdraw cognitively, emotionally, and physically, determining their role performances. In this context, disengagement involves individuals distancing themselves from their business to safeguard their psychological well-being from real or perceived challenges (Wollard and Shuck, 2011). Conversely, engagement is characterized by active participation in tasks, sustained cognitive alertness and concentration, and the establishment of emotional bonds with work and colleagues (Kahn, 1990, 1992). Entrepreneurs engage or disengage based on assessing psychological factors such as meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990, 1992; Kahn and Heaphy, 2013). According to (Kahn, 1990), individuals consider three key questions when deciding whether to engage in an activity: (1) To what extent does it feel worthwhile for me to engage in this performance? (2) How secure do I feel in doing so? and (3) How ready am I to participate?

Psychological meaningfulness pertains to the sense that the efforts invested in one's business are worthwhile (Kahn, 1990). Entrepreneurs assess this meaningfulness by comparing the value of their business objectives with their ideals (May et al., 2004). A lack of significance in one's work can lead to feelings of detachment from one's tasks. Psychological safety involves the ability to contribute without fearing negative consequences. When entrepreneurs encounter situations characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, or threats, they may experience a sense of insecurity (May et al., 2004). Lastly, psychological availability refers to having the necessary physical, emotional, and psychological resources to engage in one's business fully. This availability fluctuates based on how individuals balance the various demands of their work and personal lives (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004).

## 2.3. Job demands-resources theory

In this study, we draw on the JD-R theory because it is directly relevant to resources and demands inherent in entrepreneurial activities (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001b). This theory focuses on individuals' perception of the balance between the demands of their jobs and the resources available to deal with those demands (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Job demands are aspects of a job that require sustained effort. They often lead to psychological costs – for example,

experience of fatigue and anxiety (Demerouti et al., 2001a). Job resources, on the other hand, include physical, psychological, social, or organizational elements that support individuals in performing their work. For entrepreneurs, job demands could include high workload, interpersonal conflict, and financial performance pressures. Hence, their job resources could consist of positive feedback, appreciation, and support from team members, family, and social networks. The role of resources is to fuel individuals' work so they can achieve their work objectives while buffering against the negative effects of job demands (Bakker et al., 2023).

The JD-R theory also indicates that the severity of job demands requires increased allocation of energy and effort, which can deplete individuals' physical, emotional, and cognitive resources, potentially leading to disengagement. Conversely, the availability of job resources triggers a motivational process, fulfills psychological needs, and subsequently fosters motivation (Bakker and Demerouti, 2024). Intrinsically motivated individuals are likelier to invest more emotion and energy in their work, whereas high job demands can lead to disengagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

Finally, the JD-R theory suggests that disengagement is not merely a passive response to resource depletion but can also serve as an active coping strategy (Ahmed et al., 2022). Individuals often consciously choose to disengage emotionally and physically to compensate for a lack of resources and manage the demands of their jobs. Thus, disengagement represents individuals' cognitive and behavioral efforts (Demerouti et al., 2001b) to reduce and tolerate the internal and external demands created by an imbalance between the demands and the resources of their job (Afrahi et al., 2022).

## 3. Hypothesis development

### 3.1. The association between lack of team vision and entrepreneurs' emotional disengagement

Drawing on the psychological theory of engagement (Kahn, 1990) and JD-R theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), we propose that when entrepreneurs perceive their team's vision as a job resource that is clear, valuable, achievable, shared, and aligned with their personal and business goals, they are more likely to engage emotionally with their business. A vision that aligns with the entrepreneur's objectives and is seen as achievable and worthwhile provides a sense of psychological meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990; Wiklund et al., 2019). This sense of meaningfulness is crucial for entrepreneurs to remain emotionally engaged with their business (Cardon et al., 2017). When entrepreneurs view the team vision as consequential, it motivates them to identify new opportunities (Preller et al., 2020) and enhances their emotional investment in their businesses. Furthermore, when business objectives are perceived as meaningful, they can inspire dedication and devotion from team members. Meaningful objectives function as job resources, fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

Entrepreneurs who view their work as contributing to a meaningful vision are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2009). This intrinsic motivation drives dedication and commitment, characterized by a willingness to invest emotionally in their business (Rosso et al., 2010). Conversely, when job demands rise and the business no longer aligns with the entrepreneur's objectives, vision, and aspirations, motivation to invest emotional resources wanes (Gabay-Mariani, 2022), increasing the likelihood of emotional disengagement.

Having a vision for the business not only fosters a collective identity and purpose in entrepreneurial teams but also plays a crucial role in sustaining engagement in entrepreneurial activities (West III, 2007). A shared vision instills a sense of purpose and confidence in working toward common entrepreneurial objectives and goals (Ensley and Pearce, 2001). Furthermore, when team members have a clear understanding of the vision and objectives, this reflects effective communication within the team (Preller et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2015) and enhances

collaboration and emotional investment in the business (Zhou et al., 2015).

An achievable vision provides direction and motivation, especially when facing challenges such as financial uncertainty (Ensley and Pearce, 2001). This reassurance is vital to maintain entrepreneurs' emotional engagement because it confirms that their efforts are directed and purposeful (Shepherd et al., 2015). Team vision functions as a motivational resource; it promotes emotional engagement and buffers against the stressors that entrepreneurs encounter (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Conversely, a lack of team vision depletes job resources, including the emotional engagement of the entrepreneur (Bakker and Demerouti, 2024). According to the JD-R theory, this depletion can lead to increased disengagement as a coping mechanism to address the imbalance between demands and resources (Ahmed et al., 2022). Therefore, when entrepreneurs have access to a well-defined team vision, they are more likely to remain emotionally engaged with their ventures. Integrating insights from the psychological theory of engagement with the JD-R theory, we propose that:

**Hypothesis 1.** A lack of team vision is associated with entrepreneurs' emotional disengagement from their businesses.

### 3.2. The association between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement

Based on the psychological engagement theory and the JD-R theory, we propose that entrepreneurs experiencing emotional disengagement will also exhibit physical disengagement, characterized by a reduced investment of job resources, such as effort, time, and energy, into their businesses. The emotional connection that entrepreneurs have with their ventures significantly influences their physical actions and commitment (Murnieks et al., 2014). Entrepreneurs' emotional excitement serves as a job resource that can mitigate the demands of running a venture (Bakker and Demerouti, 2024). Emotional excitement enhances psychological availability (Kahn, 1990) and encourages entrepreneurs to allocate additional time and effort to their business, including working overtime if necessary (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Personal investment in the business enhances entrepreneurs' presence and dedication (Ucbasaran et al., 2003; Yamakawa and Cardon, 2017). Consequently, when entrepreneurs perceive a lack of intrinsic motivation in or attachment to the business, they may exhibit withdrawal behaviors, such as reduced physical involvement and commitment (Bakker et al., 2023).

When entrepreneurs emotionally disengage from their businesses, they often exhibit physical withdrawal behaviors. Emotional disengagement undermines their sense of psychological ownership toward their ventures (Pierce et al., 2001) – a cognitive-affective construct marked by possessiveness and emotional attachment to an entity (Pierce et al., 2001). This sense of ownership is crucial in shaping entrepreneurial self-identity and motivation (Cardon et al., 2009) because it fosters a sense of responsibility and drives entrepreneurs to invest personal resources in their businesses (Townsend et al., 2010). As emotional disengagement erodes this sense of ownership, entrepreneurs are more likely to demonstrate withdrawal behaviors, including decreased effort, reduced time commitment, and diminished dedication to their ventures (Cardon, 2008).

The JD-R theory emphasizes the importance of job resources in maintaining engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Emotional disengagement signifies a depletion of emotional resources and occurs when job demands surpass available resources. By emotionally disengaging, entrepreneurs can reduce demand for their personal resources and potentially prevent further depletion (Afrahi, 2019; Afrahi et al., 2022). A lack of job resources can lead to disengagement as a coping mechanism (Ahmed et al., 2022) to conserve limited personal resources, such as energy, time, and effort (Shepherd et al., 2011). Based on these theoretical perspectives, we propose that:

**Hypothesis 2.** Entrepreneurs' emotional disengagement from their businesses is positively associated with their physical disengagement from their businesses.

### 3.3. The mediating role of emotional disengagement

Building on the first hypothesis, we propose that, when entrepreneurs perceive the team vision as a job resource that is unclear, unachievable, or unworthy, their sense of psychological meaningfulness diminishes, making them less likely to invest emotionally in their businesses. Consistent with the second hypothesis, when entrepreneurs experience emotional disengagement due to job demands and insufficient job resources, their psychological availability decreases, leading to a reduction in physical dedication to their business operations. Based on these premises, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 3.** Emotional disengagement mediates the relationship between team vision and entrepreneurs' physical disengagement from their businesses.

### 3.4. The moderating role of family and social networks' emotional support in the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement

Based on the psychological theory of engagement, we propose that family and social networks' emotional support can strengthen the relationship between team vision and emotional engagement by enhancing entrepreneurs' sense of psychological meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990; Kahn and Heaphy, 2013). Several mechanisms contribute to this enhancement. Prior research has highlighted the importance of social approval in successfully managing a business (Wu and Lin, 2016). Social approval helps entrepreneurs perceive their team vision as meaningful and worthy of emotional attachment. Emotional support from family members and social networks is often seen as validation and encouragement (Gottlieb and Bergen, 2010; Newbert et al., 2013; Powell and Eddleston, 2013). When family members show genuine interest in entrepreneurs' endeavors and are responsive to their work-related achievements and challenges, entrepreneurs feel supported (King et al., 1995; Zhu et al., 2017), which fosters satisfaction. This satisfaction helps entrepreneurs feel valued, appreciated, and empowered (Edelman et al., 2016), thereby generating job resources that facilitate their commitment to achieving the team vision and enhancing their emotional engagement.

Moreover, discussing challenges with the family and social networks can help entrepreneurs remain emotionally engaged with their businesses. When entrepreneurs talk about their challenges, family members and social networks often provide emotional support. This support helps entrepreneurs to be reminded of their team's objectives and recognize the value of their team vision. This recognition reinforces the importance of their shared vision in the venture and further fosters emotional investment in their businesses (Pollack et al., 2012; Strese et al., 2018). Essentially, entrepreneurs who receive emotional support are better equipped to navigate challenges (Cardon and Patel, 2015; Shepherd et al., 2011), maintain motivation (Foo et al., 2009; Nambisan and Baron, 2013), and sustain their investment of emotion and energy in their businesses, thereby reducing the likelihood of emotional disengagement (Byrne and Shepherd, 2015; Shepherd et al., 2011). Conversely, without such emotional support, entrepreneurs may start to question the significance and value of their entrepreneurial endeavors (Arregle et al., 2015; Edelman et al., 2016), leading to emotional disengagement.

Family and social networks' emotional support can complement job resources by offering understanding, empathy, and sympathy, which provide entrepreneurs with a sense of validation and encouragement regarding their team vision (Werbel and Danes, 2010). According to the JD-R theory, emotional support can act as a buffer and serve as a source

of encouragement for entrepreneurs (Werbel and Danes, 2010), enhancing their personal resources, such as confidence and optimism (Bakker and Demerouti, 2024). Recent research indicates that strong emotional support enables entrepreneurs to better manage work-related stress and maintain emotional engagement with their work visions (Edelman et al., 2016).

Family and social networks' emotional support can also be viewed as a resource that helps entrepreneurs cope with the demands and stressors associated with a lack of a clear team vision (Ahmed et al., 2022). Consequently, this support increases the likelihood that entrepreneurs will invest emotionally in their businesses (McNall et al., 2010; Van Steenberghe et al., 2007). Furthermore, the JD-R theory suggests that resources, such as emotional support, can amplify the positive effects of other resources, such as a team vision (Schaufeli et al., 2008). Together, these resources can lead to increased motivation and reduced emotional disengagement. Therefore, we propose that:

**Hypothesis 4.** Family emotional support moderates the impact of a lack of team vision on entrepreneurs' emotional disengagement from their businesses.

**Hypothesis 5.** Social networks' emotional support moderates the effect of a lack of team vision on entrepreneurs' emotional disengagement from their businesses.

### 3.5. The moderating role of family and social networks' emotional support in the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement

In this hypothesis, drawing on the psychological theory of engagement, we argue that family and social networks' emotional support fosters feelings of psychological safety and availability in entrepreneurs. By receiving emotional support, entrepreneurs can reduce their concerns about the potential negative outcomes of failure and develop trust in their networks, which helps them feel more secure (Casson and Giusta, 2007). This trust contributes to a sense of psychological safety (Kahn, 1990). When entrepreneurs perceive their family and social networks as trustworthy and non-judgmental, they are more likely to confide in them about their business challenges (McGuire, 2007). For instance, entrepreneurs may openly share their decreased enthusiasm for their businesses and their reluctance to invest additional energy, thereby influencing their physical disengagement from their ventures.

Moreover, when entrepreneurs discuss their challenges with family and social networks, they often find reassurance in knowing that any critical feedback is intended to be constructive rather than detrimental (Greve and Salaff, 2003; Jensen and Koenig, 2002). Emotional support from these networks, coupled with the psychological safety they provide, can foster a sense of resilience among entrepreneurs – a personal resource that helps them manage job demands (Bakker et al., 2023). This resilience supports their ability to maintain both emotional and physical engagement with their businesses, even in the face of challenges (Newbert et al., 2013; Shepherd et al., 2009).

Family and social networks' emotional support also enhances entrepreneurs' psychological availability by reinforcing their vocational identity and sustaining entrepreneurial passion (Cardon et al., 2009; Hoang and Gimeno, 2010). Emotional support helps entrepreneurs view themselves as more committed to their entrepreneurial identity and fosters their ability to manage stress effectively (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010; Powell and Baker, 2014). This support not only aids in stress management but also boosts innovation and problem-solving capabilities (Baron et al., 2016; Isen, 2002; Madjar, 2008). Consequently, emotional support plays a significant role in encouraging entrepreneurs to stay engaged with their businesses, thereby reinforcing their overall investment of emotion and energy and their resilience in sustaining the business (Klyver et al., 2018).

Furthermore, emotional support from family and social networks influences how entrepreneurs perceive their external environment.

Positive emotional support helps entrepreneurs adopt a more favorable outlook on their surroundings (Isen, 2002) and fosters optimism about business success (Newbert et al., 2013; Shepherd et al., 2009). This optimism allows entrepreneurs to view their ventures positively, evaluating their feasibility and desirability in a positive light (Baron, 2008; Williams and Wood, 2015; Wood et al., 2014). As a result, they are more willing to invest their emotion, time, and energy in their businesses (Uy et al., 2015).

The absence of emotional support from family members can lead to significant challenges for entrepreneurs, including increased frustration and conflict within family dynamics (Ahmed et al., 2022; Edwards and Lopez, 2006). When family support is lacking, entrepreneurs may struggle to manage the competing demands of work and family responsibilities (Bakker et al., 2008). This struggle can reduce psychological availability and result in negative emotional spillover into their work activities (Williams and Alliger, 1994), impeding their willingness to invest additional time and energy in their businesses (Wayne et al., 2006).

Based on the JD-R theory, heightened levels of emotional support enable entrepreneurs to cultivate psychological resilience and adaptability (personal resources) (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), allowing them to effectively navigate uncertainties (Ahmed et al., 2022) or conflicts within their business sphere. This enhancement in personal resources acts as a buffer against job demands and reduces the likelihood of disengagement (Bakker et al., 2023). The emotional support entrepreneurs receive from their families and social networks can create positive effects, generating an upward spiral of additional resources, such as increased emotional and energetic investment in their businesses (Fredrickson, 2013; Fredrickson and Branigan, 2005). This support not only improves entrepreneurs' psychological resilience but also enhances their psychological availability. Integrating these insights, we propose:

**Hypothesis 6.** Family emotional support moderates the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement from their businesses.

**Hypothesis 7.** Social networks' emotional support moderates the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement from their businesses.

A summary of our hypotheses is presented in Fig. 1.

## 4. Methods and data

### 4.1. Sample and data collection

Data for this research were collected from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the UK for several reasons. First, SMEs are vital to driving innovation, boosting employment, and contributing to economic development (OECD, 2024). Notably, they represent 99.9% of all businesses in the UK (Federation of Small Businesses, 2023). Additionally, the UK ranks as the second-best country for entrepreneurship in Europe (NimbleFins, 2024), making it an ideal setting for our study. While rooted in the UK environment, the insights gained may resonate with countries that share similar cultures and social and family support structures for SMEs. We utilized the UK FAME database to select SMEs randomly and identified founders, co-founders, owners, or co-owners for the participation (Peljko and Auer Antončič, 2022). These individuals were targeted because of their active involvement in financial management and decision-making processes (Eddleston et al., 2012). Our sample included SMEs from diverse sectors, such as retail, manufacturing, and services, enhancing the relevance of our findings across various entrepreneurial contexts (Neill and York, 2012).

Data collection took place in 2016. Given the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to consider data from a period unaffected by these exceptional circumstances. Employing data from 2016 provides a stable baseline for our analysis, ensuring that our

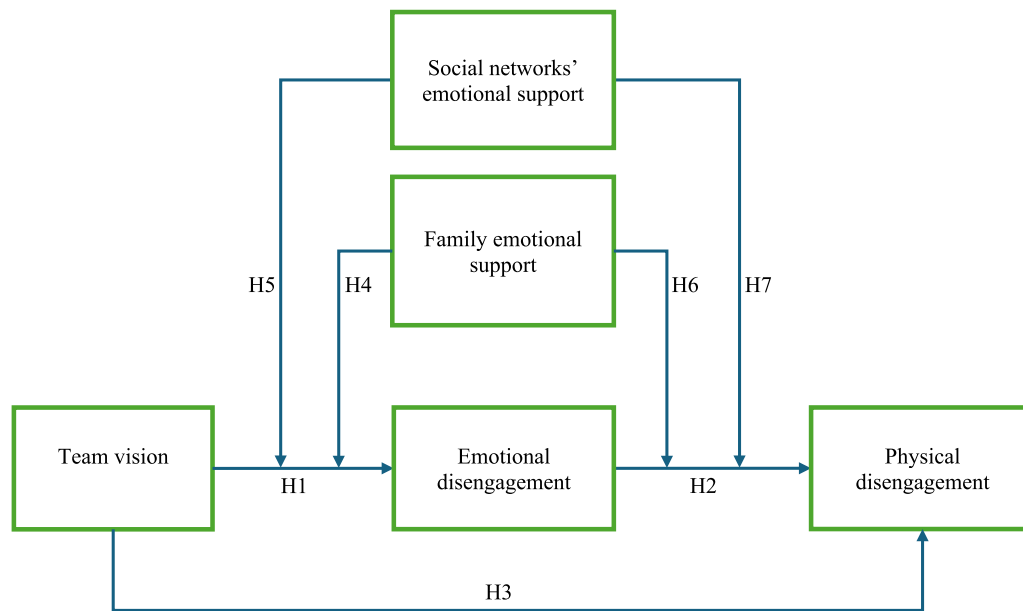


Fig. 1. A summary of hypotheses.

findings reflect the typical conditions SMEs faced before the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented disruption (Crane et al., 2022). Prior to the main study, we conducted a pilot survey with a small sample to validate our measures. A pilot study allows researchers to assess the practicality of their methods and make necessary adjustments (Ismail et al., 2018). Based on feedback from the pilot, we refined the wording of the survey items to better align with the entrepreneurial context. An online questionnaire was then designed using Qualtrics and distributed to 1000 entrepreneurs. To enhance the response rate, we provided an overview of the project's aims at the beginning of the survey and assured respondents of confidentiality and anonymity (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). We also sent two follow-up reminders and a thank-you email to encourage participation (Saunders, 2009). This strategy resulted in 184 usable responses, yielding a response rate of 18.4 %, which aligns with rates reported in other studies involving individual entrepreneurs (DeTienne et al., 2015; Murnieks et al., 2014).

To assess potential non-response bias, we compared the demographics of our sample with those of the broader population of entrepreneurs. We also conducted a *t*-test to compare the means of all study variables between early and late respondents (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). The results indicated no significant differences between the groups, suggesting that non-response bias is unlikely to have influenced our findings.

#### 4.2. Measures

To measure team vision, we used items suggested by prior studies (Anderson and West, 1998). Emotional disengagement and physical disengagement were assessed based on the framework proposed by May et al. (2004). Family emotional support was evaluated using a three-item scale from Canty-Mitchell and Zimet (2000) and Zimet et al. (1990), while social networks' emotional support was measured using three items adapted from Zimet et al. (1988). All constructs were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1: "strongly disagree" to 5: "strongly agree". A detailed list of items and their corresponding factor loadings is provided in Appendix B.

#### 4.3. Control variables

We controlled several variables known to be associated with entrepreneurial physical disengagement to account for variations in this

distal outcome. Firstly, we included firm age, measured by the number of years the business has been operating because it is well documented that firm age can influence entrepreneurs' engagement with and sustained emotional and physical attachment to their business (Justo et al., 2015; Ryan and Power, 2012). The duration of a business's operation reflects the extent of entrepreneurs' involvement and their emotional attachment to the firm. Typically, longer firm tenure is associated with lower likelihoods of emotional and physical disengagement (Justo et al., 2015; Ryan and Power, 2012). Additionally, we accounted for the financial performance of the firm because this can impact entrepreneurs' physical disengagement (Harada, 2007a; Sullivan et al., 1997). We gathered data on the firm's profit or loss from the previous fiscal year to control for this factor (Powell and Eddleston, 2013; Yamakawa and Cardon, 2017).

Furthermore, we controlled for firm size, measured by the logarithm of the number of employees (Afrahi, 2019). Prior research indicates that entrepreneurs managing smaller firms are more prone to withdrawal and disengagement compared to those leading larger firms (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019). This tendency may be due to the smaller number of individuals involved in the operations and decision-making processes of smaller firms, which can make it easier for entrepreneurs to withdraw (DeTienne and Cardon, 2012; DeTienne et al., 2015).

The gender of entrepreneurs was controlled for because it might influence disengagement levels. For example, women may face greater pressure to balance work and family responsibilities, which could affect their engagement with their businesses (Justo et al., 2015). Age was another factor that was considered because it often correlates with the entrepreneur's level of experience and may impact physical disengagement (DeTienne and Cardon, 2012; Wennberg et al., 2010). Additionally, we controlled for education because it can influence access to resources, such as financial support and valuable social networks, which could affect physical disengagement (Arenius and Clercq, 2005; DeTienne and Cardon, 2012). Education was measured by asking entrepreneurs about their highest level of education, ranging from 1 (less than high school) to 7 (doctorate).

#### 4.4. Common method bias

Since both dependent and independent variables were collected from the same respondents, there is a risk of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To mitigate this risk, we implemented several strategies

before and after data collection, as recommended by Podsakoff and Organ (1986). Before data collection, we varied response formats by using Likert-type scales for emotional disengagement and open-ended questions for variables such as age, and we ensured that predictors and criterion variables were separated in the questionnaire design, following the guidelines of Krishnan et al. (2006).

After data collection, we performed Harman’s one-factor test to assess common method bias. In this test, all items were loaded onto a single factor in an unrotated factor solution. According to Podsakoff and Organ (1986), if a significant amount of common method variance were present, a single factor would account for most of the variance. The results showed that the one-factor solution explained only 19.49 % of the variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50 %. Additionally, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis where all model items were loaded onto a single factor, and the goodness-of-fit statistics indicated a poor fit ( $X^2 = 1054.8$ ,  $df = 135$ ,  $X^2/df = 7.8$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.2$ ;  $CFI = 0.14$ ;  $TLI = 0.03$ ;  $SRMR = 0.16$ ). These results indicate that common method bias is unlikely to be a significant issue in our study.

5. Analysis

5.1. Reliability and validity of constructs

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Amos 28, following the approach recommended by Byrne (2010). The analysis indicated a good fit of the model to the data, with the following fit indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.93, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.92, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05,  $\chi^2 = 200.43$ , degrees of freedom ( $df = 123$ , and  $\chi^2/df = 1.62$ ). Convergent validity was also established where the composite reliability of all constructs exceeded 0.7, and the average variance extracted (AVE) was above 0.5. Discriminant validity was also confirmed because the maximum shared variance (MSV) was lower than AVE. Furthermore, the square root of AVE was greater than the inter-construct correlations, as shown in Table 1 (Hair et al., 2019).

5.2. Results

The results of our analysis indicate how a lack of shared vision can lead to various forms of disengagement, and how different forms of emotional support can influence this process. To analyze the data, we employed regression analysis and PROCESS models in SPSS to test our hypotheses, utilizing the bootstrapping method with 5000 samples. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics and correlations for the constructs. In Table 2, Model 1 shows the results of our analysis with only control variables. In contrast to the existing literature (Harada, 2007b; Justo et al., 2015; Ryan and Power, 2012; Sullivan et al., 1997), our results indicate that firm age, gender, entrepreneur’s age, entrepreneur’s education, and profit or loss are not significant predictors of physical disengagement. However, firm size demonstrated a positive relationship with both emotional disengagement (as shown in Model 1) and physical disengagement (as shown in Model 6). This initial finding suggests that entrepreneurs with larger firms may face more challenges related to disengagement.

5.2.1. Direct effects

Model 2 of Table 2 shows that team vision is negatively associated with emotional disengagement (Model 2:  $\beta = -0.61$ ,  $CI = [-0.75, -0.47]$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. In other words, when entrepreneurs lack a clear and shared team vision, they are more likely to experience emotional disengagement. This result could suggest the importance of a well-defined team vision and open communication to maintain emotional investment in the business. Model 7 further demonstrates that emotional disengagement is positively related to physical disengagement (Model 7:  $\beta = 0.65$ ,  $CI = [0.50, 0.81]$ ), thereby confirming

Table 1  
Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Mean	S.D.	CR	AVE	MSV	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Team vision	4.10	0.59	0.90	0.64	0.20	1.00									
2 Family emotional support	2.59	0.51	0.77	0.53	0.09	0.13	1.00								
3 Social networks' emotional support	2.69	0.64	0.76	0.52	0.09	0.16*	0.37**	1.00							
4 Emotional disengagement	0.22	0.39	0.78	0.54	0.20	-0.54**	-0.13	-0.11	1.00						
5 Physical disengagement	2.29	0.83	0.81	0.52	0.10	0.13	0.19**	0.18*	0.38**	1.00					
6 Entrepreneur's age	56.95	11.00				0.17*	-0.16*	-0.14	-0.05	0.01	1.00				
7 Firm age	18.90	11.36				0.09	-0.12	-0.09	0.01	0.03	0.58**	1.00			
8 Profit or loss	1.16	0.37				0.00	-0.251**	-0.14	0.03	-0.07	0.12	-0.12	1.00		
9 Gender	1.91	0.28				0.19*	-0.04	-0.07	-0.09	-0.03	0.19**	0.10	0.08	1.00	
10 Firm size (Log)	1.59	0.59				0.07	0.05	-0.07	-0.23**	-0.20**	0.26**	0.28**	-0.11	0.167*	1.00
11 Education	4.42	1.80				0.02	0.13	0.11	0.07	0.04	-0.07	-0.16*	0.02	0.06	-0.03

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 2**  
Regression result.

	Emotional disengagement					Physical disengagement				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
<b>Predictors:</b>										
Team vision		−0.61 (0.07) [−0.75, −0.47]	−0.61 (0.07) [−0.75, −0.47]	−0.67 (0.07) [−0.81, −0.53]	−0.65 (0.07) [−0.79, −0.51]		0.46 (0.09) [0.29,0.63]	0.47 (0.09) [0.31,0.64]	0.48 (0.08) [0.31,0.64]	0.46 (0.08) [0.29,0.63]
Family emotional support		−0.04 (0.07) [−0.18,0.10]	−0.08 (0.07) [−0.22,0.05]		−0.07 (0.07) [−0.21,0.07]		0.18 (0.07) [0.04,0.32]	0.20 (0.07) [0.07,0.34]		0.17 (0.07) [0.03,0.31]
Social networks' emotional support		−0.02 (0.07) [−0.16,0.11]		−0.04 (0.06) [−0.16,0.08]	−0.03 (0.07) [−0.16,0.10]		0.09 (0.07) [−0.04,0.23]		0.16 (0.06) [0.03,0.29]	0.11 (0.07) [−0.02,0.24]
Emotional disengagement							0.65 (0.08) [0.50,0.81]	0.65 (0.08) [0.49,0.8]	0.64 (0.08) [0.48,0.79]	0.65 (0.08) [0.49,0.8]
<b>Interactions:</b>										
Int_1			−0.12 (0.07) [−0.25,0.001]		−0.09 (0.06) [−0.21,0.04]					
Int_2				−0.18 (0.07) [−0.31, −0.05]	−0.16 (0.07) [−0.29, −0.02]					
Int_3							0.09 (0.07) [−0.06,0.23]			0.03 (0.08) [−0.12,0.18]
Int_4									0.20 (0.07) [0.06,0.35]	0.19 (0.08) [0.04,0.34]
<b>Control variables:</b>										
Entrepreneur's age	−0.004 (0.01) [−0.02,0.01]	0.004 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.003 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.004 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.003 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.003 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.003 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.002 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.003 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]
Firm age	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01,0.03]	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.001 (0.01) [−0.01,0.02]	0.001 (0.01) [−0.01,0.01]	0.001 (0.01) [−0.02,0.01]	−0.001 (0.01) [−0.01,0.01]
Profit or loss	0.08 (0.21) [−0.34,0.5]	−0.07 (0.18) [−0.43,0.29]	−0.09 (0.18) [−0.45,0.27]	−0.11 (0.18) [−0.45,0.24]	−0.14 (0.18) [−0.5,0.21]	−0.28 (0.21) [−0.7,0.14]	−0.09 (0.18) [−0.46,0.27]	−0.14 (0.19) [−0.5,0.23]	0.26 (0.18) [−0.61,0.1]	−0.16 (0.18) [−0.52,0.2]
Gender	−0.22 (0.27) [−0.76,0.32]	−0.03 (0.25) [−0.51,0.46]	−0.15 (0.25) [−0.64,0.35]	−0.02 (0.24) [−0.5,0.46]	−0.12 (0.25) [−0.61,0.38]	−0.001 (0.27) [−0.54,0.54]	−0.14 (0.25) [−0.63,0.35]	−0.23 (0.25) [−0.73,0.28]	0.20 (0.25) [−0.69,0.29]	−0.19 (0.25) [−0.69,0.3]
Firm size (Log)	−0.4 (0.13) [−0.66, −0.13]	−0.38 (0.11) [−0.61, −0.16]	−0.4 (0.11) [−0.62,0.18]	−0.38 (0.11) [−0.6, −0.16]	−0.39 (0.11) [−0.61, −0.17]	−0.41 (0.14) [−0.68, −0.15]	−0.17 (0.12) [−0.4,0.07]	−0.18 (0.12) [−0.41,0.05]	0.14 (0.12) [−0.37,0.1]	−0.16 (0.12) [−0.39,0.07]
Education	0.04 (0.04) [−0.04,0.13]	0.05 (0.04) [−0.02,0.12]	0.05 (0.04) [−0.02,0.12]	0.05 (0.03) [−0.22,0.11]	0.05 (0.03) [−0.02,0.12]	0.03 (0.04) [−0.06,0.11]	−0.02 (0.04) [−0.09,0.06]	−0.01 (0.04) [−0.08,0.06]	0.01 (0.04) [−0.08,0.06]	−0.01 (0.04) [−0.08,0.06]

$n = 184$ ; unstandardized coefficients are reported; standard errors in parentheses; confidence interval in square brackets;

Int\_1: Team vision \* Family emotional support.

Int\_2: Team vision \* Social networks' emotional support.

Int\_3: Emotional disengagement \* Family emotional support.

Int\_4: Emotional disengagement \* Social networks' emotional support.



**Hypothesis 2.** This indicates that, when entrepreneurs are less emotionally invested in their businesses, they are more likely to reduce their energy and time investment, resulting in physical disengagement. This aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of shared vision in entrepreneurial teams (Preller et al., 2020) and the role of emotions in entrepreneurial processes (Cardon et al., 2012).

5.2.2. Mediation effect

We tested our mediation hypothesis (Hypothesis 3) using the bootstrapping technique (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) with the PROCESS package in SPSS. This method allowed us to examine direct, indirect, and total effects in our mediating path. The analysis revealed that the direct effect of team vision on physical disengagement is positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.50$ ,  $CI = [0.33, 0.67]$ ). However, the indirect effect of team vision on physical disengagement through emotional disengagement is negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.39$ ,  $CI = [-0.58, -0.23]$ ), providing support for Hypothesis 3. These results illustrate how a lack of team vision can lead to diminished emotional engagement, which subsequently affects how entrepreneurs invest their energy and time in their ventures – namely, their physical engagement level. The non-significant total effect of vision on physical disengagement ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $CI = [-0.57, 0.27]$ ) further suggests that the impact of a poorly defined team vision is not immediately physical. Rather, it first weakens the emotional connection entrepreneurs have with their ventures, which in turn leads to reduced physical involvement.

5.2.3. Moderated mediation effects

We first employed PROCESS Model 7 in SPSS to test the moderating effects of family emotional support and social networks’ emotional support on the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement (see Models 3 and 4 in Table 2). Next, we used PROCESS Model 14 to examine the moderating impacts of these supports separately (see Models 8 and 9 in Table 2). Finally, we applied PROCESS Model 75 to assess all moderators simultaneously for Hypotheses 4 to 7. This approach allows us to understand how diverse types of emotional support interact with team vision and both emotional and physical disengagement. The findings are detailed in Models 5 and 10.

The results indicate that the interaction effect of team vision and family emotional support (Int\_1) on emotional disengagement is not significant (Model 5:  $\beta = -0.09$ ,  $CI = [-0.21, 0.04]$ ) (see Fig. 2A), leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 4. This suggests that family emotional support does not moderate the relationship between the lack

of team vision and emotional disengagement. Conversely, the interaction effect of team vision and social networks’ emotional support (Int\_2) on emotional disengagement is significant (Model 5:  $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $CI = [-0.29, -0.02]$ ) (see Fig. 2B), supporting Hypothesis 5. These findings highlight the role that social networks play in mitigating emotional disengagement among entrepreneurs, reinforcing previous research on their importance in entrepreneurial contexts (Zaefarian et al., 2016).

Similarly, we examined the moderating effects of family emotional support and social networks’ emotional support on the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement. The results reveal that the interaction effect of emotional disengagement and family emotional support (Int\_3) on physical disengagement is not significant (Model 10:  $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $CI = [-0.12, 0.18]$ ) (see Fig. 3A), leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 6. Contrary to expectations, family emotional support does not moderate the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement, despite its role being recognized as crucial in the entrepreneurial process (Brüderl and Preisendörfer, 1998; Tasavori et al., 2018). This finding suggests that, while family support is valuable, it may not be sufficient to address deeper issues related to emotional disengagement from business activities.

However, the interaction effect of emotional disengagement and social networks’ emotional support (Int\_4) on physical disengagement is significant (Model 10:  $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $CI = [-0.04, -0.03]$ ) (see Fig. 3B), supporting Hypothesis 7. This finding confirms that social networks’ emotional support positively moderates the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement, aligning with previous research on the significance of social networks in the entrepreneurial process (Pruthi and Tasavori, 2022; Zaefarian et al., 2016). Together with earlier results of team vision and its influence on engagement levels, various forms of support seem to have various impacts on entrepreneurs’ investment of time, energy, and emotions. The distinction between family and social network support might be contrary to what might be expected. Despite the importance of family in entrepreneurship, our findings suggest that different types of support may be more or less effective for entrepreneurs.

6. Discussion of findings

6.1. Discussion

In line with previous research emphasizing the importance of

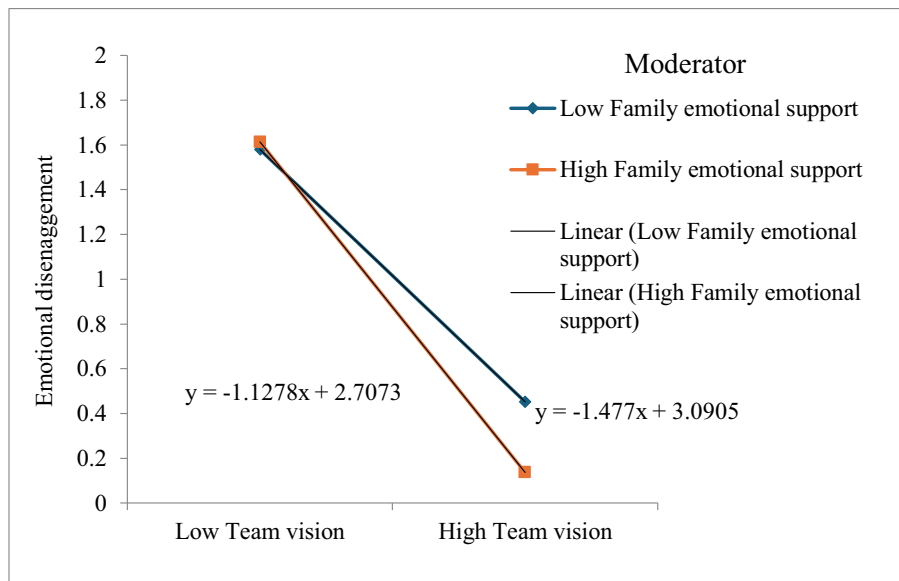


Fig. 2A. The moderating role of family emotional support on the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement.

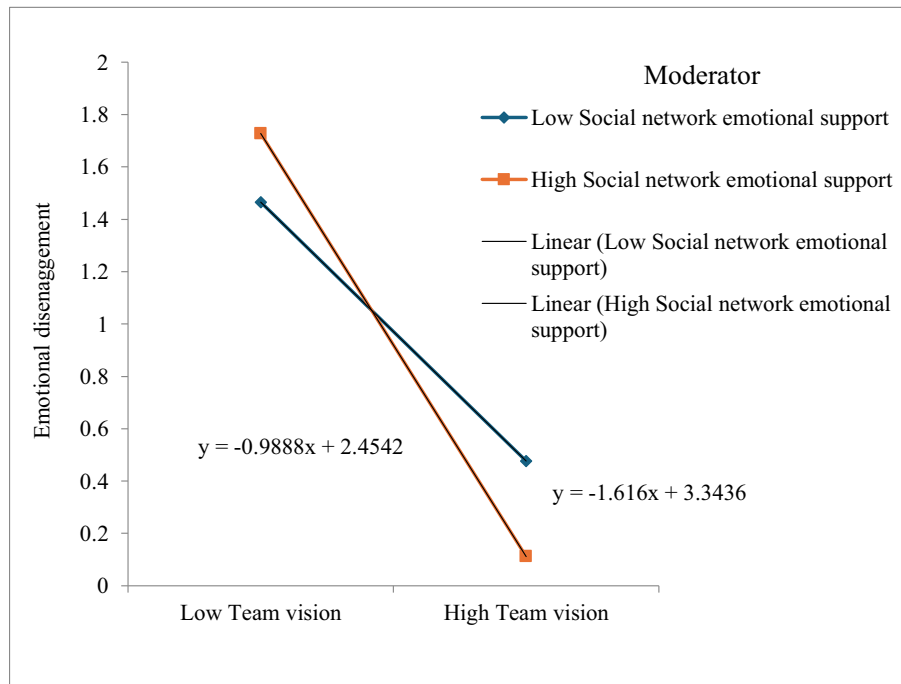


Fig. 2B. The moderating role of social networks' emotional support on the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement.

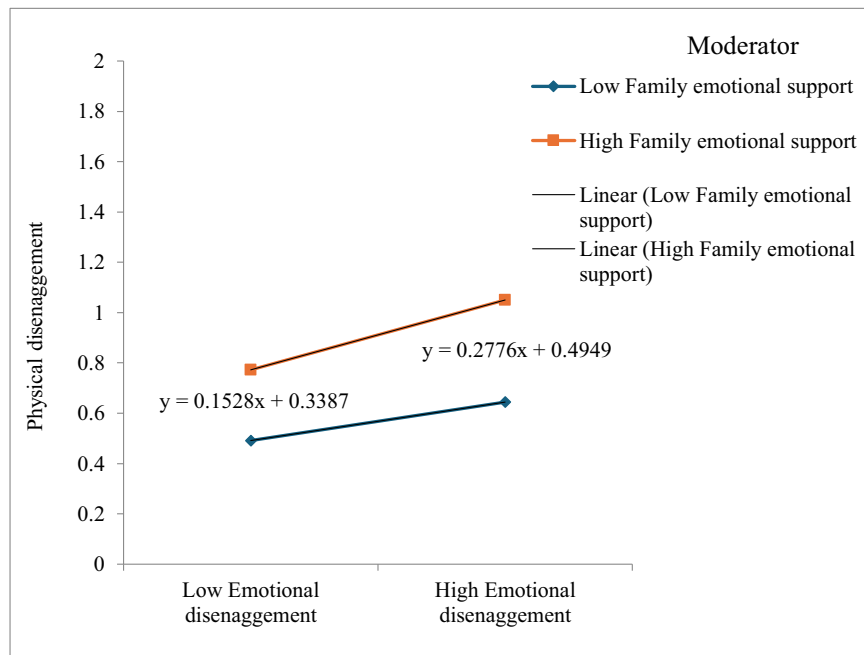


Fig. 3A. The moderating role of family emotional support on the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement.

communication (Parkinson and McBain, 2013) and organizational support (Duxbury and Halinski, 2014), our findings reveal that creating a team vision that is communicated and aligned with the entrepreneurs' values can effectively foster their emotional engagement. Thus, the findings of this research confirm prior studies indicating that a lack of team vision can lead to emotional disengagement (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019). Previous research has also highlighted that an unclear team vision can influence entrepreneurs' decisions to exit their businesses (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019; Strese et al., 2018). Consistent with these findings, our study demonstrates that a lack of team vision not only contributes to emotional disengagement but also significantly impacts

the physical disengagement of entrepreneurs.

Consistent with prior studies, our research supports the distinction between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement within the entrepreneurial process (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019; Kahn, 1990). By demonstrating that emotional disengagement precedes physical disengagement, our study suggests that entrepreneurial exit may be a gradual and process-oriented phenomenon rather than a sudden and binary transition. Entrepreneurs typically undergo a gradual emotional detachment before any observable behavioral changes occur, indicating that exit decisions are often preceded by a period of emotional disengagement. This finding aligns with and extends recent research on the

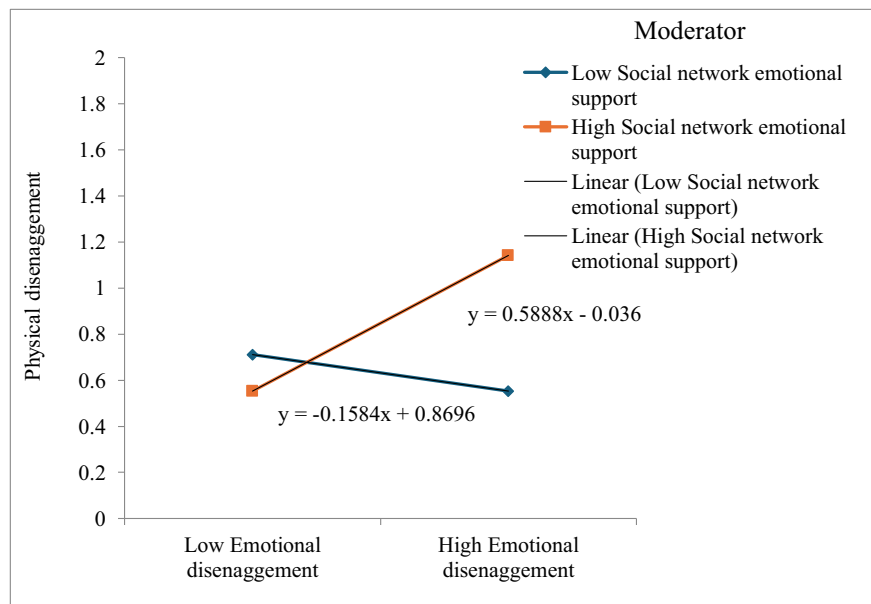


Fig. 3B. The moderating role of social networks' emotional support on the relationship between team emotional disengagement and physical disengagement.

psychological aspects of entrepreneurial persistence and exit (Lin et al., 2022; Nikolova et al., 2021).

One intriguing insight from our research is the non-significant moderating effect of family emotional support on the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement. This finding indicates that not all resources exert the same buffering effect, highlighting the importance of the specific nature and context of the support in influencing engagement levels. The lack of significant moderation by family emotional support could be attributed to several factors. While family members can offer emotional sympathy to entrepreneurs (Welsh et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2017), their understanding of business operations and relationships with stakeholders, such as customers and suppliers, may be limited. This limitation can lead to what might be perceived as blind emotional support (Arregle et al., 2015). Furthermore, family members may not fully comprehend the business vision, potentially reducing their ability to provide the meaningful empathy (Kahn, 1990) necessary to enhance entrepreneurs' emotional engagement with their businesses.

In contrast to the role of family emotional support, our findings highlight that social networks' emotional support plays a crucial role in the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of social networks (e.g., Bakker et al., 2004; Neneh, 2024; Pruthi and Tasavori, 2022), particularly their emotional support, in the entrepreneurship process and disengagement (Arregle et al., 2015; Klyver et al., 2018). The significant impact of social networks' emotional support on the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, unlike family members who might be emotionally invested in the entrepreneurs' success, entrepreneurs' social networks may provide more objective feedback and constructive criticism (Greve and Salaff, 2003; Jenssen and Koenig, 2002). This objective feedback can offer alternative perspectives (Fredrickson and Branigan, 2005) on business strategies and decisions, which can then impact entrepreneurs' emotional investment and their engagement level. Secondly, social networks often include individuals with similar entrepreneurial experiences or expertise. As a result, the emotional support they offer is often more relevant and insightful (Pollack et al., 2016). This tailored support, grounded in direct entrepreneurial experience, can influence how entrepreneurs perceive and manage the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement.

Our findings also reveal a non-significant moderating effect of family emotional support on the relationship between emotional

disengagement and physical disengagement. This may be attributed to several factors. First, managing a business often involves significant pressures and challenges that, combined with entrepreneurs' emotional and physical disengagement, can directly impact family members (Eby et al., 2005). This situation may lead to work–family conflicts, which can help explain our results (Bakker et al., 2008; Bakker and Geurts, 2004). Additionally, entrepreneurs might distance themselves from their businesses as a strategy to manage work–family conflicts, potentially reducing the influence of the negative emotions they experience (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). Another possible explanation is that family members might deplete as much emotional energy as they provide (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003; Justo et al., 2015). As a result, entrepreneurs may compartmentalize their family life from their work to mitigate the demands of the former on the latter, thereby reducing the potential benefits of family support.

In contrast to the non-significant role of family emotional support, social networks' emotional support positively moderates the association between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement. This may be because engaging with social networks allows entrepreneurs to discuss business challenges in a way that fosters psychological safety (Edmondson et al., 2004; Edmondson and Lei, 2014). Prior studies have corroborated the necessity of cultivating individuals' psychological resources to ensure their continued engagement in the business (Boyd et al., 2014). When entrepreneurs openly share their difficulties and emotional experiences with their social networks, they may experience reduced fear of judgment (Kahn, 1990; McGuire, 2007). Unlike conversations with family members, which might be fraught with concerns about impacting family relationships, discussions with social networks can provide a greater sense of psychological safety (Werbel and Danes, 2010). As a result, entrepreneurs are more likely to have open and vulnerable conversations with their social networks (Edmondson and Lei, 2014).

Our findings align with prior research that highlights the differences in entrepreneurs' expectations from various sources of family and social networks' emotional support, such as friends (Klyver et al., 2020). The observed disparities in the impact of family emotional support versus social networks' emotional support likely stem from variations in their relational roles. Previous studies have underscored the distinct nature of the emotional support provided by individuals acting in different roles in entrepreneur lives (Arregle et al., 2015; Montgomery, 1998).

## 6.2. Theoretical contributions

Our research contributes to the entrepreneurship literature in several significant ways. First, it enhances the current understanding of the importance of team vision in the entrepreneurial process (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019; Preller et al., 2020). We demonstrate that team vision is crucial in explaining both emotional and physical disengagement. Specifically, we reveal that the relationship between team vision and physical disengagement is mediated by emotional disengagement. This insight clarifies how the lack of a clear team vision can lead to emotional detachment, which in turn contributes to physical disengagement from the business.

Second, while much scholarly focus has been on venture creation and growth, entrepreneurial exit remains relatively underexplored (DeTienne, 2010; Strese et al., 2018). Our study addresses this gap by emphasizing the concept of entrepreneurs' disengagement, a critical but often overlooked aspect (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019). We enrich the literature by contributing to the understanding of how disengagement unfolds and by highlighting its emotional dimensions. Furthermore, our research expands on existing knowledge regarding emotions (Gerli et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024) and entrepreneurs' emotions specifically (Crosina et al., 2024; De Cock et al., 2020; Klyver et al., 2020; Welsh et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2024). We distinguish between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement, showing that emotional disengagement precedes physical disengagement (Kahn, 1990).

Prior research has consistently highlighted the intricate interplay between business and family dynamics, wherein family members significantly influence decision-making processes and business outcomes (Cruz et al., 2012; Steier et al., 2009). Family members have been shown to play a pivotal role throughout various stages of venture creation, growth, and exit intention (Arregle et al., 2015; Tasavori et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2017). Despite this, previous studies have produced mixed findings regarding the role of family members in entrepreneurship. Some research underscores the critical importance of family support for entrepreneurs and their businesses (Brüderl and Preisendörfer, 1998; Tasavori et al., 2018), while other studies highlight negative impacts (Eby et al., 2005) or suggest a curvilinear relationship (Arregle et al., 2015). Our research contributes to this discussion by demonstrating that family emotional support does not moderate the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement, nor does it moderate the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement.

Our research further enriches the literature on social networks and entrepreneurship (Neneh, 2024; Pruthi and Tasavori, 2022; Zaefarian et al., 2016) by confirming the pivotal role that social networks can play. We demonstrate that social networks' emotional support not only moderates the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement but also influences the connection between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement. This finding highlights the significant impact that supportive social networks can have on entrepreneurs, particularly in buffering against emotional and physical disengagement, and it underscores the role of social networks' emotional support in the entrepreneurial process.

Our research offers novel insights into the psychological theory of engagement (Kahn, 1990) by emphasizing that emotional disengagement typically precedes physical disengagement rather than occurring concurrently. This sequence of disengagement contributes to a deeper understanding of the process by which entrepreneurs detach from their ventures. Our findings address the call for further exploration of the distinct dimensions of disengagement and the progressive nature of the disengagement process (Afrahi et al., 2022; Kahn, 1990; Rastogi et al., 2018). By elucidating the temporal relationship between emotional and physical disengagement, our study enhances the theoretical framework surrounding entrepreneurial persistence and exit.

Furthermore, our research contributes to the JD-R theory (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001b) by validating that certain job

resources, particularly social networks' emotional support, can help entrepreneurs manage job demands and maintain higher levels of engagement. This aligns with the JD-R theory's premise that job resources can mitigate the impact of job demands, thereby fostering engagement. However, our study challenges some aspects of this theoretical perspective by demonstrating that not all job resources have the same buffering effect. Specifically, our findings indicate that family emotional support does not moderate the relationship between team vision and emotional disengagement, nor does it influence the relationship between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement. This highlights a limitation in the JD-R theory's applicability, suggesting that the efficacy of job resources in buffering negative job demands may vary according to their nature and context.

Finally, building on prior research (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019, 2020), this study introduces the concept of disengagement from the human resource management literature (Rastogi et al., 2018) to the field of entrepreneurship. This approach yields two significant contributions to the understanding of work disengagement (Afrahi et al., 2022; Rastogi et al., 2018). First, it broadens the scope of disengagement research by highlighting its relevance not only to employees but also to entrepreneurs, thereby emphasizing the need to address disengagement within entrepreneurial contexts. Second, it clarifies the differences between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement, providing a better understanding of how disengagement is made manifest and how it evolves in entrepreneurship.

## 6.3. Implications for entrepreneurs and policymakers

Our research provides applicable yet research-driven suggestions to address entrepreneurial disengagement. First, we suggest entrepreneurs recognize the critical role that a well-defined team vision plays in maintaining emotional and physical engagement. They should invest time in articulating a clear, achievable, and shared vision that aligns with the values and goals of their team members, revisiting it regularly to ensure it remains relevant and motivating.

Second, fostering a culture of open communication is crucial for entrepreneurs to share their vision and receive feedback, both of which are essential for maintaining emotional engagement and investment in their businesses. By creating an environment where team members feel comfortable expressing their emotions, entrepreneurs can encourage the development of a shared vision that resonates with the entire team. This can be achieved through regular check-ins, cultivating an inclusive and safe atmosphere and promoting transparent discussions about both the successes and challenges faced by the entrepreneurial team.

Third, we recommend that entrepreneurs be vigilant in recognizing early signs of emotional disengagement. These signs can include decreased enthusiasm, emotional and physical withdrawal, and a noticeable detachment from business activities. For instance, entrepreneurs might start avoiding team meetings or communicating less frequently with their team. Identifying these early indicators enables timely interventions, which can help prevent further disengagement and keep the business on track.

Fourth, entrepreneurs could actively cultivate relationships outside their family and immediate business circle. This includes networking with other entrepreneurs, mentors, and industry peers who can provide emotional support and constructive feedback. Encouraging a culture of constructive criticism within these networks is important. Feedback from friends, peers, and mentors who have navigated similar challenges can offer fresh perspectives and help prevent emotional disengagement from escalating. In times of high stress or uncertainty, entrepreneurs should rely on these networks for emotional support, engaging with them regularly through meetings, online forums, and industry events to maintain a steady source of encouragement and advice.

Finally, while family emotional support is invaluable, our findings suggest that it may be more effective in the later stages of disengagement or during the recovery phases. Entrepreneurs should manage their

expectations and avoid over-reliance on family for business-related, emotional challenges. Instead, they should direct these issues to their broader support networks.

For policymakers and educational institutions, there is a pressing need to enhance entrepreneurship education by integrating emotional management into the curriculum. This should include teaching modules on emotional intelligence, stress management, and the importance of vision and mission in entrepreneurship. This will help to prepare budding entrepreneurs for the emotional demands of running a business. Support systems should be developed to identify entrepreneurs at risk of disengagement early on, offering resources such as counseling, mentorship, and peer support to help them navigate challenges before they become overwhelming.

Furthermore, we encourage policymakers to promote work–life balance through initiatives, such as tax incentives for businesses, that provide mental health resources or flexible working conditions. Ensuring accessible and affordable mental health services for entrepreneurs, including hotlines, counseling, and workshops, is essential. By following these recommendations, entrepreneurs can proactively address the factors leading to disengagement, while policymakers can create an environment that supports sustained entrepreneurial engagement and success.

#### 6.4. Research limitations and future directions

One limitation of this study is its reliance on cross-sectional data, which captures only a snapshot of disengagement at a single point in time. A longitudinal research design could provide a more comprehensive view and better capture changes in entrepreneurs’ emotional disengagement, offering a more dynamic understanding of the relationships proposed. Additionally, since both independent and dependent variables were collected simultaneously from the same respondents, there is potential for bias and error. We encourage future researchers to address this by collecting data on independent and dependent variables at separate times to mitigate such biases.

Although our sample was collected randomly, limitations remain because we did not differentiate between successful and unsuccessful entrepreneurs, and the data were limited to UK-based entrepreneurs in SMEs. Moreover, the data of this research was collected in 2016. To enhance the generalizability of findings, future studies can include a more recent, diverse and representative sample from various countries as well as large and established firms. In addition, exploring factors such as local culture, public policies, and government support, as well as incorporating other confounding variables such as entrepreneurs’ personality traits, could provide deeper insights. Previous research suggests that individual resources, such as self-efficacy, can significantly impact entrepreneurs’ emotional investment in their businesses (Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019).

### Appendix A. Sample of relevant work disengagement literature

Antecedents	Theory	Methodology	Context of study	Authors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social support</li> <li>• Decision authority</li> <li>• Organizational justice</li> </ul>	Coping, JD-R, transactional, and action regulation theories	Qualitative: Interview data from four employees over one-year, ideographic case-study approach	A large retail organization, Australia	(Boyd et al., 2014)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level and mode of communication</li> <li>• Supportive management</li> <li>• Organizational culture</li> <li>• Career development</li> </ul>	Parkinson: Psychological Theory of Engagement Organizational commitment	Qualitative: Interviews and focus groups, collecting data from 75 managers and employees Quantitative: 5588 survey respondents	10 large UK public and private sector organizations Canadian national study on work, family, and caregiving	(Parkinson and McBain, 2013) (Duxbury and Halinski, 2014)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrepreneurial Experience</li> <li>• Self-doubt</li> <li>• Vision for business</li> </ul>	Psychological Theory of Engagement	Quantitative: 402 survey respondents	Entrepreneurs in the UK SMEs	(Afrahi and Blackburn, 2019)

(continued on next page)

Our findings indicate that family emotional support does not significantly influence the relationships we investigated. This suggests that, while family emotional support is valuable, its impact may be more relevant at various stages of disengagement – possibly after entrepreneurs have already begun to distance themselves from their businesses. Therefore, we encourage future researchers to explore the role of family support beyond the scope of physical disengagement, particularly focusing on its effects during the entire exit process. By examining how family support impacts various stages of disengagement, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of its role in the entrepreneurial exit journey.

### 7. Conclusion

In this study, we proposed that emotional disengagement precedes physical disengagement in the exit process. We further suggested that emotional disengagement will mediate the relationship between team vision and physical disengagement, and we explored how family and social networks’ emotional support moderate these relationships. Our findings reveal a full mediation effect, where emotional disengagement fully mediates the relationship between team vision and physical disengagement. Contrary to our expectations, family emotional support does not moderate these mediating relationships. However, social networks’ emotional support does moderate both the association between team vision and emotional disengagement and the link between emotional disengagement and physical disengagement.

The main contribution of our research is that the manifestation of emotional disengagement precedes physical disengagement. This contribution advances aspects of the JD-R theory by differentiating between the emotional and physical disengagement processes. Moreover, we contribute to the literature by noting the role of team vision in emotional and physical disengagement, and the impacts of family and social network support on the disengagement process. Furthermore, our research provides practical, evidence-based recommendations to address entrepreneurial disengagement, emphasizing the importance of a well-defined team vision, open communication, early recognition of disengagement signs, and cultivation of supportive networks beyond family. Finally, we suggest that policymakers should integrate support systems into entrepreneurship education so they can assist entrepreneurs in sustaining engagement with their ventures.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Bahare Afrahi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Reza Zaefarian:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Pejvak Oghazi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration. **Rana Mostaghel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

(continued)

Antecedents	Theory	Methodology	Context of study	Authors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firm size</li> <li>Job resources</li> <li>Job demands and Exhaustion</li> </ul>	JD-R theory	Quantitative: 146 survey respondents	Employees of 11 small and large companies in The Netherlands	(Bakker et al., 2004)
Psychological contract violation	Social exchange theory	Quantitative: 200 survey respondents from lower- and middle-level managers	Banking sector organizations in Pakistan	(Azeem et al., 2020)

**Appendix B. Constructs and their items’ factor loading**

**Table 3**  
Standardized factor loadings.

Constructs and their items	Estimates
<b>Team vision</b>	
Thinking about my business, I could say that our team’s objectives are clear.	0.776
I agree with our team’s objectives.	0.882
I think our team’s objectives are clearly understood by other members of the team.	0.73
I think our team’s objectives can actually be achieved.	0.715
I think our team’s objectives are worthwhile to our business.	0.872
<b>Emotional disengagement</b>	
I sometimes feel emotionally detached from my business.	0.631
I really put my heart into my business. (reversed)	0.763
I get excited when I think about my business. (reversed)	0.799
<b>Physical disengagement</b>	
I avoid working too hard.	0.785
I avoid working overtime.	0.799
I exert a lot of energy performing my business. (reversed)	0.642
I stay until the job is done. (reversed)	0.648
<b>Family emotional support</b>	
My family really tries to help me.	0.629
I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.	0.828
I can talk about my problems with my family.	0.722
<b>Network emotional support</b>	
My friends really try to help me.	0.7
I can count on my friends when things go wrong.	0.765
I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	0.691

All factor loadings are significant at  $p < 0.01$

**Data availability**

Data will be available upon request from Dr. Bahare Afrahi.

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