

A Moderated Mediation Analysis of HPWS and Work Alienation: The Roles of Thriving at Work and Promotion Focus

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Abstract

This study explores how high-performance work systems (HPWS) reduce employee work alienation through a moderated mediation framework grounded in conservation of resources (COR) theory. It posits that HPWS not only directly diminishes feelings of alienation but also indirectly does so by enhancing thriving at work. Additionally, this study identifies promotion focus as a key boundary condition that strengthens the indirect HPWS → thriving → alienation pathway. Data were collected from 524 managerial employees in Pakistan's banking sector, a high-pressure setting where HPWS is widely implemented, by employing a three-wave time-lagged survey with four-week intervals. Analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro confirmed that HPWS significantly lowers work alienation, thriving at work serves as a mediating mechanism, and promotion focus moderates the thriving–alienation relationship, with promotion-focused employees deriving greater protective benefits from it. A significant moderated mediation effect was also observed in this study. These findings contribute to COR theory by illustrating how resource gain spirals function within service industries and suggest practical interventions, such as promotion-focused training, transparent communication of HPWS goals, thriving-centered wellness initiatives, and the integration of regulatory focus principles into HR practices. The results of this study have significant practical implications for bank managers who want to alleviate work alienation by examining its causes of work alienation at the individual level.

Keywords: High-performance work system (HPWS); thriving at work; work alienation; promotion focus.

JEL Classification: J24, J28, M12, M54

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1. Introduction

Service firms operate in fast-paced and competitive environments, where their success depends heavily on employee productivity and effective management, both of which are fundamental to delivering and maintaining high-quality services. However, service sector employees frequently encounter role ambiguity, job stress, boredom, fatigue, and burnout, which are critical contributors to work alienation (Fatima et al., 2024). Work alienation, defined as an employee's psychological detachment from their job and organizational environment, is a pervasive challenge in the service industry (Sezgili & Yilmaz, 2023).

Despite its ubiquity, research on work alienation in service settings remains limited. Nonetheless, existing studies highlight its significant prevalence, with 15.4% of employees in American restaurants reporting experiences of work alienation (Mohamed et al., 2025). This phenomenon has been linked to harmful effects on numerous positive work outcomes, including knowledge sharing, learning, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and perceived over-qualification (Alzghoul et al., 2023).

Moreover, work alienation negatively impacts interpersonal workplace relationships, hindering learning and quality of work life (Srivastava et al., 2024). This is especially harmful within the service industry. In the services sector quality of services provided depends on worker engagement and the extra-intensive relationships between customer and worker because of the abstract character and the inconsistencies in the service provided (Liu et al., 2025). Although work alienation has some harmful effects on work, especially in the banking sector, the research on the antecedents and mechanisms that contribute to work alienation among service employees is limited. More research is required to explore how and under what circumstances work alienation is enhanced or moderated (Chen et al., 2024). This gap has triggered other researchers to declare the need for more profound inquiries into the phenomenon (Liu et al., 2025).

Based on the appeals provided, the current research is based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, proposing the ways in which and when HPWS can make employees feel alienated at work. HPWS is a collection of associated HR practices, including employee-engaging programs, comprehensive training, collaboration, and rewarding performance, that targets advantageous HR practices to engage and inspire employees and make them perform effectively in terms of organizational results (Agarwal et al., 2024). Researchers have demonstrated that these practices facilitate positive attitudes and enhance employee productivity, which leads to a competitive advantage for companies (Benítez-Núñez et al., 2024; Chan & Chu, 2024). This study identifies HPWS as a significant framework for dealing with work alienation within the service industry for several reasons. First, approaches of HPWS promote HR involvement and knowledge management and customer orientation, which are connected to decreased alienation rates (Matsuo, 2023). The literature written in the past demonstrates that HPWS plays an important role in enhancing positive employee attitudes, such as commitment and motivation however, the

study of how HPWS can lessen work alienation is in its nascent stages (Zahoor et al., 2024). Specifically, Kim et al. (2024) explained that it is essential to research the experience of service industry employees when they work in HPWS settings.

Second, HPWS possesses distinct characteristics compared to conventional HR practices, and it would eliminate work alienation. Selective staffing, training, mobility within the organization, job security, performance-based appraisals, and rewards based on incentives are some of the practices that help to enhance employee competencies, attitudes, and engagement in the workplace (Benítez-Núñez et al., 2024). These practices align employees both psychologically and professionally, which encourages good behavior at the workplace and discourages alienation. In addition, this study examined the mediating effect of thriving at work on the correlation between HPWS and work alienation. Success at work contributes to employees' well-being, job satisfaction, and mindfulness, which positively influences the working environment by decreasing detachment and alienation (Han et al., 2023). According to Aman et al. (2024), HR practices that empower employees and enhance positive employee attitudes and employee engagement, claiming that structured HR systems can boost thriving at work in employees. The work based on the COR theory argues that an increase in essential resources, including job security, self-control, and social relations, makes employees feel successful in the workplace, thereby reducing feelings of work alienation. Although the outcome of thriving at the workplace has been extensively researched, its mediation in the relationship between HPWS and work alienation has not been researched; therefore, it forms a large research gap.

This study places promotion focusses as a moderate power in the association between thriving at work and work alienation, specifically in HPWS. Employees with a promotion focus are also more sensitive to opportunities and rewards than prevention focus employees because of their aspirations for advancement and success (Curzi & Ferrarini, 2023). This renders them stronger against unfavorable results at the workplace, including work alienation, as they will be inclined to invest their energy into maximizing their resources and goal achievement (Peethambaran & Naim, 2024). Nonetheless, the relationship between promotion focus and thriving at work, especially in cases where thriving at work positively or negatively affects work alienation, has not been investigated in the literature. Therefore, this research fills a crucial gap in understanding how HPWS reduces or increases work alienation by thriving at work at a given level of promotion focus of employees. This study contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, it widens the image of how HPWS may act, as few studies on the nomological vision of outcomes and variables of its impact on service sectors are associated with work alienation.

This study responds directly to the increasing concern for a more in-depth examination of the little-known but critical phenomenon of work alienation and the results of HPWS in the service industry. This field of integration makes this study push the envelope towards a more holistic approach to how HPWS helps to give rise to or help to avert alienation in the employee. Moreover, although previous research has identified the role of HPWS in positive employee attitudes and

behavior and its impact on thriving at work and organizational citizenship behavior, little is known about the mediating role of thriving at work in the HPWS-work alienation relationship (Chang & Pak, 2024; Zahoor et al., 2024). This research contributes to the reduction of this gap by placing thriving at work as a key psychological phenomenon and providing new information on how HPWS influences the emotional and psychological health of employees and, consequently, their work alienation.

Finally, despite existing studies on HPWS, little is known about how and when HPWS can make employees feel alienated at work. The current study adds to the knowledge that thriving at the workplace causes a reduction in alienation of workers by incorporating the notion of promotion focus as a boundary condition. It highlights the practical and theoretical implications of promotion focus and HPWS, thriving at work, and work alienation, in which promotion-focus employees are more prepared to increase the positive effects of thriving. This allows the current research to widen the understanding of the existing literature on the subject of promotion focus, HPWS, and work alienation in the service sector, offering a detailed structure to next-generation researchers.

The first objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between HPWS and employee work alienation. Secondly, this study investigates the mediating role of thriving at work among HPWS, and employees’ work alienation and finally investigates the moderating role of promotion focus among HPWS, thriving at work, and work alienation.

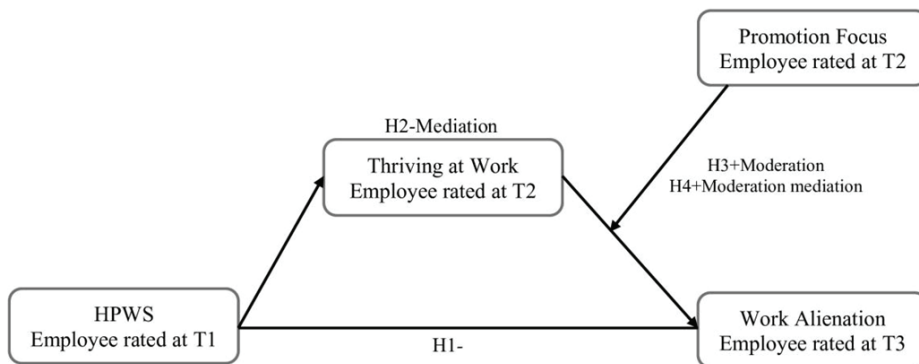


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

2. Theory and Hypothesis

2.1 HPWS and work alienation

This study considers HPWS as an all-encompassing model that includes employee involvement schemes, wide-ranging training programs, teamwork, and performance-based reward systems. The hypothesis is that HPWS has an adverse influence on employees’ feelings

of alienation at work. The rationale behind this proposal is that HPWS allows greater clarity and order in employee roles based on its core strategies and practices, which include selective staffing, training, job security, performance appraisal, and reward systems (Benítez-Núñez et al., 2024). Such practices serve to revitalize employees and give a sense of meaning and purpose in their jobs, thus increasing their meaning and importance in their profession (Fang et al., 2025). Simultaneous utilization of its critical dimensions inherently encourages HPWS employees to deliver their duties and accomplish their task-centered targets without the adverse effect of induced outcomes, leading to positive results, that is, augmented engagement, proactive behavior, and innovative work behavior (Nguyen et al., 2024; Peethambaran & Naim, 2024).

Another step in this argument is provided by COR theory, according to which satisfying essential emotional and psychological requirements and experiencing a stronger sense of meaning in the workplace is a vital personal resource (Rabiul et al., 2023). These resources create a situation of connection and well-being, which suppresses feelings of estrangement and alienation towards the job among employees (Abualigah et al., 2024). According to COR theory, HPWS is a resource gain process through which employees are prepared with personal and emotional resources to overpower the effect of work alienation (Bolt & Homer, 2024). For example, high-performance selective staffing provides the possibility of recruiting capable staff, whereas training and internal mobility offer opportunities to improve skills and competencies (Zeijen et al., 2024). Performance appraisal instills a sense of being valued and monitored, encouraging employees to invest their resources and strive to meet the organization's expectations (Peethambaran & Naim, 2024). Reward and compensation systems, both monetary and non-monetary, motivate employees to exert greater effort. Similarly, employment security enhances employees' stability and energy levels, and participatory practices foster interactive communication, social bonding, and connection among employees (Chatzoglou et al., 2024).

Moreover, HPWS empowers employees by creating a sense of competence, autonomy, and meaningfulness, enabling them to take the initiative and perform their work activities effectively (Berber & Gašić, 2024). Drawing on COR theory, feelings of empowerment, autonomy, and meaningfulness represent key resources that previous studies have shown to be negatively related to work alienation (Jia et al., 2024; Junça Silva et al., 2024). In contrast, the absence of these resources contributes to feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement, which are the core dimensions of work alienation (Mowbray et al., 2024). By mitigating these negative states, HPWS reduces employees' susceptibility to alienation from work. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: HPWS is negatively associated with employees' work alienation.

2.2 Thriving at work

The psychological condition in which an employee feels both alive and learning is known

as “thriving at work” (Bratty & Dennis, 2024). Instead of being a more permanent temperament, thriving is a psychological state and a transient internal attribute of the worker (Nayem & Uddin, 2024). Vitality is the feeling of being alive or energetic (Sharari et al., 2024). Learning is the process by which employees acquire and use knowledge and skills (Han et al., 2023). The combination of vitality and learning at work is what it means to thrive. Vitality, or a person’s enthusiasm and energy for their profession, is an affective element of thriving (Hessari et al., 2024). Learning is a cognitive aspect of thriving, defined as the process of gaining and using new information and abilities. One way to think about thriving is as a personal resource (Li et al., 2025). Additionally, the services provided by HPWS allow employees to thrive at work. According to COR theory, HPWS contributes to employees’ success at work. People work to invest in, protect, enhance, and conserve resources (Huang et al., 2024). A person with more resources is more likely to invest them in understanding the resource gain spiral. Accordingly, HPWS adds resources for workers, together with learning and vitality, as indicators of thriving at work, based on COR theory (Teng & Chen, 2024). Therefore, comprehending employee well-being and its consequences requires thriving at work.

Although HPWS does not aim to minimize job demand intensification, it can still produce an organizational environment that slows down at-risk situations (Agarwal et al., 2024). Performance-based appraisals and work structures organized around teams are common practices, which result in the elimination of unequal workloads, a decrease in the measurement of time, and a decline in stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2024). Based on COR theory, this paper, within the framework of work intensification proposes that such a decline in work intensification assists the worker to acquire physical and emotional resources like vitality and learning particularly in high-pressure workplaces. As employees sense an increase in their resources, their state of vitality and learning can lead to thrive at work (Lin, 2025). For example, higher role clarity and motivation linked to HPWS may boost employee energy, leading to thriving at work (Khanam & Tarab, 2024). In this respect, HPWS can establish a stress-free working environment. Employees working in such environment exhibit positive emotions and behaviors, which will further enhance thriving at work (Liao et al., 2024). The theory indicates that employees strive to defend their resources and invest them to avoid losses in the future. Nevertheless, this equilibrium is achieved when employees thrive at work, enhancing their capability to participate in activities that save resources (Le et al., 2023). Thriving at work promotes socialization, pleasant feelings, and the acquisition of resources that can reduce negative work behavior which are critical in diminishing work alienation (Han et al., 2023). It has been demonstrated that HPWS in workplace positively affect interpersonal relations, vitality, and attention of workers, which enhances behaviors that further attract their resources and reduce alienation at work (Han et al., 2025). Thus, this research assumes that thriving at work is an important source of both emotional and personal resources and that it facilitates the relationship between high-performance work systems (HPWS) and work alienation.

H2: Thriving at work mediates the relationship between HPWS and employees’ work alienation.

2.3 Promotion Focus

As conceptualized by regulatory focus theory, promotion focus is primarily driven by an individual's "ideal self," reflecting aspirations for growth, achievement, and personal goals (Tu et al., 2024). Employees with a high promotion focus actively seek to maximize positive outcomes and pursue advancement opportunities (Tao et al., 2024). Such individuals are highly motivated by gains, rewards, and the fulfillment of their hopes and ideals (Khan et al., 2023). They are susceptible to the presence or absence of positive outcomes, making them attentive to growth opportunities and resource-enhancing experiences. Building on COR theory, it is argued that external factors, such as contextual resources (e.g., HPWS), impact employees' emotional and psychological well-being (Tan et al., 2024). Rather, these factors depend on the resources at the individual level, including cognitive and motivational traits (Zhou et al., 2024). Another assumption of COR theory is that the higher the personal resources, such as promotion focus, the better employees will be in taking advantage of resource networks (Zhu et al., 2024).

According to previous findings, as a cognitive resource, promotion focus helps people use external resources more effectively, that is, to increase the impact of resource acquisition and investment (Yang & Gan, 2024). High promotion-focus employees have an inner system to aid them in allocating resources, which aids them in the subsequent acquisition of resources, even in stressful situations (Yang & Chen, 2024). Specifically, highly promotion-focused employees are more resilient and hence are able to demonstrate positive outcomes such as thriving at work.

The moderating role of promotion focus comes into play in work alienation. Although thriving at work can make employees more energetic at the workplace because of the role clarity and fair chances of growth, employees with a high promotion focus can better acquire resources in a flexible work environment (Khan et al., 2023). Their ability to channel efforts toward positive outcomes and resource acquisition maximizes the likelihood of further resource investment, such as a reduction in detachment or alienation (Lario et al., 2024). Furthermore, individuals with a high promotion focus are likely to transform their thriving experiences at work into growth opportunities, reducing their susceptibility to negative attitudes and behaviors, including work alienation (Kou et al., 2025).

Thus, consistent with COR theory, the relationship between thriving at work and work alienation may differ based on employees' promotional focus. Employees with a high promotion focus possess a strong ability to invest resources and offset resource depletion, thereby enhancing the negative effect of thriving on work alienation. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that

H3: Employees' promotion focus moderates the negative relationship between thriving at work and work alienation, such that the relationship is stronger for employees with a high promotion focus than for those with a low promotion focus.

2.4 Moderated mediation

The mediation between HPWS and work alienation by thriving at work is based on H2, which states that thriving at work is the key psychological process that drives the influence of HPWS on work alienation. In addition, as presented in the rationale for H3, the relationship between thriving at work and work alienation is moderated by the promotion focus of employees. In particular, employees who are highly promotion focused have a stronger negative relationship between thriving at work and work alienation than employees who are not. Expanding on this, the present study hypothesizes that not only is the direct impact of thriving at work on work alienation moderated by promotions, but also the overall indirect correlation between HPWS and work alienation. Specifically, a strong emphasis on promotion can facilitate the beneficial outcomes of HPWS on thriving in the workplace, which will decrease the chances of employee alienation (Yang & Chen, 2024). Based on COR theory, employees who have a prominent promotion focus tend to be more intentional in generating achievements in their work and allocating resources, particularly in empowering working conditions (Han et al., 2025). Therefore, these employees can have greater psychological gains through HPWS, which increases thriving and reduces the sense of alienation. This framework is statistically a moderated mediation model, where the promotion focus moderates the second part of the mediation process thriving in the work context in its impact on work alienation and, therefore, changes the entire indirect path between HPWS and work alienation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2024). The negative effects of thriving on alienation are stronger when the promotion focus is high, which increases the indirect effect of HPWS (Lin, 2025). This model has put strong emphasis on the importance of individual differences in determining the influence of organizational systems on employee well-being and the buffering potential of promotion focus against the impact of work systems on employee well-being.

H4: Employees' promotion focus moderates the indirect negative relationship (via thriving at work) between HPWS and work alienation, such that the relationship is stronger when promotion focus is high than when it is low.

3. Method

3.1 Sample and data collection

The participants were recruited through personal and professional networks, and a time-lagged survey design was used to collect data over three waves. The sample comprised full-time managerial employees from different branches of commercial banks. The selection of employees in the banking industry was based on various factors. First, the banks have been pioneering in applying HPWS, and employees in these positions usually excel in the work environment. In addition, the industry struggles with high turnover intentions, which are commonly linked with work alienation; thus, it is a very suitable setting to study HPWS, thriving, and alienation. Second, by considering the methodology of previous studies, the presence of variability in exposure to

HPWS practices became possible because of the managerial roles, as they are implementers and users of these systems simultaneously (Khan et al., 2024). This emphasis also increases the generalizability of the results to organizational settings. One of the major reasons to employ a time-lagged design was to reduce common method bias. A thousand and one hundred employees were contacted through a cover letter that contained the purpose of the study and assured the confidentiality of the information. Eight hundred and seventy-four participants provided their consent to participate in the survey. At the first phase (T1), all those who provided their consent were requested to report their perception on HPWS (independent variable) and promotion focus (moderator). At the second phase (T2), they were asked to report their perception of thriving at work (mediator). At the third phase (T3), they were asked to report their perceptions on work alienation (dependent variable) as well as their demographics. Rounds 1, 2, and 3 of the survey were completed by 756, 639, and 524 respondents, respectively. The final sample had 524 responses, resulting in a net response rate of 43.67%. The time frame of the data collection was from January 20, 2024, to July 24, 2024, and hypotheses testing was performed using the Hayes PROCESS macro via SPSS (version 27.0).

3.2 Measures

A 12-item scale was used to measure HPWS (Zhang et al., 2014). A sample item is “We have clear career paths within the bank”. Thriving at work was assessed by adapting a 10-items scale (Porath et al., 2012). A sample item is “I find meaning and purpose in my work.” Work alienation was measured by adapting a 10-item scale (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000). A sample item includes “I find it difficult to imagine enthusiasm concerning my work.” Promotion focus was assessed by adapting a 9-item scale (Neubert et al., 2008). A sample item includes “I take risks at work to achieve success.”

3.3 Analysis and results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among the constructs. The significant relationships among the study constructs allowed us to analyze the data further. However, the employees’ demographics do not relate to the study’s main constructs; therefore, we did not regress them with the study’s primary constructs in further analyses.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	1.50	0.52									
2. Gender	-	-	0.254*								
3. Experience	2.34	0.77	-0.94*	0.27*							
4. Marital status	1.35	0.48	-0.08	-0.106	-0.013						
5. Education	2.39	0.68	0.053	0.11*	0.01	0.07					
6. HPWS	3.36	0.82	0.02	0.051	0.072	0.049	-0.046	(0.720)			
7. Thriving at work	3.15	1.15	0.54	-0.029	0.54	0.032	-0.031	0.204**	(0.734)		
8. Work alienation	3.08	1.10	-0.019	0.033	0.01	0.012	-0.069	0.175**	0.216*	(0.74)	
9. Promotion Focus	2.89	0.85	-0.047	0.012	0.016	0.045	-0.012	0.065	0.001	0.060	(0.784)

Notes. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Sample size (N) = 524. SD = standard deviation, HPWS = High performance work system.

Bolded values in parentheses on the diagonals are the square root values of AVE.

Before testing the hypotheses, it was necessary to check and confirm the constructs' validity and reliability. Table 2 provides the scores for convergent and discriminant validity. The average variance extracted (AVE) scores for all constructs were greater than 0.50, ensuring convergent validity. The square root of the AVE, bold and presented diagonally in parentheses for all the constructs, was greater than the correlational scores of their corresponding constructs and both average shared variance (ASV) and maximum reliability (MaxR(H)), further ensuring discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Cronbach's alpha scores were greater than 0.70. Additionally, to further test the discriminant validity of the scales, this study performed a Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio test (Table 3), which showed that the scales used in this study ensured convergent

validity. Hence, the scales were valid and reliable. We used the HTMT because it is considered a more reliable criterion than the traditional Fornell-Larcker approach, especially in the presence of potential common method variance (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 2
Reliability and validity

Construct	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)
HPWS	0.941	0.518	0.042	0.947
Thriving at work	0.917	0.539	0.046	0.951
Work alienation	0.922	0.553	0.046	0.951
Promotion Focus	0.933	0.615	0.004	0.980

Notes. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. N = 524. HPWS = High performance work system. AVE = Average variance extracted. MSV = Maximum shared variance. MaxR(H) = Maximum reliability.

Table 3
HTMT Ratio for Discriminant Validity

Construct	HPWS	Promotion focus	Thriving at work	Work alienation
HPWS				
Promotion focus	0.104			
Thriving at work	0.231	0.002		
Work alienation	0.142	0.025	0.225	

Following Podsakoff et al. (2003), Harman's single-factor test is conducted. The unrotated factor solution explained only 41.28% of the variance (less than 50%), indicating that common method bias is not a serious concern. Additionally, variance inflation factors (VIFs) in the regression models ranged from 1.12 to 2.78, well below the threshold of 5, confirming no multicollinearity issues.

Moreover, to check the goodness-of-fit of the theoretically conceived model with the data, alternative models were compared. The results presented in Table 4 indicate that the four-factor models are superior in terms of goodness-of-fit: CMIN/DF=2.4100; goodness fit index (GFI)=0.93; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.927; and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.052.

Table 4
Goodness of Fit

Parameters	Four-factor model	Three-factor model	Two-factor model	One-factor model
CMIN	2149.809	5180.608	8282.520	11384.848
DF	892	895	897	898
CMIN/DF	2.41	5.78	9.234	12.678
GFI	0.93	0.69	0.44	0.28
CFI	0.92	0.75	0.57	0.39
TLI	0.92	0.65	0.48	0.25
SRMR	0.048	0.126	0.168	0.19
RMSEA	0.052	0.096	0.125	0.14

The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 5. HPWS is negatively associated with employees' sense of work alienation ($\beta = -.235$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H1. Furthermore, HPWS demonstrate a positive association with employees' thriving at work ($\beta = .281$, $p < 0.001$), which exhibited a negative association with work alienation ($\beta = -.26$, $p < 0.001$). Employees' thriving at work mediates the link between HPWS and work alienation ($\beta = -0.039$, $CI = [-0.104, -0.033]$), supporting H2. Promotion focus moderates the link between thriving at work and work alienation ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$) such that the association is weaker when promotion focus is low ($\beta = 0.024$, $p < 0.001$) and the relationship is strengthened when promotion focus is high ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H3. The conditional effect of HPWS indirectly (via thriving at work) affects work alienation ($\beta = -0.029$, $CI = [-0.06, -0.012]$). The link was significant and less strong when promotion focus was low ($\beta = 0.004$, $CI = [-0.019, 0.027]$). This connection was more positively significant when promotion focus was high ($\beta = 0.069$, $CI = [0.028, 0.13]$), thereby supporting H4.

Table 5
Hypothesis Testing

Effect/Path	B 95%	BootSE 95%	LLCI 95%	ULCI 95%
Total Effects				
HPWS → WA	-.15**	.072	-.31	-.09
Direct paths				
HPWS → WA	-.235**	.057	-.32	-.07
HPWS → Thriving at work	.281***	.068	.16	.41
Thriving at work → WA	-.26***	.052	-.30	-.13
Indirect Paths				
HPWS → Thriving at work → WA	-0.039	.036**	-	-
Moderated paths				
Thriving at work*Promotion focus → WA	-.11**	.031	-.18	-.05
Thriving at work *Promotion focus → WA (on low Promotion focus)	-.11	.030	-.17	-.05
Thriving at work *Promotion focus → WA (on High Promotion focus)	-.03	.030	-.10	.02
Conditional indirect effects				
Index of moderated moderation	0.29	.012	-.06	-.012
HPWS → Thriving at work → WA (on low Promotion focus)	.004	.019	-.019	.027
HPWS → Thriving at work → WA (on high Promotion focus)	.069	.097	.028	.13

Notes: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Sample size (N) = 524 (bootstrapping by specifying a sample of size 5,000). HPWS = high performance work system.

4. Discussion

This study is akin to the growing body of research on HPWS in that it investigates the role it plays in the work alienation of managerial employees working in branch banks. Based on COR theory, our results indicate that HPWS can largely influence employees' experiences, especially in reducing work alienation. Corresponding with existing studies focusing on the importance of traditional HRM in developing positive employee attitudes and behaviors, this study expands the current literature that work alienation, an adverse employee outcome, can be reduced by HPWS (Hessari et al., 2024). This above finding is consistent with evidence in the Pakistani context showing that a supportive and flexible working environment improves positive employee attitudes

and behaviors and employee disengagement decreases (Iqbal et al., 2021). Conversely, mediation outcomes confirmed that thriving at work negatively mediated the relationship between HPWS and work alienation. HPWS promotes thriving at work in terms of performance-based appraisals and flexible work conditions, which reduces alienation among employees. This is in line with the currently available literature on the positive aspects of HPWS, which points to the positive effects of HPWS on employee well-being and augmenting healthy workplace experiences (Li et al., 2025). As a mediating factor, thriving at work is important in explaining the role of HPWS in employee alienation from work.

The hypotheses in this research include the assumption that employees' promotion focus moderates the correlation between thriving at work and work alienation, such that employees with a high promotion focus would have a stronger correlation between the two. The moderating effect was found to be hypothesized. The correlation between thriving at work and work alienation is higher when managerial employees' promotion focus is greater than when employees' promotion focus is low. This implies that employees with a high promotion focus, who aim to achieve and develop at their career level, can manage alienation in the workplace. They appear to consider thriving as an asset to handle above difficulties in a work environment that may enable them to escape the sense of alienation. Conversely, in the case of employees whose promotion focus was low, the level of correlation between thriving at work and work alienation was low, which implies that less promotion focused employees can find thriving at work to be more problematic, consequently becoming even more alienated. The results are counterintuitive and emphasize that individual differences should be considered when assessing the effect of HPWS on employee welfare, especially in stressful work settings.

Surprisingly, such moderation effects seem more counter intuitive when considering such a moderate mediation model. Although one could reasonably predict that promotion focus would moderate the indirect relationship between HPWS and work alienation through thriving at work, the findings indicate that the moderation effect is influenced differently at diverse levels of promotion focus. Specifically, the relationship between HPWS and work alienation (high promotion focusses) cannot be overlooked, which implies that employees with a high promotion focus can take thriving as a resource and regard its existence as something that does not contribute to alienation. However, the indirect effect of low promotion focus cases is not as strong, since workers at varying grades of promotion focus can reinterpret thriving, which exacerbates their feelings of alienation at work. These findings highlight the anticipated buffering effect of promotion focus and show that personal disparities in perceiving the thriving-at-work relationship between HPWS and work alienation should be addressed. Moreover, the moderated mediation results are consistent with Gul (2025), who explored that psychological states, like empathy, can affect the role of HR practices on employee attitudes and behaviors.

4.1 Theoretical implications

This study addresses the knowledge gap in HPWS and work alienation in three potential aspects. First, it expands the nomological jungle that is HPWS by demonstrating its little-researched links with work alienation in the service industry, where alienation pressures are exacerbated by excessive employee-customer interactions (Agarwal et al., 2024). This study also changes the literature on HPWS because, until now, the literature has centered its analysis on HPWS as a disengagement driver. However, this study hypothesizes that HPWS attributes, such as performance pay and intensive training, may cause reduced alienation within customer-service professions, which share emotional work and standardization. A more relational perspective can also be found in the study that combines HPWS models with alienation theory, which affords us the chance to comprehend why performance-based systems not only enrich employees of a sense of purpose and agency but also permit us to recognize how this occurs simultaneously.

This twofold lens responds to the request to look even further into the bright side of HPWS. Therefore, it provides a new basis for further research that investigates the tensions between the systemic efficiency and health of employees. Second, this study highlights an important variable, thriving at work, as a mediating factor between macro-level HR systems (i.e., HPWS) and employees' micro-level experiences (alienation). Although the extant literature has identified the role of HPWS in attitude formation and the influence of thriving at work on performance outcomes independently of each other, combining them produces synergistic effects by hypothesizing that thriving serves as the mechanism through which HPWS overcomes the sense of disconnection and estrangement. This category of mediation questions the current belief that HPWS positively and uniformly contributes to well-being, as it demonstrates that HPWS can instigate learning and vitality, which decreases alienation, and thus, positively contributes to well-being).

The findings add value to COR theory by emphasizing the psychological cost of HPWS in a high-demand service setting and how the resource benefits of HPWS requirements can foster the ability of employees to develop meaningful involvement in their work. This promotes a more comprehensive understanding of HPWS outcomes, which may have both benefits and psychological costs. Finally, this study reestablishes boundary conditions within the HPWS relationship of alienation through the role of promotion focus as a moderating factor. Although previous research has considered individual differences in coping with stressors, this study is the first to view promotion focus as a growth-oriented regulatory style as a shield against alienation.

This indicates that employees with a high promotion focus conceptualize HPWS in terms of achievement opportunities, thus mitigating the thriving-alienation pathway. This understanding sensitizes the regulatory focus theory to develop a new explanation in the HPWS domain, explaining why individuals rarely respond to systemic pressures (*idem*). In addition, it provides a context for the contingency perspective of HPWS, which demonstrates that the contingency approach

is the way that adverse effects can be avoided because of overlapping between organizational systems and individual characteristics. The contribution of this study is the development of a theoretical model that connects macro-HR practices with micro-psychological processes through the combination of HPWS, thriving at work, and regulatory focus into a single construct, which can serve as a pattern for future research from the perspective of adaptive resilience in high-performance settings.

4.2 Practical implications

The results of this study have significant implications for banks and managers who want to alleviate work alienation by examining its causes of work alienation at the psychological, system, and individual levels. First, banks are advised to adjust HPWS to satisfy employees' efficiency and well-being. Managers should continue to offer performance-based rewards, but they should also allow employee participation in decision-making (e.g., involving employees in the establishment of realistic targets) and undertake developmental training (e.g., upskilling programs intended to provide career progression rather than just task mastery). This two-pronged approach to alienation may be encountered through autonomy and long-term development, which can offset the standardization of service roles and the transaction element. Second, banks can institutionalize wellness programs based on service industry stressors to enhance thriving at work as a mediator of alienation. For example, anonymous surveys conducted to determine department-specific stressors (e.g., set sales targets) and changes to the workload could help. When the practice of discussing burnout or coping strategies becomes normal, and employees run the groups, it would also support such a culture. Third, based on the results of promotion focus, managers should note the different impacts of HPWS on employees with different promotion focuses. Promotion focus employees can endure more stressors at work and curb feelings of alienation due to their achievement and growth aspirations. Thus, managers are advised to develop a work culture that is oriented toward employees' promotion focus by offering them opportunities to achieve goals and advance. Examples of these tactics include rewarding employees who are able to use HPWS requirements (e.g., customer contact quotas) to learn new skills or innovate processes, training employees to relate everyday work and long-term career goals, and rewarding creativity and initiative (e.g., providing workers with bonuses for process improvement). For employees with a lower promotion focus, tailored interventions, such as personalized support, could help them better manage work-related distress and minimize alienation. Finally, banks should address the systemic drivers of burnout by implementing "flexible customer engagement" models that grant employees autonomy in scheduling client interactions (e.g., staggered breaks during peak hours). Additionally, adopting workload transparency tools, such as digital dashboards, to monitor and redistribute tasks in real time could help prevent chronic overload and better align workloads with individual capacity.

4.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study makes progress in the field of HPWS and work alienation, its limitations represent the prospects for further research. First, the cross-sectional time-lag design does not allow for conclusive assumptions regarding the causality or time changes in the relationships among HPWS, at-work thriving, and alienation. For example, it is not clear whether alienation is a delayed reaction to stress caused by HPWS over a prolonged period or has a cyclic effect that serves to vary with the loads. Current studies ought to be longitudinal to track the relationship between HPWS practices (e.g., performance checking) and thriving and alienation during critical periods (e.g., post-training and season peaks with customers). Second, the use of Pakistan, a high-power distance culture, as the study example, a collectivistic culture with specific labor norms, restricts the extrapolation of the results to individualistic or low-power distance environments where the lack of employee-management control can be more actively manifested. Finally, the use of self-reported data also makes correlations susceptible to inflated social desirability. For example, workers can misreport alienation because of fear of the consequences of managers. Multi-source data should be incorporated in future research, such as the rating of employee engagement by supervisors. A more contextualized quantitative approach, such as interviews to infer lived experiences of alienation, may also benefit from revealing previously understudied aspects of distress (e.g., moral harm of imposition on strict targets) to a mixed methods approach.

Finally, it can be concluded that this study adds knowledge by advancing theoretical understanding by integrating HPWS, thriving at work, and regulatory focus into a conceptual framework that shows how and when HPWS can cause reduction in work alienation. It also suggests practical implications for banking institutions to improve employee well-being by designing high performance work systems, emphasizing thriving-based workplace environment. Moreover, in future more research is recommended in different contexts as this study has many contextual and methodological constraints. However, the findings of the study suggest a foundation for further research on contextual factors that shape employee attitudes and behaviors in high pressure work settings like service sectors.

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