EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND JOB BURNOUT IN THE CONTEXT OF TELEWORKING

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between engagement and job burnout perceived by teleworking employees. The theoretical framework of this paper explains the concepts of telework, work engagement, and job burnout, but also the relationships between these variables. Telework is a "new reality" for many employees, and in this new work context, engagement and burnout must be investigated, especially for entry level employees. We analyzed the relationship between engagement and telework, respectively burnout and telework based on a questionnaire. The results reveal a positive relationship between engagement and telework and a negative correlation between burnout and telework. The research results also show that burnout has a high level among telework employees, and exhaustion is the most pronounced problem.

1. Introduction

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic has generated significant changes at the workplace. Since social distancing was a necessity, teleworking was the only solution for many companies to comply with the rules imposed.

Before this global pandemic situation, many employees in organizations around the world had little experience with teleworking. After the outbreak and spread of this dangerous and unprecedented virus in 2020, millions of people around the world were forced to work remotely, and this resulted in a de facto global experiment in remote working. Employers and employees soon realized that teleworking would become the "new normal" (Wang et al., 2021).

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Even if this crisis was overcome, teleworking remained among the preferences of employers and employees. From the employee perspective, some of the positive aspects of this work system are: increased job motivation and satisfaction (Baard and Thomas, 2010; Kirk and Belovics, 2006), better work-life balance (Raiborn and Butler, 2009), increased autonomy towards manager (Dambrin, 2004), increasing digital skills among employees but also improving soft skills (time planning, personal effectiveness), reducing the time spent commuting between home and office (Guerin, 2021; Aguilera et al., 2016), greater schedule flexibility (Moroe and Haug, 2022).

Although teleworking offers many benefits, some drawbacks have been noted for both employees and employers. From the employee perspective, some of the negative aspects of teleworking are: reduced psychological well-being (social isolation, anxiety, depression and burnout are among the most common negative effects on mental health), some work-life balance problems (due to increased working hours or potential distractions from family members) (Gold and Mustafa, 2013; Boell et al., 2016), increased personal costs (electricity, internet costs, etc.), overtime is not always adequately compensated by employers, and not in lastly, problems related to living in overcrowded houses/apartments (Raiborn and Butler, 2009), which makes teleworking difficult.

Therefore, in this paper, we want to observe to what extent telework, with its benefits and disadvantages, influences employee engagement and burnout in the context of entry level employees from Romania.

2. Literature review

2.1. Employee engagement

Employee engagement is a broad concept that has been analyzed in many studies. However, what is important to note is that there is no agreement among practitioners or scholars regarding its definition and conceptualization. Consequently, we will discuss several approaches of this concept.

Bakker and Leiter (2010) argue that the exact origins of the term "employee engagement" are not very clear, but the first appearances of the concept most likely date back to the 1990s. Schaufeli (2013) mentions that this concept of engagement began to gain popularity also due to the fact that the psychologization of the workplace appeared - for an organization to survive, it needs employees with psychological capabilities such as teamwork and communication.

However, two separate dimensions are discussed: work engagement and employee engagement. Work engagement reflects the relationship of employees to the work they do, and employee engagement includes the relationship of employees with the organization (Bakker and Leiter, 2010:10). We observe that work engagement refers to involvement, dedication, passion, enthusiasm, concentrated effort, absorption and energy. Also, work engagement signifies a motivational concept: employees feel the need to succeed, and when they set themselves some clear goals, they will devote themselves strongly to achieving those goals. Moreover, they will be excited while working. This strong involvement in work will therefore reflect personal energy on which employees will incorporate

into their challenging work. Employees will show increased attention to problem solving, interact or connect with other individuals, and bring added value to their work through innovative ideas. Bakker and Leiter (2010:2) also mention the contribution of management in this context, by specifying that employees maintain a constant level of work engagement if the work environment is stable and work engagement thrives best in workplaces that emphasize strong connections between organization and individual values.

Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) also discussed the increased focus on positive states among early 21st century scientific studies that focus on human power and optimal functioning in organizations. Their study specifies that prior to the 21st century, more attention was focused on negative states, such as burnout, but a "positive psychology" has over time become a good alternative or supplement to the previously analyzed deficit states. Specifically, Maslach et al. (2001:416) define engagement as the positive antithesis of burnout (known as a negative psychological state), specifying that burnout would be an "erosion" of engagement. In other words, this definition states that, unlike those who suffer from exhaustion (burnout), engaged employees have an energetic connection to their work, and a demanding job for them will not be a stressful thing. Thus, engagement has as main characteristics: energy, involvement and effectiveness, and this approach of engagement offers a much more complex and detailed perspective on the relationship of individuals with their work.

On the other hand, Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) define employee engagement from another perspective, considering that job burnout is not the opposite of employee engagement. It is argued that burnout reflects both the inability and the lack of desire to perform at work, so it is logical that employee engagement is defined by the ability and desire to work. Their argument is based on the idea that if you're not professionally burned out, it doesn't mean you're engaged, and if you don't feel engaged, it doesn't necessarily mean you're professionally burned out.

In the same direction, another research states that engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Moreover, engagement is not a momentary state, but rather a more persistent affective-cognitive state that is not focused on specific objects, events or behaviors (Schaufeli et al., 2002:74). While Maslach et al. (2001) consider engagement as a positive antithesis of burnout, Schaufeli et al. (2002) believe that engagement is an independent or distinct concept that is not positively related to burnout.

There are three dimensions of employee engagement, namely: vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Vigor is characterized by a high level of energy and mental resilience in working time, a deliberate desire to put an effort into the work and last but not least, perseverance – even when the employee is in a moment of balance or when facing difficulties at work. Dedication is a dimension that is characterized by a sense of importance/significance, excitement, inspiration, pride and challenge. Schaufeli et al. (2002) mention in their study that they prefer to use the term "dedication" instead of "involvement" (term used by Maslach et al. (2001)) because, although both terms denote a psychological link between the employee and work/effort or organization, the term "dedication" comes with greater importance both qualitatively and quantitatively in the meaning that the

employee not only finds himself/herself in his work, but is particularly strongly involved in it. Therefore, dedication involves both a cognitive state and an affective dimension. The last dimension of engagement is absorption which is characterized by full concentration and a deep absorption in work, a period in which time passes extremely quickly and employees may have difficulty detaching themselves from work.

The same approach is followed by other studies: employee engagement is defined by how employees perceive their work as stimulating and energizing towards which they want to direct their time and effort. This is considered to be the vigorous component, then the dedication and absorption in work is added by focusing the employees on their tasks. Following this engagement, employees feel tired, but what differentiates them from workaholics is the fact that this fatigue is considered to be a pleasant state, being associated with certain positive achievements, because for them work is something pleasant (Bakker et al., 2011).

From the description of these three dimensions of engagement, it can be understood that any activity undertaken by an employee in which a high level of dedication, vigor or absorption can be observed will be an activity carried out on his/her own initiative that will help to achieve strategic, tactical or business operations and will determine performance and productivity.

Knowing some of the definitions, characteristics and dimensions of employee engagement, a question that arises is: "What is the importance of engagement?". Bakker and Leiter (2010) show some pertinent arguments that can answer this question. In their opinion, work engagement has far-reaching implications for employee performance. They argue that employee energy and focus are inherent parts of engagement that enable the employee to demonstrate their full potential at work, and with the help of this energy and focus, the quality of work or the quality of the employees' main work responsibilities also improves. The authors also highlight the fact that work engagement also supports performance and activities that are not directly related to the basic responsibilities of a job. Employers expect employees to take a proactive approach to work, to take the initiative to develop new knowledge, respond to unique opportunities, and even support the company community through mentoring, volunteering, or paying close attention to coworkers.

Moreover, Bakker and Leiter (2010) discuss the "broaden-and-build" theory. This theory claims that positive emotions will encourage new, exploratory thoughts and actions. These positive emotions will not only be motivating but have the ability to change cognitive processes so that employees will be open to opportunities that they would normally overlook when under pressure or facing difficulties. Therefore, positive emotions encourage integrative and creative perspectives, which bring added value to organizations. Thus, there is also a growing connection between companies' effort to create a healthy work environment and their desire to increase individual performance - two factors that will contribute to the success of the organization. Therefore, employee engagement is both effective and fulfilling, ultimately leaving both the employee and the employer satisfied (Bakker and Leiter, 2010:3-5).

2.2. Job burnout

Burnout is a complex concept, difficult to understand because, although there has been a wide variety of opinions over the years about what this concept might mean and how it might be managed, there has not been a unanimous definition (Maslach et al., 2001, p.402).

The first conceptualizations define burnout as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal fulfillment, which can occur among people who work with other people. An important thing about this definition is that its basis was not derived from existing theories, but was developed on the basis of several researches conducted over several years, researches that were carried out with the help of interviews, direct observations or surveys on employees in "people-oriented" professions, such as health system, social services, education or criminal justice (Maslach, 1993, p.2).

Bakker et al. (2014:390) also explained burnout, referring to the history of this concept. They stated that although initial research confirmed that burnout is a slow process of progressive loss of energy and enthusiasm, the idea that burnout is found exclusively in the human/social service sector has been rejected, and researchers have adapted early conceptualizations of burnout to make it applicable to different occupations.

More recent work has indicated increasing interest in this concept, showing that there is a greater concern for burnout as it has begun to be discussed not only in academic communities, but also in different organizations.

Leon T. de Beer et al. (2020) mentioned the fact that studies from the last decades have shown that burnout has negative consequences for individuals (health problems such as diabetes, heart problems), for organizations (absenteeism, reduced and unsatisfactory performance), and also general consequences for society (such as early mortality). It is also mentioned that studies have made it very clear that burnout and its consequences exist in different occupations and environments. So, reflecting on the analyzes made previously, the concept of burnout was defined as a state of emotional exhaustion that is directly related to a person's work and is characterized by extreme fatigue, cognitive or emotional deficiencies and mental detachment.

Another recent study also states that burnout is a phenomenon that affects both an employee's individual performance and organizational performance. In terms of individual performance, the feeling of exhaustion can influence both the mental and physical health of an employee, which can result in a lack of energy to carry out daily tasks, but which can also affect relationships and the workplace environment (Woranetipo and Chavanovanich, 2021:60).

The definition given by Maslach (1993:2) highlighted three initial dimensions that made up the bases for the analysis of burnout, and these are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, respectively success or reduced personal fulfillment. According to the explanations, emotional exhaustion refers to the feeling of being emotionally overworked or drained especially in contact with other people. Depersonalization refers to a negative, insensitive, or excessive response to detachment from other people who in normally work directly with those who issue this negative response. Low personal achievement refers to a decrease in feelings of competence and a decrease in confidence in achievement or success at work.

Since Christina Maslach was among the early pioneers of this concept, her studies have had a major impact on the development of burnout. She designed The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) scale that includes the three dimensions mentioned above, and these dimensions help to assess burnout.

Over time, the original scale was optimized to be applicable in several domains: MBI-Human Service Survey (MP) for medical personnel, MBI-Human Service Survey for social service staff, MBI-Educators Survey for the educational system, MBI – General Survey which is a general survey applicable in several fields, MBI – General Survey for Students is also a general survey applicable to university students. An important aspect to mention at this point is that the depersonalization dimension has been replaced by cynicism in the MBI – General Survey, and this represents a distant attitude towards work in general and not necessarily towards people. Another difference is that the overall survey replaces the "personal accomplishments" dimension with "effectiveness" that measures satisfaction with past and present achievements and explicitly assesses an individual's expectations of continued effectiveness at work (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). So, the optimization of the original survey meant that the research expanded over time to more general occupations, demonstrating that burnout at work can be a recurring phenomenon when employees have been exposed to excessive emotional demands, which indicated that a certain survey model would be restrictive and ineffective.

2.3. Employee engagement and job burnout

Work engagement is characterized by a high level of energy and a strong identification with one's work, while burnout is characterized by the opposite: a low of energy and a weak identification with work (Bakker and Leiter, 2010).

Engagement and job burnout represent two concepts very frequently analyzed together in different studies, and the purpose was to find out the relationship between these concepts and to find out if there are similarities between them or if they are perfect antonyms. According to what is presented below, we will notice that the experts' opinions are divided.

The study of Schaufeli et al. (2002) addressed this topic, pointing out that work engagement would be the opposite of burnout, highlighting the arguments of Maslach and Leiter who argued that engagement is characterized by energy, involvement and effectiveness, which are considered the direct opposites of the three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism and lack of effectiveness. The researchers point out, however, that they object to Maslach and Leiter's idea of measuring engagement as the opposite of Maslach Burnout Inventors (MBI) scale results. Schaufeli et al. (2002) argue that both concepts are opposite poles of a continuum that is covered by a single instrument, namely the MBI. They agree, however, that, conceptually, engagement is the positive antithesis of burnout. Burnout and engagement are opposite concepts that should be measured independently with different instruments. They further argue that, unlike the other elements of burnout and engagement, which are considered direct opposites or direct antonyms (exhaustion vs. vigor, cynicism vs. dedication), low efficacy and absorption are not direct opposites, but rather are conceptually distinct aspects that

do not represent an endpoint for an underlying continuum. This last idea about the relationship of engagement with dimensions of burnout is also supported by Halbesleben, who states that, compared to the close relationship between vigor and burnout, respectively dedication and cynicism, the dimension of engagement called absorption does not have a corresponding dimension of burnout, and the dimension of personal efficacy in turn does not have a specific equivalent among the dimensions of commitment (Bakker and Leiter, 2010).

In a more recent work from 2011, Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter formulate 10 key questions and explore work engagement in detail. One of these questions is "How should engagement be measured?" and the researchers make the following arguments: any measurement tools used must have a clear theoretical basis and have published statistical evidence to support their validity and reliability. Moreover, Bakker et al. (2011) argue that there are many questions regarding the measurement of engagement, one of which would be the potential negative consequences of too much engagement and whether the scales that measure engagement cover experiences ranging from burnout at the negative pole to commitment at the pole positive? As an example, the authors propose that engagement should therefore be assessed with broader spectrum measures such as the OLBI. Therefore, they consider the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to be the most pertinent scales that already have a well-designed basis on which a study should use. On the other hand, Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) come up with a different approach. The authors' argument is that an important theoretical piece of information omitted by Bakker et al. is that in the UWES, work engagement is defined as the opposite of burnout (since burnout reflects both inability or exhaustion and unwillingness to perform at work, it makes sense that work engagement is characterized by ability, energy, vigor and desire, involvement, dedication to perform). Regarding the MBI and the OLBI, the two authors are of the opinion that they are not good alternatives to measure work engagement because the questionnaires assume that burnout and work engagement are perfect counterparts to each other (this means that low scores on the MBI or OLBI are equivalent to high scores on work engagement and vice versa). They believe that, from a psychological point of view, that inverse relationship based on existing scales between burnout and work engagement is not feasible. More precisely, if an employee does not feel the feeling of burnout at work, it does not mean that he is engaged, and if he does not feel engaged, it does not mean that the feeling of burnout occurs, in fact, both commitment and burnout can to appear or be felt at the exact same time to some extent (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2011).

Finally, we observe that the relationship between these two concepts has generated debates and there is no unanimously accepted conclusion regarding the exact relationship between burnout and work engagement because work engagement is seen either as the positive antithesis of burnout, or as a distinct concept. More recent studies support the ideas presented by Schaufeli and Salanova, where results argued in favor of the conceptual distinction and measurement of burnout and work engagement through separate scales. Moreover, the burnout bases and engagement components are considered opposite to each other, placed on two distinct "bipolar" dimensions (i.e., energy -

vigor and exhaustion; identification - dedication and cynicism) (Maricuțoiu et al., 2017). It is also mentioned that most studies have approached the relationship between the two concepts based on a cross-sectional methodology, which makes it extremely difficult to investigate the causal or general relationships of the concepts. Based on research done over time, Schaufeli and Salanova (2014) concluded that these are constructs that describe forms of well-being that are connected but distinct.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1. Teleworking is associated with a high level of engagement for entry level employees.
H2. There is a high positive correlation between teleworking and work engagement.
H3. There is a negative correlation between teleworking and burnout.

3. Methodology

To test the research hypotheses stated above, we used a questionnaire that was applied online. The targeted respondents were entry-level employees who have been teleworking for at least 6 months before completing the questionnaire.

The questionnaire is structured in 5 sections: (1) a filter question through which respondents who did not telework were redirected to the end of the questionnaire; (2) general questions to identify respondents (gender, age, field of activity, length of service, occupation and number of hours worked per week from home); (3) Questions about respondents' perception of telework; (4) Items that analyze work engagement; (5) Items that analyze job burnout.

The section on respondents' perception of teleworking includes statements such as "Teleworking is the most suitable form of work for me" or "I was able to easily adapt to teleworking". These items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5)

Work engagement was measured using The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). This scale consists of three dimensions that serve to assess employee engagement. The three dimensions are: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Although the original scale consists of a total of 17 items, in this paper we used the short version with 9 items, each dimension having three items (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). In the survey, statements were scored on a 6-point frequency scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (6).

Burnout was measured using The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI), described by Demerouti et al. (2006; 2010) as an instrument which can be used practically in any occupational context. For the current survey, a total number of 10 items were chosen – five for exhaustion, respectively 5 for disengagement/non-involvement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In the survey, the items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) in the case of reversed items and "strongly disagree" (5) to "strongly agree" (1) for the rest of the items.

4. Data analysis and findings

The study was conducted on 357 entry level employees, of which 88.7% answered affirmatively to the question "Have you teleworked in the last 6 months?".

The general characteristics of the respondents are as follows. By gender, 82% were female and 18% were male. Regarding age, the average age was 24.3 (SD=1.5). Regarding the field of activity, it is a varied one: accounting, support services, human resources, customer service and telecommunications. 22% of the respondents hold a management position in the organization where they work, and the others do not hold a management position.

In terms of number of hours worked per week in the telework arrangement, 76% of the respondents work an average of 40 hours per week, and 24% of the respondents work in the telework system between 8 and 36 hours per week.

The adequacy of the measurement model was assessed through examining construct reliabilities. All Cronbach's α values were above 0.70 recommended by Cronbach (Tong, 2009:290 after Cronbach, 1951). All the constructs met the internal consistency reliabilities with the lowest measure of 0.72 and highest 0.85, as presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Cronbach's coefficient alpha

	No. of items	α
Perceived usefulness of teleworking	8	0.72
Employee engagement	9	0.85
Job burnout	10	0.82

Regarding the usefulness of teleworking, the results of the study showed that: teleworking is a suitable way of working for 68% of the respondents, 43% of the respondents have a high productivity at work, 42% of the respondents had a hard time adjusting to teleworking, 52% of the respondents did not feel job insecurity, 38% of the respondents considered that teamwork was efficient, and 64% of the respondents felt higher empathy towards their colleagues.

The results of this research are in the same direction as the research developed by Harker Martin and MacDonnell (2012) who sought an answer to the question "Is telework effective or beneficial for organizations?", and the results of the research indicated that there is a small but positive relationship between teleworking and productivity, retention, engagement, and performance. Also, another research by Gajendran and Harrison (2007:1535) had similar results, claiming that "teleworking is mostly a good thing". So, other research also show that there are no predominantly negative relationships between telework and other organizational related variables.

In terms of work engagement, the average of the responses is predominantly medium to high. On the vigor dimension, it can be seen that the vast majority of respondents (entry level employees) are full of energy, power and vigor when they work, but opinions were more divided on the item that analysed how energetic they are when they wake up. In terms of dedication, the main observation

is that employees take great pride in the work they do, indicating that even though they may struggle in a normal working day, they will not let the quality of their work deteriorate. Moreover, the mean of the responses is medium to high for the items that analysed whether the respondents consider their workplace to be an inspiration and whether they are enthusiastic about their workplace. The last dimension, absorption, shows us through a very high score that the respondents are very involved in the work they do. So, the respondents confirm again that they value the quality of work very much and strive to perform their tasks as well as possible. But, in contrast to this statement, respondents also confirmed that they do not always feel happy when they work, thus confirming that there are influences within the workplace that directly and negatively affect them.

Moreover, the results obtained in this section of the research are in the same direction as the research developed by Nagata et al. (2021) that highlighted that work engagement is significantly associated with teleworking, especially remote work of moderate intensity (2-3 days per week) as high work engagement was recorded in this case. This study was carried out during the pandemic and the authors argue that there is a possibility that working from home may have increased engagement because teleworking reduced the risk of infection with the SARS-Cov-2 virus (Nagata et al., 2021).

If in the results from work engagement we identified certain aspects that negatively influence the vigor, dedication and absorption for the respondents, the results in burnout helped us to understand the situation better.

The results of the vigor dimension indicated that most employees often feel tired before starting work and are exhausted after work. However, they tolerate the pressure at work well and also confirmed that they have time left for recreational activities, which indicates that they have this fatigue under control. The results of the dimension of non-involvement show us that work tasks tire the majority of respondents to a certain extent. However, most of the participants in this survey claim that they do not say negative things about their workplace.

The results of a study by Holger Raúl Barriga Medina et al. (2021) also indicated a high level of burnout among telework employees. More specifically, the results showed that work-family conflict negatively affects burnout.

Means, standard deviations and correlations for the studied variables are presented in Table 2:

Table 2: Correlations among variables and shared of measures

	Mean	SD	Perceived usefulness of teleworking	Employee engagement	Job burnout
Perceived usefulness of teleworking	3.64	0.567	1	0	0
Employee engagement	3.68	0.602	0.37	1	0
Job burnout	2.98	0.576	-0.35	0.61	1

SD-Standard deviation; p<0.05

As observed in Table 2, the variable with the highest score is employee engagement (Mean=3.68). The highest correlation coefficient was between employee engagement and job burnout (0.61), while the lowest correlation coefficient was found in perceived usefulness of teleworking and employee engagement (0.37). Consequently, H1 and H2 are partially supported. Also, respondents registered a moderate level of burnout (they showed signs of a high level of burnout to the statements that emphasized their fatigue) so H3 is supported. The table above also indicates that the value of the Pearson correlation coefficient between the telework variable and the burnout variable is (-0.35). So hypothesis 4 is partially supported.

5. Conclusion

The research results indicate the respondents' favourable perception of the usefulness of teleworking and support this form of work. The conclusion that can be drawn is that Romania has the potential to have in the future a large number of telework employees, with a similar percentage (25%) as in the countries of northern Europe. Respondents found that the adjustment process was easy, they are working effectively and, in some cases, more productively, and the relationship with co-workers has not worsened. Also, many respondents did not feel afraid that they might lose their jobs.

Regarding work engagement, the average of the answers to the 9 items is 3.68, which shows an average level of engagement of the respondents. Moreover, we observe a positive correlation between work engagement and telework, which again indicates that teleworking is more advantageous in the view of respondents. The first category of employees showed high engagement while teleworking, as we mentioned above. The second category of employees refers to the respondents who showed a medium to high level of burnout where professional exhaustion as a dimension (caused especially by tiredness felt all day) was clear evidence of this state of burnout. These two clusters confirm the theory stated by Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) which claims that if an employee does not feel burnout at work, it does not mean that he is engaged in work, and if he does not feel engaged in work, it does not mean that the feeling occurs of burnout, indeed, both engagement and burnout are felt among these employees at exactly the same time to some extent.

Regarding the limits of our research, we believe that telework intensity also affects engagement (or even burnout). This paper did not focus on the intensity of telework, which would have helped in a more concrete analysis of its influence on engagement and burnout. So, in future research, we suggest a more detailed analysis of telework classified as follows: high intensity (more than 4 days per week), medium intensity (2 or 3 days per week), low intensity (more than once per month, but not weekly).

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