AJEMATES
African Journal of Educational Management, Teaching and Entrepreneurship Studies
VOL.18 (1), May-August, 2026; https://ajemates.org

THE MODERATING ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND TURNOVER INTENTIONS AMONG PRIVATE SECTOR EMPLOYEES IN AWKA

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ABSTRACT

Employees' intentions to quit their organization, along with actual turnover and its associated factors, have been on the front burner of many organizational researches over the years. Consequently, the present study examined the moderating role of social capital (SC) in the relationship between psychological distress (PD) and turnover intention (TI) among private sector employees in Awka, Anambra State. A total of three hundred and seventy-two (372) employees (206 males, and 166 females, mean age = 31.82yrs, SD = .97) participated in study. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire and hypotheses were tested with hierarchical multiple regressions with stepwise modeling. Three instruments were used for data collection namely: The Kessler psychological distress scale (K10), individual social capital scale, and turnover intention scale (TIS-6). The results revealed that PD failed to significantly predict TI. Furthermore, SC did not moderate the relationship between PD and TI. Implications of the findings for managerial and organizational practices were noted underscoring the importance of considering cultural and economic contexts when examining turnover among Nigeria's private sector employees. Limitations of the study were also highlighted and future research directions recommended.

Keywords: Psychological distress, social capital, turnover intentions

Introduction

People engage in various works and activities at different organizations to enable ends meet on their expenditure needed to carter for themselves and their loved ones. However, for one reason or the other, people will from time to time leave their work for another or change organization to suit their desires and career aspirations. The desire to quit one's present job or organization is referred to as turnover intention. Every organization regardless of its location, size or nature of business has always given a key concern about employees' turnover intention (Long, Thean, Ismail, & Jusoh, 2012).

According to Ertureten (2013), turnover intention refers to a deliberate and conscious willfulness to leave the organization within a foreseeable future. Turnover intention includes thoughts about quitting one's job, an aim to find a new job, and the plans to quit (Rahman & Nas, 2013), whereas, turnover occurs when a person ceases to work for an organization. While turnover is a behavioral construct, turnover intention is a more sensitive measure and a strong predictor of later

turnover (Hom et al., 1992). Turnover is costly for organizations as it can result in a drain of physical and mental resources for an organization in terms of both financial and social capital (Bodla & Hameed, 2008; Winterton, 2004). It can also impact the morale of employees, as it can disrupt teamwork and lead to delays in projects (Winterton, 2004; Zahra et al., 2013).

Even though turnover is cost for an organization, Habib (2015) pointed out that a certain level of turnover cannot be avoided, and in fact, it could be beneficial to the organization as new people join organizations with new ideas that in the process enrich the organization. Turnover can also allow an organization to adapt to market changes without going through costly layoffs. Certain organizations accept a relatively moderate level of staff turnover because it keeps the organization dynamic (Richardson, 2005). Some staff turnover has benefits, and can help increase productivity by ensuring better matches between jobs and workers, as well as offering more flexibility to promote and develop valued staff (Loquercio et al., 2006).

Turnover is classified into voluntary and involuntary types in the literature (Perez, 2008). Voluntary turnover involves when an employee leaves his/her work and the organization on his/her volition. Perez (2008) noted that Voluntary turnovers create significant cost, both in terms of direct cost, such as replacement, or in terms of indirect cost, such as the pressure on remaining staff or the loss of social capital. Whereas, involuntary turnover refers to the decision of management to force the employee to leave the organization (Perez, 2008).

Several factors have been identified to affect turnover intention in the literature. Some of these factors include: Leadership styles, demographic factors (age, job tenure, marital status, etc.), organizational commitment, organizational justice, organizational climate, promotion opportunities, salary, job stress, and job satisfaction (Jha, 2009; Nanjundeswaraswamy, & Swamy, 2014; Siew, 2017; Chowdhury, 2015; Ahuja et al, 2007; Aghaei et al., 2012; Alkahtani, 2015).

Evidence in extant literature has shown that psychological stress does not only affect the quality of service or task performance by workers, but can also translate into negative attitudes toward the job, threatening job stability and increasing the intentions to leave the organization (Kim et al., 2015). Psychological distress, or posttraumatic stress, is the emotional responses to a single or series of adverse event(s) a person finds highly stressful (Weathers et al., 2013). It can cause a wide variety of physical and physiological symptoms that manifest in different ways including unpredictable emotional swings, emotional and visual flashbacks, difficulty in relationships, and physical discomfort such as headaches, nausea, back pain (Eth, 2020). These symptoms have been measured in a variety of ways and the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) is the most commonly used symptom checker for PTSD (Weathers et al., 2018). Symptoms of distress have been heavily studied outside of the work context, yet inside the workplace, research is primarily focused on the presence of positive emotions like wellbeing (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009) or non-contextualized psychological

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distress (DagenaisDesmarais & Savoie, 2012).

Despite the abundance of researches in the literature, only limited studies have examined the effect of psychological distress on employees' turnover intention (e.g. Saleem et al., 2018). Hence, utilizing data from a survey of private sector employees in Awka, Anambra State; the study empirically examined the role of social capital in the relationship between psychological distress and employees' turnover intention. Drawing on conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989), unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994), and social capital theory (Kawachi et al., 2008), in particular, I (1) investigated the direct effect of psychological distress on employee's turnover intentions, (2) examined whether social capital moderates the relationship between psychological distress and turnover intention.

Theory and Hypotheses

Psychological Distress and Turnover Intentions

Turnover behavior can be explained in terms of "push" and "pull" factors, with the former reflecting perceived desirability of movement, whereas the latter referring to the ease of movement in terms of perceptions of job alternatives (March & Simon, 1958). The unfolding model of voluntary turnover suggests that leavers appear to follow one of four psychological and behavioral paths (or decision paths) when quitting. The major components of the unfolding model are a shock (a particular event, such as an individual gets passed over for promotion, which triggers an employee to reconsider his or her job), a script (a preset reaction to a potential shock), an image violation (a violation of the self-image that one desires with respect to the job), an evaluation of job satisfaction, and a search for alternatives (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Inderrieden, 2005). In line with this model, it can be argued that psychological distress (a negative shock) can cause an employee to evaluate his/her stay in the organization with a view of quitting the job with or without a search for alternatives. Hence, psychological distress can be considered as a strong "push" factor that is likely to make an employee to leave the organization. Evidence from extant literature has shown that the most crucial predictor of actual turnover is withdrawal intentions (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000), in the same way, it is believed that psychological distress may have significant effect on turnover intentions. Many studies for instance, have shown that psychological distress has direct and/or indirect significant positive effects on turnover intention (Bhatti & Ahmed, 2021).

Another theory that can be used to explain the link between psychological distress and turnover intentions is conservation of resources (COR) theory. The COR theory posits that people work towards preserving their existing resources that are valued (conservation) and obtain new ones (acquisition), which includes cognitive, emotional, or physical assets that employees utilize to confront stress-arousing events and/or meet personal and professional objectives (Bedi, 2019; Hobfoll, 2001). Moreover, it further contends that stress will arise when individuals undergo a threat of or actual loss of resources or lack of resource gain, which will make them more likely to lose further resources (Hobfoll, 1989). The basic

tenet of COR theory is that resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain because it represents a major threat to survival (Hobfoll, 2011). This implies that real or anticipated resource loss has a stronger motivational power than expected resource gain (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008). Accordingly, an employee experiencing an unpredictable emotional swings and trauma, social exclusion etc. in the workplace probably resulting from psychological distress, will have his/her resources substantially drained, leading to elevated stress levels and further loss of resources. Indeed, when individuals are psychologically distressed, their personal resources in the form of time and energy are expended to deal with the stressful situation and, as a consequence, they may engage in avoidant and withdrawal coping strategies to protect themselves from further resource loss (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Panaccio, 2011). Consequently, it is rational to predict that prolonged psychological distress will result in turnover intentions. Thus, I propose:

Hypothesis 1: Psychological distress significantly and positively predicts turnover intentions

Moderating Role of Social Capital

Social capital is often described as the source of support available to people, that in turn can provide a type of resource needed to cope with challenges (Adler & Kwon, 2002). It is assumed that social capital includes a person's social structure (the number of people or organizations available) in addition to the properties, attributes, and mutually beneficial resources that are available when needed (Kawachi, 2006; Kawachi et al., 2008). Social capital theory posits that interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, and exchange of social support each constitutes a type of resource and that access to these resources may promote the resilience of the individuals against adversity (Furuta et al., 2012; Kawachi et al., 2010). Social capital, according to social capital theory, is the resources created through people's social relationships that can be harnessed to achieve positive social outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1992). These social relationships engender a system of trust and reciprocity that facilitates productive activity (Coleman, 1988) and operates in the same way as financial capital benefiting individuals by connecting them to other people who are influential and important within their social sphere (Putnam, 2000).

Employees going through psychological distress who might have developed their social capital through social relationships within and outside of the organization would likely have garnered a certain level of resources in terms of mutual trust and reciprocity as well social support (e.g. expression of love, care and empathy; proffering of advice, suggestions, and information on how to solve a problem; lending/giving of money and other tangibles; giving compliments and encouragements etc.) from colleagues, friends and family that are needed to help the individual go through or overcome the psychological distress prompting the thoughts of turnover intention. Hence, it can be expected that the positive effects of psychological distress on turnover intention will be less pronounced among employees who are high on social capital compared to those who are low. Thus, I propose:

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Hypothesis 2: Social capital moderates the relationship between psychological distress and turnover intentions; such that the relationship will be weaker when social capital is high.

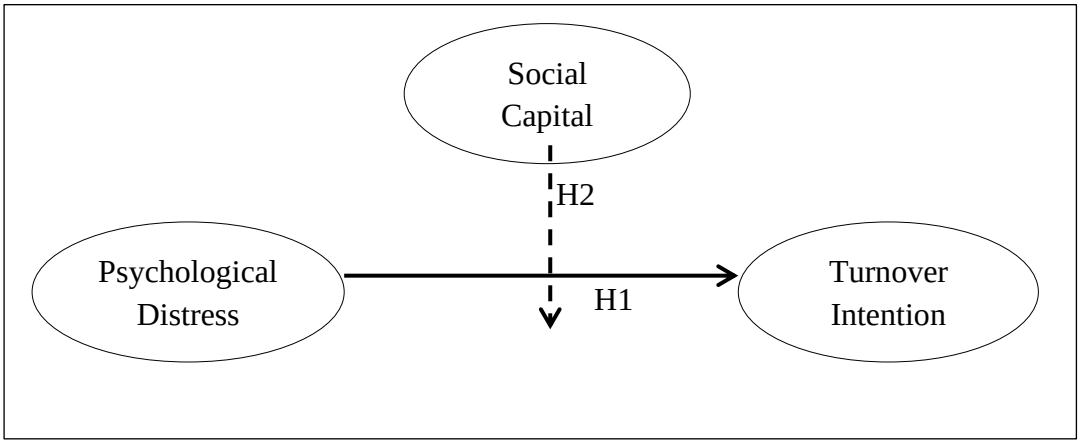


Figure 1: Research Model

Method

Sample and Procedure

A total of three hundred and seventy-two (372) employees recruited from private sector organizations located in Anambra State participated in the study. The researcher employed convenience sampling technique because every available and willing employee was sampled. The demographic composition of the sampled respondents revealed that out of the 372 participants, 206 (55.4%) were males while 166 (44.6%) were females. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 60 years with a mean age of 31.82 and SD of 0.97. One hundred and ten (29.6%) of the participants had NCE/OND as their highest level of education, 206 (55.4%) had Degree/HND, 15 (4.0%) had PGD/PGDE, 4 (1.1%) had Masters, 37 (9.9%) had Ph.D. A total of four hundred and twenty (420) questionnaires were initially distributed, out of which 388 copies were returned, which represented a return rate of 92.4%. Of these 388 questionnaires returned, 16 copies were discarded due to improper completion, leaving a total of 372 copies used for data analyses.

Measures

Employees' psychological distress was measured with a 10-item scale developed by Kessler et al. (2003). A sample item is "In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel tired out for no good reason?" Responses were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 5 (all of the time) to 1 (none of the time). The scale had an acceptable internal consistency reliability value of .91. (Kessler et al., 2003).

Employees' social capital was assessed with a 7-item scale developed by Zhang et al. (2010). Sample item include "My colleagues and I trust each other" Respondents used five-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly

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agree) to respond to the items on the scale. The scale had a high alpha coefficient of .91 (Zhang et al., 2010).

Turnover intention (the intention to leave) was measured with a 6-item scale (TIS-6) adapted by Bothma and Roodt (2013) from the 15-item scale initially developed by Roodt (2004). Sample items include: "How often have you considered leaving your job?" and "How often do you look forward to another day at work?" The Cronbach alpha obtained for this scale is .80 (Bothma & Roodt, 2013).

Data Analysis

The study adopted a cross-sectional design. Inter-correlations among the study variables were conducted using Pearson's correlation analysis. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to ascertain the prediction of the outcome variable (turnover intention) by demographic and predictor variable (psychological distress). The moderation analysis was also carried out by hierarchical multiple regression.

Results

Table 1: Means, standard deviation and inter-correlations among the study variables

Variables		*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Age	31.82	0.97	-						
2	Gender	1.45	.50	-.07	-					
3	Job Tenure	1.20	.51	.59**	.04	-				
4	Education	2.06	1.13	.08	.18**	.09	-			
5	PD	24.35	7.32	-.13*	-.20**	-.09	-.07	-		
6	Social Capital	23.22	5.40	.13**	-.19**	.12	.05	-.49**	-	
7	Turnover Intention	17.72	3.21	-.13**	.06	-.12*	.07	.08	-.06	-

Note: *p < .05(two-tailed), **p < .01 (two-tailed), N = 372; PD: Psychological Distress
Coding of Demographic Variables:
Gender: Male = 1, Female = 2; Job Tenure: 1-10 = 1, 11-20 = 2, 21-30 = 3, 31 and above; Education: NCE/OND = 1, DEGREE/HND = 2, PGD/PGDE = 3, Masters = 4, Ph.D and Above = 5.

Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among study variables are reported in Table 1. The demographic characteristics of the study participants in Table 1 revealed that the average age of the participants was 31.82 (SD = 0.97). Majority of the participants had first degree as their highest level of education. Also, majority of the sample had between 1-10 years of work experience (Job tenure).

The result of the correlational analysis in Table 1 revealed that age (r = -.13, p< .01) and job tenure (r = -.12, p< .05) were significantly and negatively correlated with turnover intention. These imply that older age and long years of service decrease the intention to quit job/organization among the employees. However, the other demographic variables (gender and education), and the main variables (psychological distress and social capital) did not significantly correlate with turnover intention

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Table 2: Hierarchical Multiple Regressions for the prediction of Turnover Intention by Psychological Distress and Social Capital

	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3		Step 4	
Predictors	**B**	***t***	**B**	***t***	**β**	***t***	**β**	***t***
Age	-.10	-1.57	-.10	-1.48	-.09	-1.47	-.08	-1.31
Gender	.04	.69	.02	.41	.02	.38	.02	.36
Job Tenure	-.07	-1.11	-.07	-1.06	-.07	-1.04	-.07	-1.04
Education	.08	1.44	.08	1.55	.08	1.55	.08	1.55
PD (A)			.07	1.24	.06	.99	-.22	-1.19
SC (B)					-.02	-.25	-.30	-1.59
Interaction (A x B)							.30	1.59
R^2		.03		.03		.03		.04
$R^2\Delta$		.029		.004		.000		.007
FΔ		2.79		1.54		.06		2.52

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001, PD = Psychological Distress, SC = Social Capital

Table 2 above shows the hierarchical multiply regression for the prediction of turnover intention (TI) by psychological distress (PD) and social capital (SC). The demographic variables (age, gender, job tenure and education) entered in first step of the regression model as covariates collectively accounted for 2.9% [$R^2\Delta$ = .029; $F\Delta$ (4, 367) = 2.785, p = ns] variation in TI. However, none of the demographic variables significantly predicted TI.

Psychological distress (PD) entered in step 2 of the equation failed to significantly predict TI (β = .07, p = ns). However, the variance in TI explained on account of PD was 0.4% [$R^2\Delta$ = .004; $F\Delta$ (1, 366) = 1.541, p = ns].

The inclusion of social capital (SC) in the third step of the equation did not predict TI (β = -.02, p = ns). However, the variance in TI explained on account of SC was 0.0 % [$R^2\Delta$ = .000; $F\Delta$ (1, 365) = .062, p = ns].

The interaction effect (A x B) entered in the fourth and final step of the equation did not significantly predict TI. Howbeit, the variance in TI explained on account of the interaction effect (A x B) was 0.7% [$R^2\Delta$ = .007; $F\Delta$ (1, 364) = 2.523, p = ns]. This implies that SC failed to moderate the relationship between PD and TI.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to examine the association between psychological distress (PD) and turnover intention (TI), as well as to investigate the moderating effect of social capital in the relationship between PD and TI. Demographic variables were entered as covariates. The result of the correlational analysis showed that age and job tenure were significantly and negatively associated with turnover intention. This finding (age - turnover intention link) is consistent with previous research outcomes (Chen et al., 2010; Lambert, 2001; Lambert, 2006; Martin and Roodt, 2008) that reported that age and turnover intention/actual turnover has an inverse relationship, for instance, older people have lower turnover intention than young people. This is because younger people may want to quit their jobs to explore better opportunities in other organizations,

whereas older employees will be more willing to stick to their jobs due to a number of factors related to the uncertainty of getting a better job, lower ambition and reduced job fantasies etc. Also, this outcome (the negative tenure and turnover intention relationship) corroborates findings of previous studies (e.g., Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Van Breukelen et al, 2004) who found that length of service in a job is negatively related to both intended and actual turnover. The reason for this outcome may be due the attachment to the organization and the uncertainty associated with getting a better job/organization with friendly colleagues and better remuneration.

The main finding of this study revealed that psychological distress (PD) failed to predict turnover intention (TI) among private sector employees in Awka City Anambra State. This follows that hypothesis 1 was not confirmed, implying that PD has no significant impact on TI. This outcome is at variance with many extant studies (e.g. Bhatti, & Ahmed, 2021; Michaud et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2022; Saleem et al., 2018) which utilized PD as a mediating variable in the relationship between various predictor variables and turnover intention as outcome variable. These studies showed that PD mediated the relationship between the predictor variables and turnover intention. This implies that PD in these studies had significant relationship with turnover intentions. However, the reason for the non-significant prediction of TI by PD in the present study may be due the fact that majority of these studies were conducted in western countries like US and UK, characterized by high standard of living and good working condition. Hence, when workers in these countries used to good living condition are exposed to adverse life situations such as psychological distress, which may encroach into their work-family life, they are more likely to develop the intention to leave their organization compared to workers in a developing country like Nigeria. Workers in Nigeria are constantly subjected to harsh economic realities and difficult working conditions which have made several of them over the years to be resilient in the face of these life-threatening conditions. Accordingly, it is reasonable to say that the experience of psychological distress in the work place among Nigerian workers may not be enough reason for these workers to develop the intention to quit their job as they have to contend with job scarcity, incessant galloping inflation, bad government policies etc.

Finally, the second hypothesis was also not confirmed as social capital failed to moderate the PD-TI relationship. This means that psychological distress - social capital interaction was not strong enough to bring about a change in turnover intention. The reason for this outcome may be linked to work exposure and mental disposition of the participants recruited for this study. Social capital has been described as a person's social structure and the source of support available to him/her, which in turn can provide a type of resource needed to cope with challenges (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Since PD failed to significantly predict TI, it is then expected that social capital may not have a strong impact on PD needed to cause a significant change on TI. That is, since Nigerian private sector employees' decision to quit an organization is not prompted by PD in the present study, then considering an employee's social resourcefulness (social capital) is

immaterial to bring about a change in the PD – TI relationship.

Implications of the Study

The results of this study have practical implications for both public and private sector organizations. The first finding of this study revealed that PD did not predict TI and this finding have several implications. First, Managers and organizations are advised to pay close attention to the wellbeing of their employees through due diligence to identify employees going through psychological distress as it may not reflect in the employees' expression of the intent to leave the organization possibly via the exhibition of negative work behaviour. Consequently, organizations should ensure that counseling services are made available to victims to help them deal with various manifestations of psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, and fatigue) which may be concealed by these employees. Second, managers and organizations should ensure that their workers are well remunerated and are given incentives to help them cope with the harsh economic situations bedeviling Nigeria as many of the employees may be suffering and smiling. That is, these employees may be going through psychological distress and may not want to express it in the form of showing off signs of dissatisfaction and the intention to leave the organization; rather they may prefer to be dying slowly on the inside so as not to annoy their boss thereby increasing the chances of retaining their job. It should be noted that according to Nigeria bureau of statistics (NBS) (2023), the headline inflation rate rose to 24.08% in July 2023, making life unbearable for most Nigerian workers and the vast majority of the Nigeria populace who are going through multidimensional poverty as reported by NBS 2023. It suffices to say that most employees in Nigeria today are simply managing and suffering as their disposable income and take-home salary no longer takes care of their basic needs and that of their loved ones, which may ultimately culminate in development of psychological distress among the employees. Therefore, organizations should consider increasing employee wages and providing incentives where necessary to help ease the challenges of the current economic climate.

The result of this study also showed that social capital failed to moderate the relationship between PD and TI. This outcome has crucial implications for organizations and employees. Since the effect of social capital (social resourcefulness) interaction with PD was not strong enough to cause a significant change in TI, it suggests that the employees are not confiding in their social network for social support. Which is further suggesting that these employees may be keeping their thoughts and challenges to themselves, and not willing to share with co-workers and friends. Therefore, organizations should make sure that counseling services are made available to employees and should be done in a conducive environment where there can empty their worries and get new counsels on the way forward in their career and personal life.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

The present study has contributed to the extant literature in no small way, in that it's one of the few studies that have examined the direct link between psychological distress and turnover

intention. However, there are some limitations to the study. First, the study was cross-sectional in nature, and data were collected using self-report measures, consequently, no experimental approach was adopted to investigate causal relationships making it impossible to avoid social desirability bias. Second, the study only covered participants (private sector employees) from one geopolitical zone of the country which may limit the generalization of the outcome of the study to the entire population of working class in the country. Therefore, future research could replicate the tested model in multiple contexts using larger sample size and other occupational groups to prove its validity across the board. Finally, making use of other moderator variables might provide further insight on the association between psychological distress and turnover intention.

Data collection in the present study was carried out at one point in time, meaning that there is the possibility that the data could be affected by common method bias. However, common method variance was checked by undertaking prescribed procedural and post-hoc statistical checks to ensure the risk of common method variance was minimized (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Future research should use longitudinal data collection to examine the impact of psychological distress on turnover intentions.

As far as the researcher is concerned, this is first study to explore the direct effect of psychological distress on turnover intentions. Majority of extant studies examined the indirect effect of psychological distress on turnover intention. Therefore, further studies should examine the direct effect of this relationship making use of different mediator and moderator variables.

Conclusion

This study explored the moderating role of social capital (SC) in the relationship between psychological distress (PD) and turnover intention (TI) among private sector employees in Awka, Anambra State. The findings of this study revealed that psychological distress (PD) does not significantly influence turnover intentions (TI). This implies that Nigerian workers, accustomed to challenging economic conditions and unstable work environments, may exhibit resilience in response to workplace stress, unlike their counterparts in Western countries where PD often predicts TI. The absence of social capital (SC) as a moderating factor further suggests that interpersonal support networks may not be pivotal in affecting the PD-TI relationship in this context. For organizational leaders in Nigeria, this highlights a unique resilience among employees, suggesting that turnover is less likely to be driven by psychological distress alone and may instead be influenced by broader economic conditions. This study provides valuable insights into the unique dynamics of PD and TI within Nigeria's private sector. Contrary to existing research, PD does not significantly predict TI, nor does SC moderate this relationship, highlighting the importance of considering cultural and economic contexts when examining turnover. Further research is warranted to explore other potential drivers of turnover among Nigerian employees, offering a broader perspective for organizational retention strategies.

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