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Resilience in Crisis: The Impact of HRM Practices on Job Performance and Emotional Exhaustion Among University Employees

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Abstract

Organizations worldwide, including universities, have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required swift adaptations in human resource management practices to maintain employee performance. This research examined the relationships between HRM practices, job performance, and the mediation of emotional exhaustion among university employees in the Western Balkans, reflecting on COVID-19 experiences. An online survey was conducted across public and private universities in the region, collecting 1,020 responses. The results showed a significant positive relationship between HRM practices and job performance. Furthermore, a significant negative relationship was found between HRM practices and emotional exhaustion. Despite predictions, the study did not confirm that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between HRM practices and job performance. This study emphasized how important HRM practices are to preserving job performance and reducing emotional exhaustion among university staff members during the COVID-19 epidemic. The results highlighted the necessity of specialized HRM approaches that tackle the difficulties encountered by university staff, guaranteeing their welfare and continued productivity in times of emergency.

Keywords: *HRM practices, Job performance, Mediation of emotional exhaustion, University employees, COVID-19 experiences.*

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1. Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) practices have long been recognized as essential for maintaining employee performance and well-being in higher education institutions (Mohiuddin et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, posed unprecedented challenges, forcing these institutions to rapidly adapt to remote work environments and rethink their HRM strategies (Gabr et al., 2021). Universities had to navigate uncertainties while ensuring that their employees could continue to function effectively (Wunderlich & Møller, 2020). In the Western Balkan region, where universities are pivotal to both education and research, understanding the role of HRM practices in influencing job performance and emotional well-being has become even more critical. Universities in the Western Balkans operate within distinct economic, political, and social contexts that significantly influence their organizational dynamics (Jusufi & Ajdarpasic, 2020). These institutions often face challenges such as limited financial resources, ongoing educational reforms, and the complexities of post-conflict socio-economic recovery, all of which contribute to heightened stress for employees (Allkja & Hidri, 2020; Gómez, 2022). These regional pressures underscore the critical role of HRM practices in supporting employee job performance and alleviating emotional exhaustion. Understanding HRM practices within this unique environment is essential to addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by university employees in the Western Balkans.

The significance of examining the impact of HRM practices on job performance and emotional well-being within the context of Western Balkan universities during the COVID-19 era stems from several factors. Firstly, universities serve as pillars of societal progress, contributing to the development of human capital and fostering innovation (Kuzey et al., 2022). Secondly, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a paradigm shift in the way organizations, in general, operate, with remote work becoming the new norm (Pavlović et al., 2021; Petrušić & Đukanović, 2023). Specifically focusing on university settings, where traditional modes of in-person teaching and collaborative administrative functions were disrupted, HRM practices played a critical role in facilitating adaptation to remote environments while maintaining employee engagement and motivation. In addition, effective HRM practices are crucial to maintaining the emotional well-being of employees and high employee job performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Previous research has emphasized the role of HRM practices in shaping employee outcomes such as job performance and emotional well-being (Liu et al., 2017; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). High-quality HRM practices, such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and employee involvement, are positively linked to improved job performance and increased job satisfaction (Jiang et al., 2012). Studies examining HRM practices during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the importance of proactive HRM strategies in mitigating adverse effects on employee well-being and performance (Agarwal, 2021; Zilić et al., 2023). In the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, studies have

begun to explore the impact of the pandemic on HRM practices and employee outcomes (Kutieshat & Farmanesh, 2022). Additionally, HRM practices can affect employee well-being, such as emotional exhaustion (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). Emotional exhaustion describes employees who feel emotionally overextended and exhausted by their work, resulting in physical fatigue and psychological exhaustion (Kuzey et al., 2023). Research has shown that the pandemic has led to increased levels of stress and emotional exhaustion among employees (Costin et al., 2023). Emotionally exhausted employees are more likely to miss work, develop occupational disabilities, and perform poorly at work (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Likewise, van de Voorde et al. (2012) have shown that emotional exhaustion is closely related to HRM practices. In some studies, HRM practices such as performance management have been found to be positively associated with emotional exhaustion, while in other studies e.g. employee development and communication were negatively associated with emotional exhaustion (Sun & Pan, 2008). Emotional exhaustion is a critical factor in understanding the impact of HRM practices on employee outcomes, especially within the unique setting of Western Balkan universities. University employees in this region face significant stressors, including limited resources, ongoing educational reforms, and challenging socio-economic conditions. These pressures, often worsened by human resource demands, contribute to emotional exhaustion, a state of chronic fatigue that can undermine both well-being and job performance. Due to the distinct organizational structures and challenges faced by higher education institutions in the Balkans region, this study examines the impact of HRM practices on job performance among university employees in the Western Balkans. Unlike their Western European counterparts, universities in the Western Balkans often operate with constrained resources, placing unique pressures on employees across all roles. By investigating this population, we aim to capture a comprehensive view of how HRM practices influence university staff within a context that has been largely underrepresented in HR research. While research has explored the link between HRM practices and employee performance, there is a noticeable gap regarding the impact on university employees in the Western Balkans reflecting on COVID-19 experiences. Much of the existing literature focuses on developed Western countries, overlooking the specific challenges and organizational dynamics in transitional economies such as the Western Balkans (Collins & Clark, 2003; Bakker et al., 2004; Guest & Conway, 2011; Jensen et al., 2013; Kilroy et al., 2016; Pereyra-Rojas et al., 2017; Dyrbye et al., 2019; Wunderlich & Møller, 2020; Koch & Schermuly, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impact of HRM practices on job performance among university employees in the Western Balkans and to explore the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in this relationship.

In the following section, definitions of the variables will be explained. Furthermore, the theoretical perspectives will be clarified, and empirical evidence will be reviewed. Finally, the next section will provide and clarify the hypotheses and the conceptual model.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to organizations worldwide, including universities (Kadum et al., 2020). As universities strive to adapt to the "new normal", the effectiveness of their human resource management (HRM) strategies in maintaining employee job performance and well-being has become a critical priority (Wunderlich & Møller, 2020; Kutieshat & Farmanesh, 2022). This literature review explores the relationship between HRM practices, job performance, and emotional exhaustion among university employees, with a specific focus on the Western Balkan region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Human Resource Management (HRM) refers to the process of managing an organization's most valuable assets—its employees—in a way that maximizes their performance to achieve the organization's objectives (Buller & McEvoy, 2012). Employee performance is determined by how effective and efficient individuals are in executing their duties (Metin & Demirer, 2021). It encompasses both task performance, which involves job-specific responsibilities, and contextual performance, which includes actions that contribute to the broader organizational goals, such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Torlak et al., 2021; Hadziahmetovic et al., 2023).

Emotional exhaustion is a condition characterized by a state of depletion caused by excessive work demands and ongoing stressors (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). It reflects feelings of being emotionally overextended and fatigued by one’s work, manifesting as both physical tiredness and a sense of psychological and emotional "drain" (Dinc et al., 2022).

2.1. Impact of HRM Practices on Job Performance and Emotional Exhaustion

Human Resource Management (HRM) practices are designed to enhance both employee and organizational performance by improving individual skills, motivation, and overall contribution. These practices play a crucial role in the workplace and can be seen as tools that reflect what an organization values and expects from its employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). In this study, HRM practices are the key predictors influencing job performance among university employees in the Western Balkan region during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also provides insights into how employees' perceptions of HRM practices are linked to job performance. This focus on the use of HRM practices is essential, as prior research has shown a strong relationship between HRM practices and job performance (Guest & Conway, 2011).

The relationship between HRM practices and job performance has been widely studied, with research demonstrating the significant impact HRM practices have on both employee performance and organizational outcomes (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021). Previous studies have shown that different HRM practices can have varying effects on job performance (Collins & Clark, 2003). Employee performance may

improve when HRM practices are developed with employees' needs in mind (Nishii & Wright, 2007). High-performance HRM practices, such as selective hiring, extensive training, performance-based compensation, and employee involvement, have been found to positively influence employee job performance (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998). Additionally, effective recruitment and selection processes have been linked to higher levels of employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, and ultimately, job performance (Huselid, 1995). Performance appraisal systems also play a crucial role in providing feedback, clarifying expectations, and motivating employees to perform at their best (DeNisi & Pritchard, 2006).

Research by Manzoor et al. (2019) confirmed that job performance is significantly influenced by HRM practices. Similarly, a study by Alsafadi and Altahat (2021) supported the positive effect of HRM practices on employee performance, while Pamungkas and Wulandari (2021) found that HRM practices in the public sector have a positive and significant impact on employee job performance. Therefore, the first hypothesis can be stated as:

Hypothesis 1: HRM has a significant positive effect on job performance among university employees in the Western Balkan region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Emotional exhaustion may result when employees perceive HRM practices as imposing unreasonably high expectations. Employees feel increased pressure at work and have less energy available when they believe performance management is solely focused on boosting productivity. This can lead to heightened stress levels and emotional exhaustion (Bakker et al., 2004). Previous research has supported both positive and negative relationships between HRM practices and emotional exhaustion. Specifically, some HRM practices have been linked to increased emotional exhaustion (Brown & Benson, 2003). However, other studies have found that HRM practices are negatively associated with emotional exhaustion, as employees view them as signals that the organization cares about their well-being (Van De Voorde et al., 2012).

Rigorous HRM practices, such as performance management, can exhaust employees, leaving them drained (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). On the other hand, studies have shown a negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and factors like participation, voice, communication, and information sharing (Bakker et al., 2003). Jyoti et al. (2015) found that HRM practices influenced emotional exhaustion, while Kilroy et al. (2016) confirmed a significant negative relationship between HRM practices and emotional exhaustion. Similarly, a later study by Li et al. (2020) showed that HRM had a significant negative impact on emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the second hypothesis can be stated as:

Hypothesis 2: HRM has a significant negative effect on emotional exhaustion among university employees in the Western Balkan region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Emotional Exhaustion and its Impact on Job Performance

A number of research studies have concluded that emotional exhaustion negatively affects job performance. Emotional exhaustion has been found to be significantly linked to employee well-being and job performance (Maslach et al., 2001). It is associated with a range of negative outcomes for both individuals and organizations, including reduced job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, and heightened health concerns (Maslach, 2001). Emotionally exhausted employees invest less effort into their work and have diminished energy overall (Bakker et al., 2004). This exhaustion can lead to a negative cycle in which employees avoid seeking assistance and continue to function inefficiently. Emotional exhaustion also undermines employees' confidence in their ability to handle work-related challenges, which is why their job performance suffers (Bakker et al., 2003).

High levels of emotional exhaustion increase the likelihood of poor job performance (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). Emotional exhaustion is a natural response to heavy physical and mental demands, signaling a greater risk of performance decline due to depleted energy (Veldhuizen et al., 2003). Ladebo and Awotunde (2007) provided specific examples of how job demands drained employees' emotional resources, raising their levels of emotional exhaustion and leading to diminished job performance. Previous studies consistently indicate that emotional exhaustion has a negative impact on job performance. For instance, Lee and Ashforth (1996) found that emotional exhaustion reduces performance. Similarly, research by Wright and Cropanzano (1998) linked emotional exhaustion to poor job performance. In a study conducted by Wright and Bonett (1997), emotional exhaustion was the only aspect of burnout found to be negatively associated with job performance. Karatepe's (2013) research also demonstrated that emotional exhaustion contributes to decreased job performance. Moreover, Dyrbye et al. (2019) reported that all dimensions of burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion, are prevalent among nurses and likely impair job performance. As job performance increases, the prevalence of overall burnout, high emotional exhaustion, and high depersonalization decreases.

Finally, our research suggests that emotional exhaustion negatively impacts job performance, leading to the third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Emotional exhaustion has a significant negative effect on job performance among university employees in the Western Balkan region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

The mediating role of emotional exhaustion draws from both management and communication sciences. Mediation is understood here in its operational sense-as both a technique and a communication strategy. It represents a communication-centered approach, serving as a lens to identify the modes of interaction and

communication stemming from emotional exhaustion's mediating role. Mediation is both a paradigm for understanding and a practical skill set. It is a way of engaging with the world and channeling positive energy (Tudor & Bratosin, 2021).

In many organizations, management prioritizes improved performance metrics, often leading to increased work intensity for employees, which is closely linked to emotional exhaustion (Brown & Benson, 2003). Several studies have explored emotional exhaustion's role as a mediator between HRM practices and job performance. For example, Demerouti et al. (2001) explained how emotional exhaustion mediates the connection between HRM practices and employee performance. High-demand HRM practices may contribute to emotional exhaustion, resulting in decreased job performance (Sun & Pan, 2008). Furthermore, Jensen et al. (2013) found that HRM practices aimed at boosting organizational success can sometimes come at the expense of employees' well-being. The research by Yang et al. (2021) demonstrated that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between guanxi HRM practices, individual pay-for-performance, and employee job performance.

While HRM practices and job performance are expected to be related through emotional exhaustion in some instances, this is not universally true. Thus, partial mediation is anticipated, suggesting that other factors, such as employee well-being, could influence the relationship between HRM practices and job performance. Khoreva and Wechtler (2018) found that different dimensions of HRM practices enhance employee well-being in various ways, which, in turn, boost job performance. These diverse HRM practices work in the same direction and do not produce unintended negative effects on employees' physical well-being. Based on the above research and previously reported empirical findings, we predict an association between HRM practices and job performance, with emotional exhaustion acting as a mediator. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 4: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between HRM practices and job performance among university employees in the Western Balkan region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

This research employed a quantitative approach, characterized by the collection and systematic analysis of numerical data. The study leverages online surveys as its primary data. In line with one of the fundamental objectives of this study, which is to explore the impact of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices on job performance and the mediating role of emotional exhaustion, the creation of a questionnaire capable of measuring the constructs was imperative. The research model was established on the interconnectedness of three constructs: Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, Emotional Exhaustion, and Job Performance (Figure 1).

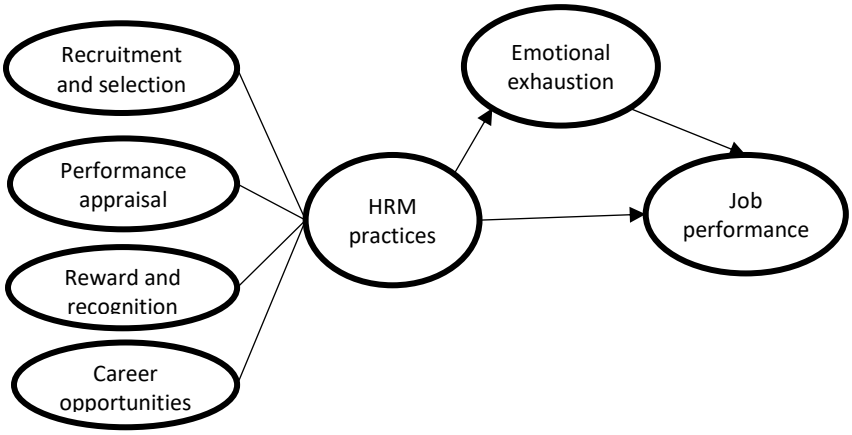

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

The measurement of Emotional Exhaustion drew from the scale and items developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981), previously utilized in studies (Demerouti et al., 2001; Sun & Pan, 2008; Yang et al., 2021) where it was probed as a mediator. Job performance was gauged using a scale formulated by Sashkin (1982), with items for the variable Job Performance drawn from articles authored by Ang et al. (2003), Chiang and Hsieh (2012), and Vo-Thanh et al. (2020).

The questionnaire employed in the survey adopted a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) = Strongly Disagree to (5) = Strongly Agree, consistent with prior studies (Sun & Pan, 2008; Yang et al., 2021). The data was subjected to analysis using SPSS 23 and AMOS 23 software, employing quantitative techniques to examine the influence of HRM practices on job performance, mediated by Emotional Exhaustion, in both private and public higher education institutions across Western Balkan Countries during the COVID-19 era. Following the approach suggested by previous research (Thompson, 2004; Marsh et al., 2009; Pereyra-Rojas et al., 2017; Kyriazos, 2018), both exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the measurement scales used in this study. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was then employed to test the proposed research hypotheses. Although the constructs of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, Emotional Exhaustion, and Job Performance are well-established in the literature, it was essential to verify their applicability in the context of the Western Balkan region, where universities operate under distinct institutional conditions. Additionally, the collected sample necessitated an initial exploratory approach to assess the consistency of the factors. EFA was employed to identify and confirm the underlying factor structure within our sample. Following this, CFA was used to confirm the final factor structure, ensuring that the measurement model aligned with theoretical expectations and demonstrated a good fit with the data. During the data analysis phase, unfavorable outcomes prompted the removal of one

construct with three items from the original 16-item HRM scale derived from Halid et al. (2024), thus enhancing the measurement instrument's reliability and validity. Consequently, a total of thirteen items remained to gauge HRM practices, comprising Recruitment and selection (three items), Performance appraisal (three items), Rewards and recognition (four items), and Career opportunities (three items) components. The measurement of Emotional Exhaustion consisted of three items adapted from Koch and Schermuly (2021). Six items adapted from Vo-Thanh et al. (2020) were utilized to measure the pertinent constructs to assess job performance.

3.1. Data Collection

The research used an online questionnaire to gather data, capitalizing on the growing trend of utilizing such surveys. The email addresses of university staff were sourced from their respective university websites. Over a span of two months, commencing from the end of March 2023 to the conclusion of May 2023, a total of more than 5,000 emails were distributed. Although the data collection took place at the very end of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents were explicitly instructed to provide answers based on their experiences during the pandemic. The survey design ensured that respondents were reminded multiple times to reflect on their work-related experiences and emotional states during the pandemic, despite the data collection occurring after the most critical periods of the pandemic. The sample includes 1,020 responses from different university staff members, affiliated with sixty-six different public and private universities across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. A concise summary of the data sample is provided in Table 1. The distribution of respondents in this study reflects the actual employment structure at universities in the Western Balkans, where academic staff are generally more involved in research initiatives. This composition is representative of the university environment, where academic staff tend to engage more readily with research studies than administrative staff.

4. Results

4.1. Data Analysis

This study involved the utilization of SPSS and AMOS software for the analysis of the collected data and the evaluation of the formulated hypotheses. The verification of factor reliability was carried out through the assessment of internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. Nunnally (1978) recommended that a set of items with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient greater than 0.7 indicates robust internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha values obtained, as depicted in Table 2, ranged from 0.894 to 0.938, indicating a high level of reliability for all factors.

Turning to the matter of validity measurement, this was accomplished using the AMOS Plugin, as outlined by Gaskin and Lim (2016) and Hu and Bentler (1999).

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Variable	Demographics	Number	Valid percentage
Gender	Female	573	56.20%
	Male	447	43.80%
Age	18–24	17	1.70%
	25–34	178	17.50%
	35–44	346	33.90%
	45–54	295	28.90%
	55–64	158	15.50%
	65 or above	26	2.50%
Education	High school diploma or equivalent	5	0.50%
	Some college, no degree	1	0.10%
	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	31	3.00%
	Master's degree or equivalent	175	17.20%
	Doctoral or professional degree or equivalent	808	79.20%
Country	Albania	205	20.10%
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	257	25.20%
	Kosovo	152	14.90%
	Montenegro	91	8.90%
	North Macedonia	103	10.10%
	Serbia	212	20.80%
University affiliation	Private	338	33.10%
	Public	682	66.90%
Job position	Academic staff	882	86.50%
	Administrative staff	46	4.50%
	Managerial staff (Head, Dean, Rector)	92	9.00%
University tenure	1–5 years	155	15.20%
	6–10 years	181	17.70%
	11–20 years	414	40.60%
	21–30 years	198	19.40%
	more than 30 years	72	7.10%

As revealed in the analyzed results found in Table 2, all constructs exhibited composite reliability (CR) greater than 0.7, spanning from 0.896 to 0.921. This substantial range reinforces internal consistency, as supported by Gefen et al. (2000). In terms of the reflective aspect, the confirmation of convergent reliability was established by guaranteeing that all average extracted variance (AVE) values exceeded 0.5, in accordance with the insights of Fornell and Larcker (1981). An important consideration pertains to the relationship between MSV and AVE. To determine the discriminant validity, a comparison was drawn between MSV and AVE values. Remarkably, all AVE values surpassed corresponding MSV values, and the square root of AVE surpassed correlation values for each respective factor. This compelling result substantiates the distinctive validity of the derived factor structure.

Table 2. Reliability and validity test results of the measurement model.

Constructs		Source	Reliability (Cronbach alpha)	CR	AVE	MSV
HRM practices	Recruitment and selection Performance appraisal Rewards and recognition	Akhtar et al. (2008) Langford (2009) Lee et al. (2010) Awais-e-Yazdan & Hassan (2020) Halid et al. (2024)	0.938	0.921	0.747	0.131
Emotional Exhaustion		Maslach & Jackson (1981) Demerouti et al. (2001) Sun & Pan (2008) Yang et al. (2021)	0.894	0.896	0.741	0.017
Job Performance		Sashkin (1982) Ang et al. (2003) Chiang & Hsieh (2012) Vo-Thanh et al. (2020)	0.899	0.908	0.626	0.131

Note: Reliability (Cronbach alpha) > 0.7, Composite reliability (CR) > 0.7, Average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.5, AVE > MSV

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA), as outlined in Table 3, was conducted within SPSS employing maximum likelihood extraction coupled with Promax rotation. This approach aimed to decipher the factor loadings of individual items and their alignments with the suggested structures, as identified during the assessment of factor loadings. The criteria set by Hair Jr et al. (1998) was adopted, stipulating a minimum loading factor of 0.3. This criterion was consistently applied to the analysis of the 1020 samples. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was executed using maximum likelihood estimation techniques to assess the validity of the proposed measurement model. This CFA analysis was executed using AMOS software. The measurement model presented encapsulates all the constructs inherent to the conceptual model, namely Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, Emotional Exhaustion, and Job Performance.

Table 3. EFA analysis.

Factors	Number of items	Number of removed items	Component loading range
HRM practices	16	3	0.527-0.904
Emotional Exhaustion	3	0	0.805-0.917
Job Performance	3	0	0.662-0.836

The purpose behind the conducted Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was to ascertain whether the number of factors and the corresponding loadings of the measured elements onto these factors align with the proposed model, thereby corroborating the alignment of the proposed factor structure with the envisioned hypothesized model. Initially, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) scrutinized the

model's fit, a process bolstered by the utilization of several indices that serve as indicators. Specifically, the chi-square fit index, the Goodness-of-Fit (GFI) index (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989; Hadziahmetovic & Dinc, 2020), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) introduced by Bentler (1990), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) as established by Bollen (1989) and confirmed by Hadziahmetovic and Dinc (2020), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) as supported by Hadziahmetovic and Dinc (2020) and initially proposed by Tucker and Lewis (1973), and further metrics like the Incremental Fit Index (IFI) and the Normed Fit Index (NFI) (Hooper & Coughlan, 2008; Hadziahmetovic & Dinc, 2020; Hadziahmetovic & Dinc, 2023) were employed to gauge the model's alignment. The outcomes of the assessment yielded model fit values that fell within an acceptable range. Specifically, the Chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) amounted to 2.822 ($p < 0.001$), the GFI stood at 0.954, the CFI demonstrated a value of 0.977, the TLI exhibited a figure of 0.973, the RMSEA yielded a value of 0.042, and both IFI and NFI displayed values of 0.977 and 0.965 respectively. A detailed depiction of the acceptable and analyzed values of the CFA process can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. CFA analysis.

Fit indices	Acceptable range	Measured values
p-value of the model	> 0.05	0
Chi-square/df (χ2/df)	< 3	2.822
Goodness-of-fit (GFI)	> 0.9	0.954
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	> 0.9	0.977
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	> 0.9	0.973
Root Means-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	> 0.05	0.042
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	> 0.9	0.977
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	> 0.9	0.965

4.2. Hypotheses Testing

The proposed conceptual model and its associated hypotheses underwent validation through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Furthermore, the SEM diagram (depicted in Figure 2) illustrates a direct connection between Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, Emotional Exhaustion, and Job Performance. Additionally, the mediation of Emotional Exhaustion between HRM practices and Job Performance was examined using the structural equation modeling approach within the AMOS software. After rigorous analysis, the obtained results were found to be satisfactory, demonstrating an adequate level of fit. The fit indices conveyed the following values: χ^2/df = 2.822, p = 0.000, AGFI = 0.940, GFI = 0.954, NFI = 0.965, IFI = 0.977, RMSEA = 0.042, and CFI = 0.977. This ensemble of indices collectively signifies a robust alignment between the proposed model and the empirical data, reinforcing the validity of the study's findings.

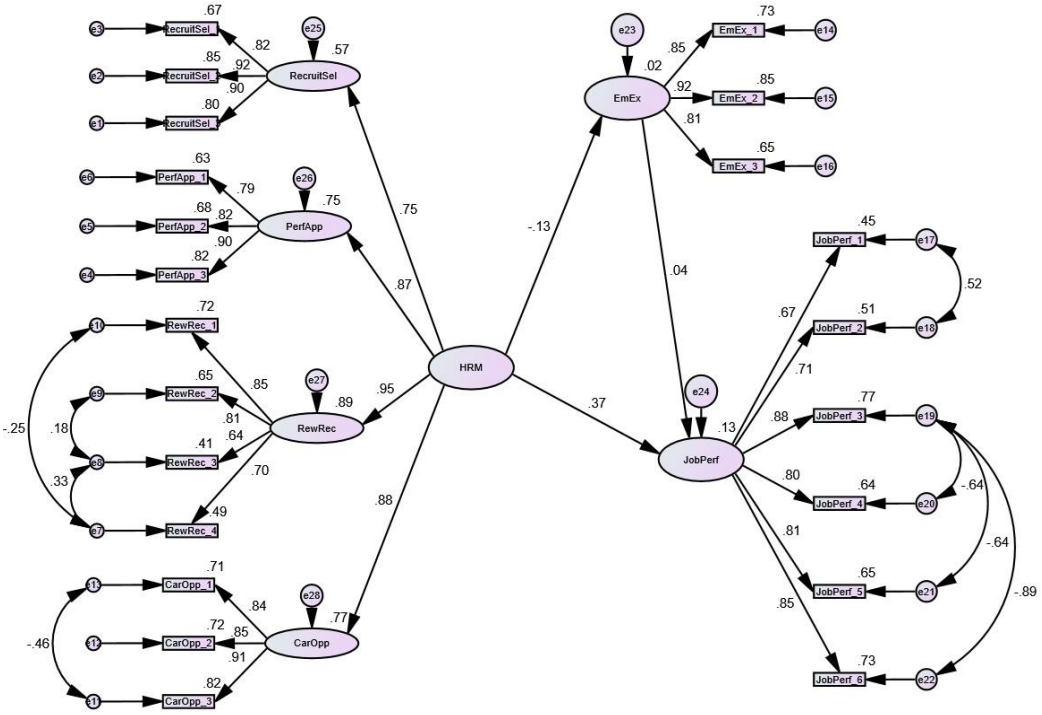

Figure 2. SEM model.

The interrelationships among Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, Emotional Exhaustion, and Job Performance were systematically assessed within the model (as illustrated in Figure 2). The dimensions of HRM practices consisted of four dimensions with a total of 13 items: Recruitment and selection (RecruitSel_1, RecruitSel_2, and RecruitSel_3), Performance appraisal (PerfApp_1, PerfApp_2, and PerfApp_3), Rewards and recognition (RewRec_1, RewRec_2, RewRec_3, and RewRec_4) and Career opportunities (CarOpp_1, CarOpp_2, and CarOpp_3). Meanwhile, the measurement of Emotional Exhaustion was evaluated with 3 items (EmEx_1, EmEx2, and EmEx3). Job Performance, on the other hand, was evaluated using 6 items (JobPerf_1, JobPerf_2, JJobPerf_3, JobPerf_4, JobPerf_5, and JobPerf_6).

Upon closer examination of the path estimates, the hypotheses were validated by critical values below $p < 0.05$. A comprehensive overview of hypothesis testing can be found in Table 5. Hypothesis 1 (H1), which poses a significant positive influence of HRM practices on Job Performance, gained support with a p-value of 0.000. Similarly, Hypothesis 2 (H2), suggesting a significant negative impact of HRM practices on Emotional Exhaustion, found validation with a p-value of 0.000. Regarding Hypothesis 3 (H3), we were unable to confirm that emotional exhaustion has a significant negative effect on Job Performance, as the p-value obtained was

0.193. To delve into the mediating role of Emotional Exhaustion between HRM practices and Job Performance, a methodology advocated by Gaskin and Lim (2018) was applied using the AMOS software. Through this approach, a deeper level of data analysis did not unveil the presence of mediation. In our obtained results, we did not find evidence of mediation by emotional exhaustion in the relationship between HRM practices and job performance, as indicated by a non-significant estimate value of -0.004 (p = 0.118). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 (H4), proposing that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between HRM practices and job performance, was not confirmed.

Table 5. Summary of SEM results.

Hypothesis	Estimate	Sig	
H1: HRM → Job Performance	0.249	***	Supported
H2: HRM → Emotional Exhaustion	-0.196	***	Supported
H3: Emotional Exhaustion → Job Performance	0.018	0.193	Not Supported
H4: HRM → Emotional Exhaustion → Job Performance	-0.004	0.118	Not Supported

Notes: $p < 0.000$ (99%), $p < 0.05$ (95%).

This study uncovered a significant direct association between HRM practices and Job Performance, as well as between HRM practices and Emotional Exhaustion. However, contrary to expectations, no significant relationship was observed between Emotional Exhaustion and Job Performance. Furthermore, the analysis indicated no mediating effect of Emotional Exhaustion in the relationship between HRM practices and Job Performance.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between HRM practices, job performance, and the mediating role of emotional exhaustion among university employees in the Western Balkans reflecting on COVID-19 experiences. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of how HRM practices impact employee outcomes and the mechanisms underlying these relationships. Consistent with existing literature (Liu et al., 2017; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019), our results confirm that HRM practices significantly shape employee job performance. High-quality HRM practices, including recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and employee involvement, have been shown to improve job performance (Jiang et al., 2012). This study supports the notion that job performance is positively influenced when HRM practices are developed with the needs of the employee in mind (Nishii & Wright, 2007). Additionally, high-performance HRM practices were found to positively influence employee job performance, consistent with previous research (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998). Our findings align with previous studies (Manzoor et al., 2019; Alsafadi & Altahat, 2021; Pamungkas & Wulandari, 2021), confirming the positive influence of HRM practices on employee job performance within the context of Western Balkan universities

during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study found a negative association between HRM practices and emotional exhaustion, consistent with previous research (Van De Voorde et al., 2012; Kilroy et al., 2016; Li et al., 2020). This suggests that organizations that implement high-quality HRM practices are likely to have employees with lower levels of emotional exhaustion.

Contrary to previous research findings (Maslach et al., 2001; Veldhuizen et al., 2003; Bakker et al., 2004), our study did not find a significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and job performance. This finding suggests that while emotionally exhausted employees may experience decreased energy, it may not necessarily translate into lower job performance. However, it's important to note that emotionally exhausted employees may still perform their core tasks adequately, but their proactive performance, such as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), may deteriorate (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Dinc et al., 2022).

Surprisingly, our results showed that the relationship between HRM practices and job performance is not mediated by emotional exhaustion. This finding contradicts previous studies (Brown & Benson, 2003), which suggested that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between HRM practices and job performance. One possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that when university management did not prioritize improved HRM, employees did not feel pressured to work intensively to meet those goals, resulting in decreased work intensity. Consequently, there was no significant association with emotional exhaustion (Noureen et al., 2020). Another explanation could be that other variables, such as employee well-being, play a more significant role in mediating the relationship between HR practices and job performance (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2018). Khoreva and Wechtler (2018) found that different dimensions of HRM practices enhance employee well-being in different ways, leading to increased employee performance. This suggests that universities can enhance employee satisfaction and productivity by implementing HR policies that prioritize employee well-being (Mohiuddin et al., 2022).

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The primary aim of this study was to examine how HRM practices influence job performance among university employees in the Western Balkans reflecting on COVID-19 experiences, and to explore the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in this relationship. Our study confirms the significant impact of HRM practices on employee job performance, aligning with previous research findings (Liu et al., 2017; Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). High-quality HRM practices, including recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and employee involvement, were found to positively influence job performance (Jiang et al., 2012). Additionally, our results support the negative association between HRM practices and emotional exhaustion, consistent with existing literature (Van De Voorde et al., 2012; Kilroy et al., 2016; Li et al., 2020). However, contrary to previous research

findings, our study did not find a significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and job performance. This suggests that while emotionally exhausted employees may experience decreased energy, it may not necessarily translate into lower job performance (Kuzey et al., 2023). This finding contributes to our understanding of the complex relationship between emotional exhaustion and job performance, highlighting the need for further investigation into the underlying mechanisms. Surprisingly, our results also showed that the relationship between HRM practices and job performance is not mediated by emotional exhaustion. This finding contradicts previous studies (Brown & Benson, 2003), which suggested that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between HRM practices and job performance. One possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that other variables, such as employee well-being, may play a more significant mediating role in this relationship (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2018). This study's contribution lies in its challenging of established assumptions, opening new avenues for future research on mediating variables in the HRM-job performance link.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for different stakeholders, including university management, policymakers, and human resource practitioners. By implementing high-quality HRM practices, such as selective hiring, extensive training, performance-based compensation, and employee involvement, university management can enhance employee job performance and well-being. Moreover, prioritizing employee well-being through HRM policies and practices can lead to increased employee satisfaction and productivity. Additionally, several communication techniques can be adopted by university management to enhance job performance and employee well-being. (1) Transparent communication of HRM practices should be present where university management could communicate HRM practices clearly and regularly through various channels, including meetings, newsletters, and online platforms. (2) Establishing formal feedback mechanisms in which employees can provide input on HRM practices, and their effectiveness could help in identifying areas of improvement and in making necessary adjustments. (3) Emphasizing employee well-being in which communication strategies should highlight the institution's commitment to employee well-being. This can be achieved through mental health programs, and stress management workshops. (4) Personalized communication in which tailoring communication could meet the diverse needs of employees and can enhance the effectiveness of HRM practices. Personalized emails, one-on-one meetings, and departmental briefings can address specific concerns and provide targeted support, reducing feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion. (5) Recognition and rewards communication where acknowledgment and celebration of employee achievements and contributions through public recognition, awards, and incentives can boost morale and job performance. (6) Crisis communication strategies are essential to have robust communication plans in place. These should include clear guidelines on work

expectations, safety protocols, and available support systems. Regular updates and check-ins can provide reassurance and reduce anxiety among employees. By implementing these six strategies, universities can foster a supportive environment that enhances job performance and mitigates emotional exhaustion. Effective communication of HRM practices not only ensures their successful implementation but also strengthens employee engagement, satisfaction, and overall organizational resilience.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size of this study was relatively small, and the findings may not be generalized to all university employees in the Western Balkan region. Future research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to confirm and extend our findings. The data for this study was collected using a quantitative approach through online surveys. While this method allowed for the efficient collection of data from many participants, future research could benefit from including qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, or employing a mixed methods approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Building on the findings of this study, future research could focus on identifying other potential mediating variables, such as employee well-being, that may explain the relationship between HRM practices and job performance. Comparative studies across different organizational and cultural settings could further enhance our understanding of how HRM practices influence job performance and well-being.

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Appendix: Survey Questionnaire

- **Human Resource Management (HRM)**

During the Covid-19 pandemic...

1. My university was good at selecting the right people for the appropriate jobs.
2. Managers at the university knew the benefits of employing the right people.
3. Managers at the university have been clear about the type of people one needs to employ.
4. My university provided adequate guidance and training to the new employees.
5. My university demonstrated a commitment to ongoing training and development opportunities for employees.
6. The training and development I received have improved my performance at my university.
7. My performance has been reviewed and evaluated regularly.
8. The way my performance was evaluated was fair.
9. The way my performance was evaluated provided me with clear guidelines for improvement.
10. The rewards and recognition I received for this job were adequate.
11. My university fulfilled its responsibilities towards me.
12. I was satisfied with the income I received.
13. I was satisfied with the benefits I received (for example working from home, leave, etc.).
14. Enough time and effort were spent on career planning.
15. I was given opportunities to develop skills needed for career progression.
16. My university provided enough prospects for my career advancement.

- **Emotional Exhaustion (EMEX)**

During the Covid-19 pandemic…

1. I felt emotionally drained from my work.
2. I felt burnt out from my work.
3. I felt I was working too hard at my job.

- **Job Performance (JP)**

During the Covid-19 pandemic…

1. I fulfilled my job responsibilities.
2. I met the performance standards and expectations of the job.
3. My performance level satisfied my supervisor.
4. My performance was still as good as it was before COVID-19.
5. I had adequate competencies to carry out my work effectively.
6. I produced high-quality work.