



# The endless pursuit for self-validation through attainment: An examination of self-esteem in relation to workaholism



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## ABSTRACT

Relationships among self-esteem, workaholism, and work stress were investigated. Data were collected from 414 faculty and staff members at a large Southeastern university and a large manufacturing organization. Workaholism and work stress were positively related to each other, while self-esteem was negatively related to workaholism. A serial mediation analysis revealed that all direct paths were statistically significant, with the exception of the direct path from self-esteem to work stress. Low self-esteem led to workaholism, workaholism led to working more hours and to greater work stress, and working more hours also led to increased stress.

## 1. Introduction

Individuals dedicate almost half of their waking hours to their employment and, over the two decades leading up to the millennium, the number of weekly hours worked has increased (McMillan, Brady, O'Driscoll, & Marsh, 2002). Despite an aging workforce, > 80% of American workers work at least 40 h a week (Ng & Feldman, 2008). Americans work longer hours, use less paid vacation days, and are more likely to work weekends or nights than employees in other industrialized countries (Hamermesh, 2014). Changes in work behavior may be attributed to the evolution of the workplace in that working adults find themselves shifting companies and careers more frequently than past generations. Employees in today's workforce must be autonomous and able to broaden their accountabilities in order to survive in a working world that is characterized by "chaos and boundary-less careers" (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Furthermore, technology has played an integral role in redefining the workplace. Employers now provide resources for their employees to work outside normal business hours, through the use of cell phones and remote access to work files (Kakabadse, Porter, & Vance, 2009). The invasion of work into leisure time through these new resources has led to a technology overload, which increases work-family conflict (Harris, Harris, Carlson, & Carlson, 2015).

Workaholism is a form of heavy work investment classified by an internal addiction to work and uninfluenced by external motives; it is a passion for work (Snir & Harpaz, 2012). Despite the recent influx of knowledge on the concept, there are still many facets of workaholism that have yet to be researched. Self-esteem is one factor that requires additional research within the context of workaholism. Existing studies

have shown conflicted findings while investigating the relationship between workaholism and self-esteem. Thus, the primary goal of the current study was to investigate the associations among self-esteem, workaholism, and work stress, as well as the potential serial mediation involving self-esteem, workaholism, hours worked, and work stress. Specifically, we proposed and investigated a serial mediation model involving these variables.

### 1.1. Workaholism overview

The term workaholism was originally conceptualized by Oates (1971) in reference to individuals who feel excessively compelled to work to the extent that their work intrudes on other aspects of life, which negatively affects health and well-being (Chamberlin & Zhang, 2009). Workaholics are constantly immersed in work activities. When they are not working, they are continuously overwhelmed by cognitions of work which, in turn, negatively influence personal relationships and engagement in leisure activities (Scott, Moore, & Miceli, 1997). Since its original denotation, there have been many interpretations of workaholism. Despite the lack of agreement across the literature on a single definition, there is a general consensus that workaholics are addicted to work, driven by an internal compulsive desire, causing them to work longer and harder than others (Clark, Michel, Zhdanova, Pui, & Baltes, 2014; Van Wijhe, Peeters, & Schaufeli, 2014). Workaholics are addicted to the act of working and do not necessarily enjoy the actual work itself (Ng, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2006).

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## 1.2. Self-esteem overview

Self-esteem is defined by Coopersmith (1967) as “the approval of oneself and the degree to which one sees oneself as capable, significant, and worthy” (p. 4–5). Individuals with low self-esteem are prone to experiencing elevated work stress. Performance-based self-esteem is a form of self-esteem in which self-esteem is dependent on career success. Although it has been insufficiently examined in the context of workaholism, individuals with low performance-based self-esteem are at risk for developing workaholism (Van Wijhe et al., 2014). Such employees are motivated to work hard by the promise of being recognized for their efforts, which ultimately depletes their resources, leading to burnout (Hallsten, Voss, Stark, Josephson, & Vingård, 2011). Additionally, individuals with high self-esteem cope with negative feedback from coworkers better than colleagues with low self-esteem, who experience greater negative affect as a result of their adverse assessment (Moreland & Sweeney, 1984). Seemingly, performance-based self-esteem is an unstable motive for employees because it depends on external influences over which individuals have little control.

## 1.3. Work stress overview

Work stress arises when work-related factors affect employees in a way that deviates them from their normal functioning (Beehr & Newman, 1978). Work stress drains an individual's personal resources. According to the conservation of resources theory, we have a limited amount of personal resources to expend. Once these resources are depleted in one area, they cannot be expended in another area (van Wijhe, Peeters, Schaufeli, & Ouweneel, 2013). Work stress, in turn, negatively influences both the individual and the organization, directly and indirectly (Morris, Messal, & Meriac, 2013). Some of its negative consequences include increased absenteeism, tardiness, and counterproductive behaviors, as well as decreased job satisfaction, job performance, motivation, and morale (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Ford, Smith, Weissbein, Gully, & Salas, 1998). As a result, organizations suffer from decreased productivity and higher turnover, which results in increased costs.

## 1.4. Workaholism and work stress

A driving factor that motivates workaholics to engage in work activities is a stressful work environment (Kanai & Wakabayashi, 2004). Studies have found that drive to work, a key facet of workaholism, is also linked to increased stress and anxiety (Graves, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Weber, 2012). The same study illustrated that enjoyment of work is associated with increases in positive affect, coping, and well-being. Similarly, others have demonstrated that workaholism links work drive with increased feelings of work stress and decreased psychological well-being, and work enjoyment is related to decreased work stress and increased emotional well-being (Aziz & Zickar, 2006; Burke, 2001; Burke & Matthiesen, 2004; Spence & Robbins, 1992). Additional research has further corroborated the positive relationship between workaholism and work stress (Aziz, Wuensch, & Brandon, 2010; Spence & Robbins, 1992). Workaholics' high and unrealistic expectations for themselves contribute to their levels of stress (Aziz et al., 2010; Porter, 1996). The workaholism—work stress relationship is further exacerbated by workaholics' feelings of guilt and anxiety when they are not engaged in work activities (Clark et al., 2014; Ng et al., 2006).

## 1.5. Self-esteem and work stress

Limited research has been conducted on the relationship between self-esteem and work stress. However, the existing literature supports a negative relationship between these two variables. One study found that engaged workers are generally optimistic and believe they can satisfy their needs by engaging in roles in their organization, also

known as organizational-based self-esteem (Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007). Blom (2012) found that the degree to which employees derive their self-esteem from performance at work was positively associated with the perceived negativity of a variety of work stressors. Furthermore, high self-esteem predicts better work conditions and outcomes, including decreased work stressors (Kuster, Orth, & Meier, 2013). The notion that self-esteem plays a vital role in work stress and burnout supports the necessity for additional research in which the causes and correlates of low self-esteem in the workplace are further examined.

## 1.6. Self-esteem and workaholism

There has been much discrepancy in the literature regarding the relationship between workaholism and self-esteem. Some researchers suggest that self-esteem is negatively related to workaholism (Graves et al., 2012; Ng et al., 2006; Porter, 1996; Seybold & Salomone, 1994). Individuals with low self-esteem place a low value on themselves and feel incompetent. Feelings of incompetence drive them to assert control and become successful in a certain facet of their lives, often by throwing themselves into work (Ng et al., 2006). In sum, workaholics may be intrinsically motivated to work in order to bolster their low self-esteem (Porter, 1996; Seybold & Salomone, 1994). In contrast, opposing views have argued that those with high self-esteem are more prone to workaholic tendencies. Perhaps those with high self-regard set high expectations and performance standards for themselves, resulting in excessive work behaviors (Burke, Matthiesen, & Pallesen, 2006). Essentially, research examining the relationship between workaholism and self-esteem is lacking with mixed results. A meta-analysis conducted by Clark et al. (2014) led to the conclusion that workaholism is not significantly related to self-esteem. Therefore, the relationships among self-esteem, workaholism, and work stress may be more complex than originally anticipated, and we propose and investigate a serial mediation model involving these variables.

## 1.7. Current study

Even though Burke et al. (2006) suggest a positive correlation between self-esteem and workaholism, their study utilized Spence and Robbins' (1992) measure of workaholism which is based on high work involvement, high work drive, and low work enjoyment, whereas the current study conceptualization of workaholism is more comprehensive in that it factors in more of the components that set apart workaholics from engaged workers. Thus, we took the stance that there is a negative relationship between self-esteem and workaholism due to the blurred lines between workaholism and work engagement. Burke et al. found a positive link because they may have been measuring components that mimicked characteristics of an engaged worker and not necessarily a workaholic—work enjoyment is the only component of Spence and Robbins' triad that sets apart workaholics from engaged workers, whereas the current study measure is more comprehensive in its conceptualization of workaholism by tapping into work-life imbalance aspects. Essentially, workaholics are motivated to engage in work activities because they are addicted to the act of working and driven by a compulsive desire to meet unrealistic personal standards in order to increase their low self-esteem (Porter, 1996). Accordingly, we expected to find a negative relationship between self-esteem and workaholism.

**Hypothesis 1.** : Self-esteem will negatively correlate with workaholism.

Previous research has found that workaholics demonstrate higher levels of work stress than do their non-workaholic colleagues (Aziz & Zickar, 2006; Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Graves et al., 2012; Kanai & Wakabayashi, 2004). Thus, we expected to replicate these findings.

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