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Does perceived psychological contract breach mediate HPWS and turnover intentions relation? An empirical enquiry

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Abstract

HPWS which refers to bundle of inter-consistent HR practices is found to be leading to several employee related outcomes. However, the underlying mechanism of how HPWS leads to negative employee outcomes is still less understood. The issue is significant from HR perspective as it can enable devising suitable strategies to foster positive employee outcomes and avoiding the negative one. In this study, we investigate this issue by focusing on two negative aspects namely turnover intention and psychological contract breach. The psychological contract breach is proposed and tested as a mediator in HPWS and turnover intention (employee outcomes) relationship. Data is collected using the survey approach from the employees of selected retail firms from Pakistan. Through the sampling approach, we generated a usable sample of 182. The findings indicate that HPWS links to turnover intention and perceived psychological contract breach among the retail sector staff. We found positive influence of perceived psychological contract breach on staff turnover intention. Furthermore, the perceived psychological contract breach partially mediates the relationship between

HPWS and turnover intention. Overall, result implies that perceived psychological contract breach is an important aspect of work and should not be ignored by the HR and general management.

Keywords: High Performance Work System, Psychological Contract Breach, Turnover Intention, Pakistan.

BACKGROUND

Evans and Davis (2015) define HPWS as an integrated system of HR practices that are internally consistent (alignment among HR practices) and externally consistent (alignment with organizational strategy). What constitute HPWS is a difficult question as experts have diverse opinion on the issue, however, some common dimensions of HPWS can be seen in related literature. In present study, we focus on six selected practices for which details are given as follows;

In HPWP context, recruitment is about attracting and selecting the individuals who are highly capable of work and have good fit with the nature of organization (Edgar, Blaker, & Everett, 2020; Zheng, Liu, & Zhou, 2020). Training and development is also part of HPWP and consist of planned activities leading to the improved knowledge, skills, and competencies (Hu, Oh, & Agolli, 2025; Zheng et al., 2020). Good training and development can develop a higher employee flexibility accompanied with work performance and loyalty. The third HPWS dimension includes promotion which is about career growth opportunities for individuals enabling them moving up the organizational ladder (Edgar et al., 2020). Availability of promotion opportunities has the potential to reduce staff turnover intention and enhance staff identification and emotional attachment to the organization. Job security is a practice of providing long term job safety to the staff. Generally, organization which focuses on job security emphasize on maintaining and developing staff and have fewer lay off in the long term. Higher productivity is reported in organization offering job security to its staff (He, Gu, & Liu, 2018; Karadas and Karatepe, 2018; Zheng et al., 2020). The fifth HPWS dimension is autonomy which is about enabling members to make decisions on time (He et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2020). Autonomy is generally leads to favorable outcomes such as efficiency and adaptability. Communication is the last dimension we are focusing in present study. In HPWS context, it is about top and middle management making effective communication which enable individuals to understand their responsibilities, tasks and other suitable details in easier manner (Edgar et al., 2020; He et al., 2018; Zhang, Zhang, & Liu, 2022). If there is a good two way communication between individuals and management, it can leads to the development of an open culture, trust, and higher performance. While, it is also clear that lack of effective communication can leads to mistrust and a culture of fear and non-productivity.

There are several studies which investigated the direct effects of HPWS on employees; however, what is scant in the literature is the explanation of the underlying mechanism through which HPWS influence employees especially the negative one. In the present study, we intend to contribute towards this underlying explanatory mechanism using the psychological contract breach as a mediator variable and turnover intention as the final outcome variable. The study is conducted in the context of retail sector employees which is a fast growing field. Despite the huge potential, the retail industry is somewhat limited in growth due to the weak HR practices resulting higher turnover among staff. Thus, the retail industry provides a suitable context where weak HPWS practices accompanied with higher turnover can be investigated objectively. The specific objective of the study is to assess the mediating role of psychological contract breach between the relationship of high performance work practices and turnover intention. The relationship is proposed based on earlier studies and gap which will be discussed in later part.

Significance of the Study

The present study has theoretical and practical significance as it enhance the theoretical understanding of HPWS, turnover, and psychological contract breach. It tests the relationship in new context thus enriching the literature and further validating the existing findings on the issue. Furthermore, from practical point of view, it provide useful insights to the HR managers in the retail context as it guides about critical issue of managing turnover among the staff.

Hypotheses Development

Proposed Mediating Role of Psychological Contract between HPWP and Employee Turnover Intentions

In present study, we intend to fill the gap about how HPWS influence employee level outcomes and the underling mechanism. We use psychological contract as an underlying explanatory mechanism of how HPWS influence staff level outcomes. We propose psychological contract based on the notion that HPWS influence staff outcomes such as job satisfaction and turnover intention. Furthermore, HPWS influence psychological contract or psychological contract breach in more specific, thus, one of them can function as a mediator. This is because there is empirical evidence that psychological contract is not just an employee outcome but also influence other employee outcomes such as turnover intentions and satisfaction. Following we breakdown this relationship and analyze more deeply.

First we discuss the relationship of HPWS and employee turnover intention. Turnover intention is about the degree to which an employe contemplates about leaving the organization (Chang, Wang & Huang, 2013). Previous studies indicate that if HPWS is present and practiced by an organization, it can lead to several favorable outcomes such as a favorable attitude among the staff such as employee job satisfaction (Zhang & Morris, 2013); and organizational commitment (Kehoe & Wright, 2013). More specifically, HPWS is also found to be linked with turnover intention of staff as reported in previous studies. For example, study by Bakhtiar, Aziz, Sumarjan, and Kedin (2024) reported that staff turnover intention is predicted by HPWS. Similarly, study by Tahir, Arul, Tummala, Shagoo, and Kutpudeen (2024) showed that HPWS influence staff turnover intention in the Call centre context. Another study by Kimaiyo, Geoffrey, Akuku, and Onyango (2022) showed that HPWS influence staff turnover intention in the healthcare context. Other studies also reported similar results including Li, Wang, Xu, Liu, and Peng (2025); Bakhtiar, et al. (2024); Jalil, Idrees, Rauf, and Bilal (2024); Guo, li, Kim, and Jeon (2024); Macky and Boxall, (2007); Alfes, Shantz, Truss, and Soane, (2012); Yamamoto, (2013); and Kehoe and Wright, (2013).

The second relationship is the HPWS and psychological contract relationship. Accordingly, the psychological contract refers to employee's belief in a reciprocal obligation between the employee and the organization (Rousseau, 1989). If employee's expectations which are started to form from the recruitment stage itself and continue onwards are fulfilled adequately by employer, then psychological contract is perceived healthy and positive by the employee. On the other hand, unmet expectations possibly lead to the perceived psychological contract breach further leading to several negative outcomes. We propose the HPWS and psychological contract breach relationship based on the notion that high performance work system influence employees positively lading to a favorable view of psychological contract or a reduced psychological contract breach view. Previous studies tested such relationship empirically and found a significant relationship between both. For example, study by Tahir (2022) showed that HPWS has negative and significant influence on employee perceived psychological contract breach. Similarly, study by Zaman (2020) showed that HPWS negatively influence employee psychological contract breach. A study by Asante, Tang, Asante, Kwamega, and Opoku-Danso (2023) tested the influence of HPWS on employee service-encounter quality while psychological contract as a mediator. The study reported a

positive influence of HPWS on employee perceived psychological contract fulfillment. Similarly, another study by Schreuder, Schalk, and Bastistic (2020) shows that HPWS influence psychological contract of employees. Other studies reported similar relationship (e.g. Ali, Mehta, Sair, Bilal, & Kaleem, 2020; Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2021; Susomrith, 2020; Usmani, Malhotra, Sehrawat, Dahiya, & Singh, 2024)

The third relationship in our model is psychological contract and employee level outcomes such as turnover intention in this case. Evidence suggest that psychological contract can leads to unfavorable employee attitude and behavior such as a reduced display of organizational citizenship behavior and a reduced trust level (Abdalla, Said, Ali, Ali, & Chen, 2021; Al-Abrow, Alnoor, Islamil, Eneizan, & Makhamreh, 2019; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018). More specifically, a study by Asante, Gyensare, El Bouzidi, and Twumasi (2025) showed that psychological contract violation leads to reduced anticipatory helping behaviors through anticipatory anxiety. Another study by Gazi, Masud, Kaium, Amin, Mahmud, Senathirajah, and Abdullah (2025) showed that psychological contract breach influence staff silence behavior directly as well as indirectly through decreased organizational identity and increasing emotional exhaustion.

Since both HPWP and psychological contract breach lead to the employee turnover intentions, so we propose that in this process, the psychological contract breach possibly work as a mediator. Here, we can use the input, process, and output model. Accordingly, the HPWP works as input, psychological contract breach works as a process, and turnover intention are output.

Theoretical Framework

We used the Social Exchange Theory to develop and support our theoretical model. Snape and Redman (2010) based on the theory states that employer-employee relationship is grounded on the economic and social exchanges. The economic exchange consists of financial agreements such as salary, overtime, and other economic incentives based on established criteria. The social exchange is terms not well defined thus leaves enough room for ambiguity and exploitation from both parties. Furthermore, the reciprocity norm based on the social exchange require employer and employee to take care of each other. If organization take care of employees, employees are required to pay it back to the employer in form of commitment and increased hardwork. Thus, It is argued that HPWS can shape employee’s perception, behavior, and attitude since HPWS practices signal employee about how employer value and take care of employees. Thus, using the social exchange theory, we propose that HPWS if present can leads to the favorable perception of employer and a favorable psychological contract leading to favorable outcomes. On the other hand, weak HPWS leads to the perceived psychological contract breach further leading to other negative outcomes. Following is our proposed theoretical model.

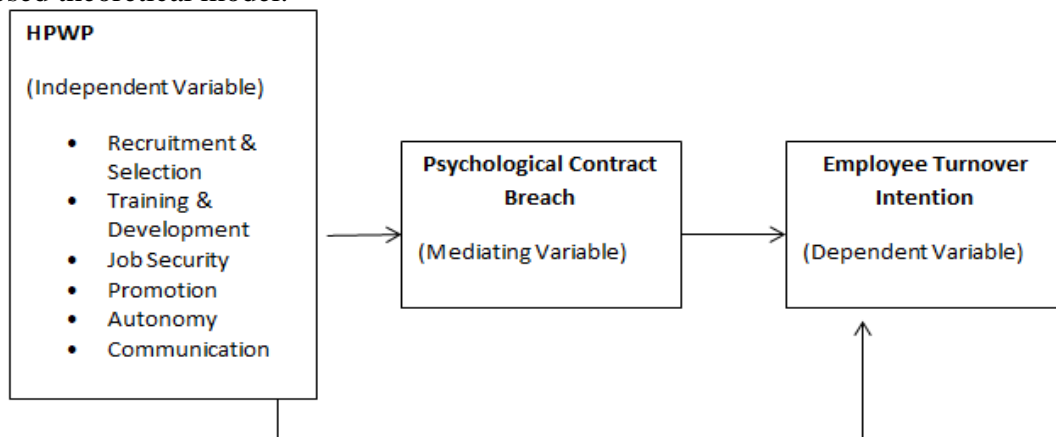


Figure 1: Theoretical Model of the Study

Our specific hypotheses are as follows;

H1: HPWS dimensions have negative significant effects on turnover intention.

H2: HPWS dimensions have negative significant effects on psychological contract breach.

H3: Perceived psychological contract breach has positive and significant effects on employee turnover intention.

H4: Perceived psychological contract breach mediate the relationship of HPWS and turnover intention.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used quantitative approach and cross-sectional survey design. Cross-sectional refers to the data collected only once which is the case in the present study. Similarly, survey approach is about distributing a survey for data collection.

Population of the Study

The study is focused on retail firms so its employees make up the population. Because population is large and undefined, we used sampling approach by selecting 10 retail firms from selected cities namely Islamabad and Peshawar.

Sample Size

A total of 285 surveys were distributed in the selected 10 retail firms, out of which 182 usable survey were returned thus making a response rate of 63.85%.

Research Tools

The study consist of HPWS which is our independent variable, perceived psychological contract breach as mediator, and turnover intention as outcome variable. The measure for HPWS is adapted from Kehoe and Wright (2013) consists of 4 items for each dimension. The measure for turnover intention is adapted from O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell (1991) consists of 4 items. The measure for psychological contract breach is adapted from Robinson and Morrison (2000) consist of 5 items.

Data Collection

We collected the primary data from selected retail firms and its branches. Most of the data collection was done using the online form (Google Form) which was circulated using the online tools including Whatsapp and social media.

Data Analysis

The analysis is performed using the Jamovi software. Analysis includes frequency, descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, path analysis, and mediation analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

Table 1
Demographic Information

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	116	63.73%
Female	66	36.27%
Age		
18 to 30	76	41.75%
31 to 45	71	39.01%
46 to 60	35	19.24%

n=182

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Most of the respondents were male (63.73%); while, female participation (36.27%) was low in the survey. 18 to 30 years was the biggest category in terms of age (41.75%), followed by 31 to 45 years (39.01%), while, 46 to 60 years was the lowest in terms of participation (19.24%).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The first step was to conduct CFA to establish the convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability. We used the Jamovi for testing the measurement model or CFA which use the covariance based approach. The results are as follows;

Table 2

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Construct & Items	Standardized Factor Loading	Cronbach Alpha	McDonald Omega	Average Variance Extracted
Recruitment & Selection				
RS1	.616			
RS2	.723	.813	.805	.508
RS3	.734			
RS4	.769			
Training & Development				
TD1	.823			
TD2	.843	.719	.721	.638
TD3	.873			
TD4	.637			
Job Security				
JS1	Deleted			
JS2	.673	.762	.761	.544
JS3	.713			
JS4	.819			
Promotion				
Pr1	Deleted			
Pr2	.673	.705	.703	.524
Pr3	.755			
Pr4	.741			
Autonomy				
Au1	.829			
Au1	.856	.714	.712	.878
Au2	.873			
Au4	.852			
Communication				
Com1	.689			
Com2	.717	.823	.821	.544
Com3	.769			
Com4	.773			
Psychological Contract Breach				
PCB1	.809			
PCB2	.812	.847	.845	.616
PCB3	.757			
PCB4	.762			
Turnover Intention				
TI1	.793			
TI2	.713	.857	.856	.634
TI3	.863			
TI4	.809			

The CFA was conducted to test the reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity. Initially, 2 items i.e. JS1 and Pr1 were deleted due to the low factor loading. After the initial adjustment, the result shows that all constructs Cronbach alpha and McDonald Omega is above 0.70 so indicating the satisfactory reliability. Furthermore, all individual items factor loadings are greater than 0.60 and AVE is above 0.50 so it shows that convergent validity is established in our data.

Table 3
HTMT Ratio

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Recruitment & Selection								
Training & Development	.302							
Job Security	.145	.202						
Promotion	.347	.521	.317					
Autonomy	.101	.473	.193	.535				
Communication	.423	.109	.359	.579	.443			
Psychological Contract Breach	.113	.332	.435	.631	.301	.597		
Turnover Intention	.372	.357	.635	.128	.209	.438	.587	

The HTMT ratio is used for testing the discriminant validity and it shows that all HTMT are lower than the critical value of 0.85 so it shows that discriminant validity criteria is satisfied in our data.

Table 4
Path Analysis

Dependent	Predictor	Estimate	SE	Z	P
PCB	Recruitment & Selection	-0.1188	0.044	-2.7	.005
PCB	Training & Development	-0.3469	0.092	-3.77065	<.001
PCB	Job Security	-0.7754	0.127	-6.10551	<.001
PCB	Promotion	-0.0781	0.027	-2.89259	0.009
PCB	Autonomy	-0.0812	0.0091	-8.92308	<.001
PCB	Communication	-.4811	0.043	-11.1628	<.001
TI	Recruitment & Selection	-0.2541	0.054	-4.70556	.001
TI	Training & Development	-0.0687	0.023	-2.98696	.003
TI	Job Security	0.00068	0.049	0.013878	.435
TI	Promotion	-0.0838	0.032	-2.61875	.004
TI	Autonomy	-0.689	0.057	-12.0877	<.001
TI	Communication	-0.0891	0.074	-1.20405	.238
TI	PCB	0.435	0.098	4.438	0.00

The result shows that all components of HPWS including recruitment & Selection ($\beta=-.118$, $P<0.05$); training & development ($\beta=-.346$, $P<0.05$); job security ($\beta=-.775$, $P<0.05$); promotion ($\beta=-.078$, $P<0.05$); autonomy ($\beta=-.081$, $P<0.05$); and communication ($\beta=-.481$, $P<0.05$) exert a negative and significant influence on perceived psychological contract breach. Furthermore, the components of HPWS also negatively and significantly influence recruitment & Selection ($\beta=-.254$, $P<0.05$); training & development ($\beta=-.068$, $P<0.05$); promotion ($\beta=-.083$, $P<0.05$); and communication ($\beta=-.089$, $P<0.05$). While, the results for two dimensions including job security ($\beta=.006$, $P>0.05$); and communication ($\beta=-.089$, $P>0.05$) turned out to be insignificant. Furthermore, perceived psychological contract breach positively influence staff turnover intention ($\beta=.435$, $P<0.05$).

Table 5
Mediation Analysis

Description	Estimate	SE	P Value
RS \Rightarrow PCB \Rightarrow TI	-.049	.019	.043
TD \Rightarrow PCB \Rightarrow TI	-.007	.007	.465
JS \Rightarrow PCB \Rightarrow TI	-.049	.023	.049
Pr \Rightarrow PCB \Rightarrow TI	-.046	.019	.037
Au \Rightarrow PCB \Rightarrow TI	-.007	.016	.565
Com \Rightarrow PCB \Rightarrow TI	-.043	.018	.046

The result for indirect effects for testing the mediation shows that perceived psychological contract breach partially mediate the relationship between HPWS dimensions and turnover intention. The dimensions for which we get the significant results include recruitment &

selection ($\beta=-.049$, $P<0.05$); job security ($\beta=-.049$, $P<0.05$); promotion ($\beta=-.046$, $P<0.05$); and communication ($\beta=-.043$, $P<0.05$).

Discussion

The objective of the study was to test if psychological contract breach mediates the relationship of HPWS and employee turnover intention. Analysis was conducted based on the data collected from the Survey of retail sector employees. Several important findings were emerged. The first key finding is that HPWS influence staff turnover intention. The finding is consistent with the findings of earlier studies including Bakhtiar et al. (2024); and Tahir et al. (2024). The finding also shows that HPWS influence staff perceived psychological contract breach which is also consistent with the previous findings including Zaman (2020); Asante et al., (2023); and Schreuder et al. (2020). We also found that perceived psychological contract breach positively influence staff turnover intention which is also similar to earlier findings including Abdalla et al. (2021); Asante et al. (2025); and Gazi et al. (2025). Finally, we found that perceived psychological contract breach partially mediate the relationship of HPWS and staff turnover intention. Because we find only the partial nature of psychological contract breach as a mediator, there is a need to further investigate the relationship such as its nature as moderator or other key variable which influence the hypothetical relationship. Overall, it shows that psychological contract breach is an important variable and has the potential to influence staff turnover intention directly as well as indirectly so it needs a greater managerial attention.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Conclusion

The objectives of the study included measuring the effects of HPWP on turnover intention, psychological contract breach, and the mediating role of psychological contract breach between the relationship of HPWP and turnover intention. Result shows that turnover intention is influenced by HPWS and perceived psychological contract breach which also function as a mediator even though partial one. The result highlight the importance of psychological contract breach as an important construct which needs a greater managerial and HR attention. Our result implies that if organizations pay greater attention to HPWS issues, it can reduce the broken relationship as perceived by employees leading to reduced negative outcomes such as turnover. On the other hand, if organization put efforts to the development of a healthy psychological contract relationship between the employer and employees, it can leads to the several favorable HR and organizational outcomes. On the basis of these findings, it is recommended that the retail firms should pay greater attention to the staff welfare and HR function including training, job security, and autonomy which will create a positive image of the firm and leads to a healthy employer-employee relationship. The study limitations includes a small sample size, perceptual measures which limits the generalizability of the findings over the wider context. Future researcher can investigate the issue by employing more diverse and robust methods of data collection along with more diverse variables.

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