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## Case Report

Work engagement and burnout in anticipation of physically returning to work: The interactive effect of imminence of return and self-affirmation<sup>☆</sup>Joel Brockner<sup>a</sup>, Marius van Dijke<sup>b,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Columbia Business School, Columbia University, United States of America<sup>b</sup> Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many employees have spent a considerable amount of time being forced to work from home (WFH). We draw on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and self-affirmation theory to study how the anticipation of returning to the physical workplace affects work engagement and burnout. We assumed that employees are conflicted about returning to work (RTW). Whereas they may look forward to RTW they also appreciate aspects of WFH which would have to be foregone. To evaluate whether the anticipation of RTW is generally experienced more positively or negatively, we examined the relationship between the perceived imminence of returning and the job attitudes of work engagement and burnout. Consistent with the view that the positive aspects of RTW outweighed the negative, imminence of RTW was positively associated with work engagement and negatively with burnout. These tendencies for greater imminence to lead to more favorable reactions were eliminated, however, when participants engaged in self-affirmation. The findings emerged immediately after the self-affirmation manipulation and were maintained six weeks later. We discuss implications for the literatures on JD-R, self-affirmation, job exits and re-entries, and wise interventions.

A major human resource management challenge facing many organizations is how employees should return to work (RTW), given the unprecedented numbers who were forced to work from home following the onset of the pandemic. Indeed, employers have varied dramatically in their RTW policies with some mandating a full-time return for its employees, others leaving it up to employees, and still others adopting a hybrid approach in which employees work from the office on certain days and from home on others. For practical and theoretical reasons, research is needed to evaluate how employees are affected by RTW. In the present study, we draw on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008, 2017) to study how anticipating RTW affects employees' work engagement and job burnout. Within the broader confines of the JD-R model, we also draw on self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988).

Work engagement is defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). It is positively associated with consequential outcomes such as productivity and employee well-being. Job burnout refers to a negative constellation

of work-related beliefs (e.g., lower self-efficacy) and attitudes (e.g., cynicism; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Kalimo, 1995), which also are related to important workplace behaviors.

The JD-R model links resources and demands in the workplace to job performance via work engagement and burnout. Resources—physical, social, or organizational aspects of one's occupation that stimulate personal growth in the workplace—are positively related to work engagement; job demands are negative work-related requirements, such as uncertain job procedures or heavy workloads, which lead to burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Our working assumption is that employees are conflicted about RTW. On the one hand, employees may look forward to RTW eagerly. Being forced to work from home for unprecedented lengths of time may have drained important resources such as social support, and increased demands such as uncertain working arrangements. To the extent that RTW is viewed as replenishing these resources and lowering demands, the prospect of RTW may be experienced as something to which people look forward. If so, perceived imminence of returning should be positively (negatively) related to work engagement (burnout).

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On the other hand, employees may experience discomfort as they contemplate RTW. While the pandemic was certainly unwanted, people learned to adapt. WFH may also have provided resources to employees such as increased autonomy and decreased demands (e.g., less time commuting). To the extent that RTW is viewed as draining resources and increasing demands, employees may become less engaged and more burnt out as they anticipate returning. If so, perceived imminence of returning should be negatively related to work engagement and positively related to burnout.

The above reasoning lends itself to competing predictions:

**Hypothesis 1a.** The perceived imminence of return will be positively (negatively) related to work engagement (burnout).

**Hypothesis 1b.** The perceived imminence of return will be negatively (positively) related to work engagement (burnout).

## 1. Moderating effect of self-affirmation

According to the JD-R model, resources may positively affect employees not simply because of the tangible benefits they provide but also because they satisfy self-relevant needs such as autonomy and competence. Similarly, job demands may increase burnout not only for tangible reasons but also because they thwart self-relevant needs (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, & Lens, 2008). This suggests that whatever form the relationships between imminence of RTW and employees' work engagement and burnout take, imminence may exert influence via its influence on employees' self-relevant needs. Put differently, the effect of imminence of RTW on work engagement and burnout should be contingent on self-relevant factors. Accordingly, we examined the moderating influence of self-affirmation on the relationship between imminence of return and work engagement/job burnout.

According to self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988), people seek global self-integrity, i.e., to see themselves as "good, competent, unitary, stable, coherent, capable of free choice, and capable of controlling important outcomes" (p. 262). Self-affirmation theory provides a common explanation for findings in many different literatures in which people experience threats to their sense of self, e.g., being on the receiving end of unfair treatment (Wiesenfeld, Brockner, & Martin, 1999) or stereotype threat (Steele, 1988).

When people experience self-threat, self-affirmation theory posits that it is the *negative implications of the self-threat for global self-integrity* that elicits adverse effects on work attitudes and behaviors. This reasoning has been tested by having people who have experienced self-threat (e.g., unfairness or stereotype threat) take part in a self-affirming activity. Studies have shown that when self-threatened individuals engage in self-affirmation, they are less likely to exhibit negative attitudes and behaviors (Kinias & Sim, 2016).

Moreover, given that self-affirmation can backfire when it is in the same domain as the area of self-threat (e.g., f), it would be ideal for self-affirmation to occur in a domain different from the one that threatened global self-integrity. A typical self-affirmation induction consists of having people rank order their personal values, choose the one that is most important to them, and write briefly about why that value is important to them (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Whereas engaging in this exercise does not directly address the threat to global self-integrity, it serves to counteract the negative implications of such experiences for global self-integrity.

We drew on the same logic to evaluate whether the competing predictions set forth in Hypotheses 1a and 1b (i.e., whichever one emerged) would be attenuated when participants engaged in self-affirmation. After assessing the imminence of participants' RTW, we randomly assigned them to engage in self-affirmation or not. According to the JD-R model, resources increase work engagement because they satisfy a variety of self-relevant needs such as autonomy and competence (Bakker &

Demerouti, 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2008). However, engaging in self-affirmation also satisfies employees' self-relevant needs (i.e., it affirms their global self-integrity). Therefore, those who self-affirm may be less apt to benefit from the anticipation of self-relevant resources being associated with RTW. Somewhat ironically, then, the positive relationship between perceived imminence of return and the favorability of employees' work attitudes set forth in **Hypothesis 1a** may be less likely to emerge among those who engage in self-affirmation.

This reasoning is consistent with research inspired by the Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model (e.g., Tesser, 2000), which shows that the various ways in which people bolster their self-esteem (e.g., engaging in downward social comparison, affirming important values) are substitutable; the presence of one self-bolstering process is sufficient to offset the positive influence of another. In the present context, if those returning imminently focus on the favorable effects of RTW (including positive effects on their sense of self), then engaging in self-affirmation will yield little additional benefit.

On the other hand, to the extent that the more negative aspects of RTW loom large, employees may feel self-threatened. If so, engaging in self-affirmation will satisfy their self-relevant needs and thereby counteract the negative effects of RTW on their work attitudes. This reasoning suggests that the negative relationships between perceived imminence and the favorability of people's work attitudes set forth in **Hypothesis 1b** will be attenuated.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b thus consisted of alternative predictions:

**Hypothesis 2a.** The tendency for perceived imminence of return to be positively (negatively) related to work engagement (burnout) set forth in **Hypothesis 1a** will be attenuated when participants engage in self-affirmation.

**Hypothesis 2b.** The tendency for perceived imminence of return to be negatively (positively) related to work engagement (burnout) set forth in **Hypothesis 1b** will be attenuated when participants engage in self-affirmation.

## 2. Longitudinal design

All hypotheses were evaluated longitudinally. Given the nature of the dependent variables, it is plausible that the various effects may hold not only immediately but also over time. That is, short-term influences on work engagement and burnout may instantiate processes that have self-reinforcing effects. For example, due to being engaged (burnt out), employees may be more (less) motivated to perform, which in turn may perpetuate their engagement (burnout) in a virtuous (vicious) cycle. To evaluate these possibilities, the dependent variables were assessed immediately after the self-affirmation manipulation and six weeks later.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Procedure and measures

All measures, manipulations, and exclusions in the study are disclosed in this paper, or in the accompanying Data Overview and Additional Analyses file. The data and materials can be accessed at: <https://osf.io/u97f2/>

On Prolific, we informed prospective participants that we wanted to learn about their anticipation of going back to the physical workplace as the pandemic eased. The data were collected during the summer of 2021, when RTW was being initiated by many organizations. Participants were eligible only if they had indicated that they worked from home due to Covid restrictions but expected to mostly return to the workplace. When they agreed to participate, we obtained informed consent and assessed demographics. We informed participants that there would be a follow-up wave of data collection about two weeks later, and then a third and final wave about six weeks later. Per wave, participants received GBP 1.

At this point we measured imminence of returning to work. Specifically, we asked: “When will you return to work?” (1 = within a couple of days; 2 = within a couple of weeks; 3 = within a month; 4 = within a couple of months; 5 = within a year). We reverse coded this variable such that higher scores reflected more imminent RTW.

Two weeks later, we invited those who had participated in wave 1 to participate in wave 2. After indicating whether they had returned to work (yes or no), we administered a standard *self-affirmation* induction (e.g., Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009). We showed participants a list of ten values (artistic skills, sense of humor, relations with family, social life, music ability, sports, religion, traditions, technology, and work ethic) and then asked them to rank the values in order of importance in their own lives. All participants were randomly assigned to the self-affirmation or control condition. In the self-affirmation condition, participants wrote about their most important value, why this value matters to them and described a situation in which this value proved especially meaningful. In the control condition, participants focused on the value that was least important to them and described why this value might matter to other people (e.g., how it could add meaning to other people’s lives).

Subsequently, we measured *work engagement* with a 9-item scale developed by Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006),  $\alpha = 0.90$ . A sample item is, “My job inspires me.” All items were assessed on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

In wave 2, we also measured burnout with a 3-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ). A sample item was: “Working all day is really a strain for me” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*; taken from Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006).

In the third wave of data collection, about six weeks after the second wave, we measured work engagement ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and burnout ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ) with the same scales used in wave 2. Participants also indicated in the third wave whether they had returned to work (yes or no) in the six-week interval in between wave 2 and wave 3.

### 3.1.1. Participants

We invited through Prolific 400 US-based participants, who held a part-time or full-time job and who worked from home due to Covid restrictions at the start of the study. In the second wave, we received responses from 339 respondents, a response percentage of 83%. In the third wave, we received responses from 286 respondents, a response percentage of 84% relative to wave 2, and of 70% relative to wave 1.<sup>1</sup>

We conducted sensitivity analyses using the InteractionPowerR package for R (Baranger et al., 2022; Finsaas et al., 2021). We used 10,000 simulations. As parameters for the analyses, we set a reliability of 0.80 or 0.90 for the dependent variable (the reliability of our burnout and work engagement measures, respectively),  $N = 286$ , no correlation between the predictor variables (due to the fact that we manipulated self-affirmation),  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and power = 0.80. These analyses showed that an effect of the Self-Affirmation  $\times$  Imminence interaction  $R^2 \geq 0.03$  could be reliably detected. Sample size was determined before any data analysis.

Of the 286 participants included in our analyses, 101 (182) identified as male (female), and 3 indicated “another gender.” Furthermore, 37 had only a high school education, 47 had some college education (not leading to a bachelor degree), 124 had a bachelor’s degree, 70 had a master’s degree and 8 had a doctoral degree. The mean age of participants was 31.48 ( $SD = 7.90$ ). Participants worked, on average, for 4.13 years in their current organization ( $SD = 4.16$ ). Two hundred and one of the participants worked in non-management positions, 40 in line management, 34 in middle management, and 11 as senior/executive manager. Finally, 49 participants (17% of participants who completed all three waves) indicated they had returned to work by the second wave of

data collection; 157 participants who completed all three waves (57%) indicated that they had returned to work by the time of the third wave of data collection.

## 4. Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations between the main study variables. Whereas there were modest relationships that those who had returned to work were more (less) job engaged (burnt out) within the same wave, controlling for whether they returned to work did not affect the results presented below, nor did whether they returned to work moderate any of the results presented below.

### 4.1. Work engagement

We tested our hypotheses with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. Table 2 presents the results. The first step showed that imminence was positively related to work engagement in both the short term and the long-term (consistent with Hypothesis 1a rather than 1b). The second step yielded significant interaction effects between imminence of return and self-affirmation. The Self-Affirmation  $\times$  Imminence interaction significantly predicted work engagement in the short term (measured in wave 2, immediately after the self-affirmation manipulation) and, even more impressively, in the long term (six weeks after the self-affirmation manipulation). Fig. 1 depicts the interaction, which was more consistent with Hypothesis 2a than with Hypothesis 2b. Simple slopes tests revealed that, in the control condition, more imminent return to work predicted greater work engagement in the short ( $b = 0.30$ ,  $se = 0.08$ ,  $t = 3.74$ ,  $p < .001$  95%CI [0.14, 0.45]) and long term ( $b = 0.30$ ,  $se = 0.08$ ,  $t = 3.56$ ,  $p < .001$  95%CI [0.13, 0.46]). However, in the self-affirmation condition, imminence of return did not predict work engagement, either in the short ( $b = -0.01$ ,  $se = 0.08$ ,  $t = -0.09$ ,  $p = .928$ , 95%CI [-0.15, 0.16]) or long term ( $b = -0.04$ ,  $se = 0.08$ ,  $t = -0.50$ ,  $p = .615$ , 95%CI [-0.12, 0.20]).

To state the interaction effect differently, self-affirmation (vs. control) led to *lowered* work engagement in the short ( $b = -0.42$ ,  $se = 0.16$ ,  $t = -2.66$ ,  $p = .008$ , 95% CI [0.11, 0.73]) and long term ( $b = -0.43$ ,  $se = 0.17$ ,  $t = 2.62$ ,  $p = .009$ , 95% CI [0.11, 0.76]) among participants who expected to return to work sooner (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean on imminence of returning to work). However, self-affirmation (vs. control) did not influence work engagement, either in the short ( $b = 0.20$ ,  $se = 0.16$ ,  $t = 1.19$ ,  $p = .237$ , 95%CI [-0.12, 0.49]) or long term ( $b = 0.24$ ,  $se = 0.17$ ,  $t = 1.45$ ,  $p = .147$ , 95%CI [-0.08, 0.56]) among participants who expected to return to work in the more distant future (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean on imminence of returning to work).

### 4.2. Burnout

The first step in the regression yielded results consistent with Hypothesis 1a rather than with Hypothesis 1b: imminence was negatively related to burnout in both the short term and the long-term. The second step yielded significant interaction effects between imminence of return and self-affirmation. As can be seen in Table 2, the Self-Affirmation  $\times$  Imminence interaction significantly predicted burnout in the short term and in the long term. Fig. 2 depicts the interaction. More consistent with Hypothesis 2a rather than 2b, simple slopes tests revealed that, in the control condition, more imminent return to work predicted less burnout in the short ( $b = -0.18$ ,  $se = 0.06$ ,  $t = -2.90$ ,  $p = .004$  95%CI [-0.30, 0.06]) and long term ( $b = -0.17$ ,  $se = 0.06$ ,  $t = 2.73$ ,  $p = .007$  95%CI [-0.30, -0.05]). However, in the self-affirmation condition, imminence of return did not predict burnout, either in the short ( $b = 0.01$ ,  $se = 0.06$ ,  $t = 0.10$ ,  $p = .920$ , 95%CI [-0.12, 0.13]) or long term ( $b = 0.01$ ,  $se = 0.06$ ,  $t = 0.12$ ,  $p = .907$ , 95%CI [-0.30, 0.05]).

To state the interaction effect differently, self-affirmation (vs. control) led to *heightened* burnout in the short ( $b = 0.36$ ,  $se = 0.15$ ,  $t = -2.27$ ,  $p = .024$ , 95% CI [0.05, 0.65]), albeit not significantly in the long

<sup>1</sup> Due to an initially invalid completion link, we received responses from 410 participants in the first wave of data collection.

**Table 1**  
Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations between Study Variables.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(1) Self-affirmation								
(2) Imminence	3.48 (1.23)	-0.05, 0.426						
(3) Returned before time 2		-0.03, 0.646	0.51, < 0.001					
(4) Returned before time 3		-0.01, 0.919	0.55, < 0.001	0.43, < 0.001				
(5) Work engagement time 2	3.28 (0.75)	0.05, 0.404	0.15, 0.013	0.06, 0.300	0.09, 0.106			
(6) Work engagement time 3	3.31 (0.81)	0.04, 0.517	0.12, 0.038	0.06, 0.339	0.13, 0.028	0.78, < 0.001		
(7) burnout time 2	3.00 (0.93)	-0.06, 0.328	-0.11, 0.057	-0.08, 0.188	-0.12, 0.046	-0.52, < 0.001	-0.50, < 0.001	
(8) burnout time 3	3.01 (0.94)	0.00, 0.960	-0.11, 0.067	-0.04, 0.525	-0.08, 0.188	-0.50, < 0.001	-0.58, < 0.001	0.71, < 0.001

Note.  $N = 286$ ; Standard deviations are presented within brackets. Two-sided  $p$  values of each correlation are presented after “;” Self-affirmation was coded as 0 = self-affirmation; 1 = control. Returned before time 2 refers to participants who had returned to work before wave 2 commenced. Returned before time 3 refers to participants who had returned to work before wave 3 commenced. Both variables were coded as 0 = not yet returned; 1 = returned.

**Table 2**  
Regression Results for Work Engagement and Burnout.

Criterion variable	Short-term work engagement	Long-term work engagement	Short-term burnout	Long-term burnout
Step 1, $R^2$ , $R^2_{adj}$	0.02*, 0.02	0.02, 0.01	0.02, 0.01	0.01, 0.01
Imminence	0.15 (0.013)	0.13 (0.035)	-0.12 (0.051)	-0.11 (0.068)
Self-affirmation	0.06 (0.323)	0.05 (0.415)	-0.06 (0.283)	-0.00 (0.971)
Step 2, $R^2$ , $R^2_{adj}$ , $\Delta R^2$	0.05**, 0.04, 0.03**	0.05**, 0.04, 0.03**	0.03*, 0.02, 0.02*	0.03*, 0.02, 0.01*
Imminence	-0.01 (0.874)	-0.04 (0.615)	0.01 (0.920)	0.01 (0.907)
Self-affirmation (SA)	0.06 (0.284)	0.05 (0.368)	-0.07 (0.256)	-0.09 (0.929)
Imminence $\times$ SA	0.23 (0.006)	0.24 (0.004)	-0.17 (0.034)	-0.17 (0.044)

Notes.  $N = 286$ ; Table presents  $\beta$  coefficients and two-sided  $p$  values (in brackets). For explained variance: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Self-affirmation was coded as 0 = self-affirmation; 1 = control.

term ( $b = 0.23$ ,  $se = 0.16$ ,  $t = 1.45$ ,  $p = .148$ , 95% CI [-0.08, 0.45]) although the trend was in the same direction (among those 1 SD above the mean on imminence of returning to work). Self-affirmation (vs. control) did not influence burnout either in the short ( $b = -0.11$ ,  $se = 0.15$ ,  $t = 0.74$ ,  $p = .459$ , 95%CI [-0.42, 0.19]) or long term ( $b = -0.22$ ,  $se = 0.16$ ,  $t = 1.41$ ,  $p = .161$ , 95%CI [-0.53, 0.09]) among participants who expected to return to work in the more distant future (i.e., 1 SD below the mean on imminence of returning to work).

4.3. Supplemental analyses

We assessed additional predictor variables in attempting to shed further light on whether participants were more focused on the gains (i.e., increased resources and decreased demands associated with RTW) or on the losses (i.e., decreased resources and increased demands associated with no longer being able to WFH). The distinction between predominantly focusing on gains versus on losses maps onto regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998), which posits that people have two regulatory systems: promotion and prevention. When promotion focused, people are motivated by a desire to advance; as Higgins (1998) suggested, they emphasize moving from 0 to +1. When prevention focused, people are motivated by safety and security; they emphasize not moving from 0 to -1.

If participants assigned importance to gains, we would expect promotion focus to moderate the two-way interaction between imminence and self-affirmation. That is, those who assign greater importance to attaining positive experiences (moving from 0 to +1) should be more apt to exhibit the interaction between imminence and self-affirmation (set forth in Hypothesis 2a), giving rise to a three-way interaction effect

between imminence, self-affirmation, and promotion focus.

If, however, participants assigned psychological significance to losses associated with no longer being able to WFH, we would expect prevention focus to moderate the two-way interaction between imminence and self-affirmation. That is, those who assign greater importance to avoiding negative experiences (not moving from 0 to -1) should be more apt to exhibit an interaction between imminence and self-affirmation set forth in Hypothesis 2b, giving rise to a three-way interaction effect between imminence, self-affirmation, and prevention focus.

The above reasoning gives rise to the following alternative (albeit not mutually exclusive) predictions:

**Hypothesis 3a.** The interaction effect between imminence of return and self-affirmation set forth in Hypothesis 2a will be stronger among those higher than lower in promotion focus.

**Hypothesis 3b.** The interaction effect between imminence of return and self-affirmation set forth in Hypothesis 2b will be stronger among those higher than lower in prevention focus.

In the first wave of data collection, we had measured Work Regulatory Focus (Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Ropberts, 2008). This instrument contains a 9-item promotion focus scale,  $\alpha = 0.86$ . A sample item is: “I spend a great deal of time envisioning how to fulfill my aspirations.”<sup>2, 3 and 4</sup> The instrument also contains a 9-item scale to measure prevention focus,  $\alpha = 0.84$ . A sample item is: “I concentrate on completing my work tasks correctly to increase my job security.” All items were assessed on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Building on the hierarchical regression analyses already presented in Table 2, we entered the Self-Affirmation  $\times$  Imminence  $\times$  Promotion Focus interaction (and all lower-order effects). Results are shown in Table S3 in the online Data Overview and Additional Analyses file. In both the short and the long run, the three-way interaction significantly predicted burnout. In the long (but not the short) run, the three-way interaction significantly predicted work engagement. More consistent with Hypothesis 3a, simple slopes tests revealed that among participants high in promotion focus (1 SD above the mean), the Self-Affirmation  $\times$  Imminence interaction as depicted in Figs. 1 and 2 significantly predicted job engagement and burnout in the short term ( $b = -0.32$ ,  $se = 0.11$ ,  $t = -2.80$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95%CI [-0.54, -0.09]) and the long term ( $b = -0.29$ ,  $se = 0.11$ ,  $t = -2.55$ ,  $p = .011$ , 95%CI [-0.52, -0.07]). However, among participants low in promotion focus (1 SD below the mean), the Self-Affirmation  $\times$  Imminence interaction as depicted in Figs. 1 and 2 did not significantly predict job engagement and burnout in the short ( $b = -0.11$ ,  $se = 0.15$ ,  $t = -0.75$ ,  $p = .454$ , 95% CI [-0.40, 0.18]) and long term ( $b = -0.11$ ,  $se = 0.15$ ,  $t = -0.73$ ,  $p = .465$ , 95%CI [-0.40, 0.18]).

We found no role for prevention focus in moderating the Self-

<sup>2</sup> One promotion focus item was unintentionally deleted from the survey; therefore, the scale was based on eight items.

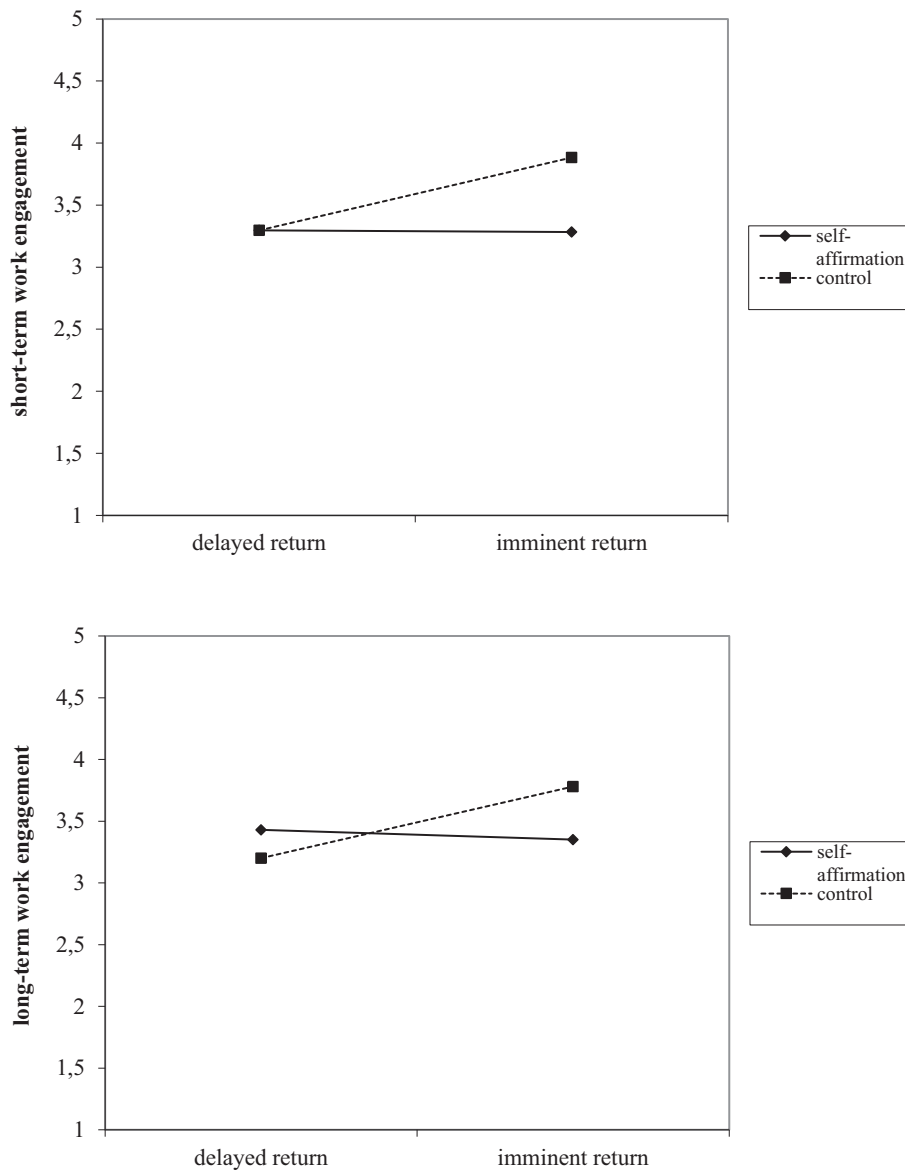


Fig. 1. The Effects of Self-Affirmation and Imminence of Returning to Work on Job Engagement in the Short Term (upper panel) and Long Term (lower panel).

Affirmation × Imminence interaction on job engagement and burnout (see Table S3). Thus, Hypothesis 3b was not supported. However, given that the tests for three-way interactions were likely underpowered, the greater support for Hypothesis 3a than Hypothesis 3b should be viewed suggestively.

### 5. Discussion

Shortly after the experimental manipulation of self-affirmation and six weeks later, we found that imminence was positively (negatively) related to work engagement (burnout). Moreover, self-affirmation moderated these results: both imminence effects were attenuated when participants self-affirmed relative to when they did not. The above findings along with the suggestive moderating effect of promotion (but not prevention) focus on the two-way interaction between imminence and self-affirmation imply that of the two components of people’s

conflicted feelings (gains about RTW versus the losses associated with no longer being able to WFH), gains were more influential than were losses.<sup>3</sup>

#### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The present findings contribute to our understanding of processes that drive central aspects of the JD-R model. This model proposes that resources lead to increased work engagement while demands increase burnout. Whereas it makes sense that people will react better when resources go up or job demands go down, the psychological reasons that explain these effects are not fully understood. In particular, influential resources are not limited to objective characteristics of the work environment. The focal two-way interaction between imminence and self-affirmation highlight the role of personal resources, such as “aspects of the self that are generally linked to resiliency and refer to individuals’

<sup>3</sup> Whereas this finding at first may appear to contradict the notion that losses loom larger than gains, that notion applies only when the objective magnitude of the outcomes is equivalent, which is unknown in the present context.

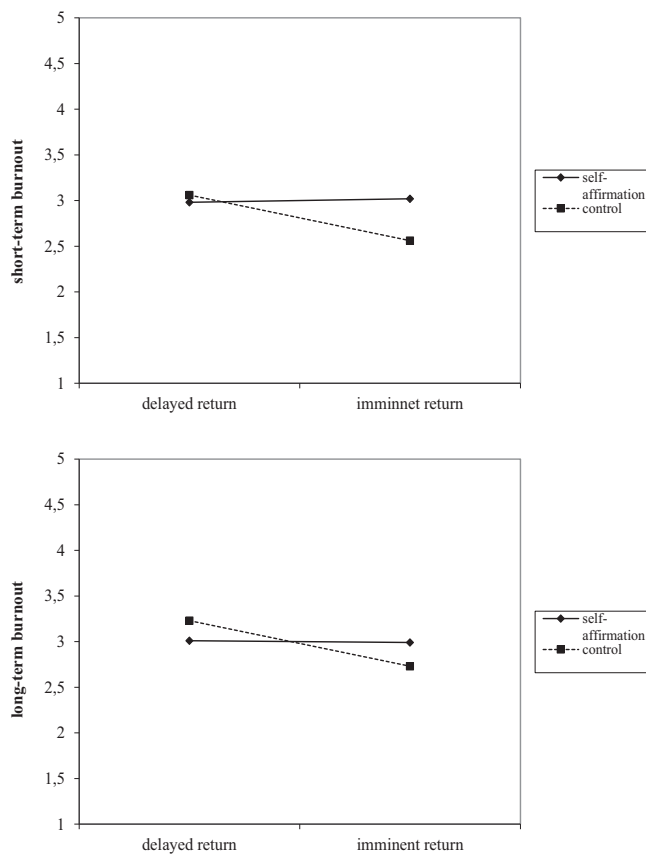


Fig. 2. The Effects of Self-Affirmation and Imminence of Returning to Work on Burnout in the Short Term (upper panel) and Long Term (lower panel).

sense of their ability to control and impact their environment successfully” (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007, p. 123).

The present findings also offer a somewhat novel way to understand the effects of engaging in self-affirmation on people’s beliefs and behaviors. One of the most useful aspects of the theory is its ability to offer a common explanation of findings in different literatures, such as fairness and stereotype threat. Results in these instances show that the adverse effects of various psychological constructs are due to their negative implications for people’s overall sense of global self-integrity. This conclusion is based on the finding that when people engage in the values affirmation exercise used in the present study, it counteracts the negative effects that the various psychological constructs elicit in people’s beliefs and behaviors.

The present study showed that self-affirmation also may give rise to other results. More specifically, just as self-affirmation can counteract the adverse effects that various psychological constructs have on beliefs and behaviors, we find that self-affirmation may have a negative influence: as can be seen in Figs. 1 and 2, among those for whom returning to work was more imminent, job engagement (burnout) was lower (higher) when they self-affirmed relative to when they did not. We offer a speculation as to why this occurred momentarily.

Furthermore, the present study contributes to a larger body of theory and research examining how employees’ exits from and re-entries to work affect various beliefs and behaviors, including job engagement. Many of these studies have examined more transient exits and re-entries, such as how going on vacation affects health and well-being (e.g., de Bloom et al., 2009) and how psychologically detaching from work at the end of the day predicts higher levels of next-day job engagement (Sonnentag & Kuhnel, 2016). Relatively few studies have examined, however, Covid-related exits and re-entry which are more involuntary than previously studied exits and re-entries. For a rare exception, Yuan, Ye,

and Zhong (2021) recently found that employees who mentally prepared beforehand for RTW as the pandemic eased were higher in job engagement after they had returned two weeks later. Pending additional research, we speculate that the positive relationship in the present study between imminence of return and job engagement (found especially in the control condition) was accounted for by prior mental preparation.

## 5.2. Limitations/suggestions for future research

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the present study is that its effects were not short-lived. Six weeks after the brief induction of self-affirmation, we found that the two-way interaction between imminence and self-affirmation was significant. However, the present study did not delineate the mechanism(s) through which the findings persisted over time; therein lies an important opportunity for further research. Drawing on prior theorizing (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), we suggest that participants’ work engagement (burnout) may have caused them to think or act in ways that reinforced their extant levels of work engagement (burnout). For example, those feeling more (less) engaged may have put forward greater (less) effort, which led them to perform better (worse), which in turn affected their subsequent level of job engagement (burnout), in a virtuous (vicious) cycle.

Another finding that warrants further exploration is that among those for whom returning to work was more imminent, self-affirmation led to worse reactions (e.g., lower job engagement) relative to the control condition. The substitutability principle inherent to the logic of the self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 2000) posits that if returning to work imminently was self-enhancing then self-affirmation would have no further positive effect on job engagement.

However, the present results showed that when the imminence of RTW was higher, self-affirmation negatively affected job engagement. One possible explanation harkens back to our assumption that employees were conflicted about RTW. One way to address the discomfort they may have experienced as they anticipated RTW imminently was to rationalize to themselves the positives (and/or minimize the negatives) about RTW. Thus: (1) when a component of a positive reaction (e.g., high job engagement shown by those returning imminently) reflects dissonance reduction, (2) engaging in self-affirmation may lead to less positive reactions, because (3) as prior research (e.g., Steele, 1988) has shown, engaging in self-affirmation reduces the need to reduce dissonance.<sup>4</sup>

## 5.3. Practical implications

Companies are struggling with the challenge of how to bring their employees back to their workplaces. The present study adds insight to this challenge by examining how to manage the RTW process in ways

<sup>4</sup> The present findings showed no evidence of a positive effect of self-affirmation on employees’ reactions associated with RTW as the pandemic eased. However, this does not preclude the possibility that at least certain kinds of individuals may respond favorably. For example, as one reviewer pointed out, perhaps the positive effects of self-affirmation upon RTW would emerge for working mothers because the benefits of remote work were greater for them prior to the disruptions brought on by Covid. If so, then being forced to RTW may be particularly challenging (i.e., self-threatening) for working mothers, in which case engaging in self-affirmation could be ameliorative. We did not measure specific profiles of workers who might benefit most from working from home, such as those with caretaking abilities. However, we measured a proxy: gender (given that women still do most caretaking work, e.g., Sherman, 2020). Gender did not moderate the focal imminence  $\times$  self-affirmation interaction effect on short- or long-term work engagement/burnout. In these analyses, we still found significant (or marginally significant) imminence  $\times$  self-affirmation interactions on short- and long-term work engagement (burnout). Moreover, gender did not significantly interact with either imminence or self-affirmation, nor did it display a significant main effect.

that make employees more engaged with their jobs and less burned out. As part of this process, employers are advised to attend even to the point in time in which employees *anticipate* their return to work. Among those who see their return as more imminent, the present findings suggest that less (intervention) may be more. That is, the positivity associated with returning imminently may be sufficient to produce relatively high (low) levels of work engagement (burnout) along with its positive work-related concomitants.

The present findings also speak more generally to the wise intervention literature, which has generated considerable excitement in showing how even brief inductions can have significant and lasting effects on important outcome measures (Walton & Wilson, 2018). It is important to keep in mind, however, that even though wise interventions *can* produce remarkably positive results does not mean that they *will*. The present findings provide an instance in which *refraining* from a wise intervention may better serve employees and employers alike.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

I have shared a link to the data in the article

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104527>.

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