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## **How can we explain burnout through existing psychological theories, and can Hannah Arendt offer an alternative framework?**

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**How can we explain burnout through existing psychological theories, and can Hannah  
Arendt offer an alternative framework?**

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## Introduction

“A burnout, I really don’t have time for that” – Maaïke (17)

(Psychologie Magazine, 2015)

The number of academic articles about burnout<sup>[1]</sup> has risen by 2500% between 1991 and 2022, yet we still do not know what burnout is. This is a rise of 2500% because academics, psychologists, philosophers, and coaches all have ‘taken on’ the phenomena of burnout. Questions on burnout, its causes, and potential remedies are constantly debated. An increase in burnout is established amongst increasingly younger generations. The Nederlands Centrum Jeugd-gezondheid (NCJ) has reported an alarming rise in stress among children; children as young as nine years old have suffered burnout (Brankele, 2024, p. 23). This alarmingly growing problem should be addressed, not just by experts but also by people who are part of the affected generation. The quote from Maaïke embodies our generation’s look at burnout; even the idea of burnout is too much, and we don’t have time for that. In an interview I conducted for this thesis, Martijn Jansen, one of the founders of Lieve Mark, an organization aimed at raising awareness and addressing mental health issues in our generation, urged the following: “We must prevent this race against each other from becoming a race to the bottom.”<sup>1</sup> (personal communication, May 5, 2024).

This is why this thesis will try to tackle this complex phenomenon. Firstly, the definition will be thoroughly set out. Following will be a literary review of multiple authors’ arguments on what causes burnout. Then, Hannah Arendt’s (2018) philosophical work in *The Human Condition* will be critically analyzed to explore whether she can offer another insight into the causes of burnout. The empirical psychological research and Hannah Arendt’s philosophical perspective will be compared and contrasted during the discussion. Then, whether these new perspectives can enhance or even make us rethink what causes burnout and why the numbers are increasing amongst increasingly younger generations will be debated. Hence, this essay will aim to answer the following research question: *How can we explain burnout through existing psychological theories, and can Hannah Arendt offer an alternative framework?*

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<sup>1</sup> If interested in the full interview with Martijn Janssen, recordings are available (in Dutch).

People use thousands of definitions and alternative versions to define burnout. However, the most simplistic definitions stem from the following: a state of complete mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion (Darling Downs Health.). Where the Cambridge Dictionary states, “extreme tiredness or a feeling of not being able to work anymore, caused by working too hard”, another version reads “to become or cause to become exhausted through overwork or dissipation” (Cambridge Dictionary.). However, the term burnout was first used by the author Graham Greene. He was writing a novel in which an architect could no longer find meaning in his profession nor pleasure in life, and Greene called it *a burnt-out case*. Only after, in 1974, did American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger define this burnout as “a state of exhaustion, fatigue, and frustration due to a professional activity that fails to produce the expected expectations”. Freudenberger initially limited this *state* to the exclusively professional context that required emotional work, intense involvement, and intrinsic motivation, all while being poorly paid. Freudenberger argued that their occupation initiated their energy loss, leading to exhaustion, demotivation, and potentially even aggressiveness toward their clients (Edú-Valsania, Laguía, Moriano, 2022, p. 2). However, years later, another American psychologist, Christina Maslach and S.E. Jackson, reformulated this concept and defined it as “a psychological syndrome characterized by *emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal achievement.*”<sup>2</sup>. The significance of this reformulated definition comes from defining burnout as a syndrome. A syndrome allows burnout to be understood as a set of symptoms and signs that can exist simultaneously, thus allowing for distinction from others (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022, p. 3). Eventhough the definition of burnout is still contested, Maslach and Jackson’s<sup>3</sup> remains the most recognized and accepted definition of burnout, and this thesis will proceed with it as its only definition.

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<sup>2</sup> These three dimensions are further defined in Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned, there is an ongoing debate in the academic world whether 'burnout' and other mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety can be differentiated. While this thesis recognizes burnout as defined above, if you are interested in this debate, the recommended authors are Brankel Frank (2023) and W.B. Schaufeli (2019) on burnout and depression. Cole A. H. (2014), Koutsimani, P., Montgomery, A., & Georganta, K. (2019), Turnipseed (1998, as cited in Koutsimani P. et al., 2019), Spielberg (1996, as cited in Koutsimani P. et al., 2019) and Vassilopoulos (2012) on burnout and anxiety.

## Literary review

This literature review seeks to unpack burnout's complex and intricate causes by tying together various scholarly threads. From the biological and psychological underpinnings studied in scientific circles to the subtle cultural and generational factors that shape this landscape, this review aims to provide the most comprehensive understanding of why burnout has become so evident in our generation. First, this review will examine the argument that frames burnout as a biopsychosocial phenomenon through scientific explanations, engaging with both theoretical models and empirical research. Then, the following sections will explore arguments based on particular factors and mechanisms and how generational shifts and societal influences affect the prevalence of burnout. Lastly, this literature review will discuss social surveys arguing that burnout's causes can be generalized over various demographic groups. Combining varied arguments, the review aims to provide an in-depth overview that clarifies the debate's various causes of burnout and establishes the framework for later discussion of Hannah Arendt's insights and potential applications from her work *The Human Condition* (2018).

It is essential to consider the scientific research that explores burnout's biological and psychological dimensions. Scientific investigations utilize numerous techniques to investigate the causes of burnout, ranging from longitudinal psychological studies to biochemical analyses. Also, scientific research allows one to explore how psychological factors, such as stress and biological factors, relate since one often affects the other. One such argument is the following; "Burnout is a syndrome which arises as the result of chronic psychological stress and is underpinned by the autonomic nervous system and its interplay with endocrine and immune processes" (Bayes, Tavella, Parker, 2021, p. 694). Authors Bayes, Tavella, and Parker undertook an extensive review of the literature that examined potential underlying biological mechanisms and physical consequences of burnout. The evaluated studies included patients diagnosed with the clinical condition of burnout and individuals who often were still working, who seemed to have some degree of burnout but not yet officially diagnosed (687). They explain that the two bodily systems that respond to acute stressors are the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. The first response comes from the ANS and they hypothesize that prolonged exposure to stressors prevents these systems from returning to their normal state (688-689). This leads to chronic stress,

causing burnout. The endocrine processes they refer to are the activities of the endocrine system, in which glands produce and secrete hormones into our bloodstream. Examples of such hormones are cortisol, known as the stress hormone. In turn, immune processes involve our immune system and concern our general health (p. 689). What the authors likely meant by the interplay of these processes is how they influence each other under chronic stress. Prolonged cortisol secretion affects our immune system, and vice versa; a weakened immune system can increase overall stress. Bayes, Tavella, and Parker conclude that the cause of burnout is the dependent relationship between chronic stress and our bodily system (p. 694).

Another author who supports this argument is Brankele Frank, a young Dutch author who wrote about her burnout experiences in her book *Over de Kop*. She acknowledges that the leading cause, as concluded by Bayes, Lavella, and Parker (2021), is chronic stress. However, Brankele (2023) wonders, in principle, that the human body is a self-regulating mechanism; why can't it adjust and recover when confronted when needed (p. 147)? When she asks this question concerning burnout, she wonders, what is the pathology of burnout (147)? As a response, she hypothesized two possible overarching biological explanations. First, whether the big biological cause of burnout is an excess of the stress hormone cortisol, and second, whether the big biological cause of burnout is an imbalanced/broken nervous system seesaw (148).

When it comes to the first hypothesis, she argues that most burnout symptoms seem to resonate with a high level of cortisol and that when these levels become too high, cortisol can become toxic for one's brain; this is called hypercorticoïde neurotoxication (152). Brankele consults O. Meijer, a Dutch professor at Leiden University Medical Center, whose research focus is primarily cortisol (Brankele, 2023, p. 152). However, Meijer argues this hypothesis is “too short-sighted”. He explains that cortisol, in itself, is never the problem as it only facilitates other processes. While cortisol plays a role, measuring cortisol has methodological difficulties (153). Cortisol fluctuates and is easily influenced by outside factors such as coffee. Gender also matters since women tend to have higher levels of cortisol compared to men. Overall, she concludes that while her hypothesis is not entirely false, cortisol is not solely the bigger biological cause of burnout (155). Her second hypothesis concerns the imbalance of the nervous system. As cited, P. Verhaeghe, a professor at the University of Gent, claimed, “Health is the balance between effort and relaxation” (Brankele, 2023, p. 158).

Brankele introduces the seesaw metaphor when explaining the autonomous nervous system. The nervous system has two divisions: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. The sympathetic division takes care of everything that has to do with action and prepares the body for stressful situations; it can trigger the well-known “fight or flight” responses (159). The parasympathetic division takes care of all ordinary processes, like digestion and the immune system. The more active the sympathetic system, the more inactive the parasympathetic system, and vice versa. Normally, one can switch between the two divisions, regulated by the endocrine system and nervous system itself; however, when someone suffers from burnout, this switching no longer works, and thus, one cannot relax (159). To further explain this malfunctioning system, Brankele looks at HRV (heart rate variability) (160). When one relaxes, the parasympathetic system becomes active, and HRV increases because the pauses between the beats become longer. Contrastingly, when one participates in more restless activities, like sports or stress, the sympathetic system becomes active, HRV decreases, and there are shorter pauses between heartbeats. Following this logic, if one suffers from a longer period of a low HRV, it can mean the sympathetic division is too active or that one's parasympathetic system is inactive (160). In other words, Brankele says, "Either you have a continuous lack of rest, or the seesaw has swung to the unrest side” (163). Hence, a lower HRV reduces the ability to react and balance the seesaw. Brankele concludes that "both hypotheses seem plausible", but one can be too simplistic and the other too difficult to prove (163). This means that while biologically, they are not the sole causes of burnout, Brankele argues that both give valuable insights into the more biological explanations of what causes burnout.

Building on scientific discoveries about burnout's psychological and neurobiological bases, we now focus on specific factors that cause burnout. Whereas scientific theories offer a well-researched framework for understanding the causes of burnout, these specific everyday factors in both individual and organizational contexts trigger these biological responses. This section explores specific factors certain authors argue can exacerbate or mitigate burnout.

Burnout is argued to be triggered by a combination of individual and organizational factors. Edú-Valsanbia, Laguía, and Moriano (2022) explain this argument in their research. They explore several antecedents that they argue will “propitiate, trigger, and/or maintain” people

suffering from burnout syndrome and categorize them under individual and organizational factors (7). Organizational factors, such as *work overload, emotional labor, a lack of autonomy, ambiguity, inadequate supervision, lack of perceived social support, and poor working hours*, are primarily sociological, adhering to the structure and demands of the workplace. These factors all contribute to high-stress levels, eventually triggering burnout. On the other hand, individual factors, such as *personality type, consciousness, or someone's openness to experience*, are psychological. These factors are argued to moderate; they either protect or enhance burnout. These individual factors either protect or enhance the effects of the organizational factors. In this way, the sociological and psychological factors that can cause burnout interact. This interaction implies that people's perceptions and coping mechanisms are equally important in contributing to burnout as the actual circumstances. Authors Maslach and Leiter (2016) add context to this argument. They mention that certain factors that seemingly cause burnout are rarely tested directly, and argue for more longitudinal studies, which can test sequential hypotheses in a better way (105). For this reason, the authors set out six key domains: *workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values* (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 105). These factors “deplete the individual capacity to meet job demands”, “limit their control”, and “create feelings of inefficiency, lack of support, and “value conflicts”, all contributing to burnout (105). This broader view, again, accentuates that the causes of burnout stem from a blend of sociological and psychological factors, this time supported by longitudinal research.

The in-depth analysis by Edú-Valsania, Laguía, and Moriano (2022) and by Maslach and Leiter (2016) support the claim that burnout is caused by an interaction of sociological and psychological factors that present themselves in an individual and organizational sense. The first shows that burnout is more situational than dispositional through this division of organizational and individual factors. The latter reinforces those findings, but with the support of longitudinal research, when they present six domains of organizational risk factors. All factors considered, the authors conclude that there is no doubt that burnout is a growing concern. The work environments, the high demands combined with the need to prove worthy, and a low sense of accomplishment are merely one combination of the presented factors that can lead to burnout.

While these specific factors provide yet another interesting insight into the causes of burnout, it is argued that the influence of broader societal and generational shifts cannot be overlooked. The subsequent section will look at how these greater shifts are changing societal norms and standards, both in the workplace and at home, which, according to these authors, subsequently change the causes of burnout. The discussion will shift from the specific, micro-level elements to broader, macro-level elements influencing our modern world and new generations.

An author who addresses these macro shifts, both societal and generational, is Anne Peterson (2019) in her article "How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation". She argues that the starting point of these shifts is when businesses became more efficient, generating more and more profit. This meant "the next generation needed to be positioned to compete. We could not just show up with a diploma and expect to get *and keep* a job that would allow us to retire at 55. In a marked shift from generations before, millennials needed to optimize themselves to be the very best workers possible" (5). With this shift marked, she argued that everything changed. As cited, Harris M. argued that our generations are now "trained, tailored, primed, and optimized for the workplace" (Peterson, 2019, p. 5). It starts as early as school and is enforced throughout the education system, where he argues risk management is no longer merely a business strategy but now a child-rearing one as well. He mentions that 'optimizing' children's play is one way this strategy becomes evident; 'unstructured daycare becomes pre-preschool, pickup games have transformed into highly regulated organized league play throughout the year, and unchanneled energy becomes medicated and disciplined" (Peterson, 2019, pp. 5-6). Peterson then goes on to argue this shift did not just occur among the bourgeois, educated parents, it applied to all. As cited, sociologist Linda M, called it "vigilante" parenting behaviors, which cuts across race and class lines (6). This optimization is set through during college, where Peterson describes most students as being convinced that their first job out of college would determine their career path and "their intrinsic value for the rest of their lives" (7). She mentions a student who applied to many internships and jobs without results, when she advised her to "move somewhere fun and get any job!", the student replied, "But what'll I tell my parents? I want a cool job I'm passionate about" (Peterson, 2019, p. 7). Without realizing it, she set the bar extremely high: a job her parents are proud of, she likes, is cool, and, she is passionate about Peterson then asks what happens when this generation starts the job search and does not manage to find 'that holy grail career' and the

dream does not feel like what we have been promised (7)? While Peterson mentions an American education shift in the 1980s, the attitudes towards such a shift are similar today; “we did not try to break the system, since that's not how we'd been raised. We internalize that we're not striving hard enough, and we get a second gig” (10). She argues it is the psychological toll of realizing that something we've been told, and that you believed would be worth it, all the extra work, all the loans, all the strict parenting – isn't (11).

Alongside this generational shift comes a more recent societal shift. Peterson mentions, "What makes that realization sting even more is watching others live their seemingly cool, passionate, worthwhile lives online" (11). Social media feeds are evidence of hard work and prove that you worked hard enough to enjoy life and post holiday pictures and luxury items (11). Additionally, our phone becomes yet another workplace. The number of channels we have created, such as email, WhatsApp, and Skype, means that employees are always accessible and always able to work. Peterson hits the nail on the head when she states, "Attempts to discourage working 'of the clock' misfire, as millennials read them not as permission to stop working, but a means to further distinguish themselves by being available anyways" and Harris supports this by saying, "Efficiency is our existential purpose" (12-13).

Moreover, as cited, sociologist A.L. Kallenberg points out that this efficiency was supposed to give us better jobs, instead it made them worse (Peterson, 2019, p. 13). Peterson argues that our commitment to work and increased efficiency have encouraged and facilitated this generation's exploitation. Peterson concludes: "All of this optimization – as children, in college, online – culminates in the dominant millennial condition, regardless of class or race or location: burnout" (14). It is because of these generational and societal shifts, that we, as a generation, have fallen into a track of optimization, ultimately causing this increased number of burnouts amongst younger generations.

Another Dutch institution that supports this claim of optimization being the cause of burnout is Gezondheidsplein (2022). With the Dutch word "prestatie maatschappij" translated as "performance society", they claim that society demanding more and more from not just adults but people of all ages is the leading cause of burnout (Gezondheidsplein, 2022). Schools ask more from students beyond homework, and children are often expected to participate in extracurriculars. They argue that "it is no longer about the fun of the activity itself, but mainly about understanding it" (Gezondheidsplein, 2022). Then, like Peterson's (2019)

second argument, younger generations are increasingly preoccupied with social media and when they grow older, they are expected to have a side job to earn some extra money, but simultaneously, they must uphold their social relations with friends, and family. Hence, Gezondheidsplein (2022) concludes that "life is fast, intensive, and has little to no breaks".

After exploring the argument that generational and societal shifts cause burnout, other theoretical insights with empirical evidence must also be explored. Social surveys conducted by both the TNO (Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research, 2023) and CBS (Centraal Bureau van Statistiek), Dutch institutions, explore a wide range of data, and this data is what the empirical evidence argues causes burnout. This section will discuss these survey results, offering a factual foundation that shows a set of causes of burnout.

As requested by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the TNO (2023) has investigated increasing burnout in younger generations. The national survey conducted by the TNO and CBS concerns a random sample group between ages 15 and 75. They organized four focus groups of 27 young adults, 14 men, and 13 women. The survey responses conclude that the top three causes of stress are *performance pressure*, *uncertainties in life*, and *social pressures* (TNO, 2023).

First, performance pressure, defined as the pressure people experience to perform and meet certain set expectations, seems to arise from higher workloads, the generational gap in work expectations, the disrupted work-life balance, the feeling of not being good enough, and the competitive urges among younger employees.

Secondly, the insecurities under younger employees, revolve around career perspective concerns, such as lack of opportunities or unclear expectations, and financial insecurity from inflation and student debt—also, societal insecurity, which comes from the constant stream of negative news like pandemics or wars.

Lastly, social pressure on younger employees arises from social media but family and friends' expectations can also create insecurity through generational clashes. Moreover, societal pressure seems to arise from always needing to be 'happy and fun' (TNO, 2023).

The TNO (2023) considers these three the leading causes of stress under increasingly younger generations. This stress then ultimately leads to an increasing number of burnouts. These stressors are not isolated; instead, they interact with each other, suggesting the

prevalence of burnout among increasingly younger generations—young adults who are highly educated experience increasing pressure to perform at work and socially. There is pressure to be constantly available and to combine work, life, and family. Moreover, to top it all off, social media reinforces the idea of never being good enough. Moreover, the younger participants in the focus group experienced the increasing uncertainty of living situations and the persistent social crises, all contributing to a "pessimistic future perspective" (TNO, 2023). A shocking statistic that concluded the investigation showed that 1 out of 4 employees between 18 and 34 suffer from burnout symptoms.

## **Body**

After exploring the varied scientific, cultural, and empirical causes of burnout, this thesis aims to explore one more dimension. Philosophy and psychology are substantially different, yet what if we can learn from both regarding the same subject? Enter Hannah Arendt (2018), an incredible thinker whose insights in her work on *The Human Condition* can provide another critical perspective on the causes of burnout. Hannah Arendt's differentiation between three activities that make up the *Vita Activa*, namely, labor, work, and action, offers another understanding of the causes of burnout (7). Rather than individual or organizational factors, generational shifts, or nervous systems, Hannah Arendt's work explores a societal misalignment through these essential activities. Her philosophical framework allows us to explore how this psychological issue might be understood differently. It is important to note that Hannah Arendt herself did not address the phenomena of burnout in *The Human Condition*. Therefore the analysis into whether her philosophical investigation into the human condition can provide another explanation for what causes burnout, is an extension of her ideas and insights. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to incorporate all the activities of the *Vita Activa* and some of Arendt's additional insights that help address the research question. Therefore, the next section will focus on the activity of labor and demonstrate how its predominance in the modern age has fostered a society of laborers, which in turn shows the underlying causes of burnout. First, Hannah Arendt's definition of labor will be explored, and how its intrinsic nature may link to burnout. Then, Arendt's characterization of the modern age as a consumer society will be examined, arguing that this cumulated a society of laborers. This shift would suggest a clear underlying cause for burnout, as it highlights the endless

cycle of consumption and production that dominates life in the modern age and results in "universal unhappiness."

Labor was first introduced by Arendt (2018) as "the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself" (7). As Arendt describes, labor is a repetitive, never-ending cycle upholding the necessities of life, "connected with the life process in its most elementary, biological sense... imprisoned in the eternal recurrence" (46). Labor always took place in the private, where individuals engage in activities essential to their maintenance and reproduction, all activities necessary to survive. However, Arendt describes how the shift into the modern age has admitted labor "to public stature" (47), which in turn has "liberated this process from its circular, monotonous recurrence and transformed it into a swiftly progressing development whose results have in a few centuries changed the whole inhabited world" (47). When labor moved into the public realm, it saw an accelerated increase in productivity. Arendt mentions that in no other sphere of life have we attained such excellence (a quality only assigned to the public realm, where one can excel and thus distinguish oneself from others) as in the transformation of labor (48). So much so that the usual meaning of "toil and trouble" has lost meaning (48). Then Arendt argues "The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society" (4). This shift, the "glorification of labor", had redefined labor's nature and purpose and allows us to explore how such glorification has reshaped our societal norms (85). It could offer another explanation as to what causes burnout.

The transformation into a society of laborers did not occur in a vacuum; Arendt (2018) argues that it was partly due to our living in a *consumer society*, which is "only another way of saying we live in a society of laborers" (126). Labor and consumption, according to Arendt, are two stages of the same process. This is because labor leaves nothing behind; everything produced is consumed as fast as it has taken to produce. This effort to produce, while it might seem futile, is motivated by the most powerful drive of all "because life depends on it" (87). This is because labor produces the necessities to stay alive; for this reason, the motivation is recurring and endless and essentially turns us into a society of laborers. Arendt argues that

neither did this society come about through the emancipation of the laboring activity itself nor because laborers were given equal rights in the public realm, but rather because we have established a society in which we level all human activities to the ability to securing the necessities of life and securing their abundance (126). Arendt argues that everything we do in this society is for the sake of "making a living" (127). Also, the number of people who could challenge this standard, and not do everything to make a living, is decreasing (Arendt, 2018, 127). Arendt argues that this trend of degrading all activities to "make a living" brings about a concerning paradox; labor becomes the opposite of play. As a result, "all serious activities, irrespective of their fruits, are called labor, and every activity which is not necessary either for the life of the individual or for the life process of society is subsumed under playfulness" (127).

This brings Arendt to her more substantial claim, one that reshapes societal norms; the emancipation of labor has not just lifted it to an equal level with the other activities of the *vita activa*, work, and action; it has instead resulted in its undisputed predominance (128). When 'making a living' becomes the essence of every activity, every other activity not connected to labor becomes a "hobby" (128). Arendt then discusses Marx and his utopia, where emancipation from labor is the emancipation of necessity (131). She argues, however, that even this utopia will not free us from the ever-recurring cycle of biological life. The increased dependency on automation causes a shift from productive labor to potentially destructive consumption. Automation is a transformative force that affects the nature of labor and, thus, society, not just a technical advancement. By reducing the demand for labor, automation would free individuals from it. Instead, it binds them to a cycle of endless consumption. This paradox comes about because the products of automation are not meant to last but to be consumed, stimulating endless consumption. This creates said 'society of laborers' in which 'making a living' revolves around consumption.

The utopia, freed from labor, will not emancipate us since the desire to consume will only grow stronger (Arendt, 2018, 132). Moreover, the idea that the 'free time' one would gain from not having to 'labor' is argued that it will never be spent on anything but consumption. She even claims that the more time left, the greedier and more craving his appetite (132). These appetites also become more sophisticated and no longer concern just the necessities of

life but also the superfluities of life (133). Arendt claims the outcome of this society of laborers, having originated from our modern age consumer society, is 'mass culture', and mass culture's consequence is "universal unhappiness, due on one side to the troubled balance between laboring and consumption and, on the other, to the persistent demands of the animal laborans to obtain happiness" (134). This unhappiness is not just a result but a structural characteristic of the modern age. The unhappiness stems from endless consumption, which in turn comes from automation and the predominance of labor. She argues that this unhappiness results from society's shift towards one in which labor and the pursuit of happiness have supplanted more meaningful pursuits connected to work and action, which used to harvest happiness not from existence but from artistic or communal activities (134). Ironically, such a society, as Arendt claims we are in, in the modern age, is ill-suited to achieve these more meaningful pursuits. Thus, their pursuit of happiness leads to universal unhappiness.

The last stage of this laboring society, as Arendt (2018) argues, requires merely automatic functioning, causing individual life to be submerged into the overall life process. The only decision left for the individual is to let go, to "abandon individuality" and thus go and "acquiesce in a dazed tranquilized functional type of behavior" (322). Before the modern age, "the public realm was reserved for individuality; it was the one place where men could show who they really and interchangeably were" (p. 41). However, this has been undermined since labor has moved into the public sphere. Since labor has become automated and repetitive, individuals 'abandon individuality'. The demands of labor now overshadow individual distinctiveness, reducing the individual to mere functions in the labor process. Arendt even admits that the trouble with this theory is not whether it is right or not but whether it becomes reality. If so, she warns, the modern age "may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known" (322).

By including Arendt's (2018) philosophical insights in the discussion of burnout, it becomes clear that the causes lie far beyond workplace pressures, the biological responses of individuals, generational shifts, and all else. The analysis of Arendt's work could suggest that the cause of burnout lies within a deeper social dysfunction. This dysfunction is, in turn, the consequence of the modern age laboring society, one that values production and consumption

above all else. So much so that the individual fully submerges into the recurring, endless life process and loses individuality. It forces the individual to continuously participate in labor activities that are futile and repetitive, leading to unfulfillment and societal unhappiness. It eventually leads to a sterile and dead society. This shift into the modern age and its consequences offer a crucial philosophical alternative explanation to the causes of burnout. The way Arendt describes the evolvment of the activity of labor and how it presents itself in our modern day can accurately apply to the phenomena of burnout. From an Arendtian perspective, understanding the causes of burnout allows us not to attribute the cause to only personal or professional conditions but instead an underlying social structure. It may call for us to assess the predominance of labor and its immediate effects on individuals and prolonged effect on the whole functioning of society.

## **Discussion**

The psychological literature regarding burnout can offer empirical support and practical insights that enhance and strengthen Arendt's (2018) philosophical framework. By examining the similarities and differences between psychological research and Arendt's theories, we can see how psychological research can advance Arendt's theories and produce a more thorough understanding of burnout and its causes. First, the value of the empirical evidence that the psychological research presents about Arendt's theories will be discussed. Secondly, the effect of the specific factors and mechanisms that the psychological literature has on Arendt's theories will be explored. Lastly, the psychological discussion of how societal shifts can lead to generational effects and Arendt's agreement with this will also be discussed.

Firstly, the psychological literature provides empirical evidence that supports Arendt's (2018) theoretical claims. The authors Bayes, Tavella, and Parker (2021) and Brankele Frank (2023) explain the argument that chronic stress and prolonged exposure to it can cause burnout. Both explain that the autonomic nervous system's response to this chronic stress can lead to detrimental health outcomes. It validates Arendt's argument that the modern age's focus on labor is one of the factors that these authors argue cause this chronic stress and leads to burnout. Also, other empirical research from the national survey by the TNO (2023) shows that insecurity revolves around career perspectives, meaning someone has no influence on

their career path, can lead to burnout. This empirical research provides a scientific and quantitative basis for Arendt's critique.

Secondly, while Arendt (2018) offers a broad philosophical perspective, the psychological literature showcases specific factors and mechanisms that make Arendt's claim concrete. Authors Edú-Valsanbia, Laguía, and Moriano (2022) name factors such as *workload* and *poor working hours*. These factors show similarities with the nature of labor. Workload entailed "excessive sustained effort," which ties into the continuity of labor—poor working hours entailed the continuous availability of employees and almost unbroken hours of work, which also ties into the endlessness of labor (Edú-Valsanbia et al., 2022, pp. 7-8). Additionally, author Peterson's (2019) analysis mentions the *off-the-clock availability* that seems to be a requirement these days, which again relates to labor's characteristic of being unending and continuous (8). As cited in Peterson's (2019) article, Harris mentioned, "efficiency is our existential purpose" (13); this is yet another tie to Arendt's analysis when she mentions that the modern age laboring society revolves around productivity to produce and consume as much as possible, in other words; efficiency. Empirical research in these cases aligns with Hannah Arendt's analysis and indicates that jobs with these characteristics of labor can be predictors of burnout. They also operationalize and concretize Arendt's theories. They make her theory applicable to real life by highlighting how these factors, which align with the characteristics of labor, ultimately can lead to burnout. The intersection of psychology and philosophy, in this case, ensures the realization of Arendt's theory in the modern age, recognizable by these factors that the authors have discussed.

Thirdly, the psychological literature shows that burnout can stem from generational and societal shifts, allowing Arendt's (2018) theories to be applied across different time periods. First, Anne Peterson (2019) explores how millennials became the burnout generation by growing up with the aim of optimization, enforcing the idea of optimization as early as pre-school (5). Peterson (2019) mentions that nowadays, one must have a career, not just a job, but the best job, which is "cool" and you are "passionate" about (7). This coincides with Arendt's claim that no other activities besides labor matter; the rest are simply "hobbies." Arendt argues that the modern age has urged this re-consideration of societal values, the glorification of labor, and what this requires of individuals. It has ensured a persistent

production and consumption cycle, and all other activities that are degraded. Authors Maslach and Leiter (2019) also argue that the factor of "values", which means the emotional power of the job, can cause someone to make a trade-off between what they want to do and what they have to do, which can contribute to burnout (105). This 'glorification' of their job, alongside the paradoxical binding to the consumption cycle, imposes critical choices on individuals that can contribute to burnout. This societal shift, which Arendt claims occurs, is supported by psychological research. Because this psychological research also considers the generational shift this societal shift has caused, it provides Arendt her theory with a detailed forward-looking perspective that underscores the later effects of this societal shift. Arendt's theory can be applied to different time periods, enhancing her theories to fit contemporary settings.

As seen, the psychological literature on burnout supports and extends Hannah Arendt's (2018) theories of labor in the modern age. The empirical evidence supports her philosophical theories, and the specific factors that the psychology literature mentions concretize and realize her theory. The psychology literature also allows her theory to be applied over time periods. While this enhances our understanding, exploring how Arendt's philosophical insights can reciprocally influence and enhance our understanding of the psychological literature is essential. This will allow us to transcend from the individualistic view the psychological literature offers into a societal and structural view. It will force the current literature on the causes of burnout to look beyond the individual, including broader societal dynamics, and urge us to restructure from the broadest perspective. In the ensuing part of the discussion, the ways psychological literature can and should consider Arendt's philosophical insights will be discussed. First, Arendt's insights into the characteristics of labor and how these reoccur in the modern age will be discussed. Then, the societal shift in the form of glorification of labor that Arendt mentioned and how this presents itself today will be explored. Lastly, Arendt's claim on the loss of individuality will also be discussed in its modern-day context.

Firstly, Arendt's (2018) definition of labor adds philosophical depth to the psychological research on what causes burnout. Arendt claims labor is the endless, continuous cycle required to sustain life. However in our modern age, as Arendt argues, this labor turns into

the endless continuous cycle of consumption and production, emphasizing the meaninglessness of labor and reducing it to mere toil. Authors Edú-Valsania, Laguía, and Moriano (2022) argue in their research that there are certain individual and organizational factors, such as poor working hours and work overload, that trap individuals in the constant cycle of work<sup>4</sup>. These individual factors either protect or enhance the effects of the organizational factors, ultimately leading to burnout. This cycle upheld by these factors that lead to burnout is thus not merely tiring but depleting them of happiness by leaving no room for growth or fulfillment. This is supported by the psychological literature that defines burnout as physical and emotional exhaustion. Authors Mashlach and Leiter (2019) also identify six key domains in the modern age that contribute to burnout. All domains comply with labor's endless, meaningless, and continuous nature, as Arendt (2018) describes it. What is interesting about this is that Arendt's definition of labor thus adds philosophical depth to these authors' arguments. These authors explain the nature of the situation in terms of factors that, according to them, cause individuals to suffer from burnout. However, Arendt shows us that 'this nature' and these 'factors' all fit the concept of labor. Arendt offers the psychological literature an over-arching concept to show why all these factors in this situation eventually lead to burnout. The subsumption of our society under these conditions of labor causes people to suffer from burnout eventually, and it is Arendt who forces us to look at it from this philosophical perspective.

Building on Arendt's (2018) definition of labor, she argues that the societal shift in our modern age towards glorifying labor causes the prevalence of burnout. This glorification of labor is echoed in psychological research that explores how the culture of efficiency and productivity contributes to burnout. Studies show that nowadays, the norm of efficiency, success, and performance increases the stress individuals experience. It becomes all that matters. Academic Martijn Jansen also emphasized this cultural switch;

The inhumanity in a system where it is only about efficiency is also one of the reasons why people ultimately end up with burnout, because you as a person no longer matter, what matters is your output. If your output is high, you are also good as a person. A very utilitarian view of how we as people should live....Hence, we come from a

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<sup>4</sup> "work" here is not to be confused with Arendt's definition of work in *The Human Condition*, instead it refers to work as the verb of performing in modern-day jobs.

system in which you are only doing good if you're busy; if you rest, you are automatically 'bad'. (personal communication, May 5, 2024).

This observation shows how modern values align with Arendt's prediction of the values of her laboring society. The shift towards production and consumption, becomes one's existential purpose, since everything but labor becomes 'hobbies' and 'play.' Arendt's analysis shows that the demand for constant productivity is not just a modern occupational requirement but lies deep within the expectations and values of our society. Arendt's theory allows individual experiences to be placed into a broader context of how our society has evolved into one dominated by labor, with its production, consumption, and productivity, all at the expense of individual and societal wellbeing.

Lastly, what Arendt (2018) calls the last stage of the laboring society, where individuals are submerged into the continuous cycle of labor and lose their individuality, resonates significantly with the psychological findings regarding the impact of the lack of autonomy and control on burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2016) point out that lack of autonomy and control can cause burnout. The survey from the TNO (2023) and CBS also points out that insecurities under younger employees stem from uncertainties about careers, lack of opportunities, and unclear expectations. Arendt's insight into this being the last stage of our modern age laboring society refines the psychological understanding. It suggests that the experiences of these individuals are not merely the result of unorganized workplaces, unmotivated employees, or discriminating employers but rather a result of larger social structures that value labor and productivity over one's individuality. Her philosophical analysis offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how the effects of deeper societal values seep into the micro-level of individuals. It, in turn, validates psychological insights on how people's burnout experiences are shaped by this new situation where they lack autonomy. Martijn Jansen builds further on this revelation when he gives the following reflection that complements Arendt;

Yes, the losing of our individuality is because our choice, what we do in or with our lives, has less to do with what we want, but with what society expects of us. We now live in a world where we can no longer be ourselves, but where it is all about our productivity, our labor, and thus we lose our personality. (personal communication, May 5, 2024).

This statement echoes Arendt's concerns and shows the consequences for our society.

A new light is shed on the study of burnout when one considers the profound philosophical insights Hannah Arendt's (2018) work *The Human Condition* can offer. Her theory of labor's predominance over all other human activities reveals how our labor society has reshaped the modern age. Arendt's claim that "the human condition of labor is life itself" underlines our societal change where life has become synonymous with labor (7). Instead of engaging in meaningful action, labor becomes mere "toil," life becomes as sterile as it can be, and society is succumbed to universal unhappiness.

The discussion showed how research overlapped with philosophical revelations, making it possible to observe and validate Arendt's theory in the real world. The empirical research adds a scientific and quantitative reality to Arendt's theory. By expanding on the nature of labor in the modern age, the psychological literature can teach us more about Arendt.

Through researched factors and mechanisms that exemplified the consequences of a laboring society. These presented factors and mechanisms teach us how this Arendtian laboring society manifests itself in the modern era. Lastly, it also teaches us how Arendt's theory can expand over time periods, when psychological research showed us that it has generational effects, ultimately leading to the prevalence of burnout.

In her turn, Arendt (2018) also forces us to rethink the psychological research that represents the current causes of burnout. Firstly, Arendt shows the overarching cause of burnout to be the concept of labor and the societal demands it requires. The psychological research delves into the individual and organizational factors that eventually enhance and reinforce each other to ultimately cause burnout. However, Arendt's philosophical insight forces us to broaden the scope of this perspective to look at the overarching source of these factors. This follows through, in Arendtian language, how our society has shifted into a society of laborers. It forces us to rethink that again; it is not just the demands placed upon us by immediate superiors or direct environment. It encapsulates the whole structure and values of our society. Our shift towards glorifying labor comes with consequences that ultimately lead to burnout, and Arendt is the one who confronts us with this. Lastly, this confrontation follows through with the effects on modern-day individuality. The demands of productivity, endlessness, and meaninglessness affect our individuality so much that Arendt argues we have nothing left to

do but give it up and succumb to universal unhappiness. Arendt forces us to think about how broader cultural standards and societal structures prioritizing production over happiness create a world where burnout is plausible and likely.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, these intersections between psychology and philosophy and the new perspective it brings about are crucial in understanding what causes burnout and its increasing presence amongst younger generations. If we accept Hannah Arendt's claim that we have become a laboring society and lost our connection to meaning, we need to rethink the sustainability of our modern age. Does this society promote our wellbeing, or does it simply exist to grow at the cost of our mental health? What does the preservation of this society mean for our younger generations? Will they grow up in a world that glorifies labor so much that they have no choice but to let go and give up their happiness? Eventually, this forces us to ask ourselves: does the life cycle of labor become a guaranteed life cycle of burnout? While this thesis focuses primarily on Hannah Arendt's concept of labor, it aims to highlight its profound relevance to understanding what causes burnout, leaving some dimensions of her philosophy less explored. Future research could expand on Arendt's concept of *action* and *natality*, exploring how this might influence or relate to burnout. This thesis, however, aimed to answer the question, "*How can we explain burnout through existing psychological theories, and can Hannah Arendt offer an alternative framework?*" by exploring the connection between Arendt's theories and empirical psychological findings. This study enriches academic discourse by combining two often separated fields and highlighting their intersection. It calls for re-evaluating our labor-centric society and its effects not just now but for generations to come. This thesis aims to open a broader discussion on the need to restructure our society to better serve the mental wellbeing of all of us. Ensuring that the demand for productivity, consumption, and efficiency does not eclipse the significance of life and individual wellbeing. So Maaïke, at 17, and all the younger adults who follow, do not end up as the next burnout generation.

## Appendix A

Table 1. Burnout dimensions (Edú-Valsania, S., Laguía, A., & Moriano, J. A. (2022).

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Emotional exhaustion	This dimension manifests in the form of feelings and sensation of being exhausted by the psychological efforts made at work. It is also described in terms of weariness, tiredness, fatigue, weakening, and the subjects who manifest this type of feelings show difficulties in adapting to the work environment since they lack sufficient emotional energy to cope with work tasks.
Cynicism or depersonalization	This dimension, the interpersonal component of burnout, is defined as a response of detachment, indifference and unconcern towards the work being performed and/or the people who receive it. It translates into negative or inappropriate attitudes and behaviors, irritability, loss of idealism, and interpersonal avoidance usually towards service users, patients, and/or clients.
Reduced personal achievement	This dimension is reflected in a negative professional self-evaluation and doubts about the ability to perform the job effectively, as well as a greater tendency to evaluate results negatively. It also translates into a decrease in productivity and capabilities, low morale, as well as lower coping skills.

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<sup>[1]</sup> It is often debated how burnout should be written. Officially, burnout is written in the following way: 'burn-out,' but for a more comfortable reading experience, I will further use 'burnout,' written as one word.

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