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**Abusive leadership, job stress and SMES employees' turnover intentions in Nigeria:  
Mediating effect of emotional exhaustion**

Ojeleye Y. Calvin<sup>1</sup>, Mustapha Hauwa A.<sup>2</sup>, Salami Afolabi<sup>3</sup>, and Bashir S. Moriki<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*Department of Business of Administration, ABU Business School  
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – Nigeria.*

<sup>3</sup>*Clinton School of Public Service, University of Arkansas Little Rock, Arkansas, United States.*

<sup>4</sup>*Department of Business Administration, National Open University of Nigeria.*

Corresponding Email: [hauwam95@gmail.com](mailto:hauwam95@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**

*There is a high turnover intention among employees in Zamfara state. This paper examines the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between abusive leadership, job stress and employee turnover intentions among 480 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Zamfara State, Nigeria. Cross-sectional and survey methods were employed in the study. The tool used for data analysis is SmartPLS 3.3.9. The results indicate that abusive leadership and job stress are positively associated with employee turnover intentions, and that emotional exhaustion is a partial mediator of the relationship between abusive leadership, job stress, and employee turnover intentions. Specifically, it was found that the relationship between abusive leadership and employee turnover intentions is partially mediated by emotional exhaustion, and the relationship between job stress and employee turnover intentions is partially mediated by emotional exhaustion. The findings of this study suggest that reducing the abusive leadership and job stress of SME employees in Zamfara State may help reduce employee turnover intentions among them. Practically, this implies that managers should be made aware of the negative effects of abusive leadership and job stress on employee turnover intentions and be encouraged to create an environment in which their employees are motivated, respected, and emotionally supported. This study's findings provide relevant implications for research and practice*

**Keywords:** Abusive leadership, Employee turnover intentions, Emotional exhaustion, Job stress, Social exchange theory.

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**1. Introduction**

The term Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) encompasses a diverse set of definitions and metrics, which vary across countries, regions, and sources reporting SME statistics. Commonly employed criteria include the number of employees, total net assets, and levels of sales and investment (Chinomona & Pretorius, 2011). Due to the significant role that small and medium enterprises play in economic growth and development, there has been a growing interest among scholars and practitioners in this sector (Rasheed,

Convoy, Nadeem & Saddique, 2017). Small and Medium Scale Enterprises are widely regarded as the backbone of any nation, whether it is developed or developing (Qamruzzaman & Jianguo, 2019). SMEs are recognized as the foundation of the Nigerian economy and play a pivotal role as primary catalysts for economic growth (Ologunagba *et al.*, 2022).

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2017), Micro Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (MSMEs) make up approximately 49.78% of the National Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Nigeria,



contributing significantly to employment (Adebakin & Okon, 2019). The observed high employee turnover in Nigeria is often attributed to the perception that SMEs lack the capacity to adequately compensate or retain skilled personnel (Ugoani, 2016). Gonzales (2013) illustrates that a conducive business environment, including a positive organizational culture, fosters the growth of SMEs. The dynamics of organizational culture impact how individuals think, feel, and act, particularly in the context of production or business processes. It serves to motivate employees, shape their thoughts, influence decision-making and resource allocation processes, and facilitate effective communication (Mbah, Ekechukwu & Obi, 2018).

Turnover intention is the sentiment or idea of quitting, though not often the physical act of departing the company. It alludes to the preparation stage that comes before departing. As an employee leaves an organization, on the other hand, that is known as actual turnover (Chen *et al.*, 2011). The probability that an employee would quit their current position is known as turnover intention (Ngamkroeckjoti, Ounprechavanit & Kijboonchoo, 2012). Employee turnover intention has always been a major worry for any corporation, regardless of size, location, or type of business. Kumar (2011) asserts that turnover is a significant problem with human resources that impacts profitability, productivity, and the quality of goods and services provided in all economic sectors. Professionals and researchers alike are interested in the concept of turnover intention. Employee turnover is a major issue in the field of human resource management. As noted by Ugwu *et al.* (2018), senior management, human resources specialists, and industrial psychologists have given it a great deal of attention. This problem has become one of the most costly and difficult human resource roadblocks that organizations encounter.

To characterize the possibility of an employee leaving their position, the literature review has employed the phrases turnover intention, turnover intent, intention to leave, and intention to quit interchangeably (Pandey, Singh & Pathak, 2019). Turnover intention, in accordance with the findings of Kurniawaty, Ramly and Ramlawati (2019), is a reflection of an employee's attitude toward the organization. In order to comprehend turnover intention, managers and supervisors need to take into account a number of essential factors.

Organizational psychologists, organizations, and employers who rely on a highly qualified workforce are keen in reducing employee turnover through retention techniques (Ugwu *et al.*, 2018). Dinger, Thatcher, Stepina and Craig (2011) noted that in order to minimize expenses, retain valuable personnel, and lower turnover rates, it is critical to comprehend the factors surrounding employee turnover intent (Chinomona & Mofokeng, 2016). According to Jano, Satardien and Mahembe (2019), turnover intention refers to a sequence of voluntary plans and intentional attempts by employees to quit or walk away from an organization.

The current body of knowledge suggests that a variety of factors contribute to the intention of employees to leave organizations. Recent academic contributions have significantly advanced the understanding of the exchange relationship between employers and employees. Research conducted by various scholars (Zeffane & Melhem, 2018; Amoako, Kutu-Adu, Caesar & Neequaye, 2019) indicates that employee turnover intention is influenced by several factors, including perceived organizational support, job satisfaction, organizational trust, and organizational commitment. The responsibility for attracting and retaining employees in an organization lies solely with management to prevent the loss of valuable talents, which could have adverse



effects on the overall survival of the organization if not handled properly. It is crucial for management to guarantee that employees are content in their roles, demonstrate commitment, and harbor no intentions of leaving the organization (Lewandowska *et al.*, 2023).

Over the years, researchers have endeavored to address the question of what leads employees to contemplate leaving an organization. They have extensively documented various potential factors contributing to this, including workplace stress (Mxenge, Dywili & Bazana, 2014; Siddiqui & Jamil, 2015), job insecurity, loss of trust, future prospects, leadership, better opportunities elsewhere, unfair treatment, level of job satisfaction (Shah & Jumani, 2015), self-concept, organizational commitment, and salary level (Lee, Huang & Zhou, 2011) as reasons for employees considering leaving their current job. Among these factors, work stress and job satisfaction have been identified as key and the most significant predictors of the intention to quit (Mxenge *et al.*, 2014).

While the relationship between the actions of abusive leaders and the outcomes of their employees is widely attended, the current study explores the relationship with emotional exhaustion, which has received less empirical attention. Second, this study strives to investigate the specific internal mechanism that leads to employees developing turnover intention. Third, an intriguing occupational gap that the current research aims to address is how these variables interact among SMEs. Fourth, the current study aims to deepen our understanding of abusive leadership and its detrimental effects on employees by investigating the theoretical foundations of the social exchange paradigm (SET). Fifth, the goal of this study is to comprehend, identify, and address the problem of workplace abuse while also providing robust implications for owners and managers of SMEs in particular.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Abusive Leadership and Employee Turnover Intentions**

The prevalence of bad leadership is a common occurrence in many public sector organizations in Nigeria (Court, 2023). Toxic leadership is defined as a leadership style characterized by "organized, systematic, and persistently destructive behaviors" employed by leaders to yield negative consequences for both employees and the organization (Labrague *et al.*, 2020). To Milosevic, Maric and Lončar (2020), toxic leadership style often leads subordinates to leave a team or department as a means of coping with the toxicity of leaders and superiors, sometimes voluntarily departing from an organization even in the absence of alternative job opportunities.

Studies have empirically indicated that any aggression from immediate supervisors and managers drains employee energies and depletes their psychological resourcefulness, thus resulting in work withdrawal (Chi & Liang, 2013). Accordingly, the abusive leader also affects employees' engagement, which ultimately affects their proactive behavior at work (Wang, Hsieh, Wang, 2020). Abusive supervision is also viewed as toxic for organizational culture (Tiwari and Jha, 2021), thus having the potential to disturb the entire workflow in a business setup. All this makes it evident how deleterious abusive supervision could be for an organization and its employees. Equally, abusive behavior from leaders or supervisors is empirically established to have a strong association with employees' emotional exhaustion (Li, Ahmed, Syed, Khalid & Munoz, 2022). For example, the study by Lim, Koay and Chong, (2020) reported a significant influence of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion among public sector employees in Malaysia. Similarly, another recent study found abusive supervision as a major workplace stressor causing emotional



exhaustion among employees in China (Akram, Li & Akram, 2019).

In a study by Moin, Wei, Khan, Ali and Chang (2022), the focus is on examining the connection between abusive supervision and subordinates' intentions to leave, with job dissatisfaction as a mediating factor. Additionally, the study investigates the moderating effect of continuance commitment in this process. The analysis demonstrated that abusive supervision directly predicts subordinates' intentions to leave and indirectly influences these intentions through job dissatisfaction. The study also found that continuance commitment moderates this relationship.

Ahmad and Begum (2023) investigate a novel model elucidating how abusive supervision contributes to employees' intention to leave in a high-power distance society such as Pakistan. Drawing from the unfolding model of voluntary turnover as the overarching theory, the researchers posit that emotional exhaustion will amplify the connection between abusive supervision and the intention to leave, while organizational-based self-esteem (OBSE) will alleviate this relationship. The findings indicate that abusive supervision has both a direct and an indirect impact on the intention to leave, with emotional exhaustion reinforcing this relationship.

In a study by Court (2023), the focus is on the association between toxic leadership and turnover intentions among police officers in the Nigerian Police Force. Using a survey design, the study selected a sample of 280 police officers through a stratified random sampling procedure, collecting data through a structured questionnaire. The results revealed a positive but statistically insignificant relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention.

Hattab *et al.* (2022) explored the impact of toxic leadership on employees' engagement in counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) by incorporating the psychological contract theory and considering the mediating role of turnover intention.

Participants were recruited through various methods, including online recruitment and alumni networks. The findings revealed that under the influence of a toxic leader, employees may develop intentions to leave the organizations and engage in CWB, driven by their perception of a breach in the psychological contract.

Consequently, the study hypothesised that **H01:** Abusive Leadership does not have significant influence on SMEs employee turnover Intentions.

### **Job Stress and Employee Turnover Intentions**

Oyewole, Adegoke and Atoyebi (2020), job stress is a psychological and physical state that emerges when an individual's resources are insufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation. They further classify stress into two types: (a) Eustress, which is positive, pleasant, or therapeutic stress, and (b) Distress, which is dysfunctional or negative stress associated with symptoms such as unstable emotions, feelings of restlessness, solitude preference, sleep disturbances, excessive smoking, inability to relax, anxiety, tension, nervousness, elevated blood pressure, and indigestion (Ojeleye *et al.*, 2022).

However, in the organizational context, job stress is also known as work stress or occupational stress. These terms are often used interchangeably in the workplace and convey a similar meaning (Shukla & Srivastava, 2016). Stress, in general terms, can be defined as the pressure individuals feel in their lives. Stress resulting from excessive workload can be characterized by an unwillingness to come to work and a persistent sense of pressure, accompanied by general mental and behavioral stress symptoms (Mohajan, 2012). This phenomenon is on the rise due to globalization, impacting all professions, relationships, and the general public across countries worldwide (Raza, Azeem, Humayon & Ansari, 2017). Currently, workplace stress poses a concern for both employees and organizations, with its



frequency steadily increasing in recent years. Job stress arises when the demands of a job do not align with the skills and knowledge that employees possess and can effectively manage (Raza *et al.*, 2017). High stress levels can hinder workers' performance and lead to adverse behavioral and attitudinal outcomes in the workplace. Recent research indicates that persistent work pressure can generate a sense of energy depletion that negatively impacts well-being. This occurs when the demands of work consistently surpass the job-relevant personal resources available (Urien Angulo & Osca, 2012).

Personal interaction emerges as a crucial predictor of turnover intention. According to Nyamubarwa (2013), a strained relationship with both management and colleagues stands out as a significant factor prompting employees to consider leaving their positions. The notion that 'people leave managers, not organizations' appears to hold true, with growing evidence suggesting that employees are willing to depart from their current organization when their relationships with supervisors are strained or when managers lack appropriate interpersonal skills during interactions (Denton, 2013). In alignment with this, Uitzinger, Chrysler-Fox and Thomas (2018) emphasized in their respective studies that supervision and leadership style play a critical role in staff retention, as leaders and their leadership styles are closely linked to turnover intentions.

Dodanwala, Santoso and Yukongdi (2023) investigated the associations between work role stressors, job satisfaction, job stress, and turnover intention within Sri Lanka's construction industry. The study also delved into the less-explored area in the literature, examining the mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between work role stressors and job stress. The findings revealed that job satisfaction and job stress were identified as direct factors influencing turnover intention. In the same vein, Nurimasjah *et al.* (2023) aimed to

investigate the effects of workplace stress and the intention to leave on employee turnover. The study's findings reveal a significant influence of both the work environment and work stress on employee turnover intentions, either concurrently or individually. The f-test results indicate a substantial impact of the workplace environment and work stress on the likelihood of employees leaving their jobs. Chigbundu and Muda (2022) conducted an investigation into the factors influencing turnover intentions within the Nigerian banking sector. The findings of the study confirmed a significant relationship between job satisfaction, job stress, organizational identification, organizational commitment, organizational justice, leader-member exchange, and turnover intentions within the Nigerian banking sector. Thus, mitigating these factors is likely to reduce employees' inclination to seek alternative employment. Hence, this study hypothesised that:

**H<sub>02</sub>:** Job stress does not have significant influence on SMEs employee turnover Intentions.

#### **Emotional Exhaustion as a Mediator**

When someone is subjected to excessive demand and time constraints, they experience emotional exhaustion (Labrague & De Los Santos, 2021). In a similar vein, emotionally spent individuals will want to remove themselves from the draining workplace, creating a high turnover intention and increase the intention to withdraw from the business (Shah, Haider, Mumtaz & Rafiq, 2022). Emotional exhaustion is part of the dimension of burnout, which refers to feelings of fatigue regarding one's emotional and physical resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Emotional exhaustion is not only experienced but also encourages one's actions to distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

As a core component of burnout, emotional exhaustion may play an indirect role in the



association between abusive leadership, job stress and turnover intention. Maslach and Jackson (1981) asserts that job stress leads to employee burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, emotional exhaustion affects the physical and mental wellbeing of employees which increases their intent to leave a field (Reb, Narayanan, Chaturvedi & Ekkirala, 2017). Similarly, a study by Azharudeen and Arulrajah (2018) demonstrated that emotional exhaustion and job stress have an impact on turnover intentions. Furthermore, the relationship between job stress, emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions has not been thoroughly studied (Labrague et al, 2021). An elevated degree of stress has an adverse effect on an employee's behavior and performance. Numerous studies have suggested that a company should lessen work pressures if it wants to retain its workers (Khan, Nazir, Kazmi, Khalid, Kiyani & Shahzad, 2014). Previous empirical research has shown that emotional exhaustion significantly supports numerous important outcomes variables, such as turnover intentions, as a predictor (Catton, 2020). A thorough analysis of the literature led to the conclusion that a variety of factors, including role ambiguity, overstretch circumstances, a lack of autonomy and support and more, might cause emotional exhaustion (Gkorezis, Petridou & Krouklidou, 2015). Several studies have shown that emotional exhaustion significantly and positively affects turnover intention. In other words, emotional exhaustion is a predictor of turnover intention (Cho, Choi, & Lee, 2014; Kraemer & Gouthier, 2014; Ogunbamila, Balogun, Ogunbamila, & Oladele, 2014).

**Ho3:** Emotional exhaustion does not mediate the relationship between abusive leadership and SMEs employee turnover Intentions.

**Ho4:** Emotional exhaustion does not mediate the relationship between job stress and SMEs employee turnover Intentions

The hypothesis was stated in the null form since the mediating effect hasn't been tested before, it will be logical to assume that null hypothesis should be tested.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

The social exchange theory is a social psychological concept that posits interpersonal interactions as a form of social exchange involving the calculation of costs and rewards (Sun & Xia, 2018). Rooted in the idea that individuals seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs in relationships, this theory suggests that people engage in social interactions based on a rational assessment of the potential outcomes (Ojeleye, Kareem, Chimezie, & Abdullahi, 2022). The concept highlights the importance of reciprocity, where individuals anticipate mutual benefits or positive outcomes in their interactions (Homans, 1958). This framework is instrumental in understanding various aspects of human relationships, such as cooperation, trust, and the dynamics of give-and-take within social exchanges (Holthausen, 2013). The social exchange theory provides a lens through which we can understand the dynamics of abusive leadership, job stress, and their impact on employee turnover intentions. In this context, employees perceive their work environment as a social exchange, expecting fair treatment and positive outcomes in return for their contributions. Abusive leadership, characterized by hostile behaviour and mistreatment, disrupts this balance by imposing high costs on employees, eroding trust, and diminishing perceived rewards. Simultaneously, job stress amplifies these negative effects, further straining the social exchange. Emotional exhaustion emerges as a key mediator in this process, representing the emotional toll of abusive leadership and job stress. As emotional exhaustion rises, employees may experience burnout, diminishing their motivation to invest in the social exchange, ultimately contributing to heightened



turnover intentions. This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of interpersonal dynamics, emotional well-being, and organizational outcomes within the framework of social exchange theory.

### **3. Methodology**

The study is a quantitative research employing both survey and cross-sectional research designs. Sekaran and Bougie (2016), a cross-sectional study involves collecting data at a single point in time. In order to support contemporary statistical analysis, investigate the relationship between constructs, and enable appropriate and logical generalisations, the study also used a survey research design, which entails steps for gathering enormous amounts of data via questionnaires or interviews. The target population comprised all employees of SMEs in Zamfara state. There are 577 small and 16 medium enterprises in Zamfara state with 50,757 employees (SMEDAN 2013). The study used the simple random sampling method, which involved giving out 400 questionnaires to SMEs employees in Zamfara State derived using Taro Yamane formula. In order to compensate for non-response error or inadequate filling of the questionnaire Israel (2013) recommended increasing the sample size by 10% to 30%. The study increased the sample size by 20% ( $1.20 \times 400 = 480$ ) 480 pieces of questionnaire. Meanwhile, out of the 480 pieces of questionnaire distributed only 407 (85%) pieces were returned adequately filled and used for the analysis.

#### **Measurements**

Validated instruments from earlier investigations were adopted for this study. Turnover intention was assessed using a turnover intention scale (TIS) instrument created by Roodt (2004). This instrument comprises six items, which were validated by Bothma and Roodt (2013), achieving a Cronbach alpha of 0.80. Example items in this instrument include statements such as "I often considered leaving my job" and "I

often dream about getting another job that will better suit my personal needs," with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For this study the composite reliability is 0.853. Abusive leadership was gauged using a 6-item scale developed by Hanges and Dickson (2004), demonstrating a composite reliability of 0.85. Sample items from this scale include statements like "The supervisor is revengeful, which pursues revenge when mistreated" and "The supervisor acts like a dictator and authoritative," with response choices ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For this study the composite reliability is 0.847. To measure job stress, a 9-item general work stress scale by De Bruin and Taylor (2005) was employed. An example item from this scale is: "Do you spend a lot of time worrying about your work?" The responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and the scale exhibited a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89. For this study the composite reliability is 0.856. Emotional exhaustion was measured using a nine-item scale from Maslach and Jackson (1981) with Cronbach's alpha of 0.9. This instrument of emotional exhaustion has been extensively used in the literature to measure emotional exhaustion. A sample item include: "I experience inadequate selective emotional reactions". The responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For this study the composite reliability is 0.865.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

The study utilised structural equation model (SEM) to analysis the validity, reliability and test the hypothesised relationship between the constructs. While the measurement model of SEM was employed to the item loadings, reliability and validity (convergent and divergent validity), structural model was utilised to ascertain the influence of the predictor and mediating variables on the criterion variable.

**Assessment of Measurement Model**

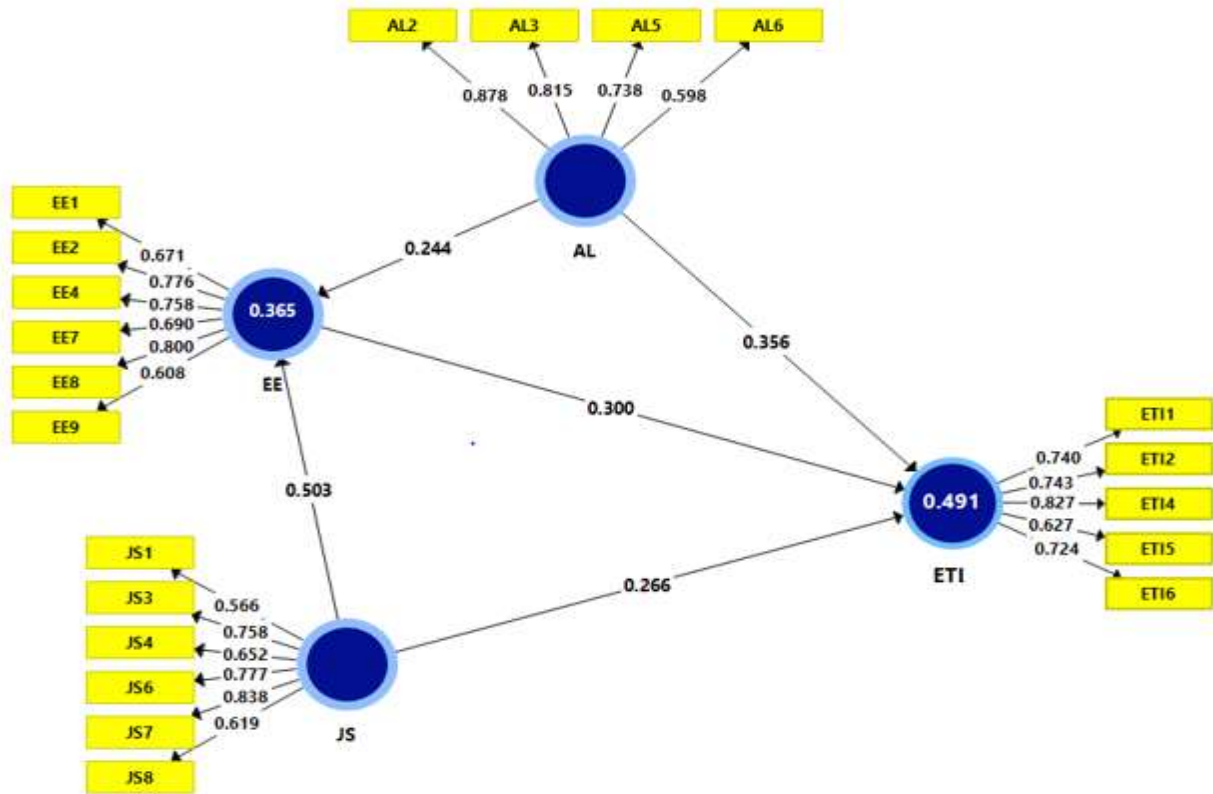


Figure 1: Measurement Model

First, the study evaluated the item loadings. Hair, Risher, Sarstedt and Ringle (2018) recommended that only items which loaded 0.70 and above should be retained and used for further analysis. However, owing to the practicality of having loadings below 0.7, Hulland (1999) advocated for retention of loading of 0.5 and above while considering the effect of the threshold on the convergent validity and reliability. As a consequence, loadings of 0.5 were retained while those below e.g., AL1, AL4, EE3, EE5, EE6, ETI3, JS2, JS5 and JS9 were deleted (See: Table 1 and Figure 1). In addition, the study checked for convergent validity using

Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Hair et al., (2021) recommended AVE value of 0.5 and above to clearly show that the construct has convergent validity. Table 1 below showed that the constructs have convergent validity since the values of AVE are all above 0.5 benchmark. Meanwhile, Hair, Page and Brunsveld (2020) recommended value of 0.7 and above to consider the construct to be consistent and reliable. Table 1 below clearly depicts that the composite reliability values are greater than 0.7 threshold. Hence, the constructs are reliable.

**Table 1: Item Loadings, Reliability and Convergent Validity**

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Composite Reliability	AVE
Abusive Leadership	AL2	0.878	0.847	0.584
	AL3	0.815		
	AL5	0.738		
	AL6	0.598		
Emotional Exhaustion	EE1	0.671	0.865	0.519
	EE2	0.776		





	EE4	0.758		
	EE7	0.690		
	EE8	0.800		
	EE9	0.608		
Employee Turnover Intentions	ETI1	0.740	0.853	0.540
	ETI2	0.743		
	ETI4	0.827		
	ETI5	0.627		
	ETI6	0.724		
Job Stress	JS1	0.566	0.856	0.502
	JS3	0.758		
	JS4	0.652		
	JS6	0.777		
	JS7	0.838		
	JS8	0.619		

Source: Authors' systemization of SmartPLS output (2023)

Furthermore, the study checked for divergent validity as recommended by (Hair et al., 2018; Kline, 2011). The study checked for divergent validity using heterotraits-monotraits correlation ratio as recommended by Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015) owing to the inability of the previous used methods of Fornell and Larcker Criterion and Cross-loading to detect lack of discriminant validity among constructs. Meanwhile, two benchmarks were advocated for by scholars (e.g., Kline, 2011 & Henseler et al., 2021). Kline advocated for a strictly threshold of < 0.85

for construct that are conceptually different while Henseler et al. (2015) recommended a more relax threshold of < 0.90 for construct that are conceptually similar. As such, since the constructs of study i.e., abusive leadership, employee turnover intentions, emotional exhaustion and job stress are conceptually different, threshold of < 0.85 was utilised. Therefore, since the correlations between constructs are less than 0.85, divergent validity is hereby confirmed.

Table 2: Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio of Correlations Discriminant Validity

Constructs	AL	EE	ETI	JS
AL				
EE	0.435			
ETI	0.627	0.701		
JS	0.325	0.647	0.604	

Source: Authors' systemization of SmartPLS output (2023)

**Assessment of Structural Model**

The section delves into the evaluation of the direct and mediation relationship between the exogenous and endogenous variables. In addition, coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), the effect size ( $f^2$ ) and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) were assessed.

Table 3: *Test of Direct Hypotheses*

Hypotheses	Relationship	Beta	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values	Decision
H01	AL -> ETI	0.356	0.031	11.592	0.000	Rejected
H02	JS -> ETI	0.266	0.035	7.683	0.000	Rejected

$R^2=0.491$

Source: Authors' systemization of SmartPLS output (2023)

Hypothesis one depicts the effect of abusive leadership (AL) on employee turnover intentions (ETI). The study found that AL has positive and significant influence on ETI at 1% significant level. Hence a 1% increase in incidence of abusive leadership will result in 0.36% increase in employee turnover intentions among SMEs in Zamfara State, Nigeria. As a consequence, the study rejects the first hypothesis. Similarly, the second hypothesis was rejected owing to the positive significant effect of job stress (JS) on employee turnover intentions (ETI). ETI will increase by 0.27% for every 1% increase in JS. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) which depicts the variance in the endogenous variable that is explained by the exogenous and mediating variables is 0.491 or 49%. While the remaining 51% is attributed to

variables not included in the study. Furthermore, Chin (1998) rated coefficient of determination value of 49% moderate.

**Test of Mediating Effect**

Zhao, Lynch and Chen (2010) noted that to explore mediating effect, direct effect, indirect effect and total effect have to be determined. The total effect is the influence of the independent variable on the criterion variable when the mediating variable is exempted (Hair et al., 2021). The direct effect is the influence of the independent variable on the criterion variable when the mediating variable is included. While the indirect effect is the effect of the independent variable on the criterion variable through the intervening variable (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2022).

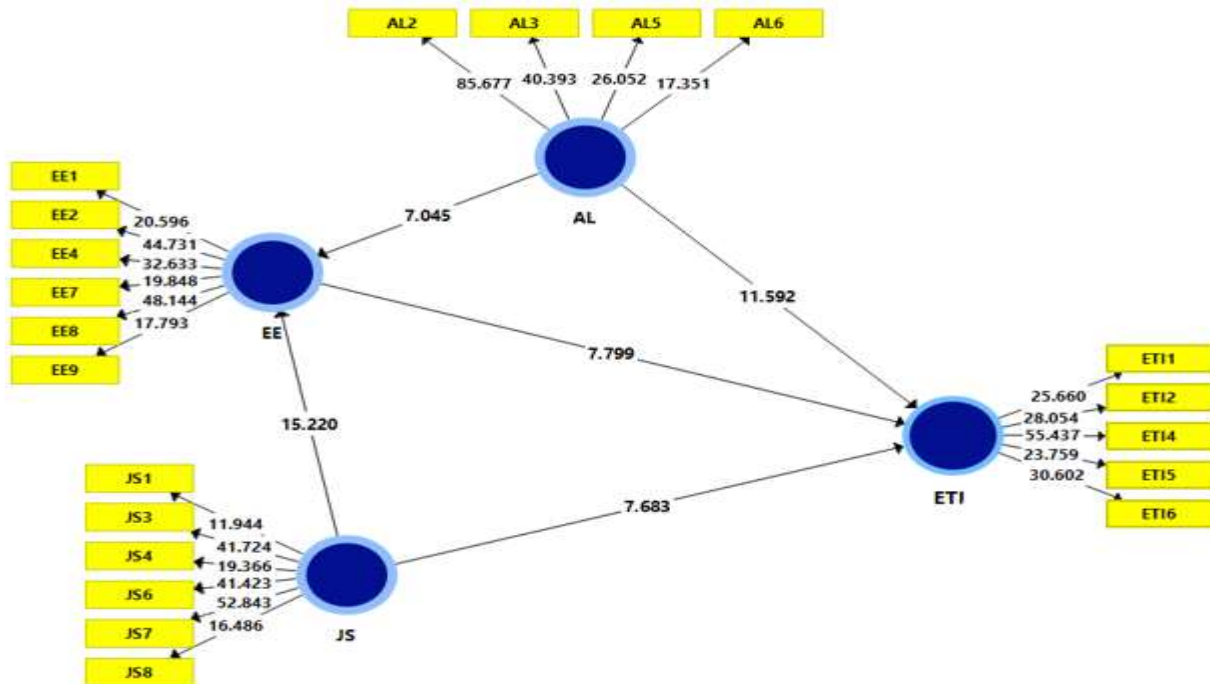


Figure 2: *Structural Model*



Table 4: Mediation Analysis

Relationship	Total Effect		Direct Effect		Indirect Effect		Decision
	Beta	P-Value	Beta	P-Value	Beta	P-Value	
<b>H03:</b> AL->EE->ETI	0.430	13.667(0.000)	0.356	11.592(0.000)	0.073	4.866(0.000)	Rejected
<b>H04:</b> JS->EE->ETI	0.417	14.160(0.000)	0.266	7.683(0.000)	0.153	7.032(0.000)	Rejected

Source: Authors' systemization of SmartPLS output (2023)

The indirect effect output in Table 4 showed that emotional exhaustion significantly mediated the relationship abusive leadership and SMEs employee turnover intentions ( $\beta=0.073$ ,  $p=4.866$ ,  $t=0.000$ ). Thus, hypothesis three is hereby rejected. In the same vein, in hypothesis four emotional exhaustion significantly mediated the relationship job stress and SMEs employee turnover intentions ( $\beta=0.153$ ,  $p=7.032$ ,  $t=0.000$ ). Hence, hypothesis four is rejected.

Meanwhile, Zhao et al. (2010) provided systemic analysis to ascertain what type of mediation (i.e., full, partial or no mediation) exist by evaluating the direct effect, indirect and total effect figures in a given analysis. Zhao et al. (2010) posited that full mediation exist when the direct effect is not significant while the indirect effect is significant. However, when both the direct effect and the indirect effect are significant, then partial mediation exist. Therefore, analysing Table 4 above, the study concludes that emotional exhaustion partially mediated the relationship between abusive leadership and employee turnover intention. Likewise, emotional exhaustion partially mediated the relationship between job stress and employee turnover intention. In addition, Zhao et al. (2010) noted that is also important to determine 2.5% and 97.5% confidence level to ascertain mediation irrespective of the statistical significance of indirect effect. Both upper and lower confidence intervals should not have zero between. However, when there is zero (0) between them i.e., positive lower interval and negative upper interval, then no mediation exist. Furthermore, when other

intervals are negative then competitive mediation exist. Whereas when both intervals are positive, then there is complimentary mediation. Therefore, Table 5 below revealed that emotional exhaustion complimentarily mediated the relationship between abusive leadership and employee turnover intention. Likewise, emotional exhaustion complimentarily mediated the relationship between job stress and employee turnover intention.

Source: Authors' systemization of SmartPLS output (2023)

**Effect Size ( $f^2$ )**

The effect size explores the individual contribution of each of the exogeneous variable to the endogenous variable. Cohen (1988) provided a threshold 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 to evaluate each effect size as small, medium and large respectively. Table 6 below revealed that when EE is the target variable, AL has small effect size while JS has large effect size. This can be interpreted that job stress contribute significantly to emotional exhaustion than abusive leadership. However, when ETI is the target variable, AL and EE have small effect size respectively while JS has small effect size. Interpreted as abusive leadership and emotional exhaustion contributed moderately to the variance in employee turnover intentions than job stress with minimal contribution.



Table 6. Effect Size ( $f^2$ )

Constructs	EE( $f^2$ )	Effect Size	ETI( $f^2$ )	Effect Size
AL	0.089	Small	0.219	Medium
EE			0.113	Medium
JS	0.381	Large	0.096	Small

Source: Authors' systemization of SmartPLS output (2023)

**Predictive Relevance ( $Q^2$ )**

The study additionally, explored the predictive relevance of the exogenous variables. Predictive relevance assesses the practical real-world significance of the exogenous variables (Ojeleye, Ojeleye, Karem, & Abdullahi, 2023). Hair et al (2021) stated that the  $Q^2$  value ranges between 0 and 1. Whenever the value is 0,

then the model lacks practical relevance. However, when the value is above 0, it signifies that the model has real-world utility. Therefore, this study predictive relevance value of 0.174 and 0.249 when the target variable is emotional exhaustion and employee turnover intentions respectively are greater than 0. As such, the models have practical relevance.

Table 7: Assessment Predictive Relevance

Constructs	SSO	SSE	$Q^2 (=1-SSE/SSO)$
EE	3,084.000	2,547.415	0.174
ETI	2,570.000	1,931.042	0.249

Source: Authors' systemization of SmartPLS output (2023)

**Discussion**

Abusive leadership within SMEs in Zamfara State can exert a detrimental impact on employee turnover intentions. The finding is consistent with previous studies of e.g., Saleem et al., 2021; Ahmad and Begum, 2023; Court, 2023. Employees subjected to such negative leadership experiences may develop heightened levels of job dissatisfaction, stress, and a diminished sense of well-being (Ojeleye & Bakare, 2020). The toxic work environment created by abusive leaders often erodes trust and undermines employee morale, leading to increased turnover intentions as individuals, seek healthier and more supportive work environments (Saleem et al., 2021). Consequently, SMEs grappling with abusive leadership may face challenges in retaining skilled and motivated employees, hindering their long-term success and stability (Court, 2023). Addressing and mitigating abusive

leadership behaviours is crucial for fostering a positive workplace culture that enhances employee engagement and reduces turnover intentions in the context of Zamfara State's SME landscape (Ojeleye et al., 2022; Ahmad & Begum, 2023). Job stress within SMEs in Zamfara State can inadvertently contribute to heightened employee turnover intentions. The finding is in tandem with previous studies of e.g. Liu, Zhu, Wu, & Mao, 2019; Novitasari, 2020; Yo & Supartha, 2019) The persistent exposure to stressful work conditions, such as excessive workload, lack of resources, and limited control over tasks, can lead to burnout and decreased job satisfaction (Ojeleye, Umar, Mejabi, & Mukaila, 2022; Tsalasah, Noermijati, & Ratnawati, 2019). Employees grappling with chronic stress may perceive the work environment as challenging and unsupportive, fostering a desire to seek alternative employment opportunities for relief (Murali, Basit, & Hassan, 2017). Consequently, SMEs in



Zamfara State may experience increased turnover intentions among their workforce. Mitigating job stress through supportive management practices, adequate resources, and employee well-being initiatives becomes essential for SMEs aiming to cultivate a positive workplace environment and enhance employee retention (Oyewole, Adegoke, & Atoyebi, 2020).

In the context of SMEs in Zamfara State, emotional exhaustion serves as a critical mediator in the relationship between abusive leadership and employee turnover intentions. Abusive leadership practices can contribute to heightened emotional exhaustion among employees, characterized by feelings of depletion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. As employees experience this emotional drain, it becomes a significant precursor to turnover intentions (Ahmed, 2015). The negative impact of abusive leadership on emotional exhaustion creates a cascading effect, influencing employees to consider leaving the organization as a means of escaping the detrimental work environment. Recognizing and addressing the mediating role of emotional exhaustion is crucial for both understanding the dynamics of abusive leadership and implementing interventions that can break the link between such leadership behaviours and increased turnover intentions within SMEs in Zamfara State.

Within SMEs in Zamfara State, emotional exhaustion acts as a crucial mediating factor in the complex interplay between job stress and employee turnover intentions. Job stress, arising from factors such as excessive workload, lack of resources, and limited control, contributes to emotional exhaustion among employees (Yo & Supartha, 2019). This emotional depletion, marked by feelings of fatigue and detachment, significantly heightens the likelihood of employees developing turnover intentions. As job stress takes a toll on emotional well-being, the subsequent

emotional exhaustion becomes a key pathway through which the negative impact of stress translates into an increased desire to leave the organization. Understanding and addressing the mediating role of emotional exhaustion is pivotal for SMEs seeking effective strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of job stress on employee turnover intentions and foster a resilient and engaged workforce in Zamfara State.

### **Implications**

The mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the connection between abusive leadership and employee turnover intentions within SMEs in Zamfara State holds significant practical implications for organizational management. Recognizing this mediation underscores the importance of addressing emotional exhaustion as a critical point of intervention. SMEs should prioritize cultivating a positive and supportive leadership culture, emphasizing respectful and fair treatment of employees. Implementing stress management programs and fostering open communication channels can help alleviate emotional exhaustion resulting from abusive leadership practices. By proactively addressing emotional exhaustion, SMEs can mitigate its impact on turnover intentions, thereby enhancing employee well-being, retention, and overall organizational resilience in Zamfara State's business landscape.

The practical implications of the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between job stress and employee turnover intentions are substantial for SMEs in Zamfara State. Recognizing emotional exhaustion as a key intermediary emphasizes the urgency for proactive stress management initiatives. SMEs should implement strategies that alleviate job stressors, such as workload management, providing adequate resources, and promoting a supportive work environment. Additionally, fostering employee well-being programs and encouraging a healthy work-life balance



can buffer against emotional exhaustion. By addressing emotional exhaustion, SMEs can effectively disrupt the detrimental pathway from job stress to turnover intentions, ultimately enhancing the resilience and retention of their workforce in Zamfara State's business landscape.

The mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the link between abusive leadership and employee turnover intentions within SMEs in Zamfara State aligns with Social Exchange Theory. According to this theoretical framework, workplace relationships are viewed as reciprocal exchanges where individuals invest effort and resources with the expectation of receiving positive returns. Abusive leadership disrupts this exchange by creating a negative and emotionally draining work environment. Emotional exhaustion, in this context, serves as a manifestation of the imbalance in the social exchange, leading to a diminished perceived value of the employment relationship. As emotional resources are depleted, employees may perceive the cost of staying in the organization as outweighing the benefits, ultimately fueling turnover intentions. Recognizing the application of Social Exchange Theory sheds light on the underlying mechanisms at play, emphasizing the need for organizations to foster positive leadership behaviours to maintain a healthy social exchange and reduce turnover intentions among employees in Zamfara State's SMEs. The theoretical implications of the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the context of job stress, employee turnover intentions, and SMEs in Zamfara State can be understood through Social Exchange Theory. According to this theory, workplace relationships involve a reciprocal exchange of resources between employees and their organization. Job stress disrupts this exchange by creating an imbalance in the perceived costs and benefits of the employment relationship. As employees experience emotional

exhaustion due to sustained stress, the social exchange becomes strained, diminishing their perceived returns from the organization. In the context of Zamfara State's SMEs, acknowledging the application of Social Exchange Theory highlights the importance of managing job stress to maintain a positive and mutually beneficial exchange. Strategies that enhance the well-being of employees can help rebalance the social exchange, reducing emotional exhaustion, and subsequently mitigating turnover intentions within the organization.

### **5. Conclusion**

The in-depth exploration of dynamics within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Zamfara State offers a nuanced understanding of the intricate connections between leadership, job stress, emotional exhaustion, and employee turnover intentions. The study highlights the significant impact of abusive leadership on employee well-being, exposing the negative consequences of detrimental leadership behaviours. Instances of verbal abuse and exploitation contribute to a toxic workplace environment, exacerbating emotional exhaustion among employees. This emotional toll, characterized by feelings of depletion and cynicism, acts as a crucial mediator in the intricate relationship between abusive leadership and the inclination to leave the organization. Additionally, the scrutiny of job stress underscores its pivotal role in shaping turnover intentions. Stressors like excessive workload, limited resources, and lack of control elevate stress levels, affecting job satisfaction and notably contributing to emotional exhaustion. As employees grapple with persistent stress, their mental and emotional resources become depleted, creating fertile ground for the emergence of turnover intentions. The study's theoretical framework, particularly Social Exchange Theory, enhances comprehension by framing workplace relationships as



reciprocal exchanges of resources. Within this context, the imbalance resulting from abusive leadership and job stress disrupts the perceived social exchange, with emotional exhaustion serving as a visible consequence. The theoretical lens deepens our understanding of the underlying mechanisms influencing employee responses to adverse leadership and stressful work conditions. These findings carry profound implications for SMEs in Zamfara State, urging organizations to acknowledge the pivotal role of leadership behaviours and job stress in shaping employee experiences. Addressing abusive leadership through initiatives like leadership development programs and implementing stress management strategies becomes imperative to foster a positive workplace culture. Additionally, endeavour to improve communication channels and support employee well-being can contribute to alleviating the negative consequences revealed in this study. In essence, the study not only underscores the complexity of interactions within SMEs but also provides actionable insights for organizations to navigate and enhance these dynamics. Through a comprehensive understanding of these multifaceted relationships, organizations in Zamfara State can make informed decisions and implement targeted interventions to cultivate healthier, more supportive work environments that elevate employee retention and well-being. Ultimately, these efforts contribute not only to the resilience of individual SMEs but also to the overall economic vitality and sustainability of the business landscape in Zamfara State.

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