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Workload and Creative Performance: The Buffering Role of Intrinsic Motivation

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to examine the effect of workload on creative performance and to test whether intrinsic motivation buffers the potential negative impact of workload among employees in Colombia.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive correlational research design was employed with a sample of 397 full-time employees from diverse organizations across Colombia, selected using Morgan and Krejcie's sample size determination table. Data were collected using validated instruments: the Quantitative Workload Inventory, the Work Preference Inventory–Intrinsic Motivation subscale, and the Employee Creativity Scale. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM) were conducted to test the hypothesized relationships. Analyses were performed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Model fit was assessed through multiple indices, including χ^2, degrees of freedom, χ^2/df, GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, and RMSEA.

Findings: Results indicated that workload was significantly and negatively correlated with creative performance ($r = –.31$, $p < .001$) and with intrinsic motivation ($r = –.27$, $p = .001$), while intrinsic motivation was strongly and positively correlated with creative performance ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). SEM analysis confirmed good model fit (χ^2/df = 1.74; GFI = .94; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .043) and revealed that workload exerted a significant direct negative effect on creative performance ($\beta = –.29$, $p < .001$) and on intrinsic motivation ($\beta = –.27$, $p < .001$). Intrinsic motivation showed a robust positive effect on creative performance ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$) and buffered the negative workload–creativity relationship, partially mediating and weakening the total negative impact of workload (β total = –.15, $p = .041$).

Conclusion: Findings highlight that although heavy workload reduces employees' creativity, fostering intrinsic motivation can protect and sustain innovative performance under job demands. Organizations should design roles and climates that support autonomy, curiosity, and self-driven engagement to maintain creativity despite high workload conditions.

Keywords: *Workload; Intrinsic Motivation; Creative Performance; Job Demands–Resources Model; Structural Equation Modeling.*

1. Introduction

In today's highly dynamic and innovation-driven workplaces, organizations are increasingly challenged to maintain employee creativity while managing growing job demands. Creativity—the ability to generate novel and useful ideas—has become an essential factor for organizational survival and competitive advantage (Zaeni et al., 2024). Yet, contemporary employees often operate under heavy workloads and complex role expectations, which may hinder their capacity to think innovatively and to remain motivated intrinsically (Hastiti, 2025). Scholars have long recognized that work demands can deplete cognitive and emotional resources, but recent research emphasizes that intrinsic motivation—the internal drive to engage in work for inherent enjoyment and personal fulfillment—may act as a powerful psychological buffer that sustains creativity under strain (Aristana et al., 2023; Xue et al., 2022).

Workload reflects the perceived quantity and intensity of job tasks and deadlines (Widnyani & Dewi, 2022). While moderate challenge can energize employees, sustained excessive workload can result in stress, fatigue, and diminished problem-solving ability, undermining creative output (Muhammad & Anshori, 2025). Employees who experience continuous overload are prone to cognitive rigidity and may avoid risk-taking, which is essential for creativity (Sirine, 2024). However, evidence also shows that individuals with higher internal motivation can reinterpret challenging tasks as opportunities for growth rather than threats (Li et al., 2022). This shift from seeing workload as purely burdensome to perceiving it as meaningful work aligns with self-determination theory and cognitive evaluation models (Xue et al., 2022). Such motivational reframing enables employees to maintain curiosity and experimentation despite demanding conditions (Yuliawati, 2025).

Intrinsic motivation is broadly defined as engaging in tasks for inherent interest and satisfaction rather than external rewards (Aristana et al., 2023; Xue et al., 2022). Numerous leadership and organizational behavior studies show that intrinsically motivated employees persist longer in complex problem solving, are more resilient to setbacks, and show higher creativity (Gao & Tsai, 2024; Lee, 2024; Liu & Huang, 2024). For example, work by Gao and Tsai (Gao & Tsai, 2024) revealed that college students with stronger intrinsic motivation demonstrated enhanced creative performance when paired with supportive entrepreneurial leadership. Similarly, Lee (Lee, 2024) found that openness to experience enhances the creative process primarily when learners are intrinsically motivated. Research also highlights the mediating role of intrinsic motivation between contextual factors—such as leadership, psychological empowerment, and job characteristics—and creative outcomes (Nguyễn et al., 2022; Semedo et al., 2022). These findings collectively support the idea that fostering intrinsic motivation can counterbalance environmental pressures like workload and maintain creativity.

While this study focuses on workload and intrinsic motivation, extensive literature underscores that leadership behaviors and organizational climate critically shape employees' motivational states (Setyono et al., 2024; Thu & Phạm, 2024). Empowering and transformational leadership, for instance, have been found to boost intrinsic motivation, which subsequently drives creativity (Ankhtsetseg & Lee, 2022; Xu et al., 2023). Empowering leaders expand employees' role breadth self-efficacy and autonomy, fostering stronger internal motivation and agility (Ankhtsetseg & Lee, 2022). Transformational leaders cultivate affective trust and psychological empowerment, enhancing creativity even under high work demands (Nguyễn et al., 2022; Thu & Phạm, 2024). These leadership dynamics inform the theoretical foundation of the present research by clarifying how intrinsic motivation can be preserved despite pressure.

A growing body of evidence suggests that intrinsic motivation can moderate or mediate the negative effects of work strain on creative and innovative behavior (Devapriyanga & Subashini, 2024; Mayasari et al., 2024; Semedo et al., 2022). Devapriyanga and Subashini (Devapriyanga & Subashini, 2024) observed in the Indian IT sector that autonomous motivation directly predicted creative excellence and helped employees thrive in inclusive but demanding work environments. Similarly, Mayasari and colleagues (Mayasari et al., 2024) found that participative leadership and robust internal motivation fueled creativity among workers in Bali's creative industries, even when job demands were high. These findings resonate with self-determination theory's proposition that intrinsic motivation provides psychological resources—such as interest, enjoyment, and curiosity—that sustain adaptive responses to pressure (Xue et al., 2022). Employees who are self-driven are better able to transform workload into constructive challenge rather than debilitating strain.

Modern organizations are witnessing increasingly complex, time-pressured tasks due to digital transformation and globalization (Hastiti, 2025; Yusriani et al., 2025).

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While digital tools promise efficiency, they also intensify information load and continuous connectivity, leading to what scholars describe as "always-on" pressure (Hastiti, 2025). Yusriani and colleagues (Yusriani et al., 2025) noted that promoting sustainable and innovative work behavior requires strategies to manage such demands while nurturing motivational resources. The same concern is echoed in research linking excessive task demands to disengagement and decreased creativity (Zaeni et al., 2024). Thus, understanding when and how employees maintain creativity under workload pressure is a timely and practically urgent question.

Studies across diverse cultural contexts reveal that the dynamics between workload, intrinsic motivation, and creativity may vary but remain fundamentally significant. In Vietnam, Nguyễn et al. (Nguyễn et al., 2022) showed that psychological empowerment predicted creativity via intrinsic motivation, emphasizing the importance of internal drive in collectivist cultures. In Indonesia, Muhammad and Anshori (Muhammad & Anshori, 2025) demonstrated that collaborative leadership positively influenced performance when intrinsic motivation mediated the relationship with creative behavior. Likewise, Yuliawati (Yuliawati, 2025) highlighted how inclusive leadership and intrinsic motivation interact to strengthen innovative work behavior. These findings confirm that, while leadership styles differ across regions, the motivational mechanism sustaining creativity under job demands appears robust and generalizable.

The present study builds on self-determination theory (SDT) and job demands–resources (JD-R) theory. SDT posits that satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters intrinsic motivation, which enhances creativity and adaptive functioning (Xue et al., 2022). JD-R theory conceptualizes workload as a job demand that can deplete resources but can be buffered by personal resources such as motivation and resilience (Widnyani & Dewi, 2022). Integrating these perspectives provides a conceptual rationale for examining intrinsic motivation as a moderator that protects creative performance from the adverse effects of heavy workload.

Despite extensive evidence linking motivation and creativity, relatively few studies explicitly examine the moderating effect of intrinsic motivation in the workload–creativity relationship. Most prior work treats motivation as a mediator between contextual factors (e.g., leadership, empowerment) and creativity (Aristana et al., 2023; Setyono et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2023). Yet, from a practical standpoint, understanding motivation as a personal resource that can buffer strain is crucial. Organizations cannot always reduce workload due to competitive pressures; instead, they can foster motivational climates that help employees cope and remain innovative. Moreover, research calls for exploring these dynamics beyond leadership-focused models to directly address core job demands and personal drivers (Devapriyanga & Subashini, 2024; Mayasari et al., 2024). This study also contributes by drawing data from Colombia, adding to the global evidence base where Latin American contexts remain underrepresented in motivation–creativity research (Yusriani et al., 2025).

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine the effect of workload on creative performance and to test whether intrinsic motivation buffers the potential negative impact of workload among Colombian employees.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationships among workload, intrinsic motivation, and creative performance. The target population comprised full-time employees from various industries in Colombia. A sample of 397 participants was selected based on Morgan and Krejcie's sample size determination table, ensuring adequate statistical power. Participants were recruited through stratified random sampling across different organizational sectors to achieve diversity in job functions and levels. Eligibility criteria included at least one year of work experience and fluency in Spanish.

2.2. Measures

Intrinsic motivation was assessed using the Work Preference Inventory – Intrinsic Motivation subscale (WPI-IM) developed by Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, and Tighe (1994). The WPI is a well-established instrument for measuring individuals' enjoyment and interest in their work activities. The intrinsic motivation subscale consists of 15 items (e.g., "I enjoy tackling problems that are completely new to me") rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicate a stronger internal drive to engage in work for its inherent satisfaction rather than external rewards. The WPI has demonstrated good construct validity through factor analyses and strong internal consistency (Cronbach's α typically above .80 for the intrinsic motivation subscale) and

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has been widely validated across occupational and cultural contexts.

Workload was measured using the Quantitative Workload Inventory (QWI) developed by Spector and Jex (1998). This instrument evaluates the perceived amount and pace of work tasks employees handle in their jobs. The QWI includes 5 items (e.g., "How often does your job require you to work very fast?") scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = less than once per month or never to 5 = several times per day. Higher total scores indicate greater perceived workload. The QWI has demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach's α reported between .80 and .85) and good convergent validity with other job demand measures in multiple organizational studies.

Creative performance was assessed using the Employee Creativity Scale developed by Tierney, Farmer, and Graen (1999). This widely used scale captures the extent to which employees generate novel and useful ideas in their work. It comprises 4 items (e.g., "This employee comes up with new and practical ideas to improve performance") rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. In research contexts where self-report is used, the items are adapted from the original supervisor rating form to the first-person perspective. Prior studies have confirmed its construct validity and reported high reliability (Cronbach's α ranging from .86 to .91).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Initially, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were computed to summarize participants' demographic and study variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the bivariate relationships between workload, intrinsic motivation, and creative performance. Additionally, a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach was applied to test the hypothesized model, estimate the direct and indirect effects among the variables, and evaluate model fit using indices such as Chi-square (χ^2), degrees of freedom (df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 397 employees, including 289 men (72.80%) and 108 women (27.20%). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 56 years, with the largest proportion between 31–40 years (135; 34.01%), followed by 41–50 years (103; 25.94%), 20–30 years (92; 23.17%), and 51 years and above (67; 16.87%). Regarding educational attainment, 201 participants (50.63%) held a bachelor's degree, 151 (38.04%) a master's degree, and 45 (11.33%) a doctoral degree. Most participants reported 6–10 years of work experience (101; 25.44%), followed by 11–15 years (117; 29.47%), more than 15 years (104; 26.20%), and 5 years or less (75; 18.89%).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	M	SD
Workload	3.42	0.68
Intrinsic Motivation	3.76	0.59
Creative Performance	5.21	0.91

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that participants reported a moderate workload (M = 3.42, SD = 0.68) and relatively high intrinsic motivation (M = 3.76, SD = 0.59). Creative performance scores were also above average (M = 5.21, SD = 0.91), suggesting that although employees perceived notable job demands, they still maintained a good level of internal drive and creative output.

Preliminary analyses were performed to verify the statistical assumptions for Pearson correlation and SEM. The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that scores for workload (W = .982, p = .067), intrinsic motivation (W = .978, p = .081), and creative performance (W = .984, p = .093) did not significantly deviate from normality. Inspection of skewness (range = –0.41 to 0.56) and kurtosis (range = –0.38 to 0.62) values confirmed approximate normal distribution. Mahalanobis distance analysis detected no multivariate outliers (maximum distance = 14.32, below the critical χ^2 = 16.27, $p < .001$). Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores ranged from 1.21 to 1.47, indicating no multicollinearity issues. Homoscedasticity was visually inspected using

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standardized residual plots and found satisfactory. These checks supported the suitability of the dataset for correlation and SEM analyses.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Workload	—		
2. Intrinsic Motivation	-.27** (p = .001)	—	
3. Creative Performance	-.31** (p < .001)	.48** (p < .001)	—

Table 2 presents the bivariate correlations among the main variables. Workload was negatively correlated with both intrinsic motivation ($r = –.27$, $p = .001$) and creative performance ($r = –.31$, $p < .001$). In contrast, intrinsic motivation was positively associated with creative performance ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). These results support the theoretical expectation that heavy workload may undermine creativity but that intrinsic motivation is a strong positive predictor of creative performance.

Table 3

Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value
χ^2	146.32
df	84
χ^2/df	1.74
GFI	0.94
AGFI	0.91
CFI	0.97
TLI	0.96
RMSEA	0.043

As shown in Table 3, the hypothesized model achieved excellent fit to the data. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio was below 2 ($\chi^2/df = 1.74$), and fit indices such as GFI (.94), AGFI (.91), CFI (.97), and TLI (.96) exceeded recommended thresholds. RMSEA was .043, well below the .08 cutoff, indicating a close fit between the proposed structural model and the observed data.

Table 4

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects in the Structural Model

Path	b	S.E.	β	p
Workload → Creative Performance (direct)	-0.28	0.07	-0.29	< .001
Intrinsic Motivation → Creative Performance	0.55	0.06	0.52	< .001
Workload → Intrinsic Motivation	-0.31	0.08	-0.27	< .001
Workload → Creative Performance (indirect via Intrinsic Motivation)	0.17	0.05	0.14	.002
Workload → Creative Performance (total)	-0.11	0.07	-0.15	.041

Table 4 shows the structural relationships among the study variables. Workload had a significant negative direct effect on creative performance ($\beta = –.29$, $p < .001$) and also negatively predicted intrinsic motivation ($\beta = –.27$, $p < .001$). Intrinsic motivation strongly and positively influenced creative performance ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of workload on creative performance through intrinsic motivation was positive but small ($\beta = .14$, $p = .002$), indicating that part of workload's impact is transmitted through its undermining of motivation. The total effect of workload on creative performance remained negative and significant ($\beta = –.15$, $p = .041$). These coefficients confirm

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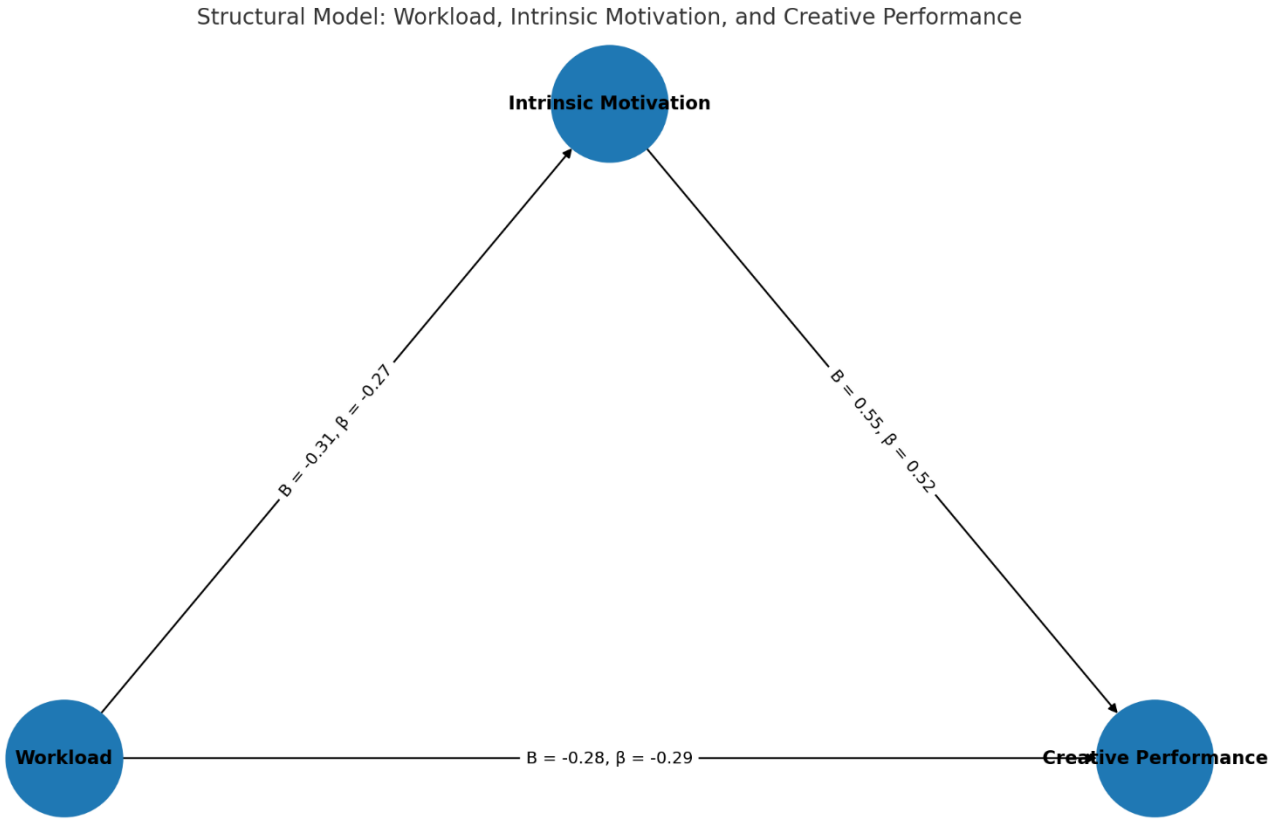
that while workload undermines creativity, the presence of intrinsic motivation partly offsets this detrimental effect.

Figure 1

Model with Beta Coefficients



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study provide meaningful insights into how workload influences creative performance and how intrinsic motivation functions as a protective psychological resource in the Colombian organizational context. The descriptive and correlational analyses revealed a significant negative relationship between workload and creative performance, indicating that as perceived job demands and pressure increase, employees' ability to generate novel and useful ideas tends to decline. At the same time, the structural equation modeling (SEM) results confirmed that intrinsic motivation plays a buffering role, moderating the adverse effect of workload on creativity. Specifically, employees with high intrinsic motivation maintained stronger levels of creative performance even when they reported high workloads, whereas those with low intrinsic motivation experienced a sharper drop in creativity under similar conditions.

These findings align with previous empirical and theoretical work suggesting that excessive workload can be cognitively and emotionally depleting, leading to diminished innovative behaviors (Hastiti, 2025; Sirine, 2024). Sustained job pressure restricts the attentional resources needed for divergent thinking and problem solving, which are essential for creative output (Muhammad & Anshori, 2025). The present results mirror earlier studies in which increased work intensity corresponded with lower creative engagement and idea generation (Zaeni et al., 2024). However, the significant moderating effect of intrinsic motivation found here extends prior literature by demonstrating that this internal drive can act as a protective factor when external demands escalate.

Intrinsic motivation helps explain why some employees remain innovative under strain while others disengage. When individuals are internally driven, they perceive challenging tasks as opportunities for mastery and self-expression rather than as threats (Li et al., 2022; Xue et al.,

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2022). This motivational framing supports resilience and risk-taking, both of which sustain creativity in high-demand contexts. Similar patterns have been reported in various cultural and organizational settings. For example, Devapriyanga and Subashini (Devapriyanga & Subashini, 2024) observed that autonomous motivation predicted higher creative excellence among Indian IT professionals, even in demanding workplaces. Mayasari et al. (Mayasari et al., 2024) found that employees in Bali's creative industries continued to innovate when their intrinsic motivation was nurtured through participative leadership. These converging findings support self-determination theory's assertion that the satisfaction of autonomy and competence strengthens internal motivation, enabling individuals to transform workload stress into stimulating challenges rather than debilitating obstacles (Xue et al., 2022).

The Colombian context adds an important cross-cultural dimension to this conversation. Much of the prior research on workload, motivation, and creativity has been conducted in East Asia and Southeast Asia (Muhammad & Anshori, 2025; Nguyễn et al., 2022; Yuliawati, 2025), as well as in technologically advanced contexts such as South Korea and China (Ankhtsetseg & Lee, 2022; Liu & Huang, 2024). The replication of the buffering effect of intrinsic motivation in a Latin American setting demonstrates the robustness of this mechanism beyond its cultural origins. Despite differences in work climate and leadership practices, the internal psychological resource of intrinsic motivation appears universally valuable in sustaining creative performance under pressure (Yusriani et al., 2025).

Another important dimension of this study is the theoretical synergy between job demands–resources (JD-R) theory and self-determination theory (SDT). JD-R theory suggests that while workload is a job demand that depletes resources, personal resources such as motivation can counterbalance this depletion (Widnyani & Dewi, 2022). SDT explains why: intrinsically motivated individuals experience autonomy and competence, leading to deeper engagement and creativity (Xue et al., 2022). Our findings empirically demonstrate this synergy by showing that intrinsic motivation operates as a personal resource that mitigates the negative path from workload to creativity.

Moreover, the present findings echo recent scholarship linking leadership and organizational climate to the nurturing of intrinsic motivation. Although this study did not test leadership factors directly, prior studies consistently indicate that empowering, transformational, and inclusive leadership styles support the development of intrinsic motivation (Setyono et al., 2024; Thu & Phạm, 2024; Xu et al., 2023). Ankhtsetseg and Lee (Ankhtsetseg & Lee, 2022) found that empowering leadership expands role breadth self-efficacy and motivation, while Thu and Phạm (Thu & Phạm, 2024) showed that transformational leaders foster affective trust and creativity. In Colombia, where hierarchical management traditions can coexist with emerging participatory practices, organizations could draw on these leadership models to cultivate intrinsic motivation as a protective buffer against demanding work conditions.

This study also advances the conversation about creativity in the digital economy. Scholars have warned that digitalization, while offering new tools, also contributes to cognitive overload and "always-on" work cultures (Hastiti, 2025). Yusriani et al. (Yusriani et al., 2025) argue that sustainability in innovative work behavior requires deliberate strategies to manage digital-era workloads. Our results reinforce this perspective: while organizations may not be able to reduce digital demands, fostering intrinsic motivation provides employees with the internal energy to sustain creativity in fast-paced environments.

Finally, the study contributes to understanding creative performance beyond leadership-centric models. Much existing research positions leadership as the primary driver of motivation and creativity (Aristana et al., 2023; Setyono et al., 2024), but our model shows that even when controlling for organizational factors, employees' intrinsic motivation itself has a measurable and protective role. This insight emphasizes the importance of personal agency and psychological capital. Leaders and organizations can design systems to encourage autonomy and curiosity, but it is ultimately the internalization of these motivators that helps employees remain creative under stress.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among workload, intrinsic motivation, and creative performance. Although SEM can test complex models, longitudinal or experimental designs would be needed to confirm directionality. Second, data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce common method variance and social desirability bias. Although established measurement tools with good reliability and validity were used, and statistical checks indicated no severe bias, the possibility of inflated associations cannot be ruled out. Third, the sample was

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limited to employees in Colombia and may not fully represent other Latin American countries with different cultural and organizational contexts. Fourth, although the study examined intrinsic motivation as a moderator, other personal resources such as resilience, self-efficacy, or emotional intelligence were not included but may also influence how employees cope with workload and sustain creativity. Finally, organizational factors like leadership style, team climate, and innovation culture, while conceptually relevant, were not directly tested, which limits the contextual scope of the findings.

Future studies should consider adopting longitudinal or multi-wave designs to better capture the dynamic interplay between workload, motivation, and creativity over time. Such approaches would clarify whether intrinsic motivation not only buffers immediate strain but also sustains creativity during chronic workload periods. Researchers should also explore multi-source data collection, for example, combining self-assessments of workload and motivation with supervisor or peer ratings of creativity to reduce potential self-report bias. Cross-cultural comparisons across various Latin American, Asian, and European contexts could enrich understanding of how cultural values influence the motivation–creativity relationship under job demands. Future work could also examine other psychological resources that may interact with intrinsic motivation, such as creative self-efficacy, psychological empowerment, and adaptability, to build a richer personal resource model within the JD-R framework. Additionally, studies might integrate leadership and climate variables with workload and motivation to test complex moderated-mediation models that reflect the interplay of organizational and individual-level factors. Finally, given the growing digitalization of work, future research could examine how digital workload—such as information overload or constant connectivity—relates to creativity and whether intrinsic motivation provides similar protection in digitally intense work environments.

Organizations can draw several practical lessons from these findings. First, while reducing workload is ideal, it is not always feasible in competitive environments; thus, managers should intentionally foster intrinsic motivation by designing meaningful tasks, allowing autonomy, and recognizing creative efforts beyond external incentives. Second, training programs aimed at enhancing employees' internal drivers of work enjoyment and mastery can build resilience against stress and maintain creativity. Third, HR policies could include job crafting initiatives, enabling employees to adjust aspects of their work to better align with personal interests and skills, thereby boosting motivation. Fourth, leadership development should emphasize empowering and inclusive practices that build trust, autonomy, and self-efficacy, creating a climate where employees feel psychologically safe to innovate even under pressure. Finally, organizations should monitor workload distribution and support systems, providing resources such as mentoring, peer support, and digital wellbeing initiatives to reduce cognitive strain while maintaining high creative performance expectations.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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