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The Intervening Effects of Perceived Organizational Support on COVID-19 Pandemic Stress, Job Burnout and Occupational Turnover Intentions of Collegiate Sport Athlete-Facing Professionals

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Citation: Chun, Y.; Sagas, M.; Wendling, E. The Intervening Effects of Perceived Organizational Support on COVID-19 Pandemic Stress, Job Burnout and Occupational Turnover Intentions of Collegiate Sport Athlete-Facing Professionals. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 6807. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14116807>

Academic Editors: Daehwan Kim, Kang Hyoun-Kil and Hyunwoong Pyun

Received: 11 May 2022

Accepted: 31 May 2022

Published: 2 June 2022

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Abstract: Already a challenging position in higher education, collegiate sport athlete-facing professionals have been exposed to excessive stress amid the COVID-19 pandemic that can result in emotional exhaustion and a mass exodus of valued employees within collegiate sport organizations. Accordingly, based on COR theory, we aimed to assess the intervening effects of perceived organizational support that can mitigate job burnout and occupational turnover intentions due to pandemic stress. A total of 427 academic support professionals in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I organizations responded to an online survey measuring pandemic stress, job burnout, occupational turnover intention, and organizational support. Hypotheses were tested through a serial-mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro for SPSS Model 6. Results showed that pandemic stress had a statistically significant effect on occupational turnover through job burnout. It was also confirmed that organizational support fully mediates the relationship between pandemic stress, job burnout, and occupational turnover. Overall, our findings highlight the importance of providing adequate organizational support towards employees under a high level of stress due to the pandemic. As ASPs adapt to the “new normal,” college sport organizations can assist employees by catering the support they provide to meet changing needs, especially by leveraging technologies that have been advanced during the pandemic. Further implications of the findings on collegiate sport organization literature are offered, as are suggestions for future research.

Keywords: pandemic stress; intercollegiate sport employees; conservation of resources theory; perceived organizational support; job burnout; occupational turnover intentions; serial-mediation model

1. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread in the United States in February 2020, the sport industry, and more specifically intercollegiate athletics, encountered unprecedented economic, cultural, and managerial challenges that threatened their survival on the market [1]. The cancelation of the NCAA's 2020 basketball post-season tournaments resulted in a 62.5% loss in direct payments to NCAA-affiliated institutions [2]. This accumulated loss led universities to cut 170 college sport teams, which affected more than 2400 student-athletes [3]. With program cutting came the elimination of academic support service positions, and reduced funding imposed an increased workload for those who remained employed. Although there is no doubt that the pandemic has had deleterious effects on the well-being of college student-athletes [4] and their performance [5,6], the potential impact of the pandemic on employees of athletic departments has been widely neglected.

The working conditions of athlete-facing professionals in college athletics, including academic support professionals (ASPs), were tremendously changed ensuing the pandemic. In addition to life stressors that individuals must experience during the pandemic, these

employees were working in a high-risk environment and experiencing difficulties such as re-evaluating their operation plans, safety measures, and communications with athletes [7]. As vaccinations became publicly available in December 2020, many sport organizations adopted phased-in-play measures during which the number of spectators on site was gradually increased in phases in order to ensure the safety of athletes, team and operational staff, and fans [7]. In organizing and executing operating plans for resuming sporting events, collegiate athletic employees had to follow the NCAA's safety measure guidelines and adapt these plans based on continuously changing influences due to the emergence of new variants. These unprecedented circumstances likely contributed to increased feelings of stress and anxiety in the collegiate sport workforce.

Operational staff of organized sport programs in the U.S. were classified as tier 2, according to DiFiori et al. [7], indicating that they are at risk of being in close contact with tier 1 individuals (i.e., athletes, coaches, training staff, officials). This ever-present risk of exposure is another plausible way in which the COVID-19 pandemic was contributing to feelings of stress among ASPs. Furthermore, although remote work has been an alternative for many occupations, ASPs may have experienced more complications with remote work settings in terms of maintaining close relationships with athletes, which is an aspect so critical to their work. This stressful working environment may have caused some ASPs to consider leaving the athletic department they work for, or even quit their career altogether.

Prior to the pandemic, the role of ASPs was already labeled as one of the most challenging positions in all of higher education [8]. A more recent study suggested that the occupational turnover intentions of this employee group are relatively high [9]. A majority of the research devoted to understanding the role of job stress in the sport industry on turnover intentions has suggested that higher occupational turnover intentions were recorded for coaches [10,11] and sport referees [12,13] who experienced a higher stress level. COVID-19-induced changes likely increased the stress level that sport employees experienced in their lives. For instance, Choi and Noh [14] pointed out that the pandemic created an unstable environment for sport facility employees, positively predicting increased stress and leading to higher turnover intentions. Thus, we contend that substantial attention should be allocated to better understanding the role of perceived pandemic stress on ASPs' intentions to leave their career.

As a well-remarked theory of stress in the organizational behavior literature, the conservation of resources (COR) theory [15] is built on the principle that the loss of key personal resources causes stress. These resources are divided into four categories, including objects (e.g., housing, cars, clothes), conditions (e.g., seniority, status, employment, marriage), personal characteristics (e.g., conscientiousness, self-esteem), and energies (e.g., knowledge, time, money). Hobfoll [15] contended that people's efforts to conserve and potentially increase resources considered valuable to one's survival, identity, and goals are the foundational tenet of COR theory. Stressors are identified by the potential loss or actual loss of key resources or even by the lack of acquiring resources after making use of one's own resources [15,16]. Thus, COR theory offers a theoretical framework for understanding employee stress based on why and how they lose, protect, or gain necessary resources to perform their work. Further, Freedy and Hobfoll [17] argued that when the rate at which resources are depleted due to work demands exceeds replenishment, employees may experience burnout.

To mitigate the loss resulting from stressors or even enable resource gain, individuals tend to rely on social support, which is considered a critical external resource in managing stressors and enhancing stress resiliency [16]. Although not included in the four types of resources aforementioned due to the external source of social support (i.e., not being directly owned by individuals), organizational support is a valuable workplace social support resource to acquire in order to retain other key resources and lessen the impact of stress on critical work-related outcomes such as job burnout and turnover intentions [18,19]. Therefore, in addition to examining the impact of pandemic stress on the job burnout of NCAA Division I ASPs and their intentions to leave their occupation, the primary

aim of this study was to assess the underlying intervening mechanisms of perceived organizational support that would mitigate these deleterious effects. In doing so, we adopted the COR theory and tested the role of perceived organizational support and job burnout as serial mediators on the relationship between pandemic stress and occupational turnover intentions.

As highlighted by Blau [20], leaving a career is a challenging decision for employees, more so than quitting an organization for another in the same field or discipline, as it requires a consideration of significant personal investments made in the occupation. As in the case of the collegiate coaching context [21], ASPs also invest a substantial amount of time and resources into their occupation [22]. Thus, understanding intervening mechanisms that would lead these employees to decide to quit their current occupation altogether is paramount, particularly in light of the stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that may be catalyzing a more significant number of individuals out of employment in the sport industry.

For college athletic departments, lost employees significantly disrupt their effectiveness, as their experience and expertise are also lost [23]. The loss of employees that work closely with student-athletes (e.g., coaches, ASPs, athletic trainers) can also affect athlete well-being and success [24,25]. In addition, replacing employees requires substantial time and energy for organizations, frequently costing 50 to 60% of a person's salary for replacement [26]. ASPs, which include life skills program directors, learning specialists, academic advisors, and student-athlete development specialists, are often asked to perform highly specialized tasks that require a specific set of skills, experience, and knowledge [9]. Therefore, retaining such key employees could collectively benefit athletic departments across the collegiate sport industry as they represent a significant investment in skill-building and rare knowledge.

2. Hypothesis Development

2.1. *The Impact of Pandemic Stress on Job Burnout and Occupational Turnover Intentions*

The COVID-19 pandemic shifted nearly all working and living conditions (e.g., remote working, virtual communications), due to which one had to navigate an unstable environment and constantly adapt to changing conditions. As previously mentioned, ASPs faced numerous stressors due to the pandemic, including increased workload, risk of being furloughed or fired, risk of being exposed to the virus, communication challenges with athletes, increased mental health issues with athletes, and continuously changing operating plans and safety measures. Stress caused by COVID-19 may have drastically impaired individual resources in a way that caused a high level of stress, ultimately steering individuals to consider leaving their occupation as a way to alleviate stress. Indeed, these changes may have threatened individuals' stress-resistance potential due to a more limited ability to gain resources that would mitigate stress [15].

ASPs faced numerous transitions given that COVID-19 kept evolving in unpredictable directions that inserted major uncertainties into their lives. When framed against COR theory, transitions are also seen as potential stressors [15]. According to Wilcox [27], a series of events that entails a chain of loss events are most likely to be perceived as stressful. In other words, individuals faced with a sudden shock to their cognitive process due to unexpected new information can induce a loss of their resources [28]. These transitions were undoubtedly affecting individuals' cognitive processes by wearing down their resources, resulting in increased levels of stress. Although stress is reported to have various harmful effects on individual's physical [29,30] and psychological well-being [31], perhaps one of the most concerning outcomes is turnover. Across fields, it has been reported that stress and turnover intentions are highly related [32,33]. As COVID-19 brought forth additional and unpredictable transitions, it can be argued that these setbacks may have significantly increased the level of stress that ASPs experienced, potentially resulting in even higher occupational turnover intentions than prior to the pandemic [34]. Thus, we developed the following hypothesis to assess this assertion:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Pandemic stress positively predicts occupational turnover intentions.*

The pandemic stress layered on existing job stressors can deplete resources over time, potentially draining and exhausting employees. Prolonged stress caused by COVID-19 may eventually lead to burnout when the rate at which resources are depleted exceeds replenishment [17]. Research conducted prior to the pandemic suggested that ASPs reported high levels of job burnout [9,22,35] and are thus quite vulnerable to experiencing greater levels of burnout as a result of the challenges caused by COVID-19. As the pandemic contributed to an accumulated depletion of resources that were essential to the continuation of work among ASPs, it can be anticipated that burnout levels likely increased.

Burnout represents a status that signals a breaking point that is no longer tolerable, initiating the internal consideration of leaving one's occupation as an easier way out [36]. Indeed, employees experiencing burnout may reconsider their current occupational status [37]. Although some may overcome burnout through solidarity with colleagues [38], quitting provides an easy way out, as overwhelmed individuals may reach an intolerable point [36]. Especially if the situation that employees are in is high intensity, as was the case of the pandemic, it increases the likelihood of turnover or turnover intentions [37,39,40]. Therefore, it can be assumed that employees who have experienced accelerated depletion of resources due to modified or increased work demands from COVID-19 may also experience feelings of stress and, potentially, job burnout. Moreover, previous literature suggested that burnout may eventually encourage employees to exit from their organization or their occupation entirely [41,42]. Based on the above literature, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Job burnout mediates the relationship between pandemic stress and occupational turnover intentions.*

2.2. The Intervening Mechanisms of Perceived Organizational Support

Social relationships that help employees think of themselves as valuable assets can significantly replenish or mitigate draining resources during the pandemic [43]. Indeed, one's social relations can have stress-reducing properties [44], so a supportive work environment can alleviate the source of stress and facilitate goal achievement [16]. Such social support from organizations, through accumulated findings, is suggested to mitigate the stress-strain relationship [45–47]. ASPs could better withstand resource loss caused by the pandemic if they perceive that their athletic department “values their contributions and cares about their well-being” [48]. Furthermore, organizational support may also reinforce positive aspects of self, which may have been lost during stressful times [49]. Acting as a resource to enhance stress resiliency, the support the athletic department provides to its ASPs can counteract the diminishment of resources caused by stress. Thus, in unprecedented circumstances caused by COVID-19, social support at the organizational level is essential in that it may not only assist employees in coping with increased stress, but may also reduce the likelihood of occupational turnover intentions [50], which led us to develop the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Perceived organizational support mediates the relationship between pandemic stress and occupational turnover intentions.*

In line with the theoretical propositions of COR theory, resource depletion due to pandemic stress increases the likelihood of job burnout, leading to higher occupational turnover intentions. Concurrently, employees' perception of the support they receive from the organization may serve as an intervening factor that would mitigate the impact of pandemic stress on job burnout through the replenishment of cognitive resources. Thus, the theory contends that perceived organizational support can lessen and possibly prevent resource depletion, averting or postponing burnout and turnover. Therefore, the relationships between these four constructs suggest the possibility of a full serial mediation model, in that pandemic stress affects ASPs' occupational turnover intentions, but only

through perceived organizational support and job burnout in sequence. To assess this serial mediation model, we advanced the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Perceived organizational support and job burnout serially mediate the relationship between pandemic stress and occupational turnover intentions.*

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 427 NCAA Division I (the highest level of competition in the NCAA) ASPs. The majority of the sample indicated themselves to be female (73.3%), were between the ages of 26 and 35 years old (53.9%), and self-identified as white (78.5%). The racial distribution of the current study's sample corresponds with the racial and gender report card [51] as well as a recent study on intercollegiate athletic department employees by Taylor et al. [52]. Furthermore, given that academic support positions in athletics are predominantly held by female employees, the higher ratio of female participants found in our study was in line with this trend and what previous studies examining this population have reported [53–55]. Thus, it informs our sample demographics to represent the current landscape of the overall field. Almost half of the participants (49.2%) were either married or living with a partner, and more than half (68.9%) did not have children under 18. In terms of employment tenure, the highest proportion (35.8%) of employees reported working in their current occupation for 2 to 3 years, whereas 15.2% had been in the industry for more than 10 years. Nearly all participants (96%) had been required to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. See Table 1 for detailed demographic information of the participants.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

The online survey software Qualtrics was utilized to develop an online survey and collect responses. NCAA Division I ASPs' emails were acquired via a paid subscription service from an online directory website (Collegiate Directories, Inc., Cleveland, OH, USA). Initial invitations to participate in the online survey were sent to 2319 employees in July 2021. The survey included a consent form, in which participants had to agree to take the survey and have their responses recorded as part of the study sample. In addition, every third participant that completed the survey was offered compensation. A reminder to respond was sent two weeks after the initial recruitment email. In total, 547 participants initiated the survey, with a response rate of 23.6%. Among those who started the survey, 502 participants completed the entire questionnaire. Data from participants who finished the survey in an unrealistically short amount of time (e.g., 3 min) or selected the same response for the entire survey were deleted in the data cleaning process, resulting in 427 participants who were retained for data analysis.

3.3. Measures

All variables were measured by adapting pre-established instruments and rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measurement items for the current study were as follows:

Pandemic stress. We used five items adapted from Cohen et al. [56]. Instructions were given to the participants to reflect on a broad range of situations caused by COVID-19, such as the lockdown regulations, social distancing, the pandemic's impact on business operations, preparation for re-operations, or any issues that had been induced from the COVID-19 pandemic that were not present previously. Sample items include "Since 1 January 2021, how often have you (a) felt that you are unable to control the essential things in your life? (b) felt nervous and stressed?" The scale has been widely adopted across fields to assess individuals' stress during periods of crisis, such as a pandemic [57–59].

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	114	26.7
Female	313	73.3
Age		
Less than 25 years old	32	7.5
26 to 35 years old	230	53.9
36 to 45 years old	103	24.1
46 to 55 years old	36	8.4
Over 56 years old	26	6.0
Race		
Asian	10	2.3
Black or African American	58	13.6
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	10	2.3
White	335	78.5
Other	9	2.1
Prefer not to respond	5	1.2
Marital status		
Single	177	41.5
Married/living together	210	49.2
Partner relationship but living alone	25	5.9
Separated/divorced/widowed	12	2.8
Other	3	0.7
Occupation length		
1 years or less	74	17.3
2 to 3 years	153	35.8
4 to 5 years	80	18.7
6 to 7 years	33	7.7
8 to 9 years	22	5.2
More than 10 years	65	15.2
Remote work duration (since COVID-19)		
Never	17	4.0
Less than 4 months	122	28.6
5 to 8 months	127	29.7
9 to 12 months	65	15.2
13 months or more	96	22.5

Perceived organizational support. Five items from Eisenberger et al. [60] were adapted. Sample items include “Since January 2021, (a) my organization has cared about my opinions, and (b) help has been available from my organization when I had a problem”. The scale has previously been applied to measure employees’ perceived organizational support in various fields during the COVID-19 pandemic [61,62].

Job burnout. We used seven items from the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, validated by Maslach and Jackson [63]. Sample items include “Over the past 30 days, I have been feeling (a) emotionally drained from my work and (b) fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job”. The scale has been applied in previous research measuring job burnout of education faculty members [64] and under the circumstances of the pandemic [65].

Occupational turnover intention. Three items by Meyer et al. [66] were used. Sample items include “(a) I frequently think about getting out of my current career and (b) I will likely explore career opportunities other than my current career”.

3.4. Data Analysis

Serial mediation model analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS Model 6 [67]. The PROCESS macro uses ordinary least squares regression to assess equation parameters, which is common practice in path analysis [68]. In particular, such an analytical method meets the purpose of the current study as it enables isolation of each me-

diator's indirect effects and allows the assessment of indirect effects passing through both mediators serially [69]. Age, gender, income, educational background, remote-working duration, remote-working status since June 2021, occupation and organization employment length, and workload increase due to COVID-19 were controlled as covariates. Van Jaarsveld et al. [69] asserted that such an analytical process enables isolation of indirect effects. The assessment of the statistical significance of the mediators utilized 5000 bootstrap samples, generating 95% confidence intervals (CI) of the indirect effects of the model. According to Hayes [67], bootstrapped 95% CIs that do not include zero are considered statistically significant.

Skewness and kurtosis were examined to assess the normality of the measured variables (Song et al., 2014). The results indicated that the skewness of the measured variables ranged from -0.34 to 0.19 , and kurtosis ranged from -1.00 to -0.23 , which met the criteria for normality [70]. Next, variable inflation factor (VIF) values were assessed. The scores ranged from 1.42 to 1.90 , indicating no multicollinearity problem [71].

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model

The measurement model was assessed through an array of fit criteria. As chi-square is affected by trivial deviations with a large sample, suggesting a poor fit [70], the current study mainly referred to other indicators based on the recommendations by Hu and Bentler [72]. Namely, cutoff values of the comparative fit index (CFI) greater than 0.90 , adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) greater than 0.80 , Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) greater than 0.90 , and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.06 or less were assessed. The model showed adequate construct validity ($\chi^2 = 377.62$, $df = 162$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.96 ; GFI = 0.92 ; AGFI = 0.89 ; TLI = 0.96 ; RMSEA = 0.06). Cronbach's alpha for each variable was also assessed for internal consistency and reliability evaluation. All measured variables within the research model showed satisfactory levels of reliability [73].

Discriminant validity of the variables were assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion analysis. In Table 2, the square root values of the AVE of each variable are reported diagonally, along with the bivariate correlation values in the off-diagonal. The results indicate that each variable shared more variance with its corresponding items in relation to any other variables used in the study, which indicates adequate discriminant validity [74]. Construct intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations are also provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Construct intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations.

Constructs	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Occupational turnover	2.82	1.12	0.89	0.54				-0.04	-1.00
2. Organizational support	3.46	0.93	0.91	-0.44^{**}	0.67			-0.34	-0.35
3. Job burnout	3.36	1.00	0.93	0.51^{**}	-0.54^{**}	0.80		-0.22	-0.42
4. Pandemic stress	2.70	0.75	0.80	0.31^{**}	-0.36^{**}	0.60^{**}	0.76	0.19	-0.23

Bold-faced numerals represent the square root value of AVE, and off-diagonal values are correlations. $^{**} p < 0.01$.

4.2. Serial Mediation Model

Results of the serial mediation analysis are as seen in Figure 1. Confirming Hypothesis 1, the result shows a positive effect of pandemic stress on occupational turnover intention (total effect; $\beta = 0.413$, $SE = 0.073$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, pandemic stress was found to significantly predict perceived organizational support ($\beta = -0.422$, $SE = 0.055$, $p < 0.001$) and job burnout ($\beta = 0.537$, $SE = 0.052$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, job burnout significantly mediated the relationship between pandemic stress and occupational turnover intention ($\beta = 0.270$, $SE = 0.047$, $CI = [0.182, 0.367]$), and thus Hypothesis 2 was supported. Confirming Hypothesis 3, perceived organizational support significantly mediated the relationship between pandemic stress and occupational turnover intention ($\beta = 0.112$, $SE = 0.027$, $CI = [0.057, 0.147]$).

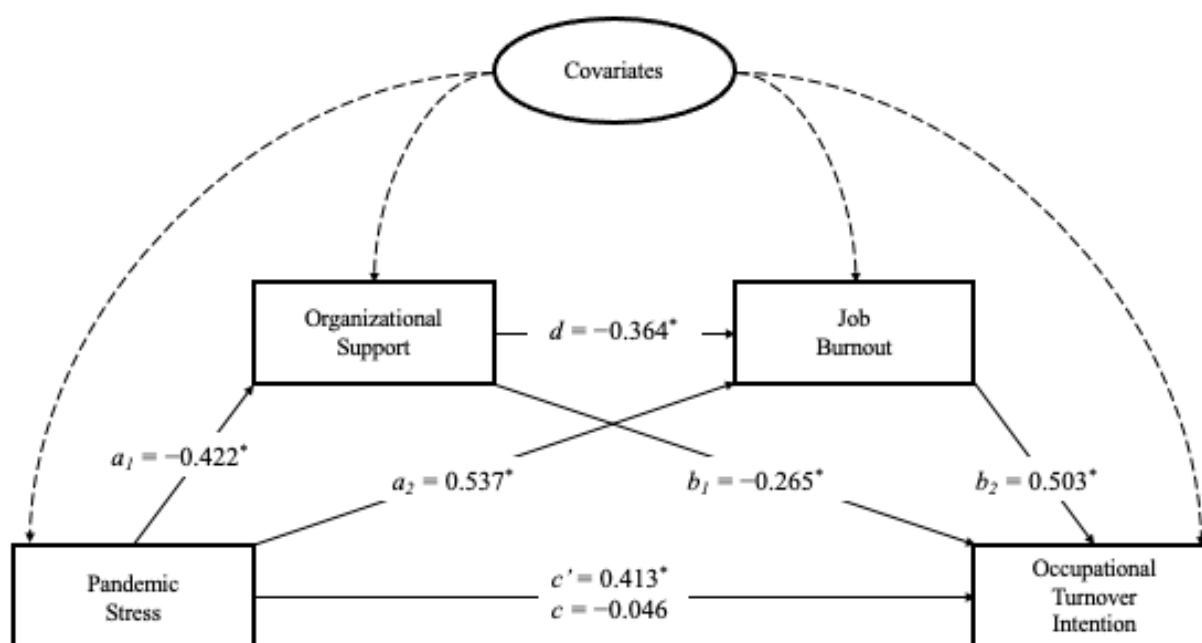


Figure 1. Serial mediation model result. * $p < 0.001$. Values are unstandardized coefficients.

Finally, the indirect effect of pandemic stress on occupational turnover intention via perceived organizational support and job burnout, serially combined, was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.077$, $SE = 0.017$, $CI = [0.048, 0.113]$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported (see Table 3). In sum, results from the study confirmed the indirect relationship between pandemic stress and occupational turnover, and the relationship was fully mediated by perceived organizational support and job burnout.

Table 3. Indirect effect of pandemic stress on occupational turnover intention via perceived organizational support and job burnout.

Path	Coefficient	95% CI	
		LL	UL
PS → OS → OT	0.112	0.063	0.167
PS → JB → OT	0.270	0.182	0.367
PS → OS → JB → OT	0.077	0.048	0.113
Total effect	0.413	0.270	0.557
Direct effect	−0.046	−0.197	0.104
Total indirect effect	0.460	0.356	0.570

CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

5. Discussion

5.1. Evaluation of Results

The current study, guided by COR theory, contributed to our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on NCAA Division I ASPs' intentions to leave their occupation by examining the serial mediating roles of perceived organizational support and job burnout. Through the theoretical tenets of COR theory [15,16], we tested whether the numerous stressors experienced by these employees during the pandemic may have accelerated resource depletion such that prolonged, heightened stress led them to experience job burnout, which in turn caused them to consider leaving their occupation as a way to protect themselves. Lastly, we expected that the organizational support that these employees received from their respected athletic department could act as an intervening factor by potentially mitigating total resource depletion and preventing or postponing burnout.

The present study provided empirical support on how stress associated with COVID-19 has affected athlete-facing employees working in collegiate sport organizations. Our results demonstrated that pandemic stress contributed to employees' intention to leave their occupation (Hypothesis 1) with job burnout mediating the relationship (Hypothesis 2). Such findings are supported through neighboring fields, where stress is being reported as one of the major antecedents for losing valuable employees [32,33,75,76], especially through burnout [37,39,40]. It has been noted that collegiate sport athlete-facing employees are, by default, suffering from excessive work, underpay, and burnout, resulting in an "unspoken mass exodus" [77]. Amplifying such a status is the heightened stress due to the pandemic that, aligning with COR theory, may have accelerated the depletion of individual resources of employees in athlete-facing positions. Specifically, depleted individual resources can include work conditions affected by the increase in remote interactions with athletes, unstable working hours, and financial impact. In such cases, as the results indicate, employees that reach an intolerable state may actively consider leaving their job or their profession entirely [78,79]. Thus, this leads to highlighting the need for an external source of resources that can be utilized by employees that may alleviate the relationship between pandemic stress, job burnout, and occupational turnover intentions.

COR theory contends that stress and its outcomes are a temporal process that can be represented as a loss cycle, during which a gradual loss of resources accompanied by insufficient investment of resources ultimately forces employees to consider the ultimate way out for self-preservation [80,81]. Thus, stopping the loss cycle requires sufficient resources that can fully intervene in such a process. By examining the mediating role of perceived organizational support, we confirmed this type of external social support as critical to assisting ASPs in coping with pandemic stress and job burnout, and in sustaining their careers (Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 4). Across fields, studies have reported the importance of organizational support by reporting a significant relationship with stress or turnover intentions [82–84]. Indeed, when employees feel valued and cared for by their respected collegiate sport organizations, it may serve as a replenishing resource that can mitigate their intentions to leave. In consideration, it is vital that collegiate sport organizations provide adequate support for their valued professionals.

Iteratively, it can be interpreted that such an external source of support may also be vulnerable to deficiency. In particular, such a deprivation of the external resource may be affected by unfavorable conditions and excessive stress, failing to successfully prevent negative outcomes [85,86]. Furthermore, it has been noted that individuals under high stress may hold organizations accountable for not providing them with necessary support [87]. Thus, it implies that perceived organizational support is also susceptible to the loss cycle and requires consistent and significant supply. Nevertheless, acknowledging such perspectives on organizational support, we assert that our findings imply the need for collegiate sport organizations to contemplate on their means to provide sufficient and effective support for their ASPs.

5.2. Implications of Findings

The current study highlights the importance of organizational support as a remedy for dealing with employee resource depletion. We therefore encourage athletic departments to assess their employee support strategies and recommend that they focus on offering care and support to their ASPs, especially when experiencing stress, in order to alleviate unwanted outcomes such as burnout and turnover. In particular, it is recommended that support be more accommodating to flexibility and adaptability as they progress towards a post-pandemic era.

Establishing and maintaining solid relationships with athletes is one of the key indicators of successful work for ASPs. Thus, amid the pandemic, remote-working conditions initially hindered their working conditions. As such, Vander Elst et al. [88] reported that teleworking resulted in a lower perception of social support among employees, which led to increased emotional exhaustion. Although collegiate sport organizations resumed their

work from their offices as the situation relieved, such a shift in working condition may persist through the years. When ASPs were asked in our survey about their preference in terms of work setting post-pandemic, 53.4% of the sample reported to prefer complete or partial remote work. The detailed motivation behind such a shift in preference is beyond the scope of the current study. However, it can be asserted that organizations can benefit by catering the support they provide to meet the employees' changing needs.

In order to promote better support, organizations are suggested to invest in training programs for managers and supervisors that raise awareness and skills on the strategic significance of social support in and out of the workplace [89]. Relatedly, leveraging on the wide access to technology that organizations can provide, it can be used to help buffer the consequences of COVID-19 [90]. For instance, although raising awareness on the importance of self-care is seen as critical for employee well-being, online tools that facilitate such a purpose can be a great way of creating a resource through organizational support in the post-pandemic workplace [91,92].

In tandem, we conclude that for NCAA Division I ASPs, organizational support could be an essential safeguard that must be recognized when attempting to reduce adverse outcomes resulting from pandemic stress. Especially in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has persisted longer than anticipated, organizations need to acknowledge that employees may have already drained their reservoir of resources and are unable to replenish them.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

The current study aimed to provide a timely and meaningful contribution to the sport organization behavior literature and meaningful implications for employees' psychological well-being during the pandemic. However, we acknowledge that our work has its limitations. First, the study was conducted as a cross-sectional design. Thus, the temporal nature of the relationships between studied variables requires further investigation, especially considering the longevity of the current pandemic. Additionally, it must be noted that the data were collected from employees working at NCAA Division I organizations and represent a specific portion of the employees. Within our acknowledgment, working conditions, responsibilities, and reactions to the pandemic may vary greatly depending on divisions, institutions, and positions. Therefore, readers should be cautious when applying the results to the general population at collegiate sport organizations.

Considering the study's limitations, we suggest some recommendations for future research. First, a longitudinal design study is recommended to assess how employees' perceived pandemic stress affects them as the pandemic lingers. Based on COR theory, individuals may adapt to prolonged exposure to a certain stress and reevaluate the value of the original resources [15]. In such cases, a longitudinal study can assess how employees might adapt or shift salience for their existing source of resources and find alternatives. Second, as the current study demonstrated the applicability of COR theory in studying collegiate sport organizations during the pandemic, other theoretically and contextually relevant variables can be applied to future studies (e.g., job satisfaction, work–family conflict, financial difficulties). For instance, Allen and Mueller [37] reported that role ambiguity and lack of voice at the workplace deplete employees' resources, predicting burnout, which may lead to turnover. Thus, with changes in working environments, future studies can apply these concepts to investigate how these changes are affecting intercollegiate sport employees.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Y.C. and M.S.; Data curation, E.W.; Formal analysis, Y.C.; Investigation, M.S.; Methodology, Y.C.; Software, Y.C.; Writing—original draft, Y.C.; Writing—review & editing, M.S. and E.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of University of Florida (IRB202101569, 6 July 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available due to privacy issues.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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