MENTAL WORKLOAD, JOB STRESS, AND LEADERSHIP TRUST SHAPING EMPLOYEE CREATIVITY VIA PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of mental workload, work stress, and trust in leaders on employee creativity and innovation at XYZ University, both directly and through psychological distress as a mediating variable. The research adopts a quantitative explanatory approach and involves employees who have been actively working for at least one year in academic or managerial roles. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the assistance of SmartPLS.The findings reveal that work stress negatively affects employee creativity and innovation, while trust in leaders plays an important role in encouraging innovative behavior among employees. Meanwhile, mental workload and psychological distress do not show a direct influence on creativity and innovation, and psychological distress does not mediate the relationship between the studied variables. The results highlight the importance of leadership quality and effective stress management in fostering creativity and innovation within organizations. Future research is recommended to expand the research context to different organizations, include additional relevant variables, and apply longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to better understand the psychological dynamics of employees in the workplace.

Keywords: *Creativity; Innovation; Leadership; Psychological Distress; Work Stress*

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of digital transformation and global uncertainty following the pandemic, the world of work has undergone extraordinary dynamics that impact employees' psychological conditions and performance (Ali et al., 2024). Previous research indicates that high job demands can increase psychological distress and negatively affect emotional states that support creativity (Santiago-Torner, 2023). Khassawneh et al., (2022) found that over 60% of educators and educational staff experience moderate to extreme occupational strain that severely undermines productivity and mental adaptability. Meanwhile, Hanaysha et al., (2022) reported that increased mental workload contributes to a reduction in creative thinking capacity by up to 30% A severe mismatch arises when occupational pressures far exceed the support, tools, and capacity provided to handle them. These findings indicate that job pressure in the context of higher education in Indonesia is a significant issue that can potentially affect both the performance and well-being of lecturers. This condition not only affects psychological well-being constrains the emergence of new ideas and create, which is crucial for competing in Islamic higher education institutions.

Mental health and workforce creativity issues have substantial implications for human resource quality and national productivity, aligning with the National Research Master Plan (RIRN) agenda, with a pronounced emphasis on Human Resource Development, Science, Technology, and Education (Mumford et al., 2023). Moreover, strengthening employee innovation in higher education also supports Asta Cita Prabowo point 4, which emphasizes the development of human resources, science, and education as pillars of national competitiveness (Huizingh, 2024). Additionally, issues of mental workload, work stress, and employees' psychological conditions are directly related to the global development agenda, particularly Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, which underscores the importance of a healthy, safe, and sustainable work environment (Srimongkolkul et al., 2025). Achieving this goal depends not only on productivity but also on the psychological well-being of human resources as the organization's main drivers. Indicators such as the human resource ratio in science and technology and multifactor productivity can be improved if psychological pressure in the workplace is effectively managed and supported by a healthy trust relationship between employees and leadership (Idris et al., 2022).

Earlier research has systematically examined how task demands and stress pressure shape individual performance outcomes, but they generally focus on the industrial or public service sectors. Baskoro (2022) emphasize that psychological distress among workers is influenced by job stressors such as low workplace trust, high task demands, and experiences of discrimination or stigma. Research by Zaman et al., (2024) shows that workload significantly affects work stress, which, if not properly managed, can reduce employee productivity. In the context of leadership, research by Bouteska et al., (2024) reveals that confidence in leadership can buffer the adverse impact of stress on employee conduct. Nevertheless, integrated investigations linking all four variables remain scarce, especially within Islamic higher education settings.

Prior studies remain fragmented and largely overlook psychological distress as a mediating mechanism linking workload, stress, and trust to employee creativity. A study by Demerouti (2007) states that psychological distress emerges from cumulative pressures, notably overwhelming job demands, insufficient interpersonal support, and persistent sleep disruption, which significantly affect individuals' distress levels. Research by Bakker (2017) indicates that psychological distress causes emotional and cognitive imbalance, which can hinder individuals' ability to engage in complex thinking,

including generating new ideas and solutions. Although psychosocial risk, psychological pressure, and their impacts on performance and employee well-being have been widely discussed, studies that specifically link these factors to creativity and innovation in higher education organizations remain relatively limited and underexplored (Park & Kim, 2025). Therefore, research is needed to fill this gap to attain a far more profound grasp of the psychosocial forces that shape innovative capacity in the Islamic academic context.

The main issue addressed in this study is how mental workload, work stress, and trust in leaders affect employee creativity and innovation, by positioning psychological distress as the mediating mechanism. If this issue is not addressed, higher education institutions risk experiencing stagnation in innovation, decreased motivation among lecturers and educational staff, and reputational losses that have long-term effects on educational quality and competitive advantage.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory

This research is anchored in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory introduced by (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), asserting that all occupations are fundamentally structured around two primary elements: job demands and job resources. Job demands such as mental workload, time pressure, task complexity, and emotional stress require sustained effort and can deplete employees' psychological energy, leading to psychological distress including emotional exhaustion, anxiety, or mild depression. Conversely, workplace assets namely trust in leadership, managerial backing, and developmental feedback enable goal attainment, buffer work-related pressure, and stimulate individual advancement and innovation. JD-R Theory identifies two main motivational pathways: the framework outlines two opposing mechanisms: an energy-depleting pathway in which excessive job demands trigger stress and ultimately burnout, and an energy-enriching pathway where sufficient job resources ignite engagement and foster creativity. As Bakker (2017) highlight, the model integrates mental strain and institutional backing into a single explanatory lens, clarifying how their dynamic interaction determines employee well-being and drives innovative outcomes. Thus, JD-R Theory is highly relevant for understanding how mental workload, work stress, trust in leadership, and psychological distress interact to influence creativity and innovation among staff in Islamic higher education institutions.

Mental Workload

Mental workload refers to the shift in a person's cognitive functioning triggered by the pressures and requirements of a task, reflected in performance, physiological responses, and subjective experiences (Park & Kim, 2025). It encompasses not only the quantity of tasks but the cognitive quality, including concentration, working memory, and information processing under pressure, and arises from both physical and digital multitasking demands. High mental workload can lead to mental fatigue, frustration, reduced work efficiency, and, over time, impaired psychological health and adaptive functioning (Berthon et al., 2025). When coupled with insufficient support or leadership, excessive cognitive demands increase psychological distress, negatively affecting employees' ability to maintain creativity and innovation (Anwar et al., 2023). Aligned with the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory, mental workload is framed as an occupational demand that compels substantial Psychological effort and may have adverse effects if not balanced with adequate resources. Therefore, in cognitively demanding

academic organizations such as Islamic higher education institutions, effectively managing mental workload is crucial to sustaining innovation and performance quality.

Work Stress

Work stress arises when individuals feel unable to cope with continuous job demands that exceed their personal capacity or resources. Common triggers include excessive workload, tight deadlines, role conflicts, unclear tasks, and pressure from supervisors or the work environment (Santiago-Torner et al., 2025). Prolonged work stress can weaken employees' psychological well-being, reduce organizational commitment, and negatively affect work attitudes and behaviors (Albashiti et al., 2021). Perceived organizational support, such as financial assistance and job adjustments, can alleviate emotional strain and foster creativity under high demands (Anasori et al., 2021). Psychologically, stress triggers anxiety, emotional tension, and mental fatigue, impairing clear thinking, adaptability, and creative task performance (Ahmed et al., 2022). While work stress negatively impacts innovative behavior, transformational leadership and knowledge sharing can mitigate its effects (Williamson et al., 2021). According to Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory, tress arises when work pressures outweigh the support and resources available to handle them, and ineffective coping can escalate stress into psychological distress, reducing overall performance. Research also shows work stress mediates the relationship between job conflict and job satisfaction, with unmanaged stress lowering satisfaction and increasing psychological burden, aligning with psychological distress as a key factor affecting employee performance in Islamic higher education Baskh, 2023). Conflicts between work and personal life further intensify stress, potentially hindering productivity and innovation, while proactive recovery strategies outside work hours help reduce daily stress and maintain affective and task performance (Nugroho, 2023). Thus, work stress not only threatens mental health but also poses a major barrier to creativity and innovation, making effective stress management critical for sustaining innovative performance and academic quality in higher education institutions.

Trust in Leaders

Employees' trust in leaders stems from their confidence that leaders act ethically, possess the necessary capabilities, and genuinely prioritize the well-being of others, forming the foundation for positive and supportive workplace relationships (Prasetyo & Iridiastadi, 2025). Trusted leaders foster psychological safety, empowering employees to voice ideas and address challenges without fear of rejection or punishment, which is essential for creativity and innovation (Anwar et al., 2022). In line with Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory, leader trust functions as a job resource, helping employees manage work demands, enhancing intrinsic motivation, engagement, and productivity. Thus, beyond its relational aspect, trust in leadership serves as a critical psychological capital that cultivates an innovative work culture, particularly in Islamic higher education institutions where ethical and moral leadership supports openness, collaboration, and continuous renewal (Ramaswamy et al., 2023).

Psychological distress

Psychological distress refers to a state of inner emotional strain marked by heightened anxiety, depression, irritability, and feelings of inadequacy, which can disrupt daily functioning and work performance (Amari, 2023). While not a clinical disorder, unmanaged distress can escalate into serious psychological problems. Despotic

leadership exacerbates distress by imposing authoritarian, exploitative, and unethical behaviors that deplete employees' psychological resources, negatively affecting attitudes and work outcomes (Wajdi, 2023). Distress emerges when intense job demands particularly mental workload and work stress, surpass the personal or organizational resources available to cope. It undermines focus, motivation, and the capacity for creative problem-solving, often accompanied by physiological and emotional reactions like insomnia, demotivation, and feelings of helplessness (Verawati, 2024). According to the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory, severely inadequate coping capacity under intense demands rapidly exhausts psychological energy, leading to distress that reduces performance and creativity (Kuswati et al., 2021). Thus, psychological distress functions not merely as an outcome of job demands, but as a pivotal mechanism through which workload exerts its effects, stress, and innovative work outcomes, particularly in intellectually and morally demanding contexts such as Islamic higher education, where undetected distress can hinder academic productivity and institutional innovation.

Creativity and Innovation in Performance

Employee creativity is the capacity to conceive novel yet useful workplace ideas, which become the foundation for innovative work behavior by being transformed into actionable and implemented solutions (Yassin, 2021). Innovation represents the practical application of creative ideas to improve efficiency, effectiveness, or work quality. In modern work environments, creativity and innovation are essential competencies for navigating rapid change, global competition, and performance demands, yet they are strongly influenced by psychological factors, such as mental state and motivation, as well as organizational context, including culture and leadership (Sholahuddin, 2024). Situational humor can foster positive psychological conditions, reduce tension, and encourage flexible thinking, thereby enhancing individual and team creativity (Biemans, 2024). According to Santiago-Torner, (2023), innovative work behavior involves developing and implementing new ideas, heavily shaped by individual creativity and organizational support. The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework conceptualizes creativity and innovation as outcomes of the interaction between job demands and resources: unmanaged mental and emotional demands increase distress and hinder creativity, whereas sufficient resources, including motivation, social support, and trust in leadership, promote engagement and innovation (Ali et al., 2024). Thus, creativity and innovation emerge not merely from individual potential but from the complex interplay of psychological conditions, organizational culture, and leadership. In the context of Islamic higher education in Surakarta, where academic, administrative, and spiritual challenges coexist, effectively managing work pressure and providing psychosocial support is critical to fostering an innovative work culture.

Mental Workload and Employee Creativity

Mental workload, as a dimension of job demands, requires employees to engage their cognitive and emotional capacities intensively over extended periods. When this workload exceeds an individual's ability to manage tasks efficiently, it leads to mental fatigue that impairs flexible and innovative thinking (Khassawneh et al., 2022). Excessive mental demands deplete cognitive resources, reducing divergent thinking and the generation of new ideas (Aji et al., 2025). Pujol-cols & Lazzaro-salazar (2021) found that cognitive pressure at work negatively correlates with task innovation, especially when meaningful support is entirely nonexistent. Similarly, Demands et al. (2016), within the JD-R framework, highlight that high mental workload diminishes psychological resources

such as concentration and motivation, thereby hindering creativity. Consequently, prolonged cognitive fatigue significantly lowers individuals' capacity to produce innovative solutions and novel ideas, leading to the following hypothesis:

H1: Mental workload has a negative effect on employee creativity and innovation among employees at XYZ University.

Job Stress and Employee Creativity

Work stress emerges when occupational pressures vastly exceed a person's capacity to handle them, disrupting cognitive and emotional functions such as clear thinking, decision-making, and creative idea generation. Poorly managed work stress can undermine employees' innovative potential (Mumford et al., 2023). Anwar & Widodo (2023) found that high stress reduces intrinsic motivation and engagement in tasks requiring creativity, as employees under pressure tend to focus on routine tasks and avoid risk, contrary to innovative behavior. Within the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework, work stress is viewed as a consequence of high job demands, which diminish cognitive and emotional capacity for innovation, making it a key barrier to workplace creativity (Biemans & Huizingh, 2024). Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Job stress negatively impacts employee creativity and innovation among employees at XYZ University.

Trust in Leaders and Employee Creativity

Trust in leaders reflects subordinates' belief in their integrity, competence, and good intentions in decision-making and team management. A trust-based work relationship fosters an open, psychologically safe environment where employees can express new ideas without fear of rejection or punishment, which is crucial for promoting creativity and innovation (Srimongkolkul et al., 2025). Research by Idris (2022) shows that transformational leadership and a leader's ability to influence and build effective social relationships shape an adaptive organizational culture that enhances performance and positive work behaviors. Similarly, Baskoro (2026) finds that transactional leadership can boost organizational creativity by encouraging knowledge-sharing behaviors through clear roles and reward systems. Trusted leaders thus serve as psychological resources within the JD-R Theory, helping to mitigate job stress and activate employees' creative potential. In Islamic higher education institutions, leaders who build trust not only strengthen interpersonal relationships but also create a work climate that supports innovative thinking. Emerging from the convergence of theoretical insights and empirical evidence, this hypothesis is advanced:

H3: Trust in leaders has a positive effect on employee creativity and innovation among employees at XYZ University.

Psychological distress and employee creativity

Psychological distress is a negative emotional state encompassing anxiety, tension, mental fatigue, and mild depressive symptoms arising from prolonged stress or psychosocial pressure. In the workplace, it can impair cognitive functions such as concentration, cognitive flexibility, and decision-making, all of which are essential for creativity and innovation (Idris et al., 2022). Psychological distress serves as an intervening mechanism that intensifies the inverse link between harmful workplace experiences and employee creativity., with higher distress leading to greater reductions in creative capacity (Anasori et al., 2021). Individuals experiencing distress tend to avoid

challenges, show low motivation, and feel less competent in coping with rapid work dynamics. However, moderate levels of distress may not directly reduce creativity if individuals possess adequate coping mechanisms, allowing them to maintain cognitive functioning under pressure. Under high distress, the brain prioritizes survival and avoiandce over exploration and creation, directly lowering workplace creativity and innovation (Baskoro, 2022). Positive psychological capital and well-being, by contrast, foster work engagement and creative behaviors (Yassin, 2021). Within the JD-R Theory framework, psychological distress emerges when excessive job demands overwhelmingly surpass an individual's capacity to cope and insufficient work resources and, if unmanaged, becomes a major barrier to individual creative productivity (Zaman et al., 2024). Emerging from the convergence of theoretical insights and empirical evidence, this hypothesis is advanced:

H4: Psychological distress negatively impacts employee creativity and innovation among employees at XYZ University.

The Mediating Role of Psychological Distress Between Mental Workload and Creativity

In modern work environments, high mental workload is a primary trigger for psychological distress. Continuous exposure to tasks requiring intense concentration, multitasking, and complex decision-making can lead to mental fatigue, reducing employees' cognitive flexibility, creativity, and innovation (Nugroho, 2023). High workload also increases emotional exhaustion, which negatively affects job performance by impairing psychological well-being (Sari & Sholahuddin, 2024). Employees experiencing distress tend to withdraw from exploratory activities and exhibit rigid, routine-oriented behavior rather than innovative performance. From the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) perspective, Severe cognitive overload in the workplace drains an individual's psychological reserves, leading to distress, which in turn diminishes the ability to generate and implement new ideas (Prasetyo & Iridiastadi, 2025). Emerging from the convergence of theoretical insights and empirical evidence, this hypothesis is advanced:

H5: Psychological distress mediates the effect of mental workload on employee creativity and innovation among employees at XYZ University.

The Mediating Role of Psychological Distress between Work Stress and Creativity

Prolonged work stress significantly contributes to psychological distress, manifesting as negative psychological states such as anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and mild depression, which impede cognitive and affective functions essential for creative thinking, including problem-solving, initiative, and risk-taking (Anwar et al., 2022). Without adequate recovery, sustained stress depletes psychological resources, weakening the capacity needed to maintain creativity and innovation (Williamson et al., 2021). Under distress, individuals not only lose psychological energy but also tend to avoid challenges, opting for routine task completion without improvisation. Ahmed et al. (2022) further highlight that the impact of work stress on creativity is indirect, mediated by feelings of lost control and psychological pressure. According to the JD-R Theory, work stress as a job demand, when not balanced by job resources, induces distress, ultimately reducing individuals' ability to adapt creatively to work demands (Ramaswamy et al., 2023). Emerging from the convergence of theoretical insights and empirical evidence, this hypothesis is advanced:

H6: Psychological distress mediates the effect of work stress on employee creativity and innovation among employees at XYZ University.

The Mediating Role of Psychological Distress Between Trust in Leaders and Creativity

Trust in leaders is fundamental to establishing a psychologically secure workplace, as trusted leaders foster openness, healthy communication, and reduce employees' emotional pressure. When trust exists, individuals feel secure and experience lower psychological distress when facing job challenges (Amari, 2023). A study by Ali et al. (2024) reveals that participative and transformational leadership act as protective forces against the strain of excessive job demands by strengthening psychological support and fostering deeper employee engagement, thereby preserving organizational innovation capacity. Similarly, authentic leadership enhances employees' psychological resilience and innovative work behavior, positively impacting performance even under high workload (Srimongkolkul et al., 2025). Within the JD-R Theory framework, trust in leaders functions as a job resource that prevents distress from job pressures, influencing creativity both directly and indirectly through reduced psychological distress (Wajdi, 2023). Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is proposed

H7: Psychological distress mediates the influence of trust in leaders on employee creativity and innovation among employees at XYZ University.

METHOD

This study applies a quantitative explanatory framework to explore the causal relationships (Williamson et al., 2021) among mental workload, Work stress, and trust Leadership in influencing employee Creativity and Innovation, with psychological distress acting as a mediating variable. The population includes X Y Z University employees who have been active for at least one year and hold academic or managerial roles, with a minimum sample of 95 determined using Slovin's formula or the guideline of 5–10 times the number of indicators (18) (Khan, 2023). Data were obtained through structured questionnaires developed from established theories and empirical studies, complemented by secondary sources to describe the institutional profile.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with SmartPLS was employed for analysis, starting with measurement model testing to confirm convergent and discriminant validity as well as reliability through Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha, followed by structural model evaluation using R^2 and f^2 (Nugroho, 2023). The study further assessed direct and indirect effects, including the mediating function of psychological distress, using path coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, and bootstrapping (Prasetyo & Iridiastadi, 2025).

Mental workload reflects high cognitive demands reducing task performance and flexibility (Aji et al., 2025), work stress denotes negative emotional responses to excessive job pressure (Amari, 2023), and trust in leadership captures perceptions of integrity, competence, and fairness (Mumford et al., 2023). Psychological distress represents anxiety, depression, or emotional strain from prolonged stress (Anasori et al., c2021), Creativity and innovation reflect a person's capacity to conceive original ideas and transform them into practical solutions (Srimongkolkul et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Description

Respondent demographics refer to the basic characteristics of research participants, such as gender, employment status, work unit, and years of service. Presenting demographic information is important because it helps describe the profile of the sample involved in the study and provides contextual understanding of the respondents who contributed to the research data (Anwar et al., 2022). In addition, demographic data allow readers to evaluate whether the characteristics of the respondents are relevant to the research context. The demographic profile of respondents involved in this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Respondent Demographics

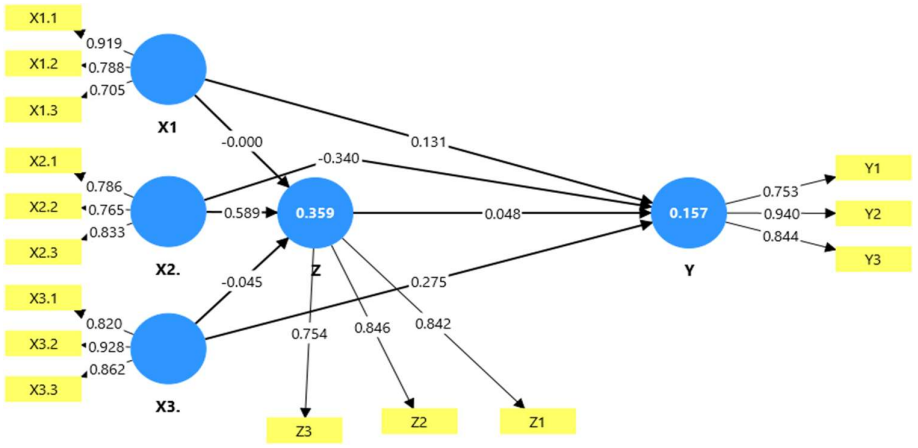
Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	60	63.16%
	Female	35	36.84%
Employment Status	Permanent	90	94.74%
	Non-Permanent	5	5.26%
Work Unit	FH	3	3.16%
	FKI	7	7.37%
	FEB	7	7.37%
	FPsi	11	11.58%
	FKIP	21	22.11%
	FT	22	23.16%
	FG	24	25.26%
Years of Service	>1 year	95	100%
	<1 year	0	0%

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The respondents of this study comprised 95 employees of X Y Z University, with a majority being male (63.16%) and permanent staff (94.74%), all of whom have worked for more than one year. Participants were drawn from diverse faculties, with the largest numbers from FG (25.26%), FT (23.16%), and FKIP (22.11%), ensuring representation across different job functions and workloads. This demographic distribution indicates that the data reflect the perceptions of employees with stable work experience and varied organizational contexts, providing a comprehensive understanding of mental workload, work stress, trust in leadership, and employee creativity and innovation in the Islamic higher education environment.

Outer Model Analysis

Outer model analysis is conducted to evaluate the relationship between latent variables and their indicators in the measurement model. The purpose of presenting the outer model is to show how each indicator represents its respective construct in the study using SmartPLS 4. Figure 1 illustrates the outer model of this research, displaying the relationships between each construct and its indicators.



Source : Primary Data, 2026

Figure 1
Outer Model

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity refers to the degree to which multiple indicators of the same construct are strongly correlated and collectively represent the underlying latent variable. The purpose of this test is to ensure that the indicators used in a construct are able to measure the same concept consistently. In PLS-SEM analysis using SmartPLS 4, convergent validity is commonly evaluated based on the outer loading value of each indicator, where a loading value greater than 0.70 indicates that the indicator adequately represents its construct, although values between 0.60 and 0.70 may still be acceptable in exploratory research (Ramaswamy et al., 2023). Table 2 presents the outer loading values of all indicators used to measure the constructs in this study.

Table 2
Outer Loading Values

Variables	Indicator	Outer Loading
Mental Workload	X1.1	0.919
	X1.2	0.788
	X1.3	0.705
Work Stress	X2.1	0.786
	X2.2	0.765
	X2.3	0.833
Trust in Leaders	X3.1	0.820
	X3.2	0.928
	X3.3	0.862
Creativity and Innovation	Y1	0.753
	Y2	0.940
	Y3	0.844
Psychological distress	Z1	0.842
	Z2	0.846
	Z3	0.754

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Based on the convergent validity results shown in the outer loading table, all indicators for the variables Mental Workload, Work Stress, Trust in Leaders, Psychological Distress, and Creativity and Innovation demonstrate outer loadings ≥ 0.70, indicating they validly measure their respective latent constructs. The loading factors

range from 0.705 to 0.940, showing that each indicator adequately represents its construct, with no indicators falling below the minimum threshold.

Additionally, convergent validity can also be assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which measures the amount of variance captured by a construct relative to the variance due to measurement error. A construct is considered to have adequate convergent validity if the AVE value is greater than or equal to 0.50, indicating that the construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators (Amari, 2023). Table 3 presents the AVE values for each construct in this study, showing that all variables meet the recommended threshold of AVE ≥ 0.50 and are therefore considered valid for further analysis in the research model.

Table 3
Average Variance Extracted Value

Variables	AVE	Information
X1	0.654	Valid
X2	0.632	Valid
X3	0.759	Valid
Y	0.721	Valid
Z	0.664	Valid

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Based on the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) results, all study variables demonstrated convergent validity with AVE values exceeding 0.50. Mental Workload (X1) had an AVE of 0.654, indicating that it explains over 65% of its indicators' variance. Work Stress (X2) showed an AVE of 0.632, reflecting a strong representation of its indicators, while Trust in Leaders (X3) had the highest AVE at 0.759, demonstrating very strong indicator representation. Creativity and Innovation (Y) achieved an AVE of 0.721, and Psychological Distress (Z) had an AVE of 0.664, confirming that both constructs adequately represent their indicators. Therefore, every construct has satisfied the requirements of convergent validity, indicating that the measurement model is robust and appropriate for further structural evaluation.

Discriminant Validity

An indicator is considered to have discriminant validity when all measurement indicators for each construct are distinct from and not combined with the measurement instruments of other constructs, and produce factor loadings greater than 0.5 (Kuswati et al., 2021). A model is considered to meet discriminant validity when the loading value of each indicator on its own construct is higher than its loading on other constructs. The following table 4 presents the cross-loading values obtained in this study.

Table 4
Cross Loading

	X1	X2.	X3.	Y	Z
X1.1	0.919	0.548	-0.209	-0.156	0.399
X1.2	0.788	0.422	-0.196	-0.063	0.228
X1.3	0.705	0.498	-0.173	0.000	0.157
X2.1	0.421	0.786	-0.187	-0.274	0.441
X2.2	0.433	0.765	-0.164	-0.197	0.479
X2.3	0.564	0.833	-0.107	-0.212	0.505
X3.1	-0.283	-0.126	0.820	0.203	-0.070
X3.2	-0.205	-0.192	0.928	0.299	-0.145

X3.3	-0.159	-0.170	0.862	0.269	-0.176
Y1	-0.080	-0.186	0.078	0.753	-0.001
Y2	-0.131	-0.288	0.397	0.940	-0.208
Y3	-0.076	-0.229	0.167	0.844	-0.097
Z1	0.308	0.486	-0.086	-0.215	0.842
Z2	0.248	0.463	-0.227	-0.172	0.846
Z3	0.330	0.513	-0.072	0.024	0.754

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Based on the discriminant validity test using cross-loading values, all indicators show the highest loading on their respective constructs compared to others, indicating good construct differentiation. For Mental Workload (X1), indicators X1.1, X1.2, and X1.3 loaded 0.919, 0.788, and 0.705, respectively; Work Stress (X2) indicators X2.1, X2.2, and X2.3 loaded 0.786, 0.765, and 0.833; Trust in Leaders (X3) indicators X3.1, X3.2, and X3.3 loaded 0.820, 0.928, and 0.862; Creativity and Innovation (Y) indicators Y1, Y2, and Y3 loaded 0.753, 0.940, and 0.844; and Psychological Distress (Z) indicators Z1, Z2, and Z3 loaded 0.842, 0.846, and 0.754. These results confirm that all indicators validly and specifically represent their constructs, demonstrating that the measurement model meets discriminant validity criteria and is suitable for further structural analysis.

Reliability Test

Reliability testing is conducted to verify the accuracy, consistency, and precision of the instrument in measuring constructs. The reliability evaluation in this study is assessed based on two criteria, namely Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. A variable is considered to meet the reliability criteria if it has a Cronbach's Alpha value greater than 0.70 and a Composite Reliability value greater than 0.70, although a value of 0.60 is still acceptable for exploratory research (Nugroho, 2023). Table 5 presents the values of Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability in this study.

Table 5
Cronbach Alpha and Composite Reliability

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability
X1	0.759	0.849
X2	0.708	0.837
X3	0.843	0.904
Y	0.815	0.885
Z	0.746	0.856

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The reliability analysis confirmed that every research variable achieved Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability scores of at least 0.70, reflecting strong internal consistency and dependable measurement instruments. Notably, Mental Workload (X1) recorded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.759 and a Composite Reliability of 0.849, reinforcing the robustness of the scale., Work Stress (X2) had 0.708 and 0.837, Trust in Leaders (X3) achieved 0.843 and 0.904, Creativity and Innovation (Y) recorded 0.815 and 0.885, and Psychological Distress (Z) reached 0.746 and 0.856. These results confirm that all constructs are reliably measured, making the instruments suitable for further structural model analysis.

Multicollinearity Test

In addition to validity and reliability tests, a multicollinearity test was also conducted to ensure that there was no high correlation among the independent variables in the structural model. This evaluation was carried out by examining the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values (Prasetyo, 2025). The criterion used is that if the VIF value is < 5.00, the model is considered free from multicollinearity issues and the analysis can proceed to hypothesis testing. Table 6 presents the VIF values in this study.

Table 6
Variance Inflation Factor Value

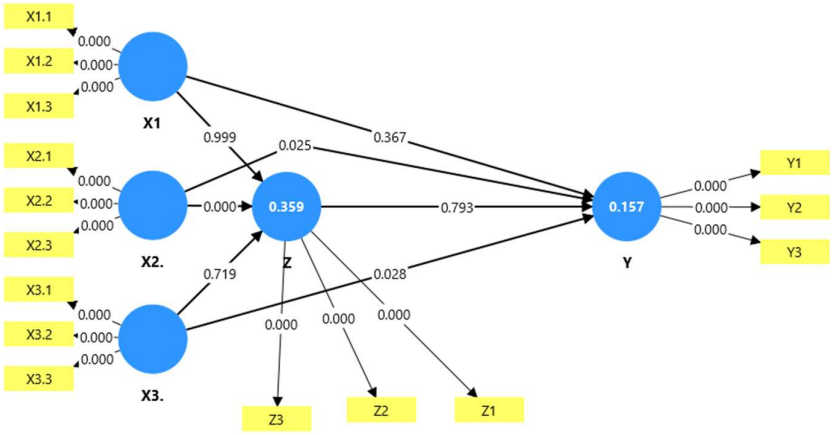
	Y	Z
X1	1.591	1.591
X2.	2.101	1.559
X3.	1.066	1.063
Y		
Z	1.561	

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Based on the multicollinearity test using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), all independent variables in the research model have VIF values below 5.0, indicating no multicollinearity issues. Specifically, Mental Workload (X1) has a VIF of 1.591 for both Creativity and Innovation (Y) and Psychological Distress (Z); Work Stress (X2) shows VIFs of 2.101 for Y and 1.559 for Z; and Trust in Leaders (X3) has VIFs of 1.066 for Y and 1.063 for Z, reflecting low inter-variable correlations. The mediating variable, Psychological Distress (Z), also has a VIF of 1.561 for Y, well below the maximum threshold. Therefore, the structural model is free from multicollinearity, ensuring accurate interpretation of relationships and reliable subsequent analyses.

Inner Model Analysis

The inner model analysis is used to evaluate the structural relationships among latent constructs through the R-square value, path coefficients, and the significance of relationships obtained from the bootstrapping procedure. Figure 2 presents the inner model.



Source : Primary Data, 2026

Figure 2
Inner Model

R-Square

The R-Square test is conducted to determine the extent to which the exogenous (independent) variables collectively influence the dependent variable. The R-Square value reflects the predictive strength of the structural model developed. A higher R-Square value indicates a greater ability of the independent variables to explain variations in the dependent variable (Wajdi, 2023). Based on general criteria, R-Square values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are categorized as strong, moderate, and weak models, respectively. Table 7 presents the R-Square values in this study.

Table 7
R-Square

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Y	0.157	0.120
Z	0.359	0.338

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Based on the coefficient of determination (R^2) results, Creativity and Innovation (Y) has an R^2 of 0.157 (adjusted R^2 = 0.120), indicating that Mental Workload, Work Stress, Trust in Leaders, and Psychological Distress explain 15.7% of its variance, while 84.3% is shaped by a range of influences that lie beyond the scope of the model. Meanwhile, Psychological Distress (Z) has an R^2 of 0.359 (adjusted R^2 = 0.338), showing that Mental Workload, Work Stress, and Trust in Leaders account for 35.9% of its variance, with the remaining 64.1% explained by other factors. Overall, these R^2 values suggest that the model demonstrates only a limited to moderate capacity to account for variations in the endogenous variables, which is acceptable in social and behavioral research given the complexity of factors affecting creativity, innovation, and psychological conditions.

Q-Square Test

The Q-Square (Q^2) test is used to assess the predictive capability (predictive relevance) of the structural model in PLS-SEM. The Q^2 value is obtained through the blindfolding procedure, where the model is considered to have predictive relevance if the Q^2 value is greater than zero ($Q^2 > 0$), indicating that the model is able to predict the observed data well (Santiago-Torner, 2023). Table 8 presents the results of the Q-Square test in this study.

Table 8
Q-Square

	Q^2predict	Information
Z	0.280	Predictive relevance
Y	0.064	Predictive relevance

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Based on the Q^2predict results, the Psychological Distress variable (Z) yielded a Q^2predict value of 0.280, while the Creativity and Innovation variable (Y) showed a value of 0.064. Values above zero indicate that the model has predictive relevance for the endogenous variables. Specifically, the Q^2predict of 0.280 for Psychological Distress demonstrates a fairly strong predictive ability in explaining respondents' variations based on the exogenous variables, whereas the Q^2predict of 0.064 for Creativity and

Innovation suggests relatively weak predictive relevance, though still above the minimum threshold. Overall, the model exhibits predictive relevance, particularly for Psychological Distress, while its predictive power for Creativity and Innovation remains limited and may be affected by external forces not captured within the mode.

Hypothesis Testing

Path Coefficient Test

The path coefficient test is used to determine the direction and strength of the relationships among latent variables in the structural model. The path coefficient value indicates the causal relationship between variables, where a positive coefficient reflects a positive relationship, while a negative coefficient indicates an inverse relationship. The significance of the relationships is assessed by examining the t-statistic and p-value obtained through the bootstrapping procedure (Khassawneh et al., 2022). A relationship is considered significant if the t-statistic is greater than 1.96 and the p-value is less than 0.05 at the 5% significance level; otherwise, if the t-statistic is ≤ 1.96 and the p-value is ≥ 0.05, the relationship is considered not significant. The results of the path coefficient analysis in this study are presented in Table 9.

Table 9
Path coefficient

	Hypothesis	Original sample	T statistics	P values
X1 -> Y	H1	0.131	0.903	0.367
X2. -> Y	H2	-0.340	2.238	0.025
X3. -> Y	H3	0.275	2.193	0.028
Z -> Y	H4	0.048	0.262	0.793

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Based on the results, Mental Workload does not significantly affect employee Creativity and Innovation (β = 0.131, t = 0.903, p = 0.367), indicating that perceived mental workload does not directly influence creative output. Work Stress, however, has a significant negative effect (β = –0.340, t = 2.238, p = 0.025), suggesting that higher stress levels reduce creativity and innovation. Trust in Leaders positively and significantly impacts Creativity and Innovation (β = 0.275, t = 2.193, p = 0.028), meaning greater employee trust in leaders enhances creative behavior. Meanwhile, Psychological Distress shows no significant effect (β = 0.048, t = 0.262, p = 0.793), indicating that psychological distress does not directly affect employees' creative and innovative abilities.

Indirect Effect Test

The indirect effect test was conducted to determine the mediating role of the mediation variable in mediating the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable. The analysis was carried out using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS 4 by examining the value of the indirect effect coefficient (specific indirect effects), t-statistic, and p-value (Mumford et al., 2023). The results indicate that the indirect effect is considered significant if the t-statistic value is greater than 1.96 and the p-value is less than 0.05, which indicates the presence of a mediating role in the research model. Table 10 presents the indirect effect values in this study.

Table 10
Indirect Effect Test

	Hypothesis	Original sample	T statistics	P values
X1 -> Z -> Y	H5	-0.000	0.000	1.000
X2. -> Z -> Y	H6	0.028	0.264	0.792
X3. -> Z -> Y	H7	-0.002	0.084	0.933

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Based on the results of the indirect effect tests, psychological distress does not mediate the relationships between the independent variables and employees' Creativity and Innovation. Specifically, for H5, the mediation of Mental Workload on Creativity and Innovation was not supported (path coefficient = –0.000, t = 0.000 < 1.96, p = 1.000 > 0.05). Similarly, H6 showed that psychological distress did not mediate the effect of Work Stress on Creativity and Innovation (path coefficient = 0.028, t = 0.264 < 1.96, p = 0.792 > 0.05), and H7 indicated no mediation effect of psychological distress on the relationship between Trust in Leaders and Creativity and Innovation (path coefficient = –0.002, t = 0.084 < 1.96, p = 0.933 > 0.05). Thus, all three hypotheses were rejected, implying that these factors influence Creativity and Innovation directly rather than through psychological distress.

The Impact of Mental Workload on Employee Creativity and Innovation

The study found that Hypothesis H1 was rejected, indicating that Mental Workload does not significantly affect employees' Creativity and Innovation. This suggests that high cognitive demands at work do not necessarily hinder individuals' ability to generate new ideas or innovate. One key reason for this insignificance is employees' cognitive adaptability; those accustomed to complex tasks often develop effective task-management strategies, perceiving Mental Workload as an intellectual challenge rather than a barrier. Moreover, academic work, which requires analysis and problem-solving, can stimulate creative thinking when within individual tolerance limits.

Conceptually, this reflects employees' relatively strong cognitive adaptation to job demands, as faculty and administrative staff are familiar with high-concentration tasks, complex decision-making, and multitasking, treating Mental Workload as part of their professional routine rather than an impediment. These findings align with Mumford et al. (2023), who argue that Mental Workload does not always negatively impact innovation when individuals possess experience, competence, and supportive work systems, and with Aji et al. (2025), who emphasize that its effects depend on job context and individual cognitive management abilities.

Theoretically, the results enrich Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory by showing that job demands like Mental Workload do not necessarily lead to negative outcomes if adequate internal and external resources exist. Practically, this implies that universities should not only aim to reduce Mental Workload but also enhance employees' adaptive capacity and work support to maintain creativity.

The Effect of Work Stress on Employee Creativity and Innovation

The findings indicate that Hypothesis H2 is supported, showing that Work Stress negatively and significantly affects employee Creativity and Innovation. Prolonged emotional and psychological pressure reduces individuals' cognitive capacity and emotional energy, diminishing cognitive flexibility and risk-taking key elements for

innovation. Under high stress, employees tend to focus on routine tasks and avoid novel approaches that might lead to errors.

This result aligns with Naseem (2024), who found that Work Stress significantly decreases innovation in higher education, and with Anwar & Widodo (2023), who reported that poorly managed Work Stress directly reduces creativity and innovative behavior. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the JD-R Theory, which views Work Stress as a destructive job demand that depletes psychological resources. Practically, they highlight the importance of managing Work Stress through realistic workloads, psychological support, and a healthy work environment to sustain innovation in higher education.

The Influence of Trust in Leaders on Employee Creativity and Innovation

The findings indicate that Hypothesis H3 is supported, showing that Trust in Leaders positively and significantly influences employee Creativity and Innovation. This suggests that leadership grounded in trust fosters a work climate conducive to idea generation, a workplace climate in which employees experience psychological safety, allowing them to voice ideas, explore new approaches, and embrace risks without worrying about adverse repercussions. Such psychological safety is a critical prerequisite for innovative behavior, particularly in knowledge-based organizations like higher education institutions.

These results align with Santiago-Torner (2023), who found that ethical and trust-based leadership creates psychological safety and fair workplace relationships, encouraging creative expression and innovative behavior, especially in flexible work contexts such as teleworking. Moreover, employee trust in leaders promotes knowledge-sharing behaviors that are essential for enhancing creativity and innovation (Khassawneh et al., 2022). Theoretically, this reinforces the role of job resources in the JD-R Theory, positioning Trust in Leaders as a psychological resource that boosts motivation and work engagement. Practically, higher education leaders should adopt transparent, consistent, and ethical leadership to cultivate an innovative organizational culture.

The Influence of Psychological Distress on Creativity and Innovation

The study found that Hypothesis H4 was rejected, indicating that psychological distress does not significantly affect employees' creativity and innovation. This suggests that the distress experienced by respondents was not strong enough to directly impair creative thinking. The insignificance may be due to distress levels being mild to moderate, allowing individuals to maintain concentration, cognitive flexibility, and work motivation.

Furthermore, the Islamic higher education context provides religious and social coping mechanisms, such as workplace support and spiritual values, which buffer psychological pressure. This aligns with the view that psychological distress does not always directly impact creativity, especially when adequate coping mechanisms are present (Santiago et al., 2025). Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2022) argue that distress does not necessarily impair job performance when individuals have strong social support and meaningful work. Practically, although distress may not directly affect creativity, organizations should continue monitoring mental health to prevent escalation.

Psychological distress mediates the effect of mental workload on creativity and innovation

The results indicate that H5 is rejected, as the indirect effect of Mental Workload on Creativity and Innovation through Psychological Distress is not statistically significant, suggesting that Psychological Distress does not mediate the relationship between Mental Workload and creativity or innovation. This insignificance aligns with recent studies showing that psychological distress does not always directly affect creativity, especially when distress is moderate and individuals possess adequate coping mechanisms. One key reason for the mediation's failure is that Mental Workload in this study was not intense enough to elicit distress impacting creative cognitive functions; it likely remained within tolerable limits, while organizational support and relatively stable work experience further mitigated negative effects.

The rejection of this hypothesis implies that employees perceive Mental Workload as a manageable challenge, particularly in cognitively demanding academic settings. This finding aligns with Aji et al. (2025), who emphasize the contextual nature of Mental Workload's impact and the buffering effect of individual adaptive capacity, and with Mumford et al. (2023), who note that cognitive demands can be neutral toward innovation when supported by organizational systems and individual competence. From a JD-R Theory perspective, these results highlight that job demands do not automatically trigger health impairment pathways when sufficient resources are available. Practically, organizations should balance increases in Mental Workload with training, role clarity, and work support to prevent it from escalating into distress that undermines creativity.

Psychological distress mediates the effect of work stress on creativity and innovation

The results of the indirect effect test indicate that H6 is rejected, as psychological distress does not significantly mediate the effect of work stress on employees' creativity and innovation. Although work stress increases psychological distress, this distress does not transmit the effect to creativity and innovation, suggesting that moderate levels of distress do not necessarily impair cognitive creative capacity. This insignificance implies that the influence of work stress on creativity is more direct rather than mediated through psychological distress. Under high work stress, individuals tend to experience decreased cognitive flexibility and innovative motivation directly, without first reaching a state of deep distress.

This finding aligns with Naseem (2024), who reported that work stress directly reduces innovation in higher education, and Anwar & Widodo (2023), who found that work pressure can hinder creativity without a psychological pathway. From the JD-R Theory perspective, work stress functions as a job demand that directly disrupts motivational processes. Theoretically, this confirms that psychological distress is not the sole explanatory mechanism between work stress and creativity. Practically, it suggests that managing work stress requires direct organizational interventions, workload adjustments, and managerial support rather than solely curative approaches targeting distress.

Psychological distress mediates the influence of trust in leaders on creativity and innovation

The indirect effect analysis indicates that H7 is not supported, since the mediated impact of trust Leadership on Creativity and Innovation through Psychological distress fails to reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$). This finding suggests that Psychological distress

does not function as a mediating mechanism within this relationship. This nonsignificance suggests that Trust in Leaders influences creativity not by reducing or increasing distress instead, it operates as an immediate psychological asset that strengthens psychological safety, fuels motivation, and deepens work engagement. Consequently, the effect of Trust in Leaders on employee creativity operates through motivational and relational mechanisms rather than through distress.

This finding aligns with Ahmed et al. (2022), who report that trust-based leadership fosters innovation via psychological safety rather than distress reduction, and Jung (2021), who found that organizational trust directly affects innovative behavior without mediation by negative psychological states. From a Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) perspective, Trust in Leaders serves as a job-based resource that promptly energizes the motivational pathway.

Theoretically, this indicates that not all job resources operate through distress reduction, and practically, it suggests that organizations, particularly higher education institutions, can enhance employee Creativity and Innovation directly by strengthening trust-based leadership and relational quality without waiting for improvements in psychological distress.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examined how mental workload, work stress, and trust in leaders influence employees' creativity and innovation in an Islamic higher education context in Surakarta, both directly and through psychological distress. Results indicate that work stress significantly hinders creativity and innovation, while trust in leaders acts as a strong facilitator. Mental workload and psychological distress showed no significant direct effects, nor did psychological distress mediate these relationships. The evidence brings forward the decisive influence of leadership quality and stress management in fostering innovative behavior.

However, the research carries notable constraints, as it centers on only one institution and depends heavily on participants' self-reported survey responses, and a narrow set of psychosocial variables. Future research should broaden the organizational context and incorporate additional relevant factors such as organizational culture, leadership style, job autonomy, and organizational support, as these variables have been widely recognized as important determinants of employee creativity and innovation. Practically, enhancing stress management and building trust through transparent, supportive, and ethically grounded leadership can create a psychologically healthy environment that sustains creativity and innovation.

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