

Conceptualizing and Measuring Emotional Saturation: A Qualitative Content Analysis Approach

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Abstract

The theory of saturation has recently emerged as a meta-framework for understanding how excessive input across cognitive, social, and emotional domains can lead to diminished functioning. By applying this theoretical lens, researchers are provided with new insights into how individuals process, manage, and respond to increasing levels of stimuli in complex environments. While prior research has examined related phenomena such as cognitive overload and emotional exhaustion, the construct of emotional saturation remains insufficiently explored and lacks a clear conceptual foundation. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore and define the dimensions of emotional saturation within organizational contexts.

Adopting an exploratory qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six experts in organizational behavior and psychology. The data were analyzed using content analysis, allowing key themes to emerge inductively from expert insights. The findings reveal that emotional saturation is a multidimensional construct consisting of four core dimensions: Affective Overload, Emotional Attenuation, Cognitive Disruption, and Regulatory Breakdown. Affective Overload captures the accumulation of intense emotional demands; Emotional Attenuation reflects reduced emotional responsiveness; Cognitive Disruption highlights the interference of emotions with cognitive processes; and Regulatory Breakdown represents the failure of emotional self-regulation under excessive strain.

These findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating how the application of the theory of saturation can enhance understanding of emotional processes in organizational settings. By identifying the core dimensions of emotional saturation, this study provides a foundational framework for future scale development and empirical validation. Furthermore, it opens new avenues for research in emotional intelligence, organizational behavior, and psychological well-being by offering a novel perspective on how individuals experience and manage emotional demands in contemporary workplaces.

Keywords: Theory of Saturation, Emotional Saturation, Affective Overload, Emotional Attenuation, Cognitive Disruption, and Regulatory Breakdown, Emotional Intelligence

1. Introduction

The theory of saturation, recently introduced by Manafi, has begun to attract scholarly attention as an emerging meta-framework applicable across various domains of science. This theory posits that systems—whether cognitive, emotional, or social—operate within

finite processing capacities, beyond which additional input leads to diminishing effectiveness or even adverse outcomes. As a conceptual lens, saturation theory provides a structured way of rethinking how individuals and systems respond to increasing levels of stimuli, offering a unifying perspective that can be applied to diverse phenomena. Within this framework, different types of saturation can be identified, including cognitive saturation, which relates to information overload and reduced mental processing capacity, as well as other forms such as social and emotional saturation. By framing these phenomena under a common theoretical structure, saturation theory serves as a valuable tool for advancing interdisciplinary research and deepening our understanding of human behavior in complex environments.

Among these forms, emotional saturation represents a particularly relevant yet underexplored construct, especially in organizational and psychological contexts. This study focuses specifically on emotional saturation and seeks to explore its underlying dimensions, based on the premise that a clearer conceptualization of this construct can significantly enhance existing research on emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence, as conceptualized through its core dimensions—self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and relationship management—has been widely recognized as a key factor influencing individual and organizational outcomes (Abdullah et al., 2021; Alismail et al., 2021; Bar-On, 1997, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Khoavi et al., 2011; Manafi et al., 2011, 2025). However, understanding how individuals experience and respond to emotional overload remains limited. By introducing and operationalizing emotional saturation, this study aims to open new avenues for research in organizational sciences and psychology. Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to explore and define the core dimensions of emotional saturation as a modern and relevant construct.

2. Literature Review

The concept of saturation has been discussed across various disciplines to describe a condition in which a system reaches a threshold beyond which additional input no longer produces proportional effects and may even lead to diminished outcomes. In psychology and organizational studies, saturation is often associated with overload, fatigue, and reduced responsiveness resulting from excessive cognitive or emotional demands. The underlying premise of the theory of saturation (Manafi, 2025, 2026) suggests that individuals possess a limited capacity for processing stimuli, and once this capacity is exceeded, performance, responsiveness, and well-being begin to decline. This premise is consistent with foundational theories such as Cognitive Load Theory, which posits that human processing capacity is inherently limited (Sweller, 1988), and with stress and burnout research, where excessive demands lead to emotional exhaustion and reduced functioning (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). Similarly, research on attentional control demonstrates that excessive emotional or cognitive demands impair performance and disrupt mental processes (Eysenck et al., 2007). Together, these perspectives reinforce the central assumption of saturation theory that exceeding human processing limits leads to negative psychological and behavioral consequences.

Within this broader framework, different forms of saturation (Manafi, 2025, 2026) have been identified depending on the nature of the stimuli involved. For instance, cognitive

saturation refers to the excessive accumulation of information that impairs thinking and decision-making, while social saturation relates to the overwhelming nature of interpersonal interactions and social demands. These forms are supported by established constructs such as cognitive overload and attentional disruption (Sweller, 1988; Kahneman, 2011), as well as social fatigue and interpersonal strain observed in organizational settings. Emotional saturation, in particular, represents a relatively underexplored dimension and refers to a state in which emotional input exceeds an individual's capacity to effectively process and regulate emotions. Although not explicitly conceptualized as a unified construct, its underlying components are reflected in prior literature, including emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001), emotional numbing (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995), cognitive interference under emotional stress (Eysenck et al., 2007), and failures in emotion regulation (Gross, 1998; Baumeister et al., 1998). This suggests that emotional saturation may represent an integrative framework that unifies these fragmented phenomena under a single conceptual umbrella.

In parallel, the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been extensively studied as a critical capability that enables individuals to perceive, understand, and manage emotions effectively. According to Goleman's framework (1995), EI consists of five core dimensions: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and relationship management. These dimensions have been widely applied across various fields, including organizational behavior, leadership, and human resource management, demonstrating their importance in enhancing individual and organizational outcomes. More recently, studies such as Manafi et al. (2025) have extended this line of research by examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological capital, highlighting how emotional capabilities contribute to positive psychological states such as hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, emotion regulation theory (Gross, 1998) and self-regulation perspectives (Baumeister et al., 1998) provide additional theoretical support for understanding EI as a mechanism that governs how individuals manage emotional inputs and responses.

Building on these perspectives, the present study argues that emotional intelligence can be understood as a regulatory mechanism that influences individuals' exposure to and management of emotional saturation. Specifically, different dimensions of EI play distinct roles in managing saturation processes: self-awareness enables individuals to detect rising levels of emotional strain; self-regulation helps reduce emotional overload; empathy prevents social and interpersonal forms of saturation; motivation acts as a buffer against emotional exhaustion; and relationship management contributes to stabilizing group-level emotional dynamics. This conceptual linkage suggests that emotional saturation may serve as an underlying mechanism through which emotional intelligence operates in organizational settings. However, despite its strong theoretical relevance and indirect support from multiple streams of research, the construct of emotional saturation has not yet been explicitly defined or empirically explored. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to identify and conceptualize the core dimensions of emotional saturation through an exploratory qualitative approach.

3. Method and Results

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design to develop and conceptualize the construct of Emotional Saturation (ES). Given the limited prior research on emotional saturation within organizational contexts, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to allow themes and dimensions to emerge inductively from expert insights rather than being imposed a priori.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select six experts with extensive knowledge in organizational behavior, psychology, and human resource management. The selected experts possessed both academic and practical experience related to emotional processes in workplace settings, ensuring the richness and relevance of the data collected.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore experts' perceptions of employees' emotional experiences under high-demand work conditions. The interview protocol consisted of five open-ended questions addressing emotional pressure, behavioral responses, cognitive impacts, and emotion regulation in the workplace.

Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a flexible format, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and observations. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and reliability of the data. Here are the questions:

1. *How would you describe the emotional experiences of employees in high-demand or stressful work environments?*
2. *What signs or symptoms indicate that employees are experiencing too much emotional pressure or strain?*
3. *How do employees' emotional responses change when they are exposed to continuous or intense emotional situations?*
4. *In your observation, how do strong or prolonged emotions influence employees' thinking, decision-making, and behavior?*
5. *How do employees typically manage or fail to manage their emotions under high emotional demands?*

The interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This method was chosen due to its suitability for systematically identifying patterns, themes, and categories within textual data.

The content analysis revealed four dominant and recurring themes that represent the core dimensions of Emotional Saturation: Affective Overload, Emotional Attenuation, Cognitive Disruption, and Regulatory Breakdown/Failure. These dimensions emerged consistently across expert narratives and reflect distinct yet interrelated aspects of emotional saturation experienced by employees in organizational settings. See Table 1.

Affective Overload

The findings of the qualitative analysis revealed Affective Overload as a primary dimension of Emotional Saturation, representing the initial stage at which employees' emotional capacity becomes strained. Affective overload refers to a state in which individuals experience an excessive accumulation of emotional stimuli that surpasses their ability to effectively process and manage them. This condition typically emerges in organizational settings where employees are continuously exposed to multiple, intense, or prolonged emotional demands, such as workplace stress, interpersonal tensions, and performance pressures.

Table 1: Emergent Dimensions of Emotional Saturation from Expert Interviews

Emergent Theme	Description (Derived from Expert Narratives)	Illustrative Expert Insights	Example Measurement Items
Affective Overload	Employees experience an accumulation of intense and simultaneous emotions that exceed their coping capacity	Experts frequently described employees as “overwhelmed,” “emotionally drained,” and “unable to process multiple emotional demands at once”	“I feel emotionally overwhelmed at work.” “I experience too many emotions at the same time.”
Emotional Attenuation	Prolonged emotional exposure leads to reduced emotional sensitivity and engagement	Experts noted that employees become “detached,” “numb,” or “less responsive to others’ emotions” over time	“I feel emotionally numb in work situations.” “I find it hard to emotionally connect with others.”
Cognitive Disruption	Emotional strain disrupts cognitive processes such as attention, clarity, and decision-making	Experts highlighted that employees “struggle to concentrate,” “lose clarity,” and “have difficulty making decisions” under emotional pressure	“My emotions make it difficult to concentrate.” “I struggle to think clearly when emotionally stressed.”
Regulatory Breakdown/Failure	Employees lose the ability to effectively regulate and control emotional reactions	Experts observed “impulsive reactions,” “irritability,” and “reduced emotional control” in saturated states	“I find it hard to control my emotional reactions.” “I react impulsively under emotional pressure.”

At this stage, employees tend to report feelings of being overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to cope with the volume or intensity of emotional input. The data suggest that affective overload reflects a critical threshold where emotional activation exceeds manageable levels, marking the onset of saturation. In this sense, it represents the foundational phase of emotional saturation, where the emotional system becomes overburdened due to sustained exposure to high emotional demands.

Two key subdimensions further capture this experience. First, *Perceived Emotional Intensity* refers to the degree to which individuals experience emotions as strong, overwhelming, and difficult to regulate. Second, *Emotional Accumulation* reflects the buildup of emotional experiences over time, particularly when individuals are exposed to consecutive or simultaneous emotional demands without sufficient opportunity for recovery.

These findings are strongly supported by existing theoretical frameworks. In particular, burnout research conceptualizes emotional exhaustion as a state in which individuals feel emotionally overextended and depleted of their emotional resources (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). This aligns closely with the notion of affective overload as exceeding emotional coping capacity. Furthermore, Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) provides additional support by emphasizing that individuals possess limited processing capacity, which, when exceeded, leads to overload. Extending this logic to the emotional domain reinforces the conceptualization of affective overload as a fundamental component of emotional saturation.

Emotional Attenuation

The qualitative findings further identified Emotional Attenuation as a key dimension of Emotional Saturation, reflecting a progressive response to prolonged emotional overload. Emotional attenuation refers to a reduction in emotional sensitivity and engagement that occurs when individuals are continuously exposed to high levels of emotional demands. As emotional input accumulates beyond manageable levels, employees may begin to detach from their emotional experiences as a protective psychological mechanism.

This dimension is characterized by emotional numbness, decreased empathy, and a reduced ability to connect with others. Rather than actively engaging with emotional stimuli, individuals demonstrate a blunted or indifferent response, indicating a withdrawal from emotional processing. The findings suggest that emotional attenuation represents a secondary phase of saturation, where the emotional system shifts from overload to conservation by dampening responsiveness in order to cope with sustained strain.

Two subdimensions further elaborate this construct. *Emotional Numbing* refers to a decreased intensity of emotional experience, often resulting in feelings of detachment, indifference, or lack of emotional reactivity. *Reduced Empathic Engagement* captures the diminished capacity or willingness to understand and respond to the emotions of others, which may negatively affect interpersonal relationships and social functioning within the workplace.

These findings are well supported by existing theoretical perspectives. In clinical psychology, emotional numbing is recognized as a condition involving reduced responsiveness to emotional stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Similarly, burnout literature identifies depersonalization as a state in which individuals develop detached and impersonal attitudes

toward others as a result of prolonged stress (Maslach et al., 2001). In addition, research on compassion fatigue highlights how sustained exposure to others' emotional distress can lead to a decline in empathic capacity (Figley, 1995). Collectively, these frameworks support the interpretation of emotional attenuation as a defensive and adaptive response to prolonged emotional overload within the broader process of emotional saturation.

Cognitive Disruption

The qualitative analysis also revealed Cognitive Disruption as a significant dimension of Emotional Saturation, highlighting the impact of excessive emotional demands on cognitive functioning. Cognitive disruption refers to the interference of emotional saturation with key cognitive processes, including attention, memory, and decision-making. As emotional demands exceed an individual's processing capacity, emotional inputs begin to compete with and consume cognitive resources, leading to diminished mental efficiency.

Employees experiencing this dimension often report difficulty concentrating, reduced clarity of thought, and challenges in making rational or effective decisions. The findings indicate that when emotional saturation intensifies, cognitive performance becomes increasingly compromised, resulting in impaired task execution and reduced overall effectiveness. This dimension reflects a critical stage where emotional strain extends beyond affective experience and begins to disrupt higher-order cognitive processes.

Two subdimensions further specify this construct. *Attentional Disruption* refers to difficulties in maintaining focus due to intrusive emotional thoughts or heightened emotional states that divert attention away from task-related activities. *Impaired Cognitive Clarity* captures the reduced ability to process information effectively, think logically, and make sound decisions under conditions of emotional strain.

These findings are strongly supported by established theories on the interaction between emotion and cognition. Cognitive interference theories suggest that emotional stress consumes attentional resources, thereby impairing cognitive performance (Eysenck et al., 2007). Attentional Control Theory further explains how anxiety and emotional strain weaken working memory capacity and reduce cognitive efficiency. Additionally, dual-process theory (Kahneman, 2011) posits that heightened emotional states shift individuals from deliberate, analytical thinking toward more automatic and less accurate processing modes. Together, these theoretical perspectives substantiate the role of emotional saturation in disrupting cognitive clarity and decision-making processes.

Regulatory Breakdown/Failure

The qualitative findings further identified Regulatory Breakdown as a critical dimension of Emotional Saturation, representing the stage at which individuals' capacity for emotional control becomes significantly weakened or fails altogether. Regulatory breakdown refers to the diminished ability to effectively manage and regulate emotional responses under conditions of high emotional saturation. As emotional demands accumulate beyond an individual's regulatory capacity, employees may begin to exhibit impulsive, disproportionate, or poorly controlled emotional reactions.

At this stage, emotional control mechanisms are no longer fully effective, resulting in observable behavioral consequences such as irritability, frustration, and emotional outbursts. The findings suggest that regulatory breakdown reflects a threshold condition within the saturation process, where the individual's ability to maintain composure and respond appropriately to emotional stimuli is compromised. This dimension highlights the behavioral manifestation of emotional saturation, where internal strain translates into external reactions.

Two subdimensions further define this construct. *Loss of Emotional Control* refers to difficulties in managing emotional reactions in a composed, stable, and context-appropriate manner. *Impulsive Emotional Expression* captures the tendency to respond rapidly and without sufficient regulation in emotionally charged situations, often resulting in reactions that may be perceived as excessive or inappropriate.

These findings are strongly supported by established theories of emotion regulation and self-regulation. According to Gross (1998), effective emotion regulation involves the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional responses in accordance with situational demands. However, when individuals are exposed to excessive emotional input, this regulatory capacity may become impaired, leading to dysregulated or impulsive behavior. Furthermore, Baumeister et al. (1998) conceptualize self-regulation as a limited psychological resource that can be depleted over time, a process known as ego depletion. This perspective aligns with the notion that emotional saturation represents a point at which regulatory resources are exhausted, resulting in a breakdown of emotional control. Together, these theoretical foundations support the conceptualization of regulatory breakdown as the final and most behaviorally salient dimension of emotional saturation. See figure 1.

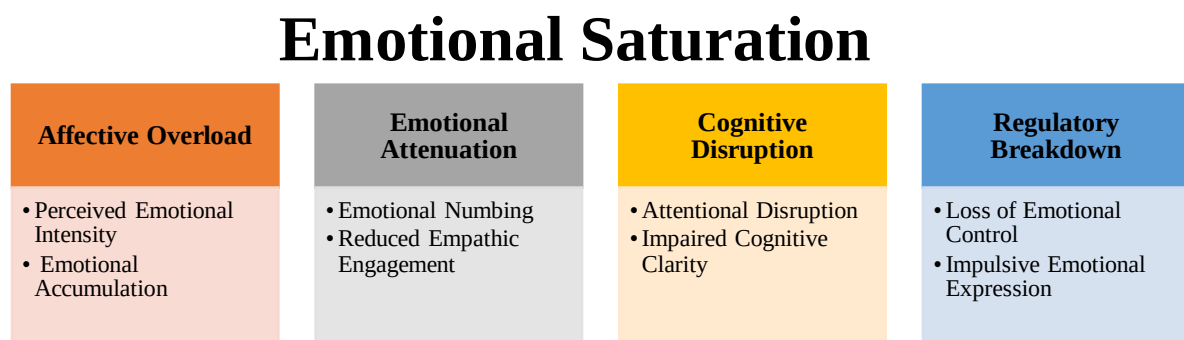


Figure 1. Emotional Saturation's Dimension

Together, these four dimensions illustrate the progressive nature of Emotional Saturation, beginning with emotional overload and potentially leading to cognitive disruption and regulatory failure if not effectively managed. This multidimensional conceptualization provides a comprehensive foundation for measuring Emotional Saturation in organizational settings.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to explore and conceptualize the construct of Emotional Saturation within organizational contexts by applying the emerging theory of saturation as a guiding meta-framework. By adopting a qualitative approach and analyzing expert insights through content analysis, the study identified Emotional Saturation as a multidimensional phenomenon that captures how excessive emotional demands impact individuals' affective, cognitive, and behavioral functioning. The findings contribute to the literature by addressing a notable gap, as emotional saturation has not previously been explicitly defined or systematically examined despite its implicit presence across several streams of research.

The results reveal four core dimensions of Emotional Saturation: Affective Overload, Emotional Attenuation, Cognitive Disruption, and Regulatory Breakdown. Each of these dimensions reflects a distinct stage or manifestation of saturation. Affective Overload, characterized by Perceived Emotional Intensity and Emotional Accumulation, represents the initial phase where emotional input exceeds processing capacity. Emotional Attenuation, encompassing Emotional Numbing and Reduced Empathic Engagement, reflects a defensive reduction in emotional responsiveness following prolonged exposure. Cognitive Disruption, with subdimensions of Attentional Disruption and Impaired Cognitive Clarity, highlights the interference of emotional strain with cognitive functioning. Finally, Regulatory Breakdown, consisting of Loss of Emotional Control and Impulsive Emotional Expression, represents the stage at which individuals' ability to regulate emotions becomes compromised, leading to observable behavioral consequences.

By integrating these dimensions and their subcomponents into a unified framework, this study advances a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional demands are experienced and managed in organizational settings. The application of the theory of saturation provides a novel perspective that not only explains the progression of emotional strain but also offers a structured approach for examining its impact. Importantly, the identification of these dimensions lays the groundwork for future research aimed at developing and validating measurement scales for Emotional Saturation.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that recognizing and assessing Emotional Saturation can enhance organizational efforts to support employee well-being and performance. From a theoretical standpoint, this study opens new avenues for research in emotional intelligence, organizational behavior, and psychology by introducing Emotional Saturation as a modern and integrative construct. Future studies are encouraged to empirically validate the proposed dimensions and explore their relationships with key organizational and psychological outcomes.

AI Assistance Declaration

Artificial intelligence tools (Grok by xAI and ChatGPT by OpenAI) were used solely for language editing, rephrasing, and improving the English expression of the manuscript. No AI tool was used to generate original ideas, research content, analysis, or conclusions. The author is fully responsible for the content of this article.

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