

The Relationship between Remote Work and Job Satisfaction During the Outbreak of COVID-19: The Mediating Roles of Perceived Autonomy and Work-Family Conflict

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Abstract

Malaysia's first case of COVID-19 has detected on the 24th of January 2020, which later comes the Movement Control Order (MCO) on the 18th of March 2020, when the number of infectious people increases. Besides that, some business services are affected. The Prime Minister ordered them to close temporarily until a specific time. Because the Covid-19 pandemic is getting worse, all the employees who work at the office have to start working from home. This research aimed to study the relationship between remote work and job satisfaction during the outbreak of COVID-19. A sample of 111 workers (53 male and 58 female) took part in this study, and the result was analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. This study's findings indicated a relationship between variables in this research, mainly between remote work and job satisfaction. Lastly, the results showed that H_1 , H_2 , H_4 , H_5 , and H_6 had been proven supported after all the variables are significant with one another. Except for H_3 , it is not supported the variable.

Keywords: remote work, job satisfaction, perceived autonomy, work-family conflict, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

The global spread of COVID-19 has led to a rapid shift of companies to let their employees work from home and rely on remote work tools now more than ever to maintain their business continuity [24]. At the end of April, [5] stated that COVID-19 quickly changes people's daily lives worldwide in just a few months, which more than 30 million people from the U.S. had been filing for unemployment in the past six weeks. Furthermore, [21] stated that the employees believe that their productivity when working from home is as high as at the office. So, if their productivity is high, does that mean their job satisfaction will also be as high? Yes, this is because, for many years, both social scientists and managers believed that increased job satisfaction led to high performance [9]. However, does it still apply during this outbreak and consider the mediating roles of perceived autonomy and work-family conflict?

In the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, it was hard to deny that the organisations face tactical and logistical challenges. For instance, the I.T. teams had to work 24/7. They had to provide employees with laptops and peripherals such as two-factor authentication tokens. Also, the law firms and financial institutions had to face a challenge in printing and scanning. They usually will print out their documents and read, review and sign them. Still, they had to find a way to do it securely [31]. According to World Economic Forum, the outbreak led to more and more employees working from home, and 98% of people surveyed would like the option to work remotely for the rest of their careers [26]. Alas, not everything is optimistic about getting to work from home in sweatpants. It is because remote workers face some top issues in 'unplugging' from work, for

example, without a clear-cut location and defined office hours. Many people find it harder to divide their personal and professional time [26]. Then, there are also different time zones for the team, distraction from home, loneliness, challenging time collaborating and communicating through telecommunication, reliable Wi-Fi, and the most crucial part for employees is staying motivated [26].

The assumption can drive the relationship between remote work and job satisfaction. Remote work allows the employee more flexibility and autonomy in doing their work, meeting their job demands and personal needs [30]. [4] said a mixed conclusion regarding whether telecommuting positively or negatively affects job satisfaction. For instance, there is a linear relationship between remote work and job satisfaction [7], and employees who work remotely become less satisfied with their job [28]. Researchers have proven that employees who have high levels of job discretion or perceived autonomy will usually experience greater job satisfaction when they work remotely [12]. It also can be implied from the above research that individuals that have a low perceived autonomy will find a way to communicate more effectively and are better able to cope with the frustrations of seeking clarification, approval, and guidance by telecommuting extensively [12].

The work-family conflict has been found to fully mediate remote work effects on employees' outcomes, representing the traditional rationale linking remote work to job satisfaction through work-life conflict [10, 11, 28]. Besides that, some researchers compared the original correlations with partial correlations, which resulted in work-family conflict partially mediating the impact of remote work on job satisfaction [11]. Overall there is a numerous study which supports the relationship between remote work and job satisfaction. The researcher's primary objective is to study how the perceived autonomy and work-family conflict acted as the mediator between the main variables, remote work and job satisfaction, during coronavirus outbreaks among workers in Malaysia.

HYPOTHESIS

By using an alternative hypothesis, the researcher hypothesised that:

- H_1 = There would be a significant relationship between remote work with job satisfaction.
- H_2 = There would be a significant relationship between remote work with perceived autonomy.
- H_3 = There would be a significant relationship between remote work with work-family conflict.
- H_4 = There would be a significant relationship between job satisfaction with perceived autonomy.
- H_5 = There would be a significant relationship between job satisfaction and work-family conflict.
- H_6 = There would be a significant relationship between perceived autonomy and work-family conflict.

METHODOLOGY

a) Study Design

This study is designed to find the relationship between remote work and job satisfaction during the outbreak of COVID-19, with work-family conflict and perceived autonomy as the moderator.

Besides that, this study also conducted the form of quantitative design by using a survey method. The survey method is employed in data collection by randomly distributing the self-report online questionnaires or google form to employees working remotely during the Movement Control Order (MCO) when the coronavirus outbreak happens.

b) *Participants*

A sample of this study is 111 respondents. There are 53 males and 58 females who participated, within 21 to 55 years old.

c) *Locations*

The location of the study is the Federation of Malaysia which consists of 13 states and three federal territories. Malaysia has two regions, which is West Malaysia and East Malaysia. Eleven states and two federal territories are in west Malaysia. Moreover, the two states and one federal territory are in East Malaysia. West Malaysia consists of Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis Selangor, Terengganu, Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, and Federal Territory of Putrajaya. East Malaysia consists of Sabah, Sarawak, and the Federal Territory of Labuan.

d) *Instruments*

Each questionnaire consists of Part A, B, C, D, and E. The questionnaires started with the demographic of employees, Remote Work, The Brayfield-Rothe Job Satisfaction Index, The Work-Family Conflict Scale, and lastly, The Work Design Questionnaire. All sets of questionnaires are bilingual, both in English and Bahasa Malaysia which the back translation is completed with the involvement of one lecturer from University Malaysia Sabah.

e) *Research Procedure*

First, the research procedure is to find the right title for the study and then submit the title, method used, instruments, and the number of respondents to the supervisor. After the permission was granted, the researcher will later get permission from the Dean Faculty of Psychology and education to conduct the study in the whole English language. Next, before the researcher can distribute the questionnaire, the supervisor must validate it, especially for the instrument translation. Not forgetting, informed consent was included in the questionnaire to ensure that all respondents voluntarily participated in this study. Then, a pilot test was carried out with only 30 respondents to test the instrument's internal consistency. The actual research is carried out by randomly distributing the self-report questionnaire through WhatsApp. Lastly, the collected data will go through screening, analysing, and also interpreting.

f) *Data Analysis*

Program IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics Version 26 was used to analyse the data in this study. Before proceeding with the next step, the data was first screened for normality and missing values. A correction was done, and a second screening was carried out to check the transformed data. Reliability was interpreted using Cronbach's alpha (α), while validity was interpreted using Pearson correlation for H_1 to H_3 . Meanwhile, multiple regression and the Sobel test is carried out to test the H_4 and H_5 .

RESULTS

a) *Socio-Demographic*

All of the respondents came from all over the Federal Territory of Malaysia. The total of respondents who have participated in this research is 111. Among the 111 respondents, there are 53 males and 58 females within 21 to 55 years old. In terms of religion, only 101 respondents are Islam (91.1%). There are six Christian (5.4%), two Buddhist (1.8%), and two Hindu (1.8%).

As a result, there are 89 Malay (80.2%), four Chinese (3.6%), three Indian (2.7%), 11 Sabah Native (9.9%), and four Sarawak Native (3.6%) who took part in this research. Out of 111 respondents, only 86 respondents are married (77.5%), 22 respondents are still single (19.8%) are still single, one respondent is widowed (0.9%), one respondent is divorced (0.9%), and the other is 0.9%. As for their education level, they are ranging from *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)* or O-Levels with only six respondents (5.4%), *Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM)* or A-Levels with seven respondents (6.3%), 19 with Diploma or Matriculation or Foundation (17.1%), 53 with Bachelor's Degree (47.7%), 19 with Master's Degree (17.1%) and seven respondents with PhD (6.3%).

b) *Descriptive Statistics*

The purpose of conducting this analysis is to check the tendency and variability for each of the variables. Among the participant, 93.7% engaged in remote work activities during the average workweek during the Movement Control Order, while 6.3% did not. The respondents rate their overall job satisfaction as moderately high ($M=5.49$, $SD=1.7$). Next, the rating of respondents was increased as well ($M=6.74$, $SD=.80$), meanwhile the rating for work-family conflict was low, which can be interpreted that the respondents perceived that their job has a very low interference with their family or spouse commitments ($M=1.6$, $SD=.68$).

- **Hypothesis 1: There would be a significant relationship between remote work with job satisfaction.**

As a result, the Correlation is displayed in Table 1 to test the relationship between the study variables: remote work with job satisfaction. As shown in table 1, there is a significant relationship between remote work with job satisfaction. Below, Table 1 shows the relationship between variables.

Table 1:
The Relationship Between Remote Work with Job Satisfaction

Variable	M	SD	r
Remote Work	0.94	.24	--
Remote Work with Job Satisfaction	5.55	1.7	.82*

*Note. N=111. * Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)*

According to Table 1, remote work and job satisfaction were highly significant with one another, $r(111) = .82$ indicate that respondents engaged in remote work during this pandemic have higher job satisfaction. Therefore, H_1 is supported.

- **Hypothesis 2: There would be a significant relationship between remote work with perceived autonomy.**

As a result, the Correlation is displayed in Table 2 to test the relationship between the study variables: remote work with perceived autonomy. As shown in table 2, there is a significant relationship between remote work with perceived autonomy. Below, Table 2 shows the relationship between variables.

Table 2:
The Relationship Between Remote Work with Perceived Autonomy

Variable	M	SD	r
Remote Work	0.94	.24	--
Remote Work with Perceived Autonomy	6.74	.80	.95*

*Note. N=111. * Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)*

H₂ is supported. Table 2 shows that the remote work and perceived autonomy were also highly significant with one another. The $r(111) = .95$ shows that respondents who worked remotely during this pandemic session have a higher autonomy towards their job.

- **Hypothesis 3: There would be a significant relationship between remote work with work-family conflict.**

As a result, the Correlation is displayed in Table 3 to test the relationship between the study variables: remote work with work-family conflict. As shown in table 3, there is not a significant relationship between remote work with work-family conflict. Below, Table 3 shows the relationship between variables.

Table 3:
The Relationship Between Remote Work with Work-Family Conflict.

Variable	M	SD	r
Remote Work	0.94	.24	--
Remote Work with Work-Family Conflict	1.6	.68	.01

*Note. N=111. * Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)*

According to Table 3, remote work and work-family conflict had no significant relationship. The $r(111) = .01$, $p > .05$ indicates that those engaged in remote work experienced a high level of work-family conflict. Therefore, H₃ is not supported.

- **Hypothesis 4: There would be a significant relationship between job satisfaction with perceived autonomy.**

As a result, the Correlation is displayed in Table 4 to test the relationship between the study variables: job satisfaction with perceived autonomy. As shown in table 4, there is a significant relationship between job satisfaction with perceived autonomy. Below, Table 4 shows the relationship between variables.

Table 4:
The Relationship Between Job Satisfaction with Perceived Autonomy

Variable	M	SD	r
Job Satisfaction	5.55	1.7	--
Job Satisfaction with Perceived Autonomy	6.74	.80	.27*

*Note. N=111. * Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)*

According to Table 4, job satisfaction and perceived autonomy show a moderate but still positively significant with one another $r(111) = .27$, $p < .05$, suggesting that a moderate level of perceived autonomy is given to the employee-related to higher job satisfaction. Therefore, H_4 is supported.

- **Hypothesis 5: There would be a significant relationship between job satisfaction with work-family conflict.**

As a result, the Correlation is displayed in Table 5 to test the relationship between the study variables: job satisfaction with work-family conflict. As shown in table 5, there is a significant relationship between job satisfaction with work-family conflict. Below, Table 5 shows the relationship between variables.

Table 5:
The Relationship Between Job Satisfaction with Perceived Autonomy, and Work-Family Conflict.

Variable	M	SD	r
Job Satisfaction	5.55	1.7	--
Job Satisfaction with Work-Family Conflict	1.6	.68	-.34*

*Note. N=111. * Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)*

H₅ is supported. According to Table 5, job satisfaction showed a moderate but negative coefficient with work-family conflict. The $r(111) = -.34, p < .05$ suggests that the higher the conflict between work and home, the lower an employee's job satisfaction.

- **Hypothesis 6: There would be a significant relationship between perceived autonomy and work-family conflict.**

As a result, the Correlation is displayed in Table 6 to test the relationship between the study variables: perceived autonomy with work-family conflict. As shown in Table 6, there is a significant relationship between perceived autonomy with work-family conflict. Below, Table 6 shows the relationship between variables.

Table 3:
The Relationship Between Perceived Autonomy with Work-Family Conflict.

Variable	M	SD	r
Perceived Autonomy	6.74	.80	--
Perceived Autonomy with Work-Family Conflict	1.6	.68	-.25*

*Note. N=111. ** Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)*

According to Table 6, perceived autonomy is negatively related to work-family conflict, $r(111) = -.25, p < .05$, indicate that a higher level of perceived autonomy was related to a lower level of conflict between work and family obligations. Overall, these hypotheses results indicate that employees who worked remotely during the MCO period perceived their job to be moderately autonomous. Also, employees experienced a high level of job satisfaction while having a low level of work-family conflict. Meaning, H₁, H₂, H₄, H₅, and H₆ has been proven supported after all the variables are significant with one another. Except for H₃, it is not supported the variable.

DISCUSSION

The first two variables are remote work and job satisfaction, which are highly significant with $r(111) = .82$. It suggests that remote work can increase an employee's level of satisfaction when doing their job. From the past research by [28], she manage to obtain only [$r(168) = .16, p < .05$], which is only a moderate relationship. Several articles have proved it. Remote working can increase employee job satisfaction. She concluded that job satisfaction is higher for remote or virtual teams than those who work at the office [19].

There is a highly significant level between both remote work and perceived autonomy and remote work and work-family conflict. Remote work has brought benefits to both employers and employees. However, its impact on productivity, creativity, and morale is still up to debate among the experts as working from home can result in a low level of interaction and networking among colleagues [1]. This study showed that the people who worked remotely during this pandemic experience a high perception of autonomy towards their job.

Although by working remotely, the employee can spend more time with their family, especially during this pandemic, the result from this study itself has proven that the respondents from

Malaysia still experience work-family conflict even when they engage in remote work. From the past research by [28], her study suggested that those who were engaging in remote work experience lower work-family conflict [$r(168) = -.24, p < .01$]. The reasons that can support our findings are the cultural differences, race, ethnicity, and the type of leadership and management applied in both countries [17].

Not forgetting, the emergent changes in work practices cause an acceleration in telecommuting, where the employee does not have another choice but to work from home [17]. Overall, the work-family conflict is still high even though employees get to work from home mainly. Some employees have difficulty assimilating into a new environment working remotely or finding it hard to maintain boundaries between work and non-work [25].

Job satisfaction is essential to the organisation and the employee itself because of its effect on business growth [19]. Job satisfaction is significantly related to perceived autonomy, which is the $r(111) = .27, p < .05$ is a moderate and positive Correlation. The perceived autonomy was moderately high and covaried positively with job satisfaction with the addition of individual factors [6]. Besides, a study by [2] found that job satisfaction is positively related to perceived autonomy. Noted that, every organisation will have its strategies that improve their employee job satisfaction and affect their work quality.

Meanwhile, work-family conflict and job satisfaction is negatively correlated but still moderately significant with one another, $r(111) = -.34, p < .05$. This result indicates that all respondents think the higher the work-family conflict the employees experienced during this COVID-19. They have their kid at home for the married respondent, the lower the job satisfaction level. Besides that, we also need to consider the many employees who were only adopting telecommuting during the Movement Control Order. The continued exposure to the COVID-19 news resulting in symptoms of distress, the possible causes, and the consequences of these symptoms, if they are one of the infected people, including thinking about their families and spouse, can increase stress [17].

Studies by [22] have suggested that exposure to Hurricane Katrina had above-baseline stress and depression symptoms a year after the event. Thus, the mental health problems during the MCO can be one of the reasons the work-family conflict increases and a decrease in job satisfaction. After this emergency world, all employees can take notes, assimilate to work remotely and make boundaries between their workplaces. So that they can focus on one work at one time, suggesting a hobby to the kids, or create a schedule with their spouse so that one parent can take care of the kids. Others can perform their work without a distraction.

Perceived autonomy is negatively related to work-family conflict, $r(111) = -.25, p < .05$. It showed that with a flexible work arrangement, adjustment working times and locations by the organisations would resulting in a low work-family conflict. The global health crisis and international threat are in action right now have caused mandatory working from home in Malaysia and worldwide. Thus, it is essential to have a great leader and management be alert that during the COVID-19 crisis, remote working is often combined with taking care of the children, which is challenging by giving the employee a little bit of autonomy to schedule their work hours. Besides that, the leader of an organisation must have the skill to make the right decision that can bring profit to the organisation without ignoring their employee needs and providing reassurance regarding the future [17].

CONCLUSION

Employees who worked remotely during the MCO period perceived their job to be moderately autonomous, had high job satisfaction, and had high work-family conflict. Moreover, the stress from pandemics may affect the outcome of this research. Alas, there is not much research regarding

remote work in Malaysia, so the researcher cannot compare the result of this research. Thus, future research is needed to study the context and factors. It may affect the relationship between remote work and job satisfaction with work-family conflict and perceived autonomy acting as a mediator during the pandemic crisis. There is a slight difference between the finding of this research with the past study made by [28]. Based on the previous studies in the United States, especially regarding the mediator variables that play a massive part in this research.

The first limitation is the number of respondents. It only yields at 111. According to [23], it is ideal for achieving several respondents exceeding 200. It will always be better to go for at least 200 samples. It is also agreed by [20] that the larger the sample, the more significant the test's power and ability to detect substantial results, plus this study estimates a value in a broader population. Thus, the accuracy of this study can improve with a larger sample. Therefore, the number of respondents can explain why perceived autonomy and work-family conflict cannot mediate between remote work and job satisfaction. Next is self-reporting, which is often related to respondents. They are biased when reporting their own experiences. They are more likely to report the knowledge that is considered socially acceptable or preferred [27].

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