Psychological experiences and responses in the global south amidst and ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic

Edited by
Nelesh Dhanpat, Madelyn Geldenhuys and Shaun Ruggunan

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Psychological experiences and responses in the global south amidst and ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic

Topic editors

Nelesh Dhanpat — University of Johannesburg, South Africa
Madelyn Geldenhuys — University of Notre Dame, Australia
Shaun Ruggunan — University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Editorial: Psychological experiences and responses in the global south amidst and ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic

Nelesh Dhanpat[1]*, Madelyn Geldenhuys[1,2] and Shaun Ruggunan[3]

[1]Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, [2]School of Arts and Sciences, Discipline of Psychology, The University of Notre Dame, Sydney, NSW, Australia, [3]School of Management, Information Technology and Governance, College of Law, Management and Commerce, University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban, South Africa

Editorial on the Research Topic
Psychological experiences and responses in the global south amidst and ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption across all levels of society and businesses, with significant implications for individual lives and work (Ainamani et al., 2020). The debilitating effects of the pandemic posed significant risks to individual health and economic wellbeing (Danquah et al., 2020) and resulted in many changes in how we work. With worldwide governments imposing various quarantine measures (e.g., lockdowns, isolation, and mask-wearing) to control the spread of the virus (Chowdhury and Jomo, 2020; Guan et al., 2020), organizations also had to implement work from home (WFH) measures to help mitigate the spread of the virus, causing employees to adjust with limited resources (De Bruin et al., 2020; Dhanpat et al., 2022).

As the pandemic significantly impacted individuals' lives and work, it has led to several psychological challenges. For example, a high degree of uncertainty, anxiety, and stress, especially in the context of work, developed resulting in several psychological issues (Lu et al., 2020) and workplace issues. Additionally, research into the effects of the pandemic and work have predominantly been carried out in the Global North. Although countries in the Northern hemisphere are struggling to manage the effects of the pandemic, most countries in the Southern hemisphere are extremely resource poor, have high levels of inequality but are also more experienced in dealing with previous pandemics such as HIV. Nonetheless, under resourced countries may find adjusting to life and work after the pandemic to be more challenging (see Sow, 2022). The work presented in this Research Topic is located in the southern hemisphere and mostly in the global south. Conceptually, we recognize that these are two different terms, the former referring to countries located in the southern hemisphere and the latter referring to the least industrialized countries, the majority of which are located in the southern hemisphere. In both instances, such work is underrepresented in the literature on the psychological experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such,

understanding the *psychological experiences and responses in the Global South amidst and ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic* can enable organizations to adjust amidst the problems they are facing.

As guest editors to this special edition, we accepted 15 articles that investigated several of the psychological experiences and responses amidst and ahead for the COVID-19 pandemic in the global south (combined sample size of 3497). Organized into themes, we believe that the findings of each of these research endeavors make critical contributions to the literature and to workplaces by understanding the impact COVID-19 had and continues to have on employees and their organizations. It also enables us to understand where to develop research interests for future research. The articles also help fill an empirical gap by drawing attention to national contexts that do not feature significantly in the western dominated literature on the pandemic.

The first theme that emerged is *organizational support and employee engagement* (with a combined sample of 2652). In their research, Reynell van der Ross et al. explored academic staff engagement and burnout risk in a Higher Education setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher education has long faced difficulties in relation academic stress and burnout. Reynell van der Ross et al. found that leaders who prioritize employee enabling creating working conditions may also facilitate staff engagement. Similarly, Dekel et al. explores the relationship between psychological wellbeing, volunteer work engagement, and perceived organizational support among young adult volunteers in not-for-profit organizations in Australia amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown period. Their research shows that perceived organizational support is critical for the process of psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement (Dekel et al.). It seems that irrespective of what can be viewed as a traumatic global event, with supporting work environments, employees can still engage in their work. This study assessed the combined impact of technostress, work-family conflict, and perceived organizational support on workplace flourishing for higher education employees during the pandemic, highlighting the need for additional support and policies that prioritize work-life balance (Harunavamwe and Ward). Ronnie et al. found that the psychological contract between women academics and their institutions in South Africa during the pandemic is critical and there seems to be major shifts in workload, resources, communication, trust, and support because of the pandemic. Positive psychological factors during the pandemic had important implications for the wellbeing of people. For example, Sekaja et al. found that manifesting gratitude at work can have many positive outcome for the employee and workplace. For example, reflecting on what employees can be thankful for can be a way of enhancing gratitude and thereby, wellness, performance, and commitment. Ngobeni et al. believes that the psychological contract at work can be crucial in determining the engagement of employees. Their research probes how leaders feel they can influence of the psychological contract on employee engagement. They found that continuous change in the world, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, can influence employee expectations. This can inadvertently have in impact on the relationship between people's perceptions of the psychological contract on employee engagement (Ngobeni et al.).

With mental health and wellbeing concerns on the rise, a second critical theme emerged, namely *work and mental health* (with a combined sample of 375). In their research, Moralo and Graupner explored the role of industrial psychology practitioners in managing the psychological impact of COVID-19 on employees. They found that Industrial/Organizational psychology practitioner's role in the changing world of work enables organizations to be prepared for the changes by providing multi-level interventions (Moralo and Graupner) and these should be leveraged more. Maharaj and Ramsaroop explored the relationship between emotional intelligence (EQ) and educators' quality of life during the pandemic. They propose that it is EQ as an essential resilience skill for enhancing the quality of life especially during times of adversity. A practical research model was advocated for key stakeholders in the South African basic education sector (Maharaj and Ramsaroop). Comparing the psychological health of previously infected and non-infected South African employees regarding burnout, anxiety, depression, and stress, Hill found that infected participants had significantly higher levels of burnout, anxiety, depression, and stress than non-infected participants. The study recommends industrial psychologists to manage the psychological impact of COVID-19 at work (Hill).

Remote work and working from home have become a new way work and it is expected to continue. This third theme (with combined sample of 131) showed that work from home during the pandemic had increased workloads and domestic responsibilities, resulting in significant negative impacts on mental and physical wellbeing (Singh et al.), while Chinyamurindi found remote working had resulting in decreased employee engagement of women leaders in the public service industry. Consequently, this also had long-term negative effects on the industry (Chinyamurindi). It is also expected that hybrid work models will continue to be possible post-pandemic (Smite et al., 2023) and holds advantages for employees such as lower psychological stress responses and associated productivity (Shimura et al., 2021). Although some research shows that work from home can be rewarding and increase performance, more research into work and other life roles seems to be an important area that needs investigating.

Occupational health education seems to be an important factor for countries in the global South (combined sample of 38). A study by Mapuranga et al. on mandatory vaccination in Zimbabwe's retail sector found most organizations require vaccination or risk job loss. Four consultation levels exist, with the fourth being most common. Employees had three categories of perceptions and varied reactions, including willingly getting vaccinated, settling for one dose, or fraudulently obtaining cards. Genuine consultation between management and employees is crucial. Meyer et al. describes a teaching approach in occupational health psychology that engages postgraduate students in South Africa as learners, research participants, and co-researchers, using their reflections on their experiences during the first 19 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study highlights the importance of considering contextual factors when engaging in occupational health psychology education, research, and practice, and illustrates the use of Sense-Maker as a research tool to develop and implement

relevant and effective means to support employee health and wellbeing.

Lastly, *leadership and workplace management* can enable efficient workplaces and performance (combined sample of 301). Meadows and De Braine explores how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the work identities of leaders and how they (effectively) responded to the challenges. They found that leaders employed virtual leadership to ensure that customers' expectations were met, and to manage team-and organizational performance. They did this by building effective teams and fostering a digital culture, taking on extra roles such as strategist, technology expert, and coach (Meadows and De Braine). The research by Deas and Coetzee observed generational cohort differences regarding value-orientated psychological contract expectations for job characteristics and work-life balance and that this difference could be utilized to develop interventions and strategies to promote retention of employees in the post-pandemic digital-orientated workplace.

Conclusion

The collection of articles in this Research Topic provides an in-depth analysis of the psychological challenges faced by employees predominantly in the South African context. South Africa remains one the most unequal societies globally, and empirical work on managing people during times of profound crisis in such a context is especially important since South Africa in many respects is representative of the majority world. Extant work on psychological experiences of COVID-19 in the workplace remains dominated by empirical work in the minority world. This Research Topic is a step toward showcasing the diversity of experiences and ways of theorizing in under studied contexts. Future research can examine more comparatively the experiences

of the global North and global South in pandemic and post-pandemic workplaces. Research questions that delve into the importance of macro-contextual factors such as political economy, income inequality levels, employment rates, experience in dealing with previous pandemics such as HIV, and the resilience and agility levels of those in the global South that navigate crisis on a daily basis, are rich areas for further scholarly work.

Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

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Engagement of Academic Staff Amidst COVID-19: The Role of Perceived Organisational Support, Burnout Risk, and Lack of Reciprocity as Psychological Conditions

Melissa Reynell van der Ross*, Chantal Olckers and Pieter Schaap

Department of Human Resources, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in radical changes within the higher education system, requiring academia to rapidly transition from the traditional learning model to a distance or blended model of learning to ensure continuity of educational processes. These changes have placed additional demands on academic staff who already have a heavy workload. According to the job demands-resources model, these additional demands may have an impact on the burnout risk, engagement, and well-being of academic staff. In alignment with the premises of positive psychology the primary objective of this study was to explore the interplay of three psychological conditions (meaningfulness, safety, and availability) needed to stimulate engagement. To investigate this interplay, the researchers connected Kahn's theory on engagement with current concepts that focus on the person-role relationship, such as those dealt with in the job demands-resources model, organisational support theory, and perceptions of reciprocity. Mediating effects between burnout risk, engagement, and psychological well-being, as well as the moderating effect of lack of reciprocity, were tested using structural equation modelling. The study used a purposive, non-probability sampling method and a cross-sectional survey research design. Participants were 160 academic staff members employed at a university in South Africa. The findings of this study revealed that the three psychological conditions (meaningfulness, safety, and availability), which were operationalised as lack of reciprocity, perceived organisational support, and burnout risk, were significantly related to emotional engagement. Perceived organisational support (job resources), which met the criteria for psychological safety and some components of meaningfulness, displayed the strongest association with engagement. Policymakers within higher education institutions should be sensitive to the issues this study focused on, especially as regards the need to provide organisational support in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: engagement, perceived organisational support, job demands, lack of reciprocity, burnout risk, psychological well-being, academic staff

INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) institutions play a key role in facilitating economic development and growth, and meeting the social needs of the 21st century (Boggs, 2003; Pouris and Inglesi-Lotz, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has, however, posed numerous challenges to employees (Liu et al., 2021) and organisations in all sectors. The pandemic has brought about changes requiring academia to rapidly transition from the traditional learning model to a distance or blended learning model to ensure continuity of educational processes (Ali, 2020; Armoed, 2021). In addition to coping with an already heavy workload, which include having to produce an increasing number of high-quality international publications (Barkhuizen et al., 2014), academic staff have had to offer extra support to students. This, due to abrupt changes in the academic calendar and the concomitant lack of physical interaction caused by the complete or partial change over from traditional face-to-face teaching to online or blended teaching (Chiu, 2021). Barkhuizen et al. (2014) asserted that all the demands made on academic staff may lead to their burnout and low levels of commitment.

Scholars have stated that even during times of change and uncertainty, engaging the workforce remains one of the key strategic imperatives to ensure success (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017) as it significantly affects essential business outcomes such as productivity, customer satisfaction, discretionary effort, commitment, and well-being (Shuck, 2011; Shuck and Reio, 2011, 2014). In a study that Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) conducted during the pandemic, they maintained that engagement is now, more than ever, a key factor in the success of organisations.

According to Kahn, the presence of three experiential or psychological conditions namely, meaningfulness, safety, and availability influence people to "employ" or express themselves (self-in-role) and personally engage. Kahn (1990) described personal engagement as an employee who harness themselves to their work role and express their "preferred self" physically, cognitively, and emotionally when they perform their work. He likened personal engagement to "self-employment" and described it as inspiring aspects that can be termed flow, intrinsic motivation, involvement, and mindfulness. Bailey et al. (2017) investigated the meaning, antecedents, and outcomes of engagement and found that most studies on the antecedents of engagement explored the experience of job-design-related factors, which included job demands or job resources. Accordingly, Mercali and Costa (2019) indicated that the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) offers one of the most solid empirical foundations to clarify the psychological mechanisms that underlie engagement in a work context.

Drawing on Kahn's (1990) theory and using the JD-R model as a framework, the present study explored the conditions that stimulated the positive psychological construct of engagement (Kotera and Ting, 2019) and investigated its role in contributing to optimal functioning (Gable and Haidt, 2005) in HE institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The Relationship Between Job Demands, Burnout Risk (Psychological Availability), and Engagement

The JD-R model stipulates that job demands refer to negatively valued physical, social, psychological, or organisational aspects that require continuous effort and cost or consume energy (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Within the HE context, academic staff often need to reconcile the demands their teaching tasks and research work place on them. In addition to being responsible for teaching, administrative work, and community service, they are expected to conduct high-quality research (Taris et al., 2001; Houston et al., 2006); Taris et al. (2001) found that the time demands and pressure of having to do research and teach have a significant positive relationship with strain, which drains the energy of academic staff. Accordingly, they posited that the combination of teaching and research is a key source of stress for academic staff. Other studies conducted within an academic context conceptualised job demands (e.g., research, teaching, and administrative work) as time pressure (e.g., Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011) or as workload (Boyd et al., 2011). The stress resulting from time pressure and workload has been exacerbated by the changes and challenges staff have experienced because of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al., 2021). A major challenge in the HE context has been the need to shift from the traditional learning model to the distance or blended learning model to ensure continuity of educational processes (Ali, 2020; Armoed, 2021). In alignment with research carried out by Taris et al. (2001) and others (e.g., Boyd et al., 2011; Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011) within the context of education, the present study adopted the description of job demands as relating to: (1) time pressure, (2) relationships with colleagues, and (3) pressures stemming from teaching vs research tasks.

The JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) outlines two psychological processes that are responsible for job demands and resources operating as antecedents to engagement and burnout. These processes include the energetic process and the motivational process (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Jackson et al., 2006). According to the energetic process, job demands wear out and drain the energy of people, resulting in burnout or high levels of exhaustion. The JD-R model's proposed energetic process seems to map well onto the strain coping mode described in Hockey's (1997) state regulation model of compensatory control. This model takes into account different effects on observed performance under circumstances of high demands (e.g., workload or stress) and offers a framework for the analysis of issues associated with strain, fatigue, and psychological health. In the strain coping mode, individuals make an increased effort to accommodate the high demands, in this way maintaining levels of performance but at the cost of expending energy, which manifests itself psychologically in the form of exhaustion and/or physically in the form of an increased excretion of cortisol (which leads to, for example, burnout risk). In the passive coping

mode, individuals' perception of excessive demands results in a downward adjustment of performance objectives, for example, by reducing their level of accuracy or paying less attention so as to avoid the cost of expending more energy (e.g., through mental activity), which they perceive to be high already. Hockey indicated that complete disengagement from task goals may result in extreme forms of passive control. This suggests that high demands may lead to disengagement, which in turn may negatively affect performance. Rich et al. (2010), Han et al. (2020) and Rattrie et al. (2020) were in agreement. The scholars respectively found statistically significant negative associations between demands (hindrance demands) and engagement. Thus, based on the descriptions of the energetic process, the strain, and passive coping modes, and empirical work highlighted, the researchers formulated the following hypotheses for the present study:

H1: *There is a statistically significant positive relationship between job demands and burnout risk.*

H2: *There is a statistically significant negative relationship between job demands and engagement.*

The JD-R model's energetic process, in which job demands wear out and drain the energy of people, resulting in burnout or high levels of exhaustion seems to link well with Kahn's (1990) notion of (psychological) availability as referred to earlier. In Kahn's (1990) description, the availability of people is dependent upon how well they cope with the demands of life, be it work or non-work related. Thus, how available people are to engage despite the distractions experienced as members of a social system. These distractions that shape availability include: depletion of physical and emotional energy; outside or personal lives (e.g., personal or non-work matters that drain or take away from one's psychological availability); and insecurity (e.g., concerns about the quality of one's work, how it compares with the work of others, and one's status in the role that distracted one or "occupied energies") (Kahn, 1990: p. 715). Burnout has been regarded as a metaphor for a state of mental weariness (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) or physical and emotional exhaustion (Kristensen et al., 2005). The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, developed by Kristensen et al. (2005), operationalises burnout as consisting of fatigue and exhaustion. The questionnaire consists of three sub-dimensions, work-related burnout, client-related burnout, and personal burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005; Creedy et al., 2017). Hodson (2021) highlighted the importance of considering how the constructs we use within the field of psychology fit in with that already understood in the field. Based on this premise, and the highlighted linkages between the description of availability, the energetic process of how burnout risk is shaped, and the conceptualisation of burnout as per the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, the researchers operationalised burnout risk as psychological availability.

The researchers also formulated a third hypothesis based on further findings in existing literature. The JD-R model further postulates that high levels of exhaustion threaten the energy resources of an engaged individual, which can impact levels of engagement negatively (Jackson et al., 2006;

Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). In support of this postulation, Russell et al. (2020) indicated a significant negative relationship between burnout and work engagement. As regards Kahn's (1990) theory, (psychological) availability was identified as one of three conditions that shape whether a person will personally engage or not. Availability refers to the psychological or physical resources people have available to enable them to engage despite the distractions experienced as members of a social system. Based on these criteria, the researchers hypothesised as follows:

H3: *There is a statistically significant negative relationship between burnout risk and engagement.*

The Relationship Between Job Resources (Psychological Meaningfulness and Safety), Burnout Risk (Availability), and Engagement

The JD-R model explains that resources operate as antecedents to engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Jackson et al., 2006; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) by way of a motivational process: the resources employees have available motivate them to be committed, have positive attitudes toward work (Albrecht, 2012), and contribute to work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R model's motivational process seems to link well with the concept of perceived organisational support (POS). The concept of POS derives from the organisational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and describes the degree to which employees perceive that their employer cares about their well-being and values their contribution (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Eder and Eisenberger, 2008; Kurtessis et al., 2017). POS encapsulates the general beliefs employees hold regarding the commitment of the organisation towards them as a result of perceived beneficial or harmful treatment by the organisation. These beliefs are informed by organisational aspects e.g., traditions, practices, policies, job enrichment, as well as social aspects, e.g., receiving sincere praise and approval (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Similar to the premise of how resources motivate employees to be committed (Albrecht, 2012) and contribute to work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017); the held beliefs regarding POS influence work effort or behaviour. POS further fosters positive affective commitment toward the organisation (Kurtessis et al., 2017); and contributes to work engagement (Rich et al., 2010; Zacher and Winter, 2011). Furthermore, with reference to the statement of Bakker and Demerouti (2017, p. 312) that resources are not only needed to effectively perform work but are also "important in their own right," POS can be regarded as a valued resource that helps employees carry out their work (Kraimer and Wayne, 2004).

Apart from the condition of psychological availability that Kahn's (1990) grounded theory identifies as shaping personal engagement, the theory identifies the psychological conditions of safety and meaningfulness as necessary to stimulate personal engagement. Safety is experienced as feeling that one can express oneself without fear of negative consequences to one's career or self-image and is influenced by supportive

interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, management style, and organisational norms. Safety was thus promoted in the following cases: (1) where interpersonal relationships were supportive and trusting; (2) where the unconscious roles individuals assumed and perceived as per the group dynamics promoted a feeling of safety in bringing "their selves into" role performance. Here, Kahn (1990) referred to perceptions regarding the distribution of power and authority among groups, and how this could suppress individuals' voices and negatively impact safety; (3) where the management style or processes were supportive, consistent, predictable and created paths along which employees could safely travel; and (4) where the organisational norms, general expectations, cues or boundaries could govern employees to safely execute work (Kahn, 1990, p. 710).

Scholars have put forth that employees tend to personify organisations, viewing line managers as organisational agents and their actions toward them as reflecting the intentions or actions of the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Karagonlar et al., 2016). Therefore, POS can be regarded as consisting of aspects that reflect management/interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and (organisational) norms/expectations. This assumption is based on the following grounds: (1) POS captures aspects related to supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships by tapping whether the organisation or rather organisational agents consider the interest of the employee in decision making, offer help when the employee is in need and care about their well-being; (2) by tapping whether organisational agents notice extra effort, consider employee feedback and goals, or whether organisational agents would undermine or exploit the employee, POS captures considerations regarding treatment by organisational members with authority or power, and the room this allows the employee to safely bring "their selves into" role performance; (3) by tapping whether organisational agents value employee contributions, tries to make the job more interesting and cares about the employees' work satisfaction, POS captures considerations regarding supportive management processes and opportunities for career growth; (4) by tapping the general beliefs regarding whether policies and governing practices are perceived as favourable, POS provides information regarding general norms which can inform appropriate or proportionate ways of working.

Meaningfulness is experienced when people feel they are valued, worthwhile, and not taken for granted (Kahn, 1990; Olivier and Rothmann, 2007). Factors that influence meaningfulness are whether tasks are challenging, allow for learning, and provide a sense of competence, whether employees' role is central to/needed by the institution, and whether work interactions with co-workers or clients are meaningful (Kahn, 1990). POS includes facets of meaningfulness that tap into perceptions of not being taken for granted, working on challenging tasks, and performing a role that is of importance to an organisation. Thus, the present study operationalised POS as a job resource that included aspects of psychological meaningfulness and safety.

The possibility of POS as an antecedent to engagement has been considered within the business sector and within the HE context (e.g., Guan et al., 2014; Mabasa and Ngirande, 2015).

Among staff at a business college, support was found that a relationship existed between POS and engagement (Najeemdeen et al., 2018); Kurtessis et al's. (2017) view that POS should lessen burnout was confirmed in a study among academics that indicated that POS negatively affected levels of burnout (Yew and Ramos, 2019). In addition, results from a meta-analysis indicated a statistically significant association between job resources and both burnout and engagement (Rattrie et al., 2020). Based on these findings, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H4: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between POS and engagement.

H5: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between POS and burnout.

The Influence of Reciprocity (Psychological Meaningfulness) on Engagement

According to equity theory, reciprocity is pursued in interpersonal or organisational relationships and denotes the equality of exchange between two parties (Schaufeli et al., 1996). Similarly, Rothmann and Welsh (2013) contended that social exchange relationships affect employee engagement. A study by Van Horn et al. (1999) put forth that teachers' views that there exists disagreement between what they have invested and the outcomes/return received (e.g., in terms of student progress, gratitude or enthusiasm) can result in disillusionment and energy depletion. This suggests that the perception of lack of reciprocity might increase states of weariness such as burnout risk, a view that was corroborated by Bakker et al. (2000) who found that general practitioners' perception of a lack of reciprocity had a positive impact on emotional exhaustion. Another example of the negative impact of lack of reciprocity is Eisenberger et al.'s (2014) finding that in cases where supervisors held the general view that subordinates would not reciprocate favourable treatment (highly reciprocation-wary supervisors), it weakened the positive relationship between supervisor POS and high-quality relationships with the subordinate (leader–member exchange). By implication, apart from job demands and burnout risk, perceptions of lack of reciprocity from student groups may further deplete the energy of educators, or result in educators being unable to reciprocate with engagement for the high POS received. Therefore, in alignment with considerations by Lorah and Wong (2018) that where the relationship between the independent variable (IV) and the dependent variable (DV) may differ or depend on the level of a third variable, called the moderator, lack of reciprocity was considered as a possible moderator in the relationship between the predictors of engagement (IV's) and engagement (DV).

Lack of reciprocity seems to tick further criteria for Kahn's (1990) psychological meaningfulness domain in terms of work interactions with clients and the perception of being valued or appreciated by this group, which did not seem to be covered by POS. Based on the above deductions made and following Kahn's (1990) theory, the present study was able to test the coaction of psychological availability (burnout risk), safety (POS), and

meaningfulness (POS and lack of reciprocity), by considering lack of reciprocity as a moderator in terms of the JD-R model's proposed relationships relating to engagement. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H6a: *Perceived lack of reciprocity moderates the negative relationship between job demands and engagement, such that the relationship becomes stronger as lack of reciprocity increases.*

H6b: *Perceived lack of reciprocity moderates the positive relationship between POS and engagement, such that the relationship becomes weaker as lack of reciprocity increases.*

H6c: *Perceived lack of reciprocity moderates the negative relationship between burnout risk and engagement, such that the relationship becomes stronger as lack of reciprocity increases.*

The Relationship Between Burnout Risk, Engagement, and Psychological Well-Being

Robertson and Cooper (2010) stated that the fostering of a culture associated with high performance and organisational effectiveness required the consideration of critical aspects such as engagement and psychological well-being. Wright et al. (2007) described psychological well-being as the overall effective psychological functioning of a person.

Hockey (1997) posited that the adjustments individuals make to deal with adverse conditions (e.g., high job demands) must take into account the need to maintain an acceptable state of well-being, in addition to considering the achievement of performance goals. These considerations seem to be reasonable cautionary measures individuals should take because later studies have suggested that: (1) job demands are linked to challenges related to well-being because of burnout (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Jackson et al., 2006); (2) dimensions of burnout have a significant negative impact on psychological well-being (Wright and Hobfoll, 2004); and (3) participants with lower cortisol output have higher levels of psychological well-being (Ryff, 2013). Based on these findings, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H7: *There is a statistically significant negative relationship between burnout risk and psychological well-being.*

Shuck and Reio (2014) found that people who displayed high engagement had significantly higher levels of psychological well-being. Two relatively recent studies corroborated these scholars' finding. In the first place, Jena et al. (2018) found that meaningful engagement allowed employees to feel positive toward their organisation and work, leading to psychological well-being. In the second place, Rusu and Colomeischi (2020) found a positive association between teacher engagement and well-being. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H8: *There is a statistically significant positive relationship between engagement and psychological well-being.*

Important in the context of the present study was the association found between psychological well-being and important outcomes such as better job performance and mental and physical health (Wright and Cropanzano, 2000; Robertson and Cooper, 2010). This association was confirmed in studies that showed strong links between well-being and performance (Daniels and Harris, 2000; Lee, 2019). Moreover, Wright (2014) asserted that psychological well-being can be regarded as a robust determinant of good performance. Students are the primary recipients of the learning experience, and although much contested, university management regard student feedback as important for evaluating client satisfaction with educational programmes and lecturer's performance (Tasopoulou and Tsiotras, 2017). Furthermore, using a measure from a different source than the lecturer offered an avenue to help control for method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Accordingly, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H9: *There is a statistically significant positive relationship between psychological well-being and student-reported levels of lecturer performance.*

The Mediating Role of Engagement and Burnout Risk

Studies have indicated that engagement plays a mediating role between antecedents and outcomes of engagement (Saks, 2006; Christian et al., 2011; Saks and Gruman, 2014). For example, Garg and Singh (2020) found that engagement mediated the association between work withdrawal behaviours and subjective well-being. A further finding was that engagement mediated the relationship between negative emotions and well-being (Rusu and Colomeischi, 2020). Based on these findings, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H10: *Engagement mediates the relationship between burnout risk and psychological well-being.*

In a study among teachers, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018) found that teacher well-being (measured in terms of exhaustion, feelings of a diminished or depressed mood, and psychosomatic responses) mediated the relationship between job demands and engagement. Similarly, Russell et al. (2020) found that burnout risk mediated the relationship between job demands and work engagement among educators in the United States. Accordingly, the researcher of the present study formulated the following hypothesis:

H11: *Burnout risk mediates the relationship between job demands and engagement.*

Figure 1 below provides the conceptual theoretical framework which is based on the above hypotheses.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample and Procedure

The study formed part of a bigger multilevel research project. Participating academic staff members thus needed to comply with the criterion of having lectured a second-semester undergraduate module during 2020. All in all, 295 academic staff members

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework (measurement model).
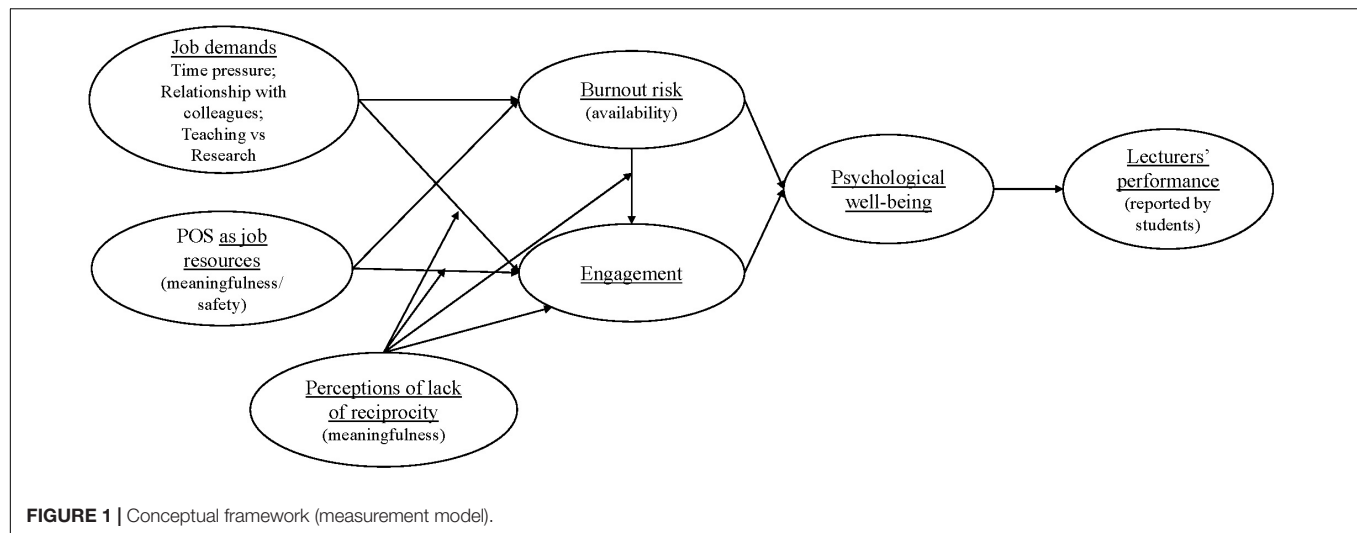
were invited during 2020, but, although 219 of them started the survey, only 174 valid responses were received. Students of participating lecturers were invited to report on the lecturers' performance in lecturing the relevant modules. Out of the 174 valid responses received from lecturers, 161 could be matched with students' reports. One statistically significant multivariate outlier was removed from the data sets prior to conducting the analyses using a conservative χ^2 critical probability value of 0.001, resulting in a total sample of 160 lecturers. Males comprised 52% of the sample of academic staff, and females made up 48% of the sample. Most respondents (29%) fell within the age group category of 30 to 39, followed by 28% who fell within the age group of 50 to 64, and 26% who fell in the category of 40 to 49 years old. Respondents' length of service in the various faculties ranged from periods of less than 5 years to over 31 years. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed, and a purposive, non-probability sampling strategy was used.

Measures

The survey included the following measures:

Job Demands

In alignment with work that Taris et al. (2001), Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) did among academic staff, the following scales were used to measure job demands: the 3-item scale on time pressure; the 3-item scale measuring relations with colleagues; and the 4-item scale focusing on teaching vs research. In total, the scale consisted of ten items. Items for the scales of time pressure and relationship with colleagues were scored on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = "completely disagree" to 6 = "completely agree." The items relating to the teaching vs research scale were scored on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 6 = "always." Cronbach's alpha reported by Taris et al. (2001) was α = 0.84 (teaching vs research), and the reported reliability coefficients for scales reported by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) were α = 0.86 (relationship with colleagues), and α = 0.81 (time pressure).

Job Resources

Job resources were measured using the 16-item short version of the "Survey of Perceived Organisational Support" (Eisenberger et al., 1997). Items were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree." The single-factor unidimensional measure demonstrated reliability coefficients of 0.90 (Eisenberger et al., 1997).

Engagement

The 18-item Job Engagement Scale (JES) (Rich et al., 2010) was used to measure engagement. The scale's items measure three dimensions of engagement, namely, emotional, cognitive, and physical. Respondents could score the items on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." The JES has good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha equal to 0.95 (Rich et al., 2010).

Burnout Risk

The 19-item Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005) was used to measure burnout risk. The measure consists of three subscales, namely, personal, client, and work-related burnout. In respect of 12 items, the rating is on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "always" to 5 = "never/almost never," and in respect of seven items the rating is on a scale of 1 = "to a very high degree" to 5 = "to a very low degree." Cronbach's alpha for the subscales was found to be as follows: α = 0.82 (client-related burnout), α = 0.85 (personal burnout), and α = 0.87 (work-related burnout) (Johnson and Naidoo, 2013).

Psychological Well-Being

The Schwartz Outcome Scale-10 (Blais et al., 1999) was used to measure psychological well-being. The scale, consisting of 10 items, has been used as a psychological well-being and psychological health measure in previous studies (e.g., Young et al., 2003; Haggerty et al., 2010). Items are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 7 = "all of the time/nearly all of the time." Cronbach's alpha coefficients were

reported between $\alpha = 0.88$ (Haggerty et al., 2010) and $\alpha = 0.92$ (Shuck and Reio, 2014).

Lecturer Performance

The lecturers' performance was reported by students. The researcher adapted questions taken from the student evaluation form that the university used and that focused on lecturers' characteristics and the conditions during lectures. The scale consisted of 22 items. A similar approach had been used in a study exploring student evaluations of lecturers at private universities (Sok-Foon et al., 2012).

Reciprocity of Student Groups

In alignment with work done by Schaufeli et al. (1996), Tayfur and Arslan (2013), lecturers' perceptions of reciprocity were measured using three items adapted from the measures these scholars had used. The items were as follows: "I spend much time, effort and consideration on work for students in the specified module, but in general, students in the specified module give back little effort, appreciation, and interest"; "I invest more in the relationship with students in the specified module than what I receive back in return from them"; and "I know that my students will complain, no matter what I do." Respondents rated the questions on the following 5-point scale: 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree."

Data Analysis

Mplus version 8.6 was used to conduct the statistical analyses. Latent models were estimated using structural equation modelling (SEM) and the maximum likelihood robust (MLR) estimator. The delta method for estimating robust standard errors with a sandwich estimator was used for non-normal data. As an extra precaution, all standard errors for interaction effects were cross-checked for consistency using the bias-corrected bootstrapping technique and the ML estimator (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017; Schaap and Olckers, 2020). Two stages were followed in the analysis of the data. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to confirm the factor structure validity and psychometric properties of each of the scales in order to ensure factor manifest scores with the least possible error variance. Factor scores that were used in the structural model were generated from the latent variable using the regression approach in Mplus. The use of optimally weighted regression scores entailed creating factor scores from the model for each construct separately and subsequently using these factor scores in the structural model (McNeish and Wolf, 2020). Second, an evaluation was done of the structural model depicting the theoretically supported hypothesised relationships between the constructs that formed the focus of this study. The two-stage approach and the use of optimally weighted regression factor scores in the structural model can be substantiated as follows: (1) The use of optimally weighted regression scores in a structural model alleviates potential convergence problems associated with the testing of complex latent structural models; (2) the quality of a measurement model affects the structural model and vice versa, even in the case of well-fitting measurement models (McNeish and Hancock, 2018); (3) McNeish and Wolf (2020) posited that

possible differences in the relationship between items and the true latent score are ignored when using sum scoring or unit weighted scoring, resulting in less reliable scores. Optimally weighted regression scores thus more closely represent the true latent variable in the measurement model.

Following the guidelines suggested by Kenny et al. (2015), the present study considered model fit together with regression estimates, standard error, residuals, and underlying substantive theory. All the popular fit indices were considered and where degrees of freedom were low in models, the CFI and SRMR played a more decisive role in adjudicating model fit (Bentler, 2007; Kenny et al., 2015; McNeish and Hancock, 2018). Per the guidelines, model fit was appraised as: a CFI value above 0.90 but preferably above 0.95, a SRMR value preferably less than 0.08, a RMSEA value below 0.08, and a TLI value above 0.95 (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Olckers and Van Zyl, 2019).

The factor score determinacy is of special concern for unbiased univocal scoring of a measurement model (Gorsuch, 1983). Factor determinacies of 0.80 and above were regarded as demonstrating strong correlations among items with the latent factor and denoting good internal consistency (Gorsuch, 1983; Wang and Wang, 2020). Univariate normality and multivariate normality were tested for skewness and kurtosis and were appraised in alignment with the recommendation by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) that values equal to $>$-1 and $<$+1 in the case of both skewness and kurtosis be used as indicators of normality. Also, the Mardia multivariate normality test was used to evaluate the normality assumption.

In alignment with findings that the omega coefficient offers a more accurate approximation of the internal structure of a scale (Dunn et al., 2014; Crutzen and Peters, 2017), the present study used the CFA factor loadings to calculate McDonald's omega coefficient. Values of 0.70 and 0.80 have been considered as the general rule of thumb when it comes to establishing acceptable or good reliability and have been commonly reported as the more popularly used Cronbach's alpha estimates (Crutzen and Peters, 2017; Hoekstra et al., 2019). Seemingly, scholars have applied a similar rule in judging McDonald's omega coefficient, putting forth that values of 0.80 can be regarded as demonstrating good internal reliability (Feisst et al., 2019; Dedeken et al., 2020). Confidence intervals (CIs) were set at a level of 95% and, as recommended in the case of interacting effects, the present study applied the guideline that where CIs did not include zero, the indirect effect was regarded as significant (Zhao et al., 2010).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, skewness/kurtosis, correlations, factor determinacy values and McDonald's omega values of the latent variables. Most variables show univariate skewness and kurtoses slightly outside of the range -1, 0 to $+1$ (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The Mardia multivariate skewness and kurtosis are 9.73 and 69.62 respectively (see **Table 1**), these values indicate non-normality in the data (Gao et al., 2008), justifying the use of the MLR estimator for

non-normal data. The correlation matrix indicated statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.01$) between all variables. McDonald's omega coefficient values ranged between 0.81 and 0.97, demonstrating good reliability (Feisst et al., 2019; Hoekstra et al., 2019; Dedeken et al., 2020). Factor determinacy values were all above 0.90, demonstrating strong correlations among items with the latent factor (Wang and Wang, 2020) and supporting the use of factor scores in the structural model (Gorsuch, 1983). The results reported in **Table 1** do not support the likelihood of adverse multi-collinearity as scale reliabilities are high (Omega ≥ 0.8) for the variables with high inter-correlations and sample size ($N = 160$) to the number of latent variables (6) exceeds a 6:1 ratio (Grewal et al., 2004). The variables in the correlation matrix show discriminate validity as all values below the diagonal are lower than the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) which is presented on the diagonal (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

The Measurement Model

Table 2 provides an overview of the constructs measured and the fit indices per construct. No absolute cut-off value for factor loadings was used; however, the approach followed was "the higher the better," with due consideration to item content and construct coverage. A special effort was made to retain as many as possible of the original items for each construct that proved to be psychometrically sound in the measurement models and that allowed for limited bias in the single and univocal score obtained for each measure used in this study (Cole and Preacher, 2014). As the scales used had been validated in previously published studies, the use of CFA rather than exploratory factor analysis was selected. However, where the data did not support model fit or item loadings, the models were re-specified in accordance with theoretical guidelines to ensure that robust psychometric measurements were obtained for the variables used in the study's structural model. This is in alignment with Jackson et al. (2009) advice that *post hoc* modifications are supportable when these modifications are practically or theoretically justifiable. Recommendations in these cases include that any *post hoc* model re-specifications should be

kept to a minimum as such re-specifications could erroneously lead to data-driven models, and that *post hoc* modifications be labelled, thus revealing which latent variables were allowed to correlate or which correlated residuals were freed. Measurement models that were not supported by the data were adapted in accordance with the following principles: (1) Jöreskog's (1993) recommendation that by freeing a fixed or constrained parameter with the largest modification index (provided that this parameter can be interpreted substantively), the correct model can be readily obtained. (2) Byrne et al. (1989) advice that parameter specifications are justifiable where they represent measurement error due to method effects (e.g., item format of subscales). These method effects or measurement errors are attributed to question wording (e.g., items containing similar words, phrases or similar meaning), negative scoring, the effect of item adjacency, close proximity or blocked items from the same construct that follow each other in direct sequence (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Loiacono and Wilson, 2020). (3) Reise et al. (2013) recommendation to avoid biased path estimates in SEM models tested by not treating unidimensional data as multidimensional and to rather use only measurement models where the fit indices and variance explained support a sufficiently defined common or general factor that justifies univocal scoring.

The second-order measurement model for the job demands scale was non-identified and did not converge. It was found that the dimension of relationship with colleagues showed low correlations ($r = 0.10$; $r = 0.03$) with the dimensions of time pressure ($r = 0.10$) and teaching vs research ($r = 0.03$), suggesting that these constructs were unrelated. Upon reviewing the dimension of relationship with colleagues, it seemed that its items were formulated to contribute to job resources and not job demands (e.g., "Educators at this university help and support each other"). Consequently, a unidimensional model was tested that excluded this dimension. After excluding one item (which had a low factor loading of 0.28) and allowing the residuals of two items to correlate due to similar item content/method effects (Byrne et al., 1989; Podsakoff et al., 2012; Loiacono and Wilson, 2020) the model was supported by the data. It is noted that in accordance with the work of Kenny et al. (2015), the low degrees

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics, correlations, skewness/kurtosis, and factor determinacy.

Variable		Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4	5	6	FD	ω
1	Burnout risk	−0.08	−0.83	0.85						0.98	0.96
2	Emotional engagement	−0.73	−0.07	−0.51	0.81					0.98	0.94
3	Psychological well-being	−1.02	0.43	−0.61	0.51	0.72				0.96	0.91
4	Job demands	−1.07	0.88	0.65	−0.36	−0.47	0.77			0.98	0.91
5	POS	−0.16	−0.03	−0.57	0.53	0.54	−0.43	0.80		0.98	0.94
6	Lack of reciprocity	−0.60	−0.63	0.33	−0.36	−0.27	0.32	−0.34	0.75	0.93	0.81
7	Lecturer performance	1.27	2.12	−0.05	−0.11	0.03	−0.05	−0.04	0.07	0.99	0.97
	Mardia's multivariate values	**Estimate**	***p*-Value**								
	Mardia's multivariate skewness	9.73	0.00								
	Mardia's multivariate kurtosis	69.62	0.00								

POS, Perceived organisational support; 160 participants made up the study sample; FD, Factor score determinacy; ω, McDonald's omega. Factor scores are Z-values with a mean of 0. Underlined values on the diagonal represent the square root of the AVE (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All correlations are statistically significant ($p ≤ 0.05$).

of freedom (8) did indeed result in an elevated RMSEA value (see **Table 2**).

POS was measured using a one-factor/unidimensional model consisting of 16 items. Two items, for which correlated residuals were allowed, scored negatively and were adjacent to each other, suggesting method effects (Byrne et al., 1989; Podsakoff et al., 2012; Loiacono and Wilson, 2020). The scale showed an acceptable model fit (see **Table 2**).

The construct of burnout risk consisted of three subscales (i.e., personal, work-related, and client-related) (see **Table 2**). Client-related burnout displayed low correlations with both personal (0.35) and work-related burnout (0.43), and it displayed low loadings (0.45) on the second-order model (showing low model fit), and was thus removed. The scales personal and work-related burnout correlated highly ($r = 0.93$) and were grouped as one unidimensional scale. For all practical purposes, these two constructs could not be considered separate in the case of the sample group as working from home was a general trend during the COVID-19 pandemic. Residuals for four items, were allowed to correlate because of one or more method effects/measurement error (Byrne et al., 1989; Podsakoff et al., 2012; Loiacono and Wilson, 2020). One item, the only negatively scored item that displayed low factor loadings (0.46), was removed, after which a good model fit was obtained (see **Table 2**).

Data from the study did not support a second-order factor measure for the JES that would produce a univocal and non-biased factor score; therefore, the researcher considered the core focus of Kahn's (1990) theory, which is to simultaneously explain the emotional reactions of people to unconscious and conscious phenomena. Kahn entertained the possibility that a hierarchy of engagement or investment of the self in the work role exists, in that people may engage or invest themselves first physically, then cognitively, and lastly emotionally. Thus, the researcher explored this final level of the hierarchy (i.e.,

emotional engagement) and consequently excluded the cognitive and physical engagement dimensions from the measurement model. The retained emotional engagement subscale showed sufficient unidimensionality and model fit that would support univocal factor scoring and result in non-biased factor scores. The subscale consisted of six items and displayed good model.

The construct of psychological well-being, measured as a unidimensional scale, consisted of 10 items. Two items showed method effects (Byrne et al., 1989; Podsakoff et al., 2012; Loiacono and Wilson, 2020) and demonstrated high correlated residuals; thus, one item that showed redundancy was removed. Two items that demonstrated high correlated residuals which were attributed to method effects—were allowed to correlate (Byrne et al., 1989; Podsakoff et al., 2012; Loiacono and Wilson, 2020). The scale displayed acceptable model fit (see **Table 2**). The construct of lack of reciprocity consisted of three items; this three-item scale was a (just-) identified model (zero df) and displayed good model fit. An adapted version of the student evaluation form used by the university was employed to measure lecturer performance. The total score of the measure was used as a performance measure in practice (unit-weighted). The scale displayed acceptable model fit.

The Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

As indicated in **Table 3**, the hypothesised measurement model (Model 1) provided a poor fit to the data (CFI = 0.83; SRMR = 0.09; TLI = 0.73; RMSEA = 0.12). Furthermore, the lecturer performance scale showed an insignificant regression path (close to 0) on well-being. Kenny (2020) asserted that a good-fitting measurement model is required before researchers can endeavour to interpret a structural model, but warned that once model fit drives the research, scholars move away

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TABLE 2 | Fit statistics per measurement construct included.

Construct measured	Subscales	Items used	χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
(a) Job demands	Time pressure	2	35.73	8	0.00	0.94	0.90	0.05	0.14
	Relationship with colleagues	3 (removed)							
	Teaching vs research	4							
(b) Perceived organisational support (POS)	n/a	16	213.91	103	0.00	0.91	0.90	0.06	0.08
(c) Burnout risk	Personal burnout	5	147.04	43	0.00	0.93	0.91	0.04	0.12
	Work-related burnout	6							
	Client-related burnout	6 (removed)							
(d) Engagement	Physical engagement	6 (removed)	22.17	9	0.01	0.98	0.96	0.02	0.09
	Emotional engagement	6							
	Cognitive engagement	6 (removed)							
(e) Psychological well-being	n/a	8	36.38	20	0.01	0.97	0.96	0.04	0.07
(f) Lack of reciprocity	n/a	3	0.00	0	0.00	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.00
(g) Lecturer performance, measured by students using an adapted student evaluation form	n/a	22	1663.41	209	0.00	0.90	0.89	0.04	0.07

χ^2, chi-square statistic; df, degrees of freedom; p, p-Value; CFI, Comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker-Lewis Index; SRMR, Standardised root mean square residual; RMSEA, Root mean square error of approximation.

TABLE 3 | Fit statistics of the path and alternative models.

Model	χ^2	df	p-Value	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
1	63.01	19	0.00	0.83	0.73	0.09	0.12
2	33.81	18	0.01	0.94	0.90	0.06	0.07
3	18.98	10	0.04	0.96	0.92	0.05	0.08

from theory testing, and the latter is the purpose of SEM (Hooper et al., 2008). This study formed part of a multi-level research project, thus alternative models were tested based on prior empirical work.

The hypothesised model (Model 1) was used as a template for Model 2; however, an indirect path was included, based on the finding of Russell et al. (2020) that burnout partially mediates the relationship between job resources and work engagement, and similar findings by Hakanen et al. (2006) that burnout mediates the relationship between POS (job resources) and emotional engagement. The modified Model 2 showed improved model fit (CFI = 0.94; SRMR = 0.06; TLI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.07), but, considering the recommendation of Cohen (as cited by Hox et al., 2018) that a power of 0.80 with a corresponding β = 0.20 is a high power value, the power of 0.67 displayed by Model 2, ($N = 160$; $df = 18$, effect size = 0.10, α = 0.05) was insufficient. This finding was in alignment with the method of Satorra and Saris (1985) that recommends a power value of 0.80 to be desirable for SEM (Zhang and Yuan, 2018). To be more conservative, the researcher worked with an effect size of 0.10, which would provide for sufficient coverage of interaction effects that were inclined to be small but statistically significant. Model 2 served as a template for Model 3; however, the lecturer performance scale was excluded due to low power and the lecturer performance scale's demonstration of an insignificant regression path (close to 0) on well-being. After removal of the lecturer performance scale, improved overall model fit (CFI = 0.96; SRMR = 0.05; TLI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.08) and sufficient power of 0.79 ($N = 160$; $df = 10$, effect = 0.10, α = 0.05) was obtained. The researcher noted that statistical interaction effects lower than 0.10 were likely to not be recognised. The results obtained suggested that the empirical data were reproduced reasonably well in respect of the measurement models.

Model 3, which showed the best fit and power, formed the basis of the structural model. It should be noted that in the reporting of the results, significant implied "statistically significant."

As displayed in **Figure 2** (the portion of the model predicting burnout risk), the direct effect of job demands (β = 0.50, $p < 0.01$) was significantly positive (large effect), providing support for hypothesis 1. The effect of POS (β = −0.36, $p < 0.01$) was significantly negative (medium effect), providing support for hypothesis 5. Job demands and POS explained 52% of the variance in burnout risk ($R^2 = 0.52$).

As displayed in **Figure 2** (the portion of the model predicting emotional engagement), the direct effect of job demands (β = −0.06, $p = 0.57$) was not statistically significant; therefore, hypothesis 2 was not supported. Hypothesis 3 was supported

because the effect of burnout risk (β = −0.26, $p < 0.01$) on emotional engagement was significantly negative (small effect). Hypothesis 4 was supported because the effect of POS (β = 0.31, $p < 0.01$) on engagement was significantly positive (medium effect).

As regards indirect effects, the relationship between the moderator (Z) and the outcome (Y) must be known. Accordingly, the relationship between the moderator (lack of reciprocity) and the outcome (emotional engagement) was tested. Results showed a significant negative relationship between lack of reciprocity and emotional engagement (β = 0.19, $p < 0.01$, small effect). For the indirect effects, deductions were made based on the statistical significance of interaction terms shown in Mplus (Hernandez and Guarana, 2018). Results of the moderation analyses revealed that the interaction term (XZ), i.e., job demands × lack of reciprocity (β = 0.04, $p = 0.72$; 95% CI [−0.26, 0.18], CIs included zero) was not significant, accordingly, hypothesis 6a was not supported. Similarly, the interaction term POS × lack of reciprocity (β = 0.03, $p = 0.68$; 95% CI [−0.12, 0.18], CIs included zero) was not significant, and the moderation proposed in hypothesis 6b could not be supported. Furthermore, the interaction term burnout risk × lack of reciprocity (β = −0.12, $p = 0.26$; 95% CI [−0.32, 0.09], CIs included zero) was not significant, and the moderation proposed in hypothesis 6c could not be supported. Thus, the independent variables POS (safety and meaningfulness), burnout risk (availability), and lack of reciprocity (meaningfulness) as direct effects explained 39% of the variance in emotional engagement ($R^2 = 0.39$).

For the portion of the model predicting psychological well-being (see **Figure 2**), the direct effects of burnout risk (β = −0.47, $p < 0.01$, medium effect) and emotional engagement (β = 0.27, $p < 0.01$, small effect) were respectively significantly negative and significantly positive. These relationships provided support for hypotheses 7 and 8. The two independent variables (burnout risk and emotional engagement) explained 42% of the variance in psychological well-being ($R^2 = 0.42$).

Hypothesis 9 proposed that psychological well-being would be positively related to students' reports on lecturers' levels of performance. Due to low power and the lecturer performance scale's demonstration of an insignificant regression path (close to 0) on well-being, the scale was removed from the path model.

The path model (using unstandardised path coefficients obtained from the Mplus analysis) tested three mediating effects. It is noted that where this study made mention of mediation or mediation analysis, this was done to test indirect effects. As proposed by hypothesis 10, it was tested if engagement mediated the relationship between burnout risk and psychological well-being. A negative and significant indirect effect of burnout risk on psychological well-being via engagement (β = −0.07; $p = 0.03$; 95% CI [−0.12, −0.01], CIs did not include zero) was found; therefore hypothesis 10 was supported. Further, hypothesis 11 was supported as the results revealed a negative and significant indirect effect of job demands on engagement via burnout risk (β = −0.12-; $p = 0.01$; 95% CI [−0.21, −0.03], CIs did not include zero). The path model included a *post hoc* hypothesis based on the work of Hakanen et al. (2006) and Russell et al. (2020)
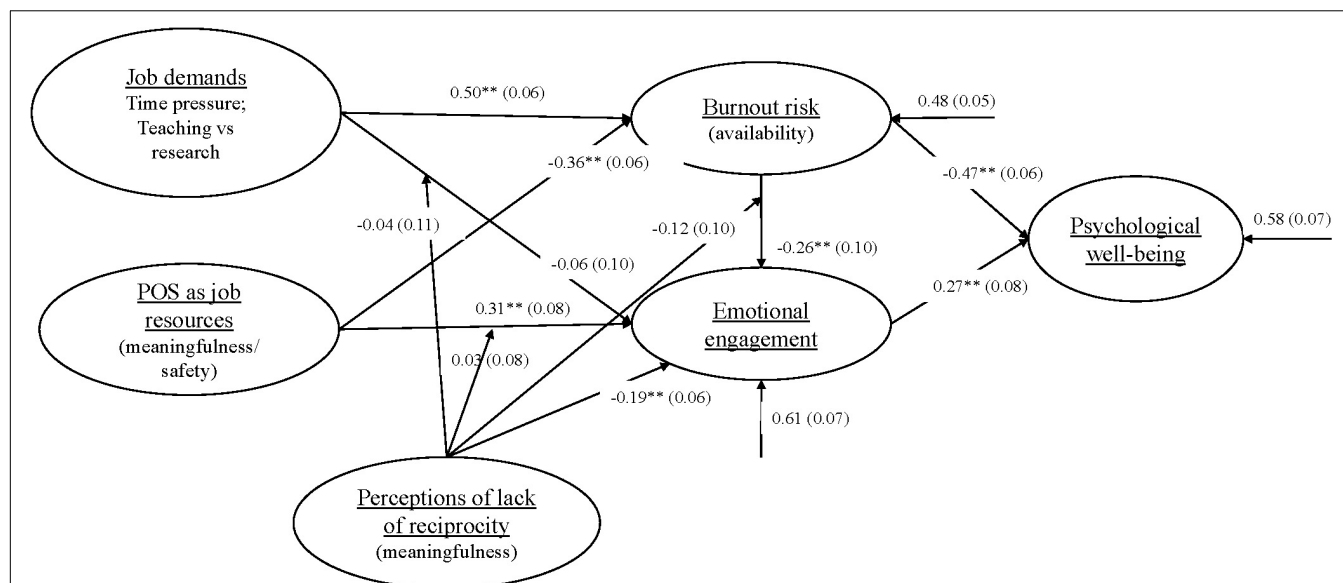
FIGURE 2 | The path/structural model tested Note. **$p < 0.01$.

which was discussed earlier. This *post hoc* hypothesis (H12) proposed that burnout risk mediated the relationship between POS and emotional engagement. The proposal of hypothesis 12 was supported by the results which revealed a positive and significant indirect effect of POS on emotional engagement via burnout risk ($\beta = 0.07$; $p = 0.02$; 95% CI [0.01, 0.12], CIs did not include zero).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to answer the call of scholars for more studies on the topic of engagement (Bailey et al., 2017), and within the HE context, to explore the impact of work demands and resources on the engagement of academic staff (Najeemdeen et al., 2018) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study thus set out to explore the interplay of conditions that stimulate the positive psychological construct of engagement (Kotera and Ting, 2019) by integrating Kahn's (1990) theory on engagement with the JD-R (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) and other concepts such as reciprocity (Schaufeli et al., 1996) and POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

As regards engagement, Kahn's (1990) theory focuses on understanding the objective properties of work contexts and roles and the importance of people's experiences in these contexts. In explaining engagement, the JD-R model focuses on job characteristics (job resources and demands) and whether they involve psychological/physiological costs or are functional in achieving work goals (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). The present study showed that the effects of burnout risk (availability) (hypothesis 3) and lack of reciprocity (meaningfulness) on emotional engagement were small, though significant. Findings pointed to a greater focus by academic staff on their experiences of the organisational context, in other words to POS as a job

resource (hypothesis 4). This finding supported the finding of Schneider et al. (2018) that organisational practices had the strongest correlation with work engagement, even stronger than work attributes. The non-significant association between job demands and engagement (hypothesis 2) seems inconsistent with those who found a negative association between the constructs (e.g., Crawford et al., 2010; Han et al., 2020), however, previous studies (e.g., Gan and Gan, 2014) have found no significant association between job demands and engagement. Further, the present study's finding may be regarded as corroborating the findings of May et al. (2004), Olivier and Rothmann (2007), Rothmann and Rothmann (2010), Rothmann and Welsh (2013) and Liu et al. (2021), who found that psychological meaningfulness was the strongest predictor of engagement. In this present study, POS involved aspects of both psychological meaningfulness and safety, which might explain the stronger association with engagement. Based on the findings of the study conducted by Liu et al. (2021) during the global COVID-19 pandemic, it might be that the academic staff participating in the present study perceived that organisational support functioned as an important safeguard against the negative impact of the pandemic on their experiences in the work context.

In the present study, consideration was given to lack of reciprocity (meaningfulness) being a moderator of the proposed antecedents to engagement, these include job demands, POS as job resources (safety and meaningfulness), and burnout risk (availability). However, none of these moderation interactions were found to be significant predictors of engagement (hypotheses 6a, b, and c). Reference may be made here to scholars' (Andersson et al., 2014; Memon et al., 2019) proposed seven-step framework in conceptualising moderating relationships. Although most of the mentioned steps were considered, some, such as step number 6, to explore reverse interaction in which the independent variable might be the moderator should be ruled

out theoretically, may have required more consideration. These findings indicate that the strength of lecturers' perceptions of lack of reciprocity from student groups, did not weaken or otherwise strengthen the respective positive and negative influences of POS (safety and components of meaningfulness) and burnout risk (availability) on emotional engagement.

As regards burnout risk and well-being, findings from this study aligned with the review study of Halbesleben and Buckley (2004) in that job demands (time pressure; teaching vs research) seemed to be the main initiator of burnout risk (hypothesis 1 and 5). In explaining the stronger negative association between burnout risk and psychological well-being (hypothesis 7) when compared to the positive influence engagement had in improving psychological well-being (hypothesis 8), reference may be made to recent studies (e.g., Kadhum et al., 2020; Denning et al., 2021). These studies highlighted the negative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on employees' levels of burnout risk, and the ways in which the changes that the pandemic brought about threatened the psychological and overall well-being of people (Harju et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2021).

The lecturer performance scale was removed from the structural model because the scale's inclusion resulted in the model showing low power. The scale further demonstrated an insignificant regression path (close to 0) on well-being. Hypothesis 9 could thus not be examined. However, previous research suggested that the rating by students of teaching effectiveness might be misleading as students tend to evaluate educators based on popularity rather than on effectiveness (Obenchain et al., 2001); Tan et al. (2019) concurred, stating that students evaluate educators' performance effectiveness based on their reactions to non-instructional or irrelevant characteristics, such as traits or attractiveness.

Lastly, findings from the study provided support for the mediation effects proposed. Hypothesis 10 showed complementary mediation (Zhao et al., 2010), in that the mediated effect (burnout risk × emotional engagement) and the direct effect were both significant and pointed in the same direction. These findings revealed that lecturers' burnout risk had an indirect effect on their psychological well-being through the mediating role of emotional engagement. The findings suggest that experiencing high levels of burnout risk weakens the emotional engagement of academic staff, which in turn negatively influences their well-being. The *post hoc* hypothesis (hypothesis 12) also displayed complementary mediation (Zhao et al., 2010) in that the mediated effect (POS × burnout risk) and the direct effect were both significant and pointed in the same direction. The results suggest that the lecturers' perception of organisational support and the indirect effects of burnout play an important role in shaping engagement. In both the above cases, the significant direct effects may suggest the existence of some omitted mediator which could be explored in future research (Zhao et al., 2010). Furthermore, results revealed that job demands had an indirect effect on the emotional engagement of academic staff through the mediating role of burnout risk (hypothesis 11). This offered a good example of indirect-only mediation and suggests that it is unlikely that there exist additional mediators (Zhao et al., 2010).

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This research study responded to the call for more studies to be conducted on the antecedents (Rothmann and Welsh, 2013) and topic of engagement, and to do so in alignment with the construct's positive psychological roots (Bailey et al., 2017). The study aimed to make a contribution by exploring the conditions that enabled engagement specifically among academic staff within the HE context (Najeemdeen et al., 2018). For this purpose, this study also aimed to establish conceptual connections between some aspects of Kahn's (1990) psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability, and the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), which is regarded as a well-being and job design framework (Rattrie et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study aimed to establish connections between Kahn's (1990) theory on engagement and concepts relating to organisational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and perceptions of reciprocity (Schaufeli et al., 1996) to gain a better understanding of the conditions in an organisation that enable engagement and promote well-being in accordance with the tenets of positive psychology (Seligman et al., 2005).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Although previous studies based on the JD-R model have highlighted five types of job resources (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007) (i.e., social support, autonomy, supervisory support, opportunities for professional development, and performance feedback) that are recognised as operating as antecedents to engagement in the majority of occupations, the present study demonstrated that, in alignment with organisational support theory, POS serves as a valued job resource (Kraimer and Wayne, 2004). POS not only taps into the five aforementioned categories (Eisenberger et al., 1997; Kurtessis et al., 2017) but further carries with it aspects that support psychological meaningfulness and safety, as conceptualised by Kahn (1990).

Through the integration of theory and literature on engagement (i.e., Kahn's 1990 theory and the JD-R model), the study found that Kahn's psychological conditions could be operationalised as POS (meaningfulness and safety), burnout risk (availability), and lack of reciprocity (meaningfulness). Findings indicated no relationship between job demands and emotional engagement but revealed a small negative and significant indirect effect of job demands on engagement via burnout risk. Furthermore, POS showed a stronger association with emotional engagement than did burnout risk and lack of reciprocity. With regard to this finding, reference can be made to Barrick et al.'s (2015) statement that strategic and deliberate management of organisational resources are required to foster an engaged workforce, as well as to Boikanyo and Heyns's (2019) statement that organisations need to view engagement as a broad organisational strategy. Considering these findings, the practical implication of the present study's findings is that it could assist university leaders in recognising the importance of creating conditions that enable the engagement of their staff. For example,

universities could design policies and practices and consider strategies that are geared toward POS and that give employees the assurance that they are valued and regarded as important contributors to institutional objectives, particularly during times of change or crises.

Findings from the study also revealed that while burnout risk and emotional engagement explained 42% of the variance in psychological well-being, the negative effect of burnout risk was stronger than the positive effect of engagement. This finding highlights the importance that tertiary institutions (universities) should address burnout as it has implications for the psychological well-being of academic staff. University leaders could, therefore, consider strategies such as employee wellness/assistance programmes (online and face-to-face) to address psychosocial issues (e.g., burnout risk, work-/home-related stress). These programmes might not only provide the needed support to employees by addressing burnout risk but might also have the potential to create the positive perception among employees that their institution cares about their well-being and values them.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although the study had strengths (e.g., a solid theory-driven approach and the inclusion of reliable measures), it also had a few limitations. First, the use of manifest factor scores with error variance might have attenuated the path coefficients to some extent, although the effect should be small where measurement models show high reliability and factor determinacy coefficients, as was the case in this study. A second limitation of the study was its cross-sectional nature and its reliance on self-report data, making the study prone to common method variance (CMV) (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). Researchers have noted that method variance in organisational research accounts for less variance than previous studies have suggested (Lance et al., 2010). There has also been an ongoing debate regarding whether the presence and effects of CMV are of real concern for construct-valid self-report measures (Spector, 2006; Fuller et al., 2016). Nevertheless, future studies should implement efforts to mitigate variance. The present study implemented several strategies to mitigate some of the issues associated with cross-sectional data and CMV (Chang et al., 2010). For example, it followed the suggestions of Podsakoff et al. (2003) to use different scale formats and anchors for the different constructs that were measured in order to be in alignment with how the relevant measures had been developed (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Chang et al., 2010). These efforts were shown to reduce the likelihood of cognitive processing (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). Efforts were also made to ensure that the wording of questions was concise and clear by using more familiar concepts rather than concepts that could be perceived as complex or unfamiliar (Rodríguez-Ardura and Meseguer-Artola, 2020).

A third limitation was that data was collected over a period of 4 months to ensure a large enough sample size. Therefore, causal inferences cannot be made. Nevertheless, based on the tenets of the JD-R theory and the findings of previous longitudinal studies,

it can be inferred that demands are predictive of burnout risk and that resources are predictive of engagement (see, for example, Hakanen et al., 2008; Sonnentag et al., 2010). Future studies may nonetheless consider a longitudinal design to gain a better understanding of the interplay and causal influences among the constructs. In addition, it may be worthwhile for future studies to consider these variables in a non-crisis state, such as when the COVID-19 pandemic has passed.

A fourth limitation was that the generalisability of the findings might be limited because all participants were academic staff from one South African tertiary institution. It is recommended that future studies explore these variables in different university settings locally or internationally and use a longitudinal design to validate causality among the variables. Lastly, as noted within the results section, power of 0.79 ($N = 160$; $df = 10$, effect = 0.10, $\alpha = 0.05$) was obtained, thus statistical interaction effects lower than 0.10 were likely to not be recognised. With reference to the non-significant indirect and moderating effects, a limitation of the study may be that insufficient power existed to pick up lower-lying effect sizes. The notion is further supported by the relatively large confidence intervals reported for the statistically insignificant parameter estimates of the three moderator effects in the model. It is a common problem in studies reporting multiple moderating effects in the social sciences. Scholars noted that SEM models with multiple moderating effects require large samples to detect significant effects (Aguinis et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

Kahn (1990) noted the importance of understanding (and investigating) the degree to which people are psychologically present during moments or circumstances of performing a certain role, and what their emotional reactions are to both conscious and unconscious phenomena. The present research study attempted to apply Kahn's (1990) theory on engagement by taking a closer look at the interplay of the psychological conditions (meaningfulness, safety, and availability) that stimulated the engagement of academic staff. The researcher provided support for Kahn's theory on personal engagement by connecting Kahn's psychological conditions with concepts focusing on the person-role relationship, such as those dealt with in the JD-R model, organisational support theory, and perceptions of reciprocity. The findings highlighted the importance of addressing these psychological conditions as they could lead to personal engagement. Further, the findings highlighted the implications of burnout risk and emotional engagement for the psychological well-being of academics.

It is hoped that the findings of this study might improve practices and policies within HE institutions and lead to a recognition of the importance for such practices and policies to be geared toward fostering engagement and well-being. Furthermore, the study's findings might motivate university leaders to take note of the impact of POS and the need not only to lend the required support to academics in the face of dealing with various stressors but also to improve academics' general engagement.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria

(Protocol number: EMS105/20). Obtaining participants' informed consent formed part of the survey.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MR and CO conceived the presented idea. MR developed the theoretical linkages and wrote the manuscript. CO and PS supervised the project, provided critical feedback, and assisted in shaping the research. PS conducted the statistical analyses. All authors contributed to the final version of the manuscript.

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Thankful employees: The manifestation of gratitude at work during a pandemic in South Africa

Lusanda Sekaja*, Courtney A. Tully, Senzile Mahlangu, Katya de Freitas, Lihle N. Tyelbooi, Bonisiwe P. L. Mjojeli, Masase E. Mokhethi and Tshegofatso Mabitsela

Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Gratitude or the appreciation of being given something of value, is an important element in positive emotions within positive psychology. Gratitude has been linked to wellbeing and gratitude in the workplace is positively associated with constructs such as performance and organizational citizenship behavior. The pandemic brought on many negative experiences but employees could still find things to be grateful for during this time. The purpose of the study was to understand what aspects of work and the organization employees were grateful for during the pandemic. A generic qualitative approach was used. Participants were sourced from various industries in South Africa using purposive sampling. Data were gathered through 21 semi-structured interviews of working people in South Africa. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis revealed five themes, namely, (1) gratitude for no negative work-life changes; (2) gratitude for a caring workplace; (3) gratitude for a new way of working; (4) gratitude for the ability to put oneself first; and (5) gratitude for having resilience, optimism and spirituality as a psychological buffer. Managers should deliberately engage in behaviors that will bring about gratitude from their employees. Employees should reflect on the positive things at work that they are thankful for as a way of enhancing gratitude and thereby, wellness, performance, and commitment. The study combines existing knowledge on gratitude during the pandemic with gratitude in the workplace.

KEYWORDS

gratitude, workplace gratitude, generic qualitative approach, positive psychology, South Africa, pandemic, COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 has had a well-documented negative impact on the world, and South Africa is no exception. South Africa felt this impact from psychological, social, medical, educational, and economic points of view (Arndt et al., 2020; Bonaccorsi et al., 2020; Sekyere et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Álvarez-Iglesias et al., 2021), through an

imposed lockdown (Ramaphosa, 2020, 2022), a lack of social interaction with loved ones (Greyling et al., 2021), a decline in physical and mental wellbeing (Álvarez-Iglesias et al., 2021), illness and loss of life (Ramaphosa, 2020), inaccessibility of online learning and challenges in remote instruction for learners (Gumede and Badriparsad, 2022), forced virtual work (Leask and Ruggunan, 2021), and permanent closure of businesses and/or loss of work (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2020; Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020; Ramaphosa, 2022).

The impact of the latter can still be felt strongly as life returns toward normalcy. Despite these occurrences, some individuals were able to see the silver lining in the pandemic-induced way of life, look beyond their misfortunes, and find things to be grateful for.

Emmons (2004) defined gratitude as "a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift can be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty" (p. 554). According to Bono et al. (2020), individuals can experience subjective wellbeing, which could have helped them cope with the challenges of the pandemic when they viewed the hardship of the pandemic through the lens of gratitude. For example, while the pandemic has caused a disruption to life as people had known it, focusing on positive aspects, such as still having a job, supportive and understanding leadership, and freedom to their workdays while working remotely (Sangoni, 2020), gratitude during times of crisis can help individuals sustain a positive outlook, which serves to energize and motivate them (Fishman, 2020).

Problem statement

Gratitude has many benefits. Research shows that gratitude has positive relations with the performance of employees (Wang et al., 2020), the productivity of employees (Grant and Wrzesniewski, 2010), job satisfaction (Cortini et al., 2019), and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs; Chen et al., 2020). The practice of gratitude has also shown to enhance the wellbeing of employees (Kaplan et al., 2014); Lambert et al. (2009) explained that because individuals who experience gratitude, are more likely to focus their attention on the positives, these individuals will have a greater propensity of managing obstacles they encounter.

Fishman (2020) recommended that during times of crisis (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), people may engage in exercises such as starting a gratitude journal to document all the good things that have happened that they can appreciate in their lives. Fishman (2020) also recommended that individuals re-evaluate past negative experiences for the purpose of identifying their vulnerabilities and appreciating their resilience and ability to adapt. Jans-Beken and Wong (2019) found that when individuals showed existential gratitude (i.e., gratitude for both ease and hardship), they were able to cope during adverse times.

While research predominantly shows that gratitude is inextricably linked to wellbeing, there is a dearth of empirical research showing the negative impact of gratitude. However, early contemplations on the prospect suggest that demonstrating gratitude can sometimes be damaging in certain situations. For example, when an employee has an abusive leader, showing appreciation may have a detrimental effect because it leads the employee to tolerate a situation they should not otherwise accept and thus, in this instance, gratitude is deemed inappropriate and excessive (cf. Card, 2016; Wood et al., 2016). Furthermore, in situations where there are disparities in power, the mutual display of gratitude by individuals could work against the individual with lesser power by unwittingly maintaining as a sense of dependence on the more powerful individual (Ksenofontov and Becker, 2020). Thus exhibiting thankfulness inappropriately to an undeserving other deprives them of the opportunity to recognize and reflect on their negative behavior and therefore make the necessary changes in behavior (Wood et al., 2016).

While there is a plethora of research and commentary on gratitude (e.g., Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Emmons and Mishra, 2011; Davis et al., 2016; Cunha et al., 2019; Yoo, 2020; Nawa and Yamagishi, 2021), gratitude at work (e.g., Cortini et al., 2019; Komase et al., 2019; Chhajer and Dutta, 2021; Komase et al., 2021; Unanue et al., 2021), and gratitude during the pandemic (e.g., Fishman, 2020; Feng and Yin, 2021; Jans-Beken, 2021; Fekete and Deichert, 2022), to the best of the authors' knowledge, research on gratitude at work during the pandemic remains a lacuna (Youssef-Morgan et al., 2022).

In the context of the pandemic in South Africa, insufficient exploration has been made into developing an understanding of how expressing gratitude manifests positive outcomes (Bono et al., 2020; Fishman, 2020; Shen and Sosa, 2020). Gratitude builds enduring resources (e.g., skills for showing appreciation, social bonds) that function as reserves that can be used in difficult times (Fredrickson, 2004). Research efforts within South Africa should therefore be geared toward exploring the beneficial effects of gratitude during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The South African economy was already vulnerable when the pandemic first struck. In the fourth quarter of 2019, the economy of South Africa shrank by 1.4%, jobs were shed (Statistics South Africa, 2020), and the country's medical resources were limited (Furtak and Barnard, 2021). With such contextual challenges at play and the advent of a real-world crisis, delving deeper into understanding how gratitude positively manifests itself can help to illuminate how individuals cope with challenging situations (Wood et al., 2007).

To this end, the lack of research into the previously mentioned positive effects associated with the expression of gratitude has motivated the present researchers to carry out this study. With this in mind, the objective for the current study was to investigate the sources of gratitude for South Africans at work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review

Conceptualizing gratitude

Gratitude is a prominent construct within the framework of positive psychology. People's natural tendency to respond positively to another person's altruism is characterized by gratitude (Emmons and Stern, 2013). According to Sansone and Sansone (2010), gratitude is concerned with being thankful for those things that one values and that hold meaning for oneself. Grateful individuals give thanks to someone or something for their fortune (Emmons, 2003). It is a state of being appreciative.

Gratitude has been conceptualized as both a trait and state. In its trait form, gratitude refers to an individual's propensity to show appreciation for the goodwill of others (McCullough et al., 2002) and in its state form, gratitude is about feeling thankful in one particular moment (Emmons and Mishra, 2011). When someone understands and appreciates the benefits they receive from others, they experience gratitude (Emmons and Mishra, 2011). It is therefore possible, especially for those that do not have an affinity for gratitude, to develop it. Merçon-Vargas et al. (2018) identified three characteristics that can be utilized to determine gratitude. They state that the beneficiary must (1) freely accept something beneficial from another person (benefactor), (2) have pleasant thoughts about the other person's activities, and (3) want to freely reciprocate this benefit. Gratitude, in simple terms, is an emotional state roused when one appreciates obtaining something as a result of someone's good intentions.

Gratitude has been studied as an attitude, a personality characteristic, a moral virtue, and a coping technique (Mahipalan and Sheena, 2019). For example, Watkins (2013) defined gratitude in three ways:

- as an *emotion* or *mental state*—a person recognizes that they have received a benefit or experienced something good as a result of someone else's actions;
- as an *affective characteristic*—an individual naturally endowed with a high level of gratitude and will therefore probably be grateful more frequently than others; or
- as a *mood*—gratitude can sometimes be an emotional state that endures over an extended period.

According to various definitions of gratitude, first, a person acknowledges the goodness that they are experiencing; second, they recognize that the source of these good things is external to themselves; finally, a person who benefits from another's gratitude must be willing to reciprocate it. Two of the strongest predictors of gratitude are the giver's responsiveness to the needs of the receiver and whether the benefit provided is liked by the receiver (Algoe and Haidt, 2009).

Gratitude has been linked to a number of wellbeing-related outcomes for people, such as mental health, contentment, happiness, a healthy sense of pride, hope, a higher degree of life satisfaction, and reduced stress and depression (Lavelock et al., 2016; Randolph, 2017; Cain et al., 2019; Komase et al., 2019, 2021; Nezlek et al., 2019).

Gratitude in the workplace

An individual who generally exhibits gratitude in their personal life may not necessarily do so at work (Cain et al., 2019). In the context of the organization, gratitude is seen as the act of being thankful for any work-related benefits and how they may positively impact one's life (Cain et al., 2019), an individual's predisposition to experience positive emotions in the context of their profession (Emmons and Stern, 2013), and feeling appreciative in response to their job (Cain et al., 2019). According to Youssef-Morgan et al. (2022), at work, gratitude is conceptualized and operationalized as (1) grateful appraisals of work, (2) gratitude toward colleagues, and (3) a purposeful attitude of gratitude. Work-related outcomes such as job performance and OCBs are also said to be positively correlated with gratitude in the workplace (Cain et al., 2019; Komase et al., 2019). Having demonstrated the beneficial effects of gratitude, organizations can utilize gratitude as a strategy to enhance the wellbeing of employees (Fehr et al., 2017).

Anticipated gratitude also has a bearing on performance. This form of gratitude speaks to how one anticipates that others, such as colleagues and supervisors, may feel grateful for one's efforts and contributions. For example, Grant and Wrzesniewski (2010) investigated whether the relationship between core self-evaluations and performance was determined by anticipated guilt and gratitude. They found that employees who held high core self-evaluations and experienced anticipated guilt and gratitude were more likely to be high performers. In an experiment by Grant and Gino (2010), it was found that supervisors' expressions of gratitude increased the input of call center agents. Furthermore, according to Hu and Kaplan (2014), if performance management systems can foster a culture of cooperativeness among team members, these can elicit gratitude.

Gratitude can also foster social bonds and prosocial behavior among colleagues (Cameron and Spreitzer, 2012; Lomas et al., 2014). It is associated with supervisor satisfaction (Hu and Kaplan, 2014) and, according to Fredrickson (2004), social bonds are strengthened through gratitude when individuals give for the sake of benefiting another, rather than expecting something in return. Once a benefit has been given, the giver is motivated to do more for the current and future beneficiary—an important consideration for OCB (Grant and Gino, 2010) and

TABLE 1   Characteristics of participants.

Participant	Gender identity	Racial identity	Age	Occupation
P1	Male	Indian	31	Mechanical engineer
P2	Female	Black	35	Journalist
P3	Female	White	56	Self-employed
P4	Female	White	48	Marketing director
P5	Male	White	32	Employed
P6	Female	White	35	Human capital business partner
P7	Female	Black	30	HR administrator
P8	Female	Black	21	Technician
P9	Male	Black	24	Unemployed
P10	Male	Black	26	HRSS administrator and executive assistant
P11	Male	Black	47	Attorney
P12	Female	Black	44	HR assistant
P13	Female	Black	55	Professional nurse
P14	Male	Black	28	Graphic designer
P15	Female	Black	22	Employed
P16	Male	Black	26	Self-employed
P17	Female	Black	32	Employed
P18	Male	Black	23	Employed
P19	Male	Black	39	OD manager
P20	Female	Black	39	Administrative officer
P21	Female	Black	36	Compliance administrator

moreover, a culture of reciprocity, teamwork and recognizing the good that others do (Dik et al., 2015). When individuals experience gratitude, they tend to ascribe the benefit they receive as valuable and thus view the act of giving as more altruistic and appraise the giver more positively. This could therefore lead to greater satisfaction with the social aspect of work, that is, with colleagues and supervisors (Smith et al., 1969; Wood et al., 2008b).

Given its link to other organization-related constructs, it can be seen that gratitude is an important player in enhancing the performance of employees and overall health of organizations (Snyder et al., 2014; Fehr et al., 2017).

Materials and methods

Research method

We decided that the most suitable way to fulfill the research objectives was to conduct a study using the generic qualitative approach as a research strategy. This strategy is most suitable in studies where the focus is on external, real-world, subjective experiences, rather than inner emotions (Percy et al., 2015). This allowed us to glean individuals' perspectives of their experiences of gratitude during the pandemic. We adopted an interpretivist research philosophy to understand the value associated with the experiences that made the participants grateful.

TABLE 2   Interview guide.

Think about yourself as an employee during COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns as you answer these questions.

Tell me about the aspects of your work that the pandemic has made you grateful for.

In what other ways did you feel fortunate during this time at work?
Why did this make you feel grateful?
Do you have another example to give me?

Tell me about the positive lasting changes this pandemic will have on your work.

What positive things did you learn about yourself during this time, as an employee?
Is this something you are grateful for? Why?

What positive things did you learn about your colleagues during this time?
Is this something you are grateful for? Why?

What did you appreciate about your manager during this time?
Why?

Tell me about your resilience at work during this time.
Would you say you drew on the resilience during this time for work?
Explain how this helped you cope with work during the pandemic.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that we spoke to the part of the population that had experiences that brought about gratitude (Campbell et al., 2020). A total of 21 participants took part in the study. It was apparent that data saturation had been

reached at 18 participants, but a further three were interviewed to make sure that this was indeed the case. Participants had to be adults residing in South Africa who worked during the COVID-19 lockdown. Table 1 contains the biographical characteristics of the participants.

Data gathering

We employed semi-structured interviews to gather data for this study, as this was deemed the most appropriate technique. An interview may be understood as a guided or unguided conversation between two people in order to uncover information, ideas, beliefs, and experiences. A semi-structured interview contains predetermined, open-ended questions and allows the interviewer to probe the participant for further explanations on their given answers (Adams, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are conducted conversationally and allow the researcher the freedom to construct additional questions during the interview process to retrieve subjective information from the interviewee.

Each participant was asked the same set of pre-determined questions, and with each individual response, the interviewer asked probing questions for further clarity and exploration (cf. Busetto et al., 2020). The interviews lasted between 30 and 54 min. Examples of questions asked included "Tell me about the aspects of your work that the pandemic has made you grateful for" and "What are the good things you learnt about your colleagues during this time? In what ways did this make you grateful?" The full list of questions can be found in Table 2. Because the interviews took place during lockdown, the interviews were conducted *via* Zoom and Microsoft Teams and were recorded on the same platform (see Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021).

Data analysis

Following the chosen research strategy, Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis was deemed a fitting mode of data analysis. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings. Next, we read and re-read the transcripts in order to familiarize ourselves with the data. At this point, mental notes were made of the texts of interest and any patterns that were emerging. The text was then selectively coded for data that spoke specifically to the study objectives. Once the text was coded, like codes were banded together and we searched for themes by starting to think about the salient features of those codes. Once we had established themes, we reviewed them, combining some when they shared similar meaning and breaking others apart when the codes were sufficiently different. Next, the themes were given names and each was defined according to what they

meant in the context of the data. Finally, the report on the findings was written.

Rigor

Rigor was maintained in several ways in this research, per the guidelines of Forero et al. (2018). Firstly, credibility was upheld through peer debriefing—the lead researcher communicated with the various co-authors at different stages of the research to ensure alignment. Investigator authority was maintained, as all authors were trained on how to conduct semi-structured interviews. Transferability was maintained through purposive sampling as the participants had to meet specific requirements for inclusion. Dependability was maintained by providing a rich description of the study methods. Lastly, confirmability was ensured through researcher triangulation, as there were multiple authors who all gave input for a higher quality study.

Ethical considerations

The University of Johannesburg's Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management Research Ethics Committee granted ethical clearance for the study [Clearance Number IPPM-2020-449(H)]. The participants were informed fully about the nature of the study and their participation, so that they could provide their informed consent. The participants partook in the study out of their own volition, and they were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence or needing to give an explanation. Confidentiality was achieved by protecting the identities of the participants and as such, participant codes (P1, P2, P3, and so forth) were used. Data were carefully stored and managed in password-protected computers that were only accessible by the researchers.

Results

The data analysis yielded five themes, namely, (1) gratitude for no negative work life changes; (2) gratitude for a caring workplace; (3) gratitude for a new way of working; (4) gratitude for the ability to put oneself first; and (5) gratitude for having resilience, optimism and spirituality as a psychological buffer. All the themes are presented below:

Theme 1: Gratitude for no negative work life changes

Participants were most grateful for not experiencing any major, negative work-related changes. Many people around

them had experienced major negative work such as the loss of income and subsequently, their homes, possessions, and lifestyles. Most important for the participants was the fact that they were able to keep their jobs and income which would then allow them to maintain their current lifestyles:

> *"I am grateful for having a stable income."* (P5)

> *"I have a home still because a lot people have actually been so badly affected by this pandemic. They have lost their jobs and have had to turn to smaller accommodation or have lost their homes completely."* (P2)

> *"I was fortunate enough to still have my job when the pandemic hit and to still have it currently during the pandemic because a lot of people in the country and globally lost their work."* (P21)

For other participants, the things that stayed the same and were appreciated tended to be smaller, yet these still played an important role. For example, another participant recognized that apart from having a home, the small things also had a big impact. This included the ability to purchase necessities such as food and warmth.

> *"The fact that we had a roof over our heads, we had a plate of food in front of us, we were kept warm through the winter season. . ."* (P4)

Lastly, others were thankful for not having contracted COVID-19, maintaining good health and life, and thereby still possessing the ability to work:

> *"I was not infected by COVID-19, I am still strong and healthy and able to work so that is what I am mostly grateful for."* (P10)

Theme 2: Gratitude for a caring workplace

Compassion in organizations did not go unnoticed during this time. Both management and fellow colleagues showed care and support during this time. Management tended to show understanding and removed certain barriers to enable success during this period:

> *"So the support that they gave us—it's not like they were forced to give it, but they gave it willingly. So it just comes out to show that the company cared about us. As much as they are just employers, they cared about us."* (P15)

Participants detailed gratitude for the support they received from their employer. This support manifested in various ways, such as being provided with the necessary tools to protect

participants from contracting the virus. Participants were also grateful for the introduction of work-from-home policies to lessen their chances of contracting the virus.

> *"We were mobilized by our company to work from home; everything was supplied for us by them. We have great support structures that were given to us from work, basically, like wellness or, you know, support, if you needed 'Hello Doctor'* [a medical advice app], *you know, and always make sure that we're okay. Surveys were done, check-ins were done."* (P5)

Some organizations recognized that not all employees were financially capable of providing their own tools of trade while working from home and therefore made provision for this:

> *"They made sure I have a company cellphone as well as a laptop with enough data."* (P6)

The organizational quality of empathy also went a long way for employees. Working from home brought about a new set of challenges. One participant pointed out that his organization was *"empathetic to family constraints resulting from the pandemic"* (P19).

During the lockdown, there were concerns around public transportation and whether passengers could ride safely. One participant detailed how their organization provided Uber rides:

> *"So for the ones that traveled by taxi* [minibus taxi, a South African mass public transportation system], *just to make sure that we minimized contact with other people and not infect other colleagues, they organized e-hailing services for us and we didn't have to pay anything for that, so that was from the company as well."* (P15)

Leadership has typically been an important part of driving positive behavior from employees. To the participants, little acts of support from their leaders was recognized and appreciated during this time, as demonstrated by these quotes:

> *"And I've also got a very understanding boss, where we have very open lines of communication. There are days where I've been very hard on myself and felt like I'm not delivering or I could do better, but she's always very encouraging—when you do something she'll give, like, the props, like, 'Hey, well done, congratulations, keep up the good work,' and it's been quite the motivator."* (P17)

> *"I'm extremely grateful for it because I work in the city, my family, my children live in another province. I appreciated my line manager actually for providing me with that opportunity."* (P20)

Similarly, colleagues played a pivotal role. One participant could not cope with the pressure of work and tending to their

children during the lockdown and was grateful when colleagues who could assist did so:

"I dropped the ball a few times during the lockdown, but some colleagues really stepped up for me." (P19)

Mothers felt especially hard hit by the lockdown given their new roles of employee, parent, teacher and coping was evidently difficult for them and thus needed all the emotional support they could get. Colleagues who are also moms understood this dynamic and were a source of this support for some which then brought them closer:

"I feel like I have become closer to some colleagues who are also moms. Before the lockdown, we were colleagues, and now there are other colleagues whom I have upgraded to friend status. We talked about the difficulties of working from home during the lockdown. I am so grateful for them. They made me feel like I was not alone." (P17)

Theme 3: Gratitude for a new way of working

The new way of working came as something of a relief for some. A few participants expressed relief that a hybrid work arrangement had been enforced in many organizations. They were grateful for the opportunity and ability to work from their own space, which allows for some flexibility. To them something that was long overdue for South Africa since it was already happening in some parts of the world. For many employees, after evaluating their finances against the new work arrangement, they believed they were saving time in traffic and money usually spent on fuel or public transport:

"We were able to transition from what we knew from the normal nine-to-five basis in terms of going to work and being physically present to doing all that work in the comfort of your own space. To me, that is what I am grateful for—and being in the comfort of my own space." (P10)

"I am grateful for the fact that companies realized that life can happen anywhere you are; you do not have to be in the office to do the work." (P12)

"It could be early in the morning. It could be late at night having my laptop at home having access to Internet out always be attending to work related stuff. I work in a space where." (P20)

"This pandemic has showed me I'm more efficient at home than I am in the office," (P21)

"Spending money for transport I saved lots of money because I was working from home." (P7)

"The first thing that stands out for me is not having to get up in the morning and sit in traffic to get to work." (P20)

It was hoped by them that new policies would be drafted by the organization which would allow for this to be a norm going forward. As the participants put it:

"With this change also comes updated policies which ensure that this new configuration of work is here to stay for the foreseeable future. So our flexibility... [is] guaranteed for much longer." (P19)

The ability to work from home also afforded employees the opportunity to be more focused in their work, whereas the workplace has too many distractions.

"I always say, you cannot work at work. There is far too much catching up and gossiping to be done with colleagues. I can go to work and come back home having done not a single ounce of work, whereas if I had just stayed at home, I would have ticked so many items off my to-do list. That balance is important, and I am happy it's something we have that can enhance our productivity." (P19)

Theme 4: Gratitude for the ability to put oneself first

A marker of the pandemic was how employees were stretched as they took on multiple roles. While under lockdown, many people had to be employees, parents, housekeepers, and teachers simultaneously. This put them under severe mental strain, as the boundaries between these roles had been completely broken down due to working and schooling from home. One participant recalled this challenge:

"I found it very difficult to cope during this time. I am one of those people that is always 'on' regardless of the time of day. My work calls, I answer." (P19)

However, burnout made her rethink how she operates and forced her to do things differently.

"I wish I had started much earlier in setting boundaries for myself. Just the power of 'no' has been liberating for me. When time for work ends, that's it. That's my time. That is

my children's time, and I do not feel guilty for not opening my mails. Even if I worked from home, there is a time to knock off and shut the laptop down. We will die working our fingers to the bone for these organizations, and my mental health is just too much of a sacrifice." (P12)

Working from home has afforded individuals to be able to take meaningful work breaks. Whilst at work, naptimes are forbidden, at home, a nap is both possible and easy as demonstrated by Participant 19 who states:

"You can easily still get some rest because you have been in your own comfortable space." (P20).

This allows them to be more rested and more effective at work:

"I am more rested that I didn't have to get up so early in the morning and actually sit for hours just trying to get to work. So I yeah, I feel I was really". (P20).

Theme 5: Gratitude for having resilience, optimism and spirituality as psychological buffers

As Participant 21 put it, she was *"grateful to be able to remain sane to an extent. But I think most of us lost it a bit."* Coping with the effects of the pandemic would not have been possible had the participants not been able to lean on their positive outlook of the future. The participants were grateful for internal psychological buffers such as resilience which allowed them to bounce back from the difficult times. They also seemed optimistic and believing that they will overcome the obstacle that is the pandemic and as such, were grateful to not have been heavily burdened mentally by the pandemic. Believing in a higher power also helped them frame what was happening as something that God had control over, thus taking away the need to worry.

"It's to respect life and my colleagues that we are not here on our own consent; God brought us here" (P11)

"Yeah, my spirituality is what grounded me throughout this time. It was easy to look at the statistics" (P8)

"I'm pretty optimistic. I didn't take much strain at work" (P5)

"It's always made me realize to always look at the positive side of things and appreciate my work and the people I work with, instead of focusing more on the negative. . . . Looking into the positive just helps you come up with better solutions to resolve a problem." (P15)

Similarly, a shift in attitude provided some participants with the ability to see the pandemic differently and as such, they were grateful that they could therefore deal with the effects of the pandemic better and think about how to act differently in future to attain success in the new world:

"We cannot change what we are going through, but we change our attitude toward it. I can cry all the time about how much this has impacted my ability to perform my job, or I can do the best I can with the cards I have been dealt. Optimism is a great buffer. It makes you feel like you can do all things. And I did." (P19)

"I am grateful for the chance to rebuild. And also reevaluate. I think the underlining is I'm grateful for life." (P21)

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to understand how employees experienced gratitude in the workplace during the pandemic.

Some participants in the present study experienced few or no negative life changes which meant that they kept their jobs, their homes, and did not contract COVID-19. These findings contradict those from a vast number of studies in South Africa and abroad that showed that when COVID-19 and its associated lockdowns hit, many were adversely impacted through a decline in wellbeing and job loss (Posel et al., 2021). Only a small minority felt no impact at all psychologically (cf. Kim et al., 2020); Ranchhod and Daniels (2020) suggest that individuals from lower socio-economic circumstances were disproportionally impacted economically. Given that most of our sample was employed in office jobs, they may have been better shielded from income loss which enabled them to maintain their pre-COVID-19 lifestyles and thus be grateful for their fortunes amidst the adversity faced by others around them.

The considerate nature of some of our participants' workplaces was not lost on them. Human resource initiatives are often implemented as a strategic attempt to bring about positive organizational outcomes as was done by the employers of participants. Mariappanadar (2020) maintains that human resources can enhance employees' lives, and perceived organizational support may decrease the health harm of work to employees—employees are of no productive help to their employers if they are in ill health. It is therefore a prerequisite for human resource management to play a role in minimizing the impact of crises and uncertainties on an organization's talent, because this is seen in conjunction with organizational strategic decisions

(Zagelmeyer and Gollan, 2012). An organization's concern and care for its people is therefore as crucial a practice as any other strategic intent in the broader organizational strategy. With concern and care for its people, the organization stands to manage its effectiveness during crises. This is even more important during remote working and digitalization, as it offers the opportunity for human resource management to enhance and keep up productivity against these circumstances of change (Giguari, 2020). Giguari (2020) study showed that treating employees with compassion during the COVID-19 pandemic helped with the effective adaptation to new working practices (flexible working hours and remote work). Additionally, demonstrating organizational support can improve the wellbeing of employees—through emphasizing the value of individual strengths of employees, organizations can mitigate employee burnout and reduce the prevalence of mental illness for employees (Meyers et al., 2019). In this study, supervisor support seemed to be important and therefore recognized by the recipients. This is in keeping with Mihalache and Mihalache (2022) who found that one of the ways that employers can support their employees during environmental disruptions it to be accessible and communicate which in turn help employees cope in the same way our sample coped during the pandemic.

Our participants had the privilege of being able to switch from going physically into work to working remotely. In doing so, they were able to retain or even improve their productivity. This was in keeping with research by Wessels et al. (2019) who confirmed that flexibility in terms of remote working enhances productivity and performance. This means that working from home may have increased employees' ability to meet their targeted performance metrics and possibly enhanced organizational productivity. Additionally, flexible work design has multiple benefits, such as enhancing the work–life balance, autonomy, and engagement of employees (Coenen and Kok, 2014).

Women have indicated a positive appreciation of the flexible work schedule for quite some time (Subramaniam et al., 2013). It is therefore noteworthy that flexibly designed workplaces were a positive experience during the COVID-19 pandemic for this group especially (Giguari, 2020). Past researched has demonstrated that flexible work schedules allow working mothers to enjoy the ability to continue working after having children, even in human-capital-intensive work (Chung and Van der Horst, 2018; Fuller and Hirsh, 2018). This demonstrates that work–life balance has been of utmost importance to women for a long time; the impact of the pandemic in terms of working from home has therefore only strengthened this.

Although working from home may have resulted in better work–life balance for some employees, it is noteworthy to indicate that it may have caused others to be engaged in work over and above normal working hours and possibly struggle to enjoy free time and social activities (Peters and Blomme, 2019). This may therefore necessitate conversations around employee wellbeing and wellness for the participants.

According to our findings, working from home also led to a significant reduction in household consumption, for instance, spending on transportation, electronics, clothing, and services. This finding is supported by Purwanto et al. (2020) who argued that working from home supports employees through flexible work schedules to complete work and save money usually spent on the work commute. This may have led to individuals' experiencing improved financial health to some degree, a good motivation to be grateful.

The pandemic provided the opportunity for employees to focus on themselves. According to Clay (2020), being able to care for oneself during this time will allow individuals to enjoy a sense of wellbeing. For our participants, one of the ways this was achieved was through setting boundaries for themselves. This is supported by Hinton et al. (2020) who stated that saying "no" is an essential part of self-management. Further ways to self-manage can include behaviors such as identifying work and life priorities and then deciding what one should do now, what one can save for later and what can be delegated to competent others (Sekaja, 2021).

The study suggests that resilience, optimism and spirituality were key factors in overcoming the negative emotions associated with the burdens of the pandemic. Practicing virtuousness in the workplace has implications for desired actions and behavior. Chhajer et al. (2018) maintained that when employees exhibit increased levels of optimism, they tend to expect good things to occur in the future during a change. This optimism can also lead to positive performance outcomes (Cameron et al., 2011). A similar link to performance can be found with other virtuous acts such as support for others, forgiving mistakes, fostering meaningfulness, and showing gratitude. Since optimists are wired to expect good things to happen to them, they tend to exhibit more positive emotions and keep trying in the face of challenging circumstances (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000); Riskind et al. (1996) maintain that optimism training interventions should not only act to diminish negative thoughts but also actually increase positive thinking for greater impact.

Resilience is conceptualized as the process of adapting positively to stress, threats, tragedy, or trauma (American Psychological Association, 2002). The sample in the study, having gone through COVID-19 and its effects, can therefore be said to be resilient. When individuals are resilient, they tend to experience less anxiety, negative emotion, and depression, and rather show greater life satisfaction, subjective wellbeing, and positive emotions (Wu et al., 2020), which may explain how the participants in this

study were able to identify points of gratitude. Lastly, according to Daniel (2015), integrating spirituality into the workplace can be linked to lower levels of stress. Therefore, those with a spiritual grounding in our sample were able to buffer the effects of COVID-19 by drawing on their spirituality.

Managerial implications

Gratitude is an internal feeling that can impact how employees view and interact with the world around them. Managers can try to cultivate this feeling by investigating the behaviors that elicit gratitude from their employees. These behaviors should be aligned to the employees' values so that they care about what is being done for them. Understanding the behaviors that bring about gratitude may allow the employee to feel closer to their colleagues and more committed to the organization. After all, as Lee et al. (2019) argued, being a recipient of gratitude is indicative of a successful social interaction.

Expressing gratitude can be achieved in many ways. For example, Locklear et al. (2021) posited that the expression of gratitude can be achieved by reflecting and listing things for which one feels grateful. This intervention has been highly effective at improving wellbeing (Emmons and McCullough, 2003).

Managers should regularly and intentionally show gratitude to their employees for both big and small actions. This acts as a form of encouragement and motivation for the employees. A tangible way to demonstrate gratitude in the workplace is for managers to institutionalize the use of thank-you notes (Emmons and McCullough, 2003), even delivered by the manager to the employee's workspace (Seligman et al., 2005), as a way of expressing gratitude to others. Research suggests, however, that gratitude letters have a shorter lasting positive effect than gratitude lists (see Wood et al., 2010).

In line with these ideas, this study suggests that managers can make use of these strategies to either elicit gratitude from or demonstrate gratitude to their co-workers and subordinates. This study also suggests that expressing gratitude in this way can help employees comprehend the positive impact they may have on their company of employment. Furthermore, fostering a culture of gratitude among employees can prompt individuals to feel a sense of connectedness to others (Wood et al., 2008a,b) and can motivate individuals to develop a sense of cohesion with respective others (Algoe, 2012). It therefore seems reasonable for managers to pre-emptively introduce interventions aimed at enhancing gratitude within the workplace to reap the associated benefits.

Limitations

The study consisted of participants from a wide range of occupations. When it comes to the workplace, it could be argued that specific employment levels or jobs appreciate different gestures of kindness from their organization. For example, a worker on the lower end of the pay grade may be motivated by different things than a senior manager. The study therefore could have homed in on one of these specific groups for even more meaningful data. The study sought to investigate *what* working people were grateful for; to add to the value of the study, the participants could have been asked *how* their experience of gratitude enhanced their lives.

Future directions

People of the world are now coming out of lockdowns and resuming life as they once knew it, or as close to that as possible, as they forge ahead with a new normal. To address the shortcomings found in this study, more research should be conducted using alternative approaches and designs. Future studies should employ a variety of sampling approaches with a larger sample of people from various occupations and demographic categories (e.g., race, gender, age, educational level, and seniority). This would help researchers understand how different employment categories experience gratitude by exploring the determinants and consequences thereof. It is an opportune time for researchers to understand how, after the height of the pandemic, employees experience gratitude and compare that to life during the pandemic. This is because there is a difference between experiencing life's minor inconveniences (arguably the case before COVID-19) compared to potentially huge life changes (as a result of the pandemic), which would test any individual's outlook on life. Future studies could look into whether workplace gratitude predicts wellbeing (or the reverse), using longitudinal and experimental approaches. Research yet to come could also look into whether being grateful at work has any drawbacks. For example, are workers who exhibit gratitude less inclined to address inequity or other injustices at their organization with its management? Furthermore, a study should be conducted on the impact of gratitude exercises among team members at work in order to understand which co-workers attributes are appreciated, how these can be harnessed and how these may impact professional relationships between team members. Lastly, there is no empirical evidence for the impact that a lack of gratitude has on the employee and the organization and this needs attention in order for scientists and organizations to understand the true value of gratitude, that is, not only what happens when employees are grateful, but also what may happen when they are not.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management Research Ethics Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

LS conceptualized and supervised the study, analyzed the data, and prepared the manuscript for publication. KF, SM, CT, and LT carried out and completed the write up of the study that this manuscript in loosely based on. BM analyzed the data and helped prepare the manuscript for publication. MM and TM prepared the manuscript for publication. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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A value-oriented psychological contract: Generational differences amidst a global pandemic

Alda Deas [1]* and Melinde Coetzee [2]

[1]Department of Human Resource Management, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa, [2]Department of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of working conditions world-wide, fast tracking the reality of the digital-driven workplace. Concepts such as remote working, working-from-home and hybrid working models are now considered as the "new normal." Employes are expected to advance, flourish and survive in this digitally connected landscape. Different age and generational groups may experience this new organizational landscape differently and may expect different organizational outcomes in exchange for their inputs. Accordingly, the study investigated differences regarding the value-oriented psychological contract expectations of employes from different generational groups. An ANOVA test for significant mean differences and a *post hoc* test for multiple comparisons were conducted on a sample of (N = 293) employes in the services industry in Southern Africa (85%) and other European countries (15%). The observed generational cohort differences regarding value-orientated psychological contract expectations for job characteristics and work-life balance could be utilized to develop interventions and strategies to promote retention of employes in the post-pandemic digital-orientated workplace.

KEYWORDS

Psychological Contract Inputs-Outcomes Inventory, equity theory, COVID-19, employe input obligations, employe organizational outcome expectations, psychological contract, generational differences, digital worker

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in significant economic and social challenges for nations globally (Potgieter, 2021) and transformed the way in which we worked, studied, traveled and lived in general (Lopez and Fuiks, 2021). The world-wide shutdown that was implemented in order to control the pandemic, resulted in various challenges for the employment relationship (Kniffen et al., 2021) as it disrupted and

transformed workplace policies and practices significantly (Lee, 2021). Covid-19 has also placed a renewed emphasis on the implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT), that has influenced the way in which we manage human capital (Bester and Bester, 2021; Potgieter, 2021). As Stofberg et al. (2021) noted, the digital revolution has transformed the workplace and organizations had to adapt in order to survive this tsunami called Industry 4.0. Managing employes and their expectations is therefore of utmost importance.

Recent research has also indicated that alternative work arrangements, teamwork through virtual platforms and contingent work arrangements augmented by the Covid-19 pandemic and the digital revolution have resulted in the birth of the value-oriented psychological contract for the digital worker (Coetzee, 2021; Veldsman and Van Aarde, 2021; Deas and Coetzee, 2022). However, employers should be mindful that employes from different generational groups may respond differently to the changes brought on by the digital revolution and the Covid-19 pandemic (Shanmugam, 2016; Dhliwayo, 2021). Conversations concerning value-oriented generational differences are commonplace for organizational science and practice (Rudolph et al., 2021) especially when considering that traditional employment relationships are rapidly changing to non-traditional employment relationships and part-time, fixed-term work arrangements (Alcover et al., 2017; Kutaula et al., 2020). Accordingly, the objective of this study was to explore differences regarding the value-oriented psychological contract expectations of employes from different age-grouped generational cohorts. We hypothesized that employes from various generational groups will differ in terms of their perceptions of the value-oriented psychological contract. The concept of the psychological contract has been studied extensively; however, the concept of the value-orientated psychological contract is still under-researched (Coetzee et al., 2022; Deas and Coetzee, 2022). The results of this article will therefore contribute to new knowledge on this concept from a generational perspective.

The value-oriented psychological contract

The psychological contract represents an essential part of the employment relationship and is mainly based on the power of perception (Veldsman and Van Aarde, 2021; Perkins et al., 2022). Argyris (1960) conceptualized the psychological contract as the perception of mutual expectations underlining the exchange agreement in the employment relationship. Drawing from Adams (1965) equity theory, the value-oriented psychological contract refers to employes' perception of equity in terms of the organizational obligated outcomes in exchange

for their obligated inputs. It is argued that employes will be satisfied with their employment relationship if they perceive that there is an equitable balance between what they receive from the organization in return for what they give to the organization (Payne et al., 2015; Coetzee et al., 2022). Expectations normally include aspects such as compensation and benefits, training opportunities and skills development, and job characteristics (Nayak et al., 2021).

Research on the psychological contract typically concentrates on either one of the two predominant themes, namely content-based or evaluation-based psychological contract expectations (Kutaula et al., 2020). Various researchers have emphasized the necessity to examine the contents of the psychological contract; however these studies are more concentrated on the traditional employes' perceived obligations (Rousseau, 1989; Karani et al., 2021). Generally, the content-based approach focus on the transactional and relational content-elements of the psychological contract (Kutaula et al., 2020). According to Coetzee (2021), the traditional transactional psychological contract generally refers to specific, short-term and monetary benefits, based on financial exchange agreements, whereas a relational psychological contract refers to open-ended or extended employment agreements. Evaluation-based psychological contract research, on the other hand, is focused on determining the fulfilment, or breach of these psychological contract content-elements (Santos et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, Deas (2021) conceptualized four dimensions for the value-oriented psychological contract, namely employe obligated inputs, organizational obligated outcomes, employe obligated inputs delivered and psychological contract fulfilment. Employe obligated inputs refers to both task obligatory aspects (e.g., meeting task requirements and acting ethically and honestly) and attitudinal obligatory aspects (e.g., being engaged and loyal toward the organizational brand, vision and mission) (Coetzee et al., 2022; Deas and Coetzee, 2022). Organizational obligated outcomes include aspects such as organizational culture, career development opportunities, work-life balance, rewards, job characteristics and relationships (Deas and Coetzee, 2022). The employe obligated inputs delivered dimension and the psychological contract fulfilment dimension act as perceived equity ratio measures (Coetzee et al., 2022).

Generational differences in terms of work values

Based on the generational cohort theory, people who grew up and experienced the same historical events during their emotional developmental years will belong to the same generational cohort (Ryder, 1965; Jung et al., 2021). Research has distinguished between four generational (age-grouped)

cohorts currently in the workplace ranging from the Baby Boomers (1946–1965), Generation X (1966–1980), Generation Y (1981–1994) and the final generational cohort joining the workforce, Generation Z (1995 and after) (Chaney et al., 2017; Lissitsa and Kol, 2021). It is widely believed that different generational cohorts bring different values, attitudes and behaviors to the workplace (Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021) and these different values, attitudes and behaviors should be understood in order to successfully manage employes from different generational cohorts (Kirchmayer and Fratričová, 2020). Both researchers and practitioners are apprehensive about the impact of generational differences on the workplace and the issues these value-based differences can create for human resource practitioners (Stark and Poppler, 2018). As a result, the impact of generational differences on the employment relationship has been studied in terms of job-related aspects and work-related values (Goh and Jie, 2019; Jung et al., 2021). However, little research has focused on the generational effect on the psychological contract (Lub et al., 2016; Magni and Manzoni, 2020). Magni and Manzoni (2020) postulate that, together with age, it is important to examine the psychological contract from a generational perspective as this might have a stronger impact on psychological contract expectations than merely examining it from an age perspective. Accordingly, the objective of the study was to investigate differences regarding the value-oriented psychological contract expectations of employes from different generational groups.

Materials and methods

Participants

Contemporary workers (N = 293) from human resource and financial services organizations across Southern Africa (85%) and various European countries (15%) were included in this study by means of a convenience sampling method. Demographics for this sample are mostly represented by the Black (63%) men (54%) from the Generation Z generational cohort (53%, ages between 26 and 40 years).

Measuring instrument

The *Psychological Contract Input-Outcomes Inventory* (PCIOI) (Deas, 2021; Coetzee et al., 2022) is a 46-item multi-level, 5-point Likert-type (ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = to a great extent) scale measuring four dimensions of the value-oriented psychological contract. The first dimension of this scale, the employe obligated inputs dimension (12-items), measures employes' perceptions in terms of primary task performance obligations (e.g., "I feel obligated to provide inputs and ideas to execute tasks") and secondary attitudinal

obligations (e.g., "I feel obligated to fulfill the organization's vision, mission and values"). The second dimension, the organizational outcomes dimension (29-items), measures employes' perceptions of organizational outcomes, including organizational culture (e.g., "I expect equal treatment of all employes"), career development opportunities (e.g., "I expect to receive learning/coaching/mentoring on the job"), work-life balance (e.g., "I expect flexibility in terms of where and when I do my job"), rewards (e.g., "I expect job security"), relationships (e.g., "I expect opportunities for teamwork"), and job characteristics (e.g., "I expect innovative work challenges").

The third dimension, the psychological contract fulfilment dimension (5-items), measures employes' perceptions on the organizations' fulfilment of employe expectations (e.g., "I feel the organization fulfilled my needs for autonomy and challenging job characteristics"). The final dimension, the employe obligated inputs delivered dimension (2-items), is based on a self-reflection on whether employes' delivered on their primary tasks and secondary obligations toward the organization (e.g., "I feel I delivered on the primary employe inputs to the organization"). Deas and Coetzee (2022) provided evidence of the construct validity and internal consistency reliability for the four-dimensional scale in the South African context.

Procedure

The online platform LinkedIn was used to invite participants to complete a voluntary, anonymous survey (LimeSurvey GmbH, 2020). Data obtained were transferred to a SPSS file for data analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the research was obtained from the University of South Africa (ERC Ref#: 2020_CEMS/IOP_014). Participants were advised that participation was completely voluntary, anonymous, confidential and private. Informed consent was also attained in order to use the data for research purposes.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM Corp (2020) SPSS Version 27 and SAS/STAT® software version 9.4M5© (2017). Test for significant mean differences were conducted to determine the differences between age/generational cohorts and their perceptions in terms of the value-oriented psychological contract. ANOVA's were used to determine the differences among the variables.

Results

Table 1 indicates that the generational groups appeared to differ significantly in respect of the organizational obligated outcomes and employe obligated inputs delivered constructs. The Bonferonni's test for multiple comparisons showed significant mean differences in terms of work-life balance for the 30 years and younger (Gen Z) (M = 3.83; SD = 0.91) versus the 46–55 years (Gen X) (M = 4.26; SD = 0.66; ω^2 = 0.02; small practical effect) generational groups [$p \leq 0.05$; C.I. = (−0.8128; −0.0350)].

The results indicated significant mean differences regarding job characteristics for the 30 years and younger (Gen Z) (M = 4.33; SD = 0.71) versus the 46–55 years (Gen X) (M = 4.63; SD = 0.49; ω^2 = 0.02; small practical effect) generational groups {$p \leq 0.05$; C.I. = [(0.0350;0.8128)]}, as well as the 31–45 years (Gen Y) (M = 4.39; SD = 0.58) vs. the 46–55 years (Gen X) (M = 4.63; SD = 0.49; ω^2 = 0.02; small practical effect) generational groups {$p \leq 0.05$; C.I. = [(0.0007;0.4910)]}.

In terms of the employe obligated inputs delivered construct, the results indicated significant mean differences for the 30 years and younger (M = 3.83; SD = 0.88) versus the 31–45 years (Gen Y) (M = 4.27; SD = 0.71; ω^2 = 0.045; small practical effect) generational groups {$p \leq 0.001$; C.I = [(−0.7427; −0.1441)]}, as well as for the 30 years and younger (M = 3.83; SD = 0.88) vs. the 46–55 years (Gen X) (M = 4.22; SD = 0.72) generational groups {$p \leq 0.05$; C.I. = [(−0.7598; −0.0323)]}.

Discussion

The current study set out to investigate whether age-grouped generational cohorts differ in terms of their value-oriented psychological contract expectations. More specifically, the findings suggest differences in terms of work-life balance and job characteristics expectations. According to Sánchez-Hernández et al. (2019), an important aspect for the younger generations is to combine work and family life in such a way as to create a strong work-life balance. Further to this, the younger the generation, the more value is placed on work-life balance and relaxation and less value is place on

TABLE 1 ANOVA (with *Post Hoc* Bonferonni Tests): Organizational obligated outcomes, employe inputs delivered and generational groups.

Variable	Age group	N	Mean	SD	ω^2	df	F	Sig	Source of significant difference between means	Mean differences 95% CI [LL;UL]
Organizational outcomes (work-life balance)	30 years and younger (Gen Z)	64	3.83	0.91	0.023	3	3.290	0.021*	46–55 years (Gen X)	−0.42* [−0.8128; −0.0350]
	31–45 years (Gen Y)	151	4.13	0.82						
	46–55 years (Gen X)	58	4.26	0.66					30 years and younger (Gen Z)	0.42* [0.0350;0.8128]
	56–65 years (Baby Boomers)	16	3.93	0.68						
Organizational outcomes (job characteristics)	30 years and younger (Gen Z)	64	4.33	0.71	0.021	3	3.042	0.029*	46–55 years (Gen X)	−0.29* [−0.5865; −0.0112]
	31–45 years (Gen Y)	151	4.39	0.58					46–55 years (Gen X)	−0.25* [−0.4910;−0.0007]
	46–55 years (Gen X)	58	4.63	0.49					30 years and younger (Gen Z) 31–45 years (Gen Y)	0.29* [0.0112;0.5865] 0.25* [0.0007;0.4910]
	56–65 years (Baby Boomers)	16	4.44	0.65						
Employe obligated inputs delivered	30 years and younger (Gen Z)	64	3.83	0.88	0.045	3	5.491	0.001***	31–45 years (Gen Y) 46–55 years (Gen X)	−0.44*** [−0.7427; −0.1441] −0.39* [−0.7598; −0.0323]
	31–45 years (Gen Y)	151	4.27	0.71					30 years and younger (Gen Z)	0.44*** [0.1441;0.7427]
	46–55 years (Gen X)	58	4.22	0.72					30 years and younger (Gen Z)	0.39* [0.0323;0.7598]
	56–65 years (Baby Boomers)	16	4.28	0.79						

Source: Authors' own work.
***$p \leq 0.001$, **$p \leq 0.01$, **$p \leq 0.05$.
CI, confidence interval. LL, lower level. UL, upper level.

work ethic and the importance of work to an employe's life (Lyons and Kuron, 2014; Brink and Zondag, 2019). Brink and Zondag (2019) also reported that the significance of flexible work-life policies increased across the generational cohorts. In terms of job characteristics, previous research has indicated that workers from different generational groups may react differently toward similar job characteristics (Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004; Zaniboni et al., 2013; Hernaus and Vokic, 2014). Vui-Yee and Paggy (2018) further assert that differences in age may impact on job-related aspects. According to findings from Stark and Poppler (2018), Baby boomers and Generation X employes indicated that they value a work that has meaning and affords a sense of achievement. Generation Z employes, on the other hand, value high-quality feedback and guidance (Zhang and Zhao, 2021). Job characteristics are regarded as a significant factor contributing to employe retention (Vui-Yee and Paggy, 2018). Accordingly, human resource practitioners should ensure that employes' job characteristics are aligned with their values and expectations.

Implications, limitations and directions for future research

The results of this study suggest important practical implications for work-life balance and job characteristics as important content-elements of the value-oriented psychological contract for different generational groups. The study corroborated that generational groups tend to differ regarding their work-life balance and job characteristics psychological contract expectations. Human resource practitioners may therefore adapt work-life balance policies in order to accommodate different age-grouped generational cohort values. Human resource practitioners should also focus on offering customized and individualized human resource practices that address the job characteristic needs of employes from different generational cohorts (Malik et al., 2020).

The limitations of this research suggest some insights for future research. The results of this cross-sectional study were largely restricted to employes from Southern Africa and cannot be generalized as such. Furthermore, all four generations were not equally sampled with the participants being predominantly from the Generation Y cohort. Also, participants were requested to complete a self-reported survey, therefore causal inferences are not possible. Future research could consider test-retest studies with a more equal representation of the generational cohorts across various occupational fields around the globe. Aside from these limitations, this study encourages new opportunities for research on the value-oriented psychological contract of employes, especially in the new digital work environment.

Conclusion

This article contributed to the lack of and emerging body of knowledge on the value-oriented psychological contract. It also subsequently emphasized generational cohort differences in terms of organizational obligated outcome expectations for work-life balance and job characteristics. While the results of this empirical study may possibly be reinforced through further reproduction and investigation, it is believed that this article may stimulate further research and consideration in the measurement of employes' value-oriented psychological contract through the Psychological Contract Inputs-Outcomes Inventory (PCIOI) in order to better understand the values and expectations of employes in the post-pandemic digital-revolutionized world of work.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ERC Ref#: 2020_CEMS/IOP_014 University of South Africa. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The reviewers AR, SR, and handling editor declared their shared affiliation.

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The influence of technostress, work–family conflict, and perceived organisational support on workplace flourishing amidst COVID-19

Martha Harunavamwe[1]* and Chené Ward[2]

[1]Department of Human Resource Management, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa,
[2]Department of Industrial Psychology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

The remote working environment is characterised by excessive use of new technology and work activities that extend to personal time. It is expected of each employee to balance multiple roles whilst maintaining maximum performance and individual wellbeing; however, without adequate support from an organisation, employees languish instead of flourish. The current study applied a model to investigate the combined effect of technostress, work–family conflict, and perceived organisational support on workplace flourishing for higher education employees. The study followed a cross-sectional quantitative research framework. Data were collected from a sample of 227 academic and support staff employees from a selected residential University in South Africa. The results indicated that technostress through perceived organisational support and through work–family conflict influences workplace flourishing. No direct significant effect was reported between technostress and workplace flourishing. Technostress, work–family conflict, and perceived organisational support combined explained 47% variance in workplace flourishing. Perceived organisational support displayed the strongest direct effect on workplace flourishing, and technostress is a strong determinant of work–family conflict, which then mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. The study concluded that providing organisational support and creating policies favourable to work–life balance assist employees in managing techno-overload, techno-invasion, and techno-complexity (technostress) better and enhance workplace flourishing. Although employees struggle in the remote working context with demands imposed by techno-overload, techno-invasion, and techno-complexity, the results indicate that perceived organisational support and balanced work life act as job resources that enhance emotional, psychological, and subjective wellbeing (workplace flourishing).

KEYWORDS

technostress, work-family conflict, perceived organisational support, workplace flourishing, COVID-19, remote working

Introduction

Higher education employees have been exposed to new changes, shifting from face-to-face classes to the emergency of online platforms in the middle of a stressful pandemic. Some negative consequences have been observed, particularly for workers' wellbeing and productivity. A deep comprehension on how individuals experienced remote working supported by technologies has become very crucial (Lades et al., 2020). In such conditions, positive academic and support staff functioning is an important objective desired by every leader. It is relevant for researchers to unpack the progressive aspects related to positive academic practices. Accordingly, particular consideration should be given to constructs, such as workplace flourishing, which encompass all aspects of wellbeing. This study examines emotional, psychological, and subjective wellbeing (workplace flourishing) amongst employees at a residential higher education institution in South Africa during the COVID-19 lockdown, which was characterised by remote working, social distancing, and measures that transformed the working practices of most employees across the country. A number of studies have identified the extensive challenges imposed by the pandemic in the workplace, especially in terms of wellbeing (Jemberie et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020; Sibley et al., 2020). Recently, Wanberg et al. (2020) have discovered that higher education employees experience and display high depressive symptoms coupled with an increase in life dissatisfaction due to work pressure imposed by the pandemic. Contrary to these findings, some studies noted that most of the academics who are familiar with online learning tools barely experienced stress or anxiety during the shift from face-to-face classes to online learning platforms during the pandemic (Apouey et al., 2020; Spagnoli et al., 2020). The conflicting findings simply suggest how different employees' wellbeing was impacted by the pandemic and the change of the work scenario; hence, these conflicting findings call for clarity.

COVID-19 penetrated social, cultural, and technological barricades that blocked virtual working leading to a structural shift in where work occurs (Lund et al., 2020). Remote working created stress, which was exacerbated by the usage of information and communication technologies (ICT). ICT prompted work intensification, which consequently produced negative outcomes, including strain, anxiety, tension, and discomfort, which then led to poor work performance, increased work–family conflict, and emotional exhaustion (Penado Abilleira et al., 2021). Hence, the adaptation of ICT came with both benefits and challenges. ICT altered the work environment, the culture, and the means by which employees performed their given work. The greater reliance on ICT has also bred work extension expectations, with most employees being always accessible, working at a higher speed, and producing better results, but experiencing overload and strain (Spagnoli et al., 2020). This has resulted in technology being considered as a fundamental part of major organisational functions, as well

as a source of stress (Le Roux and Botha, 2021). Exploring technostress has, therefore, become pertinent and relevant.

Amidst COVID-19, institutions of higher learning had to reconsider how current technology could allow business to function as usual. Academics and support staff had to frequently interact with technology, and the continuous upgrading of the online systems and software exposed them to constant strain, considering that they do not always have the knowledge required to use new and updated technologies (Li and Wang, 2021). However, lockdown left academics improvising new forms of teaching, resembling emergency remote teaching (Dey et al., 2020), which required the ability to integrate technology into lectures. For some, this increased ambiguity and burnout due to the complex nature of technology (Schildkamp et al., 2020). Thus, the virtual work arrangements imposed by the COVID-19 crisis have increased workload and the levels of technostress, which eventually threatens wellbeing (Spagnoli et al., 2020).

Technology has the capacity to upgrade the work environment and enhance performance, productivity, and efficiency and create flexibility; however, it can also result in adverse consequences for individuals' physical, psychological, and cognitive wellbeing. The negative outcomes of technostress subsequently affect the organisations through low productivity caused by decreased employee wellbeing, low satisfaction, lack of commitment, and possible burnout and languishing (Salanova, 2020). With proper support from the organisations, technology can improve workplace efficiency and productivity; however without such perceived support, technology tends to be a burden and a source of strain. Thus, when employees perceive that their supervisors and the organisation at large are supportive and fulfil their socio-emotional needs, they are more likely to flourish in their work. Accordingly, workplace flourishing is further intensified in the presence of significant resources that are associated with a job, including perceived organisational support (POS). Within the premises of the job demands–resources model (JD–R model), technostress creators can be regarded as job demands (including techno-invasion, techno-complexity, and techno-overload) that can be curbed by the supply of adequate job and personal resources, such as organisational support and work–life balance. Putranto et al. (2021) added that, when experiencing technostress, POS creates a feeling of security and satisfaction of employees' emotional needs to positive effect. This implies that employees who regard their organisations as supportive are more likely to experience positive psychological wellbeing even when they experience challenges, enabling them to flourish.

Within the remote settings, roles of employees have doubled or tripled, resulting in the interference between work and family (Le Roux and Botha, 2021). Since restrictive lockdowns were imposed, employees were confined to their homes with their children and partners. This meant that, whilst one was considered to be working, simultaneously, it included doing house chores, taking care of the children, and providing

homeschooling, whilst still dealing with the reality of the COVID-19 disease (Spagnoli et al., 2020). All of this contributed to the experience of the crisis of work–life balance (Tomohiro, 2021). Based on the sentiments of Tomohiro (2021), a flexible work style and persistent confinement with technology may lead to a decrease in employee wellbeing and interfere with employees' private life by blurring working hours and non-working hours. However, with adequate support from the supervisor and the organisation at large, employees experience emotional security and engagement. A recent study has noted that, without support from an organisation, the changes brought by digitalisation, where academics are expected to adapt to the high demands imposed on them, threaten their mental and physical resources, thereby depreciating their wellbeing (Penado Abilleira et al., 2021). The impact of adaption in the current work context has largely remained untested, more so in residential higher education institutions. A relative burden has been placed on employees' work–life balance with increased adaption to technology as a tool to work from home, and adequate support needs to be provided to ensure employee flourishing. This study seeks to establish the combined effect of technostress, work–family conflict, and perceived organisational support on workplace flourishing in higher education.

Literature review

Workplace flourishing

The concept of workplace flourishing is regarded as the most prominent multidimensional construct for the wellbeing models (Seligman, 2012). It encompasses emotional, psychological, and subjective wellbeing in one context, and the construct provides an indication of the way employees feel and function in an organisation (Rothmann, 2014). As a multifaceted approach to wellbeing, workplace flourishing considers the extent to which one experiences a purposeful and meaningful life at work (Redelinghuys et al., 2019), being engaged, interested, and competent in one's work; feeling self-respect and optimism; being respected by others; having supportive relationships; and socially contributing to the happiness of others (Diener et al., 2010). Workplace flourishing is defined as the employees' state of wellbeing, which is a result of frequent positive experiences and favourable job-related experiences. The concept has become relevant due to challenges experienced by most employees in trying to adjust to the new nature of work (Rautenbach, 2015). According to Huppert and So (2009), when an individual successfully thrives and experiences a sense of wellbeing in almost all areas of their work life, it is summed up as flourishing at work. This implies that one functions effectively and perceives life as going really well; thus, wellbeing is fully conceptualised in those lenses. Flourishing, in general, is seen as a time when an employee experiences high levels of personal wellbeing, coupled

with minimum pain, pleasant emotions, and being involved in interesting activities, which brings overall satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 2010).

Given that emotional, psychological, and subjective wellbeing are the collective components that explain flourishing and languishing of employees, an individual's level of flourishing or languishing can be evaluated on the mental health continuum (MHC) developed by Keyes and Annas (2009). According to this continuum, flourishing is a state in which individuals experience high levels of emotional, psychological, and subjective wellbeing; on the other hand, languishing is a state in which individuals do not have much good feeling toward life, and they also do not see themselves as functioning well in life (Keyes and Annas, 2009). In line with the above, according to the JD–R model, employees who sense that their job demands surpass the available resources because of complexity or emotional, psychological, or physical strain will feel incapable to cope with management at work (May et al., 2004; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). This can potentially cause employees to feel that they are not in control of their environment, and, consequently, they experience burnout and languish rather than flourish. Exposure to technostress and persistent work–family conflict involves an inescapable component of strain, as employees experience a variety of complexities and multiple job demands; hence, technostress creators and work–family conflict are considered as strenuous job demands. In terms of the job demands–resources (JD–R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001), although employees face stringent demands, they also have various personal and job resources that may well counter the influences of the demands. Employees need an incrementation of resources to restore a balance between job demands and resources. In this case, more ICT support and more favourable work–life balance strategies/policies may act as resources that may inhibit technostress and work–family conflict and facilitate flourishing despite the challenges facing employees.

Technostress

Knani (2013) states that technostress emanates from the excessive utilisation of ICTs, including laptops, cellphones, constant instant messaging, e-mail, and voice mail. The experience of technostress is attributed to one's attempt to handle the constantly changing and developing ICTs, which pose new challenges in adjusting to the frequently changing physical, social, and cognitive demands posed by ICT in the work settings. The use of ICT can create difficulties for employees through generating a variety of stressors, such as overload, invasion of family time, role ambiguity, complexity, and job insecurity. Tarafdar et al. (2007) conceptualised the technostress phenomenon as a form of stress that is experienced by end users in organisations as a result of operating the ICTs.

Atanasoff and Venable (2017) defined technostress as a mental stress created by use of technology, resulting in strong emotional responses associated with fear and anxiety. Ragu-Nathan et al. (2008) noted that technostress consists of five components, namely, techno-complexity, techno-overload, techno-insecurity, techno-invasion, and techno-uncertainty. These dimensions can be used to measure levels of technostress experienced by employees in organisations. Techno-overload describes an increase in the rate and amount of work, which causes employees to execute their duties at a high speed and spend more time on work (Tarafdar et al., 2007). The volume of information that employees have to absorb from ICTs can be beyond comprehension, such that it results in negative outcomes and detrimental effects on individual health. For instance, in the university setting, frequently alternating between diverse devices (laptops, phones, emails, and instant messaging), as well as performing diverse job tasks, reduces task quality, and efficiency as the employee's mind requires an adequate time span to process the absorbed information (Ingusci et al., 2021). Techno-invasion is the pervasive invasion of an employee's personal life by ICTs, therefore blurring the boundaries between work and private life (La Torre et al., 2020). Techno-invasion has a direct impact on work–life balance. Mahapatra and Pati (2018) found techno-invasion to be negatively related to wellbeing in employees. Techno-complexity is the high complexities of new ICTs, which cause an employee to feel incompetent (Barber and Santuzzi, 2015). More complex devices and software evoke more frustration and demoralise individuals as they try to understand how the device works. This negatively impacts an organisation, because, when employees are frustrated and demoralised, their performance and productivity decrease. When technology is perceived to be too complex to carry out a task, or to incorporate into work, an employee may experience the techno-stressor called techno-complexity, which negatively affects performance and wellbeing (Day et al., 2012). Techno-insecurity considers what employees experience when they fear that they may lose their jobs and be replaced by new information systems or by better equipped or more technologically skilled employees (Ibrahim and Yusoff, 2015). Thus, instead of focusing on producing good results, employees spend most of their time frequently experiencing fear of job loss due to automation.

Previous studies have concluded that people reporting elevated levels of technostress are more likely to suffer the psychological strains of diminished commitment, struggle to flourish and display signs of languishing (Tarafdar and Stich, 2021), have poor self-esteem (Korzynski et al., 2021), and dissatisfaction with the IT system (Tams et al., 2020), harmful psychological responses, and burnout (Afifi et al., 2018), and their wellbeing is negatively affected. It is, therefore, proposed that technostress has a negative influence on workplace flourishing.

Work–family conflict

Work–family conflict is derived from the work–life balance construct that is defined as the link between an individual's work and life; when the balance is achieved, no interference is seen between an employee's family life and his or her work life (Muthukumar et al., 2014). It is thus the relationship between work and non-work aspects of an employee's life (Kelliher, 2016). Achieving a satisfactory balance may, however, mean restricting one side, normally the work side to create more time for family. A study by Haar et al. (2014) discovered that employees who master how to balance family and work life experience more satisfaction in their life, and this positively impacts their mental and physical health. The construct of work–family conflict (WFC) is made up of three components, namely, the behaviour-based conflict, the strain-based conflict, and the time-based conflict (Kossek and Lee, 2017). Behaviour-based conflict refers to situations where certain behaviours, rules, and expectations required by one role (work or family) are found to be incompatible with those required for the other role (Loscalzo et al., 2019). Time-based conflict refers to the amount of time needed by one of the two roles (i.e., work–family or family–work) that prevents the possibility of fulfilling the other role's expectations (Loscalzo et al., 2019). Lastly, strain-based conflict is experienced when an individual is strained and fatigued and experiences tension, anxiety, and dissatisfaction in one domain, which then negatively influences his or her performance in the other domain (Kossek and Lee, 2017).

Work–family conflict directly and together with technostress may negatively influence workplace flourishing. Technostress creators (techno-invasion) are associated with work–family conflict, behavioural stress, and ICTs, and support the negative spillover between work life and family life (Kelliher, 2016). When ICT deeply penetrates the family boundaries (i.e., high techno-invasion), the individual will have less time and energy to devote to his/her family responsibilities, resulting in frustrations, constant feelings of failure, and a negative influence on flourishing (Salo et al., 2019).

Perceived organisational support

Karim et al. (2019) defined perceived organisational support as the perception of an individual pertaining to the extent to which his or her organisation looks after his or her wellbeing and values his or her contribution. POS is a multidimensional construct. The first dimension is fairness in organisational procedures: this is derived from the theory of organisational justice, which uses fair procedures to determine the allocation of resources. Employees regard these procedures as essential to their long-term interests and wellbeing (Jabagi et al., 2020). The second dimension is supervisor support. Supervisors are regarded as the agents of an organisation and have a close

relationship with top management; therefore, employees regard supervisor support as organisational support (Jabagi et al., 2020). Organisational rewards and working conditions make up the last dimension. This refers to human resource practices that take employees' contributions, their working conditions, and characteristics of their job into consideration. In the context of this study, perceived organisational support is regarded as a job resource that may assist individuals with challenges emanating from the use of technology and failure to balance work life and family life due to work demands. Applying the organisational support theory (OST), when employees assume that their organisations provide them with intangible and tangible support, a norm of reciprocity creates a feeling of obligation amongst employees that drive them to help their organisations to achieve their goals. A reciprocity norm recommends that employees with high POS pay off their organisations in the form of flourishing and by engaging in their work (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005; Karim et al., 2019). Therefore, perceived organisational support directly and indirectly influences flourishing.

Theoretical framework [the job demands–resources model (JD–R model)]

The JD–R model is rooted in the premise that certain aspects of a job or specific field are deemed too demanding by an individual, causing him or her excessive stress and overtaxing, which result in exhaustion and languishing (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011). The model focuses on the interaction between job resources and job demands and how the interaction results in health impairment, such as languishing, or impacts motivation, such as employee engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands encompass any social, physical, or organisational aspects of work that requires an employee to dedicate his or her mental or physical effort. Job demands are associated with certain psychological or physiological costs (Llorens et al., 2006). These include things like unusually high work pressure, irregular working hours (interfering with work–life balance), or a poor work environment (Demerouti and Bakker, 2011). Job resources include organisational, physical, and social aspects of the job that enables individuals to manage and take control of their job demands, achieve work-related goals, and reduce stress, as well as stimulate growth and development (Llorens et al., 2006).

The current study views technostress as a job demand, which, if not managed, may negatively influence work–life balance. It is thus expected that both technostressors and work–family conflict will negatively influence workplace flourishing (La Torre et al., 2020). Techno-invasion forces employees to handle a wide variety of work demands during family time at home. This situation reduces the employees' ability to be

fully absorbed and enjoy what they wish to do at home and, consequently, has a negative effect at home (Mahapatra and Pati, 2018). Techno-complexity coerces individuals to spend much of their time and cognitive effort trying to learn and master the application of different technologies in their jobs. It requires individuals to continually develop their skills to keep up with new tools. This process can possibly negatively impact employees' effectiveness in both work and life roles, since more time is invested in training; this, in turn, causes anxiety and affects individuals' emotional and psychological wellbeing (Karim et al., 2019). Thus, the combined effects of technostress and work–family conflict may be detrimental to employee health and wellbeing, and this becomes worse in remote settings. Fortunately, Putranto et al. (2021) indicated that, in such work contexts, POS is seen as a job resource that lessens stress and supports and creates a feeling of security and satisfaction of the employees' psychological and emotional needs for positive effect. Thus, individuals who perceive their supervisors and organisations as supportive have a greater chance of experiencing positive psychological wellbeing, and, despite the challenges they encounter, they are more likely to flourish than to languish (Mahapatra and Pati, 2018).

Supportive organisations and leaders monitor the signs and effects of technostress and immediately provide corrective measures and good practices, particularly during times of crisis when employees are expected to meet certain targets (Putranto et al., 2021). The introduction of good practices relating to the use of technology, such as compulsory training in new devices, systems and software, use of a single device at a time, and disconnection (during non-work times), is an achievable preventive intervention that individuals in supportive environments are encouraged to implement. Therefore, POS may assist individuals in coping with demands relating to technostress and conditions leading to work–family conflict. The JD–R model suggests that excessive job demands result in the depletion of employees' personal and job resources and energy, which could result in burnout and health deterioration; thus, one would languish instead of flourish in the workplace (Hakanen et al., 2008).

Individuals who experience flourishing are emotionally, cognitively, and physically fit compared to those that are languishing (Jemberie et al., 2020). Flourishing individuals are creative and experience less helplessness and more favourable emotions; they achieve higher and produce more positive outcomes in the work context; hence, they benefit an organisation more compared to those that experience adverse emotions (Patrick et al., 2020). With all these benefits of flourishing in mind, the current study examined the indirect and direct effects of technostress, work–family conflict, and POS on workplace flourishing. The idea is to develop a model to assist employees working in remote contexts to identify job resources that will enable them to manage the job demands imposed by technostress creators as well as to counteract work–family

conflict. The study positioned POS as an external job resource that counteracts the demands imposed by both technostress creators and work–family conflict, and this, in turn, helps to sustain a continuous positive emotional and psychological state of employees leading to workplace flourishing. The following four propositions guided this exploratory study: (1) Technostress, work–family conflict, and POS have a direct influence on workplace flourishing; (2) POS mediates the link between technostress and workplace flourishing; (3) Work–family conflict mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing; (4) Both POS and work–family conflict mediate the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing.

Methods

The study applied a quantitative research framework. This design was adopted and found appropriate due to its systematic and scientific nature of investigating data and their relationships. The approach has been successfully followed in studies of a similar nature (Redelinghuys et al., 2019). The study aimed to test the propositions and describe relationships between four variables (workplace flourishing as the dependent variable and three independent variables: technostress, POS, and work–life balance).

Sample of participants

A survey was conducted with the employees at a selected residential University in South Africa. Data were collected through online platforms using evasys, and the sample was made up of both academic and support staff. The participants completed a cross-sectional survey, utilising a self-reported questionnaire. A total of 227 employees completed the survey. The participants completed the survey when lockdown measures were still in place. Amongst the participants, the majority (68%) were female; in terms of age, the majority were between the ages of 31 and 40 years (38%), whilst the minority were above 60 years (6%). Most of the participants, 62%, were academic staff, whilst 38% were support staff.

Measures

Flourishing at work

The flourishing at work construct was assessed using the Flourishing-at-Work Scale (FAW). The scale was developed and validated by Diener et al. (2010). It consists of items measuring emotional wellbeing (7 items), psychological wellbeing (7 items), and subjective wellbeing (7 items). The scale is a self-report instrument that includes three subscales as noted above. In the

current study, permission to use the adapted scale was sought from and granted by Redelinghuys et al. (2019). The response scale is scored on a five-point Likert scale, varying between poles of intensity from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A higher response aggregate indicates higher levels of workplace flourishing, and a lower response aggregate indicates otherwise. Evidence of both construct validity and internal consistency reliability has been established by Di Fabio et al. (2017) with the respective scores $\alpha = 0.88$ and $\alpha = 0.83$. The current study also observed an acceptable internal consistency for the Flourishing-at-Work Scale (α 265 = 0.957).

Technostress questionnaire

The technostress variable was assessed using the Technostress Questionnaire, which is made up of the five dimensions of technostress noted in the literature review section (Tarafdar et al., 2007). The scale applied in this study consists of 23 items that are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 indicating "strongly agree" and 1 indicating "strongly disagree." According to Tarafdar and Stich (2021), the scale is reliable with the Cronbach's alpha for all the dimensions above 0.80, i.e., techno-invasion, 0.81; techno-overload, 0.89; techno-complexity, 0.84; techno-uncertainty, 0.82; and techno-insecurity, 0.84. The current study obtained an acceptable internal consistency for the technostress questionnaire (α = 0.881).

Work–family conflict scale

Work–family conflict was assessed through the Work–Family Conflict Scale (WFC) developed by Chen et al. (2021). The entire scale contains a total of 18 items. According to Carlson et al. (2000), the three-dimensional scale consists of three sections, including strain-based conflict, behaviour-based conflict, as well as time-based conflict. The internal reliability estimates for the Work–Family Conflict Scale measure was found acceptable in previous studies, ranging from 0.84 to 0.94 (Brough et al., 2014). The Work–Family Conflict Scale has discriminant validity (Chen et al., 2021), and it has been proved to be an accurate measure to assess the level of work–family conflict. Consistent with the above, the current study observed an acceptable internal consistency (α = 0.928).

Perceived organisational support scale

As far back as 1986, Eisenberger et al. (1986) developed the POS questionnaire. The original 36-item scale measures POS and its sub-dimensions (Wojtkowska et al., 2016). However, the current study used the shortened version, which is made up of 8 items. The questionnaire uses a 7-point Likert scale where 7 represents "strongly agree" and 1 represents "strongly disagree." The scale has an internal consistency of 0.952 in the study by

Wojtkowska et al. (2016), and the Cronbach's alpha was 0.88 in a study by Hinschberger (2009). The current study observed an acceptable internal consistency for the Perceived Organisational Support Scale ($\alpha = 0.900$).

Research procedure

The respondents were recruited from a selected university in South Africa. Ethical clearance was applied for and granted by the University of the Free State, specifically the Economic Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (GHREC), with reference No. HSD2021/1827/21. After obtaining the permission, questionnaires were distributed *via* online platforms. The questionnaire included a clause for voluntary participation and the guarantee for both anonymity and confidentiality.

Analytical procedure

Preliminary data analysis was done using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, SPSS version 28. This included all the descriptive statistics and the Cronbach's alpha reliability tests. All measures were then subjected to confirmatory factor analysis, which was conducted using Lisrel 10.3. This was used to determine the psychometric properties of the measures used in the study, using the goodness-of-fit statistics, including standardised root mean square residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and comparative fit index (CFI). To address the objectives of the study and to evaluate the different propositions, the variance-based structural equation modelling was utilised.

The proposed model was tested following a two-step process as instructed by Henseler et al. (2009). In this process, the outer model, which is the measurement model, was evaluated first to assess the relevant quality criteria. The main purpose of the measurement model is to establish whether the measurements applied to operationalise the latent variables (i.e., technostress, workplace flourishing, and work–family conflict) are reliable and valid. The quality criteria associated with an acceptable outer model include (1) internal consistency, which is evaluated through composite reliability scores, which should be 0.7 and higher, (2) the discriminant validity assessed through the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio values, which should be lower than 0.9, (3) the convergent validity, which is assessed through average variance extracted (AVE) values, which should be 0.5 and higher, and (4) the indicators (i.e., dimensions of constructs), which should have significant loadings on their respective constructs (Hair et al., 2019). Subsequently, the inner model, which is the structural model, was evaluated through determining the size of the path coefficients using the beta values, assessing the significance levels of the path coefficients,

TABLE 1 Reliability of the scales.

Variable	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Technostress	21	0.881
Techno-invasion	4	0.773
Techno-overload	4	0.810
Techno-complexity	4	0.843
Techno-insecurity	5	0.738
Techno-uncertainty	4	0.810
Perceived organisational support	8	0.900
Work–family conflict	18	0.928
Time-based conflict	6	0.845
Strain-based conflict	6	0.810
Behaviour-based conflict	6	0.910
Workplace flourishing	21	0.957
Emotional wellbeing	3	0.863
Psychological wellbeing	9	0.917
Social wellbeing	5	0.935

and then finally determining the aggregate size of variance explained in the dependent variable by the proposed model. The mediation proposition was tested using the specific indirect effects provided on the model.

Results

The Cronbach's alpha scores, as well as the composite reliability scores, confirmed the internal consistency of the scales as indicated in Table 1. The average variance extracted in and the heterotrait-monotrait scores, as well as the confirmatory factor analysis through the goodness-of-fit statistics, confirmed the distinctive, discriminant, and the convergent validity of technostress, perceived organisational support, work–life balance, and workplace flourishing. The composite reliability scores indicated in Table 2 observed a technostress scale Cronbach's alpha of 0.881, which is regarded as good (Pallant, 2020). The reliability scores associated with the dimensions of technostress were good, varying from 0.738 for techno-insecurity to 0.843 for techno-complexity. The internal consistency scores of work–family conflict dimensions were estimated, and the following scores were observed: time-based conflict, 0.845; strain-based conflict, 0.810; and behaviour-based conflict, 0.910, all considered as good. The perceived organisational support scale scored 0.900. The workplace flourishing scale was made up of three dimensions that all scored acceptable internal consistency scores (emotional wellbeing, 0.863; psychological wellbeing, 0.917; and subjective wellbeing, 0.935).

TABLE 2 Quality criteria.

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Workplace flourishing	0.901	0.937	0.833
Work–family conflict	0.844	0.906	0.762
Technostress	0.736	0.802	0.512
POS	1.00	1.00	1.00

POS, perceived organisational support.

TABLE 3 Heterotrait-monotrait ratio discriminant validity.

Variables	POS	Technostress	WFC	WF
POS				
Technostress	0.179			
WFC	0.414	0.677		
WF	0.695	0.218	0.441	

POS, perceived organisational support; WFC, work-family conflict; WF, workplace flourishing.

To determine model fit to the data, the following goodness-of-fit statistics were used: the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR), and the comparative fit index (CFI). Little (2013) noted that, in most cases, models with RMSEA and SRMR lower than 0.05 and a CFI higher than 0.95 are regarded as representing a very good fit between the hypothesised model and the data. The measurement model for the three-dimensional model of workplace flourishing was stipulated through allowing each dimension to load on its respective latent factor (for example, the seven items representing psychological wellbeing, seven items reflecting emotional wellbeing, and another seven items for subjective wellbeing. A CFI of 0.891, RMSEA of 0.059, and SRMR of 0.051 were observed. The confirmatory factor analysis model fit indices related to technostress were observed as RMSEA = 0.052, SRMR = 0.063, and CFI = 0.956. Based on the results, the model fit the data well, since all the three fit statistics observed were statistically adequate. For the work–family conflict, the following fit statistics were discovered: SRMR = 0.0728, CFI = 0.940, and RMSEA = 0.123. The model can be considered to be adequate since two of the three fit statistics (SRMR and CFI) were acceptable.

Quality criteria: Outer model

To assess the quality criteria the composite reliability was considered for the internal consistency reliability aspect. The results indicated that the composite reliability for all the variables was above the 0.6 cut-off score; therefore, it can be concluded that the four constructs in the study observed satisfactory composite reliability. The scores are as follows: workplace flourishing, 0.937; work–family conflict, 0.906; technostress, 0.736; and perceived organisational support (1.00). To assess convergent validity of the scales, the average variance extracted (AVE) score was applied and all observed as acceptable. All the AVE scores were above the 0.5 cut-off (work–family conflict, 0.762; workplace flourishing, 0.833; technostress, 0.512). Table 3 displays the findings for the discriminant validity, indicating the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) values observed for the variables: 0.179 for technostress and perceived

organisational support, 0.414 for work–family conflict and perceived organisational support, 0.677 for work–family conflict and technostress, 0.695 for workplace flourishing and perceived organisational support (0.695), 0.218 for workplace flourishing with technostress, and 0.441 for workplace flourishing with work–family conflict. For a good discriminant validity, Hair et al. (2019) noted that the HTMT values should be lower than 0.90; thus, it is evident from the results that all the values obtained were lower than the cut-off. This enabled the study to proceed with the evaluation of the structural model, reflecting the proposed paths of the conceptual model. Table 4 shows the outer loadings, which are the paths linking each dimension or indicator to its relevant theoretical construct. From the table, it is clear that significant loadings were observed for all the indicators loading on their respective constructs with ($p = 0.000$). The loadings for the indicators were spread from 0.646 (techno-insecurity) to 0.930 (psychological wellbeing).

Assessment of the measurement model

Table 5 indicates the path coefficients with the associated p- and t-values. The path coefficients provide an indication of the strength as well as the direction of the proposed theoretical paths. From the results, it is evident that all the proposed paths in the theoretical model are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. The observed pathway from perceived organisational support to workplace flourishing was the strongest (β = 0.611: t = 12.40: mean = 0.611: p = 0.000). Technostress to work–family conflict observed the second strongest link (β = 0.524: t = 11.117: mean = 0.533: p = 0.000), implying that technostress is a strong determinant of work–family conflict. Perceived organisational support reported a negative but significant path to work-family conflict (β = −0.288: t = 5.003: mean = − 0.285: p = 0.000). Technostress to perceived organisational support also reported a negative but significant path (β = −0.178: t = 2.417: mean = −0.181: p = 0.016). Work–family conflict to workplace flourishing reported the least statistically significant path to the endogenous variable (β = −0.154: t = 2.635: mean = −0.155: p = 0.009). It is evident that two of the proposed paths to the dependent variable in the proposed theoretical model are

TABLE 4 Indicator loadings: the outer model.

Variable and dimension	Original sample (o)	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T-statistics	P-values
Emotional wellbeing: workplace flourishing	0.899	0.898	0.014	62.168	0.000
Perceived organisational support	1.000	1.000	0.000		
Psych wellbeing: workplace flourishing	0.930	0.930	0.013	71.558	0.000
Social wellbeing: workplace flourishing	0.908	0.908	0.011	85.722	0.000
Techno-complexity: technostress	0.685	0.676	0.064	10.731	0.000
Techno-insecurity: technostress	0.646	0.638	0.063	10.275	0.000
Techno-invasion: technostress	0.832	0.832	0.030	28.125	0.000
Techno-overload: technostress	0.909	0.910	0.015	59.499	0.000
Strain-based: work–family conflict	0.889	0.887	0.020	43.734	0.000
Time-based: work–family conflict	0.875	0.874	0.018	48.299	0.000
Behaviour-based: work–family conflict	0.855	0.853	0.024	35.726	0.000

TABLE 5 Path coefficients: the inner model.

Variables	Original sample (o)	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T-statistics	P-values
POS—WLC	−0.288	−0.285	0.058	5.003	0.000
POS—WF	0.611	0.611	0.049	12.410	0.000
Technostress—POS	−0.178	−0.181	0.074	2.417	0.016
Technostress—WFC	0.524	0.533	0.047	11.117	0.000
WLC—WF	−0.154	−0.155	0.058	2.635	0.009

POS, perceived organisational support; WFC, work-family conflict; WF, workplace flourishing.

TABLE 6 R-squared.

Variable	R-square	R-square adjusted
POS	0.032	0.027
Work–family conflict	0.412	0.406
Workplace flourishing	0.469	0.464

POS, perceived organisational support.

TABLE 7 Specific indirect effects.

Variables	Original sample (o)	Standard deviation	T-statistics	P-values
POS–WFC–WF	0.044	0.018	2.429	0.017
Tech–WFC–WF	−0.081	0.032	2.533	0.008
Tech–POS–WFC	0.051	0.023	2.272	0.018
Tech–POS–WF	−0.109	0.047	2.326	0.021
Tech–POS–WFC–WF	−0.008	0.005	1.625	0.082

POS, perceived organisational support; WFC, work-family conflict; WF, workplace flourishing; Tech, technostress.

statistically significant. A combination of all the independent constructs in the model explains ∼47% variance in workplace flourishing. It is also clear that two of the three independent variables (perceived organisational support β = 0.611, p = 0.000 and work–life conflict β = −0.154, p = 0.009) observed significant direct relationships with workplace flourishing.

On the other hand, technostress had a non-significant direct relationship with workplace flourishing. These results, therefore, provide partial support for Proposition 1. Thus, work–life conflict and perceived organisational support have a direct influence on workplace flourishing. Table 6 shows the extent to which technostress, perceived organisational support, and work–family conflict influence workplace flourishing. The independent variables in the theoretical model (technostress, perceived organisational support, and work–life balance) explain ∼46.9% = 47% of the variance in workplace flourishing,

which, according to Chin (1998), is interpreted as moderate effect. Note is taken that perceived organisational support and work–family conflict both have a significant association with workplace flourishing. Note should also be taken that, whilst perceived organisational support exhibited positive significant influence on workplace flourishing, work–family conflict observed a negative statistically significant influence on workplace flourishing. The results provide partial support for Proposition 1. Figure 1 shows the significant paths from the independent variables to the dependent variable.

To evaluate the other three propositions formulated, which relate to mediation, the indirect effects presented

FIGURE 1
The model for the influence of technostress, work−family conflict, and perceived organisational support on workplace flourishing.

in Table 7 should be considered, examining if perceived organisational support mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing, and whether work–life conflict mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing, as well as whether both perceived organisational support and work–life conflict combined mediate the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. It is evident that work–family conflict significantly mediated (β = 0.044, p = 0.017) the relationship between perceived organisational support and workplace flourishing. It is also noted that perceived organisational support significantly mediated (β = −0.109, p = 0.021) the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. Work–family conflict mediated the relationship between technostress and work–life balance significantly (β = −0.081, p = 0.008). Therefore, the findings supported Propositions 3 and 2. However, the mediating effect for the ultimate path from technostress *via* POS through work–family conflict to workplace flourishing is not statistically significant (β = −0.008, p = 0.082); the mediating effect is smaller than that of perceived organisational support alone (0.109 vs. 0.008). Because the direct path coefficient between technostress and workplace flourishing is statistically insignificant, the

results provide evidence of no direct influence between the two constructs.

In addition, no significant mediating effect was observed between technostress and the combined perceived organisational support and work–family conflict on workplace flourishing. Therefore, the findings of the study found no support for Proposition 4, with both perceived organisational support and work–life conflict having an insignificant mediating effect (−0.008, p = 0.082) on the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing.

Discussion

The remote working settings imposed by COVID-19 caused significant and radical reconsideration of the nature of work within companies and institutions, which resulted in a shift in the way work is completed. The continuous use of ICT has resulted in strain leading to the unpleasant physiological activation that materialises in anxiety, tension, and discomfort (technostress), which has effects on employee health and wellbeing (Lund et al., 2020). The current study had a two-fold aim: to discover the direct and indirect influence of technostress,
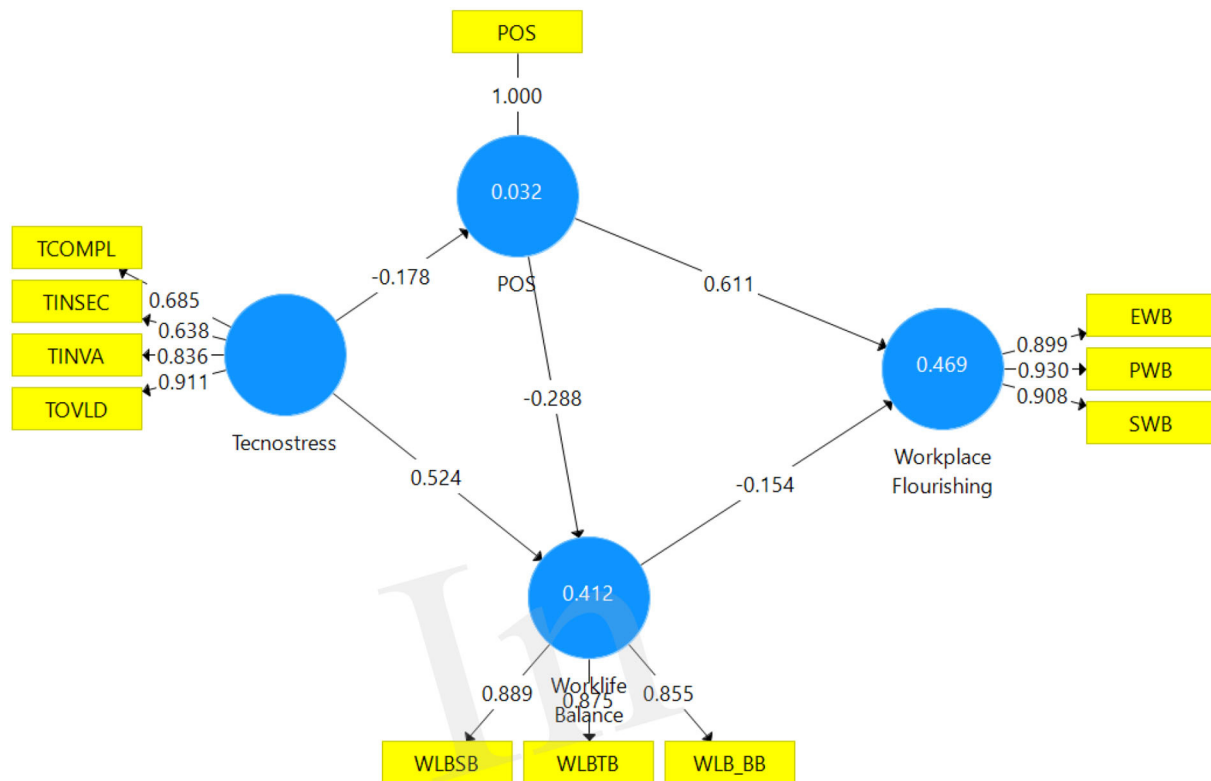
work–family conflict, and perceived organisational support on workplace flourishing in the context of remote working amidst COVID-19. It was proposed that technostress and work–family conflict negatively influence workplace flourishing (directly and indirectly), and perceived organisational support positively influences workplace flourishing.

Two of the three constructs had significant direct relationships with workplace flourishing. A positive relationship was observed between POS and workplace flourishing. These findings are consistent with the social exchange perspective on the employment relationship: Employees are more likely to flourish in their work when they perceive that their supervisors as well as the organisation at large are providing adequate support and are fulfilling their needs (Karim et al., 2019). Literature clearly indicates that POS is positively linked to psychological wellbeing (Caesens et al., 2016), which is part of the dimensions of workplace flourishing. This study is consistent with the research finding by Caesens et al. (2016), showing that POS is positively correlated with workplace flourishing. Thus, flourishing is intensified when crucial and significant resources related to a job such as POS are provided (Mahapatra and Pati, 2018). Consistent with that, the theory of conservation of resources (COR; Hobfoll, 2011) indicates that POS does not only establish the basis for the exchange relationship but also builds resources to maintain employee wellbeing (Panaccio and Vandenberghe, 2009). POS emerged as a strong predictor of workplace flourishing, and this relationship is not surprising, because De Paul and Bikos (2015) proved that the perception of a supportive organisation adds to improved outcomes of psychological wellbeing. Thus, POS is often equated to positive relations and support networks in an organisation, which result in workplace flourishing.

Part of the first proposition stated that perceived work–family conflict has a direct effect on workplace flourishing. The findings supported the proposition, indicating that work–family conflict negatively influences workplace flourishing. This implies that, when participants perceive a high experience of work–family conflict, they are more likely to exhibit low levels of workplace flourishing. The findings are consistent with Parris et al. (2008), Khan and Fazili (2016), and Gomes et al. (2021), who noted that perceived work–family conflict predicted workplace flourishing negatively, especially the psychological wellbeing dimension.

On the other hand, technostress was not significantly associated with workplace flourishing. This implies that the level of technostress of the participants did not positively or negatively influence their workplace flourishing directly. Contrary to these findings, based on the JD–R model, technostress is regarded as a job demand, which puts strain on employees and is expected to negatively influence workplace flourishing. Similarly, the stress-strain outcome (SSO) model by Cheung and Tang (2010) explains that a negative association between technostress creators and wellbeing does exist. The

SSO model explains that, when exposed to technostress, users are likely to experience emotional strain, such as helplessness, anxiety, feelings of incompetence, and low confidence, which reflect languishing rather than flourishing. Although the findings are surprising and contradict the findings of other researchers (Salo et al., 2019; Tarafdar and Stich, 2021), who noted that employees who experience technostress may also experience burnout, poor psychological health, and even depression, it is important to note that the current study discovered indirect effects between technostress and workplace flourishing.

Consistently, although it has become difficult for individuals to complete most tasks and activities without incorporating technology, the technology poses a challenge of strain that may diminish flourishing (Janse van Rensburg et al., 2017). Although the use of ICTs has greatly enhanced the performance as well as the production efficiency, the adoption, and the diffusion of ICTs demand high social, cognitive, and physical skills, which have resulted in technostress. The implementation of the ever-changing technologies has resulted in more complex demands on jobs, which eventually affect work–life balance and wellbeing. The increased interdependency on ICTs demands a lot of effort and new knowledge from the employees, and this negatively influences workplace flourishing (Tarafdar and Stich, 2021).

In line with the above, some of the reasons why individuals languish at the hands of ICTs and fail to manage technostress and work–family conflict include lack of support during the installation, testing, and implementation of ICTs adopted by a company. In remote settings this may be fuelled by insecurity and discomfort, resulting from multitasking (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008) and frequent interruption of assigned tasks due to the ongoing stream of communication (Mark et al., 2008). These stressors, coupled with a lack of personal coping mechanisms, result in low levels of psychological and emotional wellbeing. This is manifested through frustration, a sense of ineffectiveness, high mental load, time pressure (Mark et al., 2008), and reduction in work–life balance (Tarafdar and Stich, 2021), which eventually affects workplace flourishing. Thus, perceived technostressors can lead users to experience emotional problems and negatively affect social relationships and the general psychological wellbeing of employees. According to Janse van Rensburg et al. (2017), these aspects are of primary concern as they indirectly impact on workplace flourishing. Nevertheless, with adequate organisational support, the demands imposed by both technostress and work–family conflict are neutralised.

The second proposition noted that POS mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. The proposition was supported. POS mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. Thus, technostress influences workplace flourishing through perceived organisational support; those who experience technostress with high organisational support tend to flourish. These findings are consistent with other related empirical studies (e.g.,

Ujoatuonu et al., 2019; Springs, 2021), which indicated that POS may be considered a potent factor that, if properly instituted, may make the difference in the impact of technostress on flourishing. Consistently, with reference to the JD–R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014), job resources such as POS have the potential to buffer the negative effects of job demands such as technostress (techno-invasion, techno-complexity, and techno-overload), and job resources (POS) facilitate motivational processes, for example, an individual's desire for growth, which is regarded to be part of psychological and subjective wellbeing. This is the most important finding in this study, that there was no direct influence between technostress and workplace flourishing but a full mediation/strong indirect link between technostress and workplace flourishing through perceived organisational support.

The 3rd proposition noted that work–family conflict can mediate the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. This proposition was supported. Technostress had an indirect influence on workplace flourishing when work–family conflict was applied as a mediator; note is taken that the relationship direction is negative ($\beta = -0.154$). Accordingly, a negative significant test ($p = 0.008$) mediating effect of work–family conflict is confirmed in the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. Those who perceived low technostress tend to flourish when they have low work–family conflict. Thus, technostress through work–family conflict is negatively associated with workplace flourishing. This is consistent with the findings of other researchers (Brough et al., 2014; Casper et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2018), who noted that a few of the dimensions of technostress, including techno-invasion and techno-complexity, invade individual employees' family time and, in turn, negatively affect emotional and psychological wellbeing, which form part of workplace flourishing. The results are reasonable, considering that the intrusion of work into personal life caused by ICT intensifies the negative spillover between work and family and eventually influences flourishing. In remote settings, individuals experienced feelings of being always reachable and attuned to work issues without a break. Such experiences reflect the spillover of work technologies to the family time and result in conflict between work and family roles, which, eventually, negatively influence workplace flourishing.

According to Propositions 2 and 3, which were fully confirmed, POS mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing, and work–family conflict also mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. However, the mediating effect of work–family conflict was weaker (-0.081) than that of technostress and perceived organisational support (-0.109). Technostress through work–family conflict had a negative influence on workplace flourishing. These findings are consistent with Mark et al. (2008), who discovered that it is hard to maintain the boundary between work and professional life with high

levels of work–family conflict, coupled with techno-invasion, and hence difficult to experience workplace flourishing under those circumstances. This implies that, when technostressors are coupled with a lack of personal coping mechanisms that assist with balancing work and life demands, it becomes difficult for individuals to flourish. The technostress is manifested through frustration, a sense of ineffectiveness, high mental load, and time pressure (Mark et al., 2008), leading to a reduction in work–life balance (Tarafdar et al., 2007), which eventually affects psychological wellbeing (flourishing). It is, therefore, conceivable that, whilst experiencing technostress, employees respond better when they perceive that their organisation supports them and offers them security.

The fourth proposition, which proposed that perceived organisational support through work–life conflict mediates the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing, was not supported. POS through work–family conflict does not mediate the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. These results are contrary to the COR theory, where work and family conflict and POS are considered to be reserves of job and personal resources, and the absence of resources in one domain influences the state of the other domain (Hobfoll, 2011). Both POS and work–family conflict are expected to impact personal burnout, distress symptoms, and employee wellbeing, which reflect workplace flourishing (Ibrahim, 2011; Fotiadis et al., 2019). Negative work–family interaction decreases workplace flourishing due to increased psychological strain and diminished mental resources (Voydanoff, 2002; Eby et al., 2005). The confidence of being in control over technology, work, and family activities is expected to have positive implications for workplace flourishing, specifically the psychological and emotional wellbeing components (Fotiadis et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the combined effect of technostress, POS, and work–family conflict on workplace flourishing indicated that POS is a critical component in the relationship between technostress and workplace flourishing. Putranto et al. (2021) noted that POS is seen as a job resource that lessens stress and supports and creates a feeling of security and satisfaction of employees' psychological and emotional needs for positive effect. Thus, despite the presence of technostress creators and work–family conflict issues, employees who regard their organisations as supportive can possibly experience positive psychological wellbeing and flourish rather than languish even when high demands are imposed on them. Highly flourishing individuals are more resilient toward life challenges and vulnerabilities, and such individuals benefit an organisation more since they are considered to be fit both physically and mentally compared to their languishing colleagues (Fotiadis et al., 2019). Within the JD–R model, individual technostress creators can act as job demands, and perceived organisational support acts as a resource that enhances workplace flourishing. Therefore, POS may assist

individuals in coping with demands relating to technostress and conditions, leading to work–family conflict and thus enhance workplace flourishing.

Practical implications

The utilisation of technology in the work context has several benefits for employees and for an organisation at large. However, as indicated in the findings, there are negative consequences, such as technostress and work–family conflict, that should be taken into consideration, and the necessary support should be provided. The current findings suggest that, since a negative relationship exists between technostress and perceived organisational support, in environments that are more prone to technostress and where workplace flourishing is threatened, managers need to maintain regular, transparent, and consistent communication to ensure that employees have adequate resources to deal with technology. When organisations provide adequate support for their employees in terms of ICT skills, even when exposed to technostress, this support creates positive results such as employee flourishing. Therefore, this suggests that fast and visible technical support during testing, implementation, and use of the ICTs adopted by the company is crucial.

In addition, supervisors should discourage certain behaviours that create technostress, such as multitasking, use of multiple devices, and use of real-time notifications. In line with that, to reduce the negative effects of techno-complexity, ICT leaders should create a culture of knowledge-sharing across a company and ensure that all employees are autonomously motivated to use the available ICTs (Al-Ansari and Alshare, 2019). Adequate support from managers is expected through recommending technical skills training for new devices, systems, and software; this should be coupled with the provision of adequate technical resources to integrate technology into daily work activities. To avoid boredom and information overload, consider making the ICT training more enjoyable, perhaps by making it game-based. Other interventions to support employees can include adequate forms of individualised ICT support that can be done over the phone, increased perceived organisational support through open communication, and employee valuation of the help received from ICT. In practice, ICT call-in services should be easily accessible to avoid techno-complexity and techno-uncertainty. Supervisors and technicians in organisations should make sure that there is accessible technical, emotional, physical, and mental health support for employees to ensure that individuals do not languish due to techno-complexity and techno-uncertainty in remote settings.

It should be noted that previous studies indicated that some of the attempts to inhibit technostress have been proved to be ineffective. More scientific approaches, such as positive technology, have been proved to be highly effective in reducing technostress and should be considered (Calvo and Peters, 2014). Positive technology is defined as a scientific and applied approach to the use of technology for improving the quality of our personal experience and making our work easier (Riva et al., 2012). This approach advocates that technology is used to generate positive experiences and is designed to support individuals in reaching self-actualising experiences, and it helps to improve connectedness between individuals or groups. Therefore, implementation of positive technology-designed solutions presents possible inhibitors of techno-overload, techno-complexity, and techno-invasion, and, in turn, increases workplace flourishing through autonomy and control. This eventually benefits individual wellbeing (Riva et al., 2012).

A positive relationship was also observed between technostress and work–family conflict, with the ultimate impact on workplace flourishing. Accordingly, when technostress and work–family conflict are high, low levels of flourishing are exhibited. These findings have implications for workplace flourishing in higher education. The managers need to realise the importance of helping both academic and support staff to flourish by instituting relevant organisational support and work–life balance policies that will help employees to flourish, especially when dealing with technostress creators in the remote work setting. To those struggling with work–family conflict, there is a dire need for managers to make allowances for employees to adjust their schedules to accommodate personal obligations, adjust employees' workloads to accommodate family responsibilities, and make it easier for employees to take paid time off. The struggle with both technostress and work–family conflict in the South African context is worsened by challenges regarding access to technology. Unique problems, such as load shedding, poor wi-fi connections, and the use of old devices, expose users to techno-unreliability strain, resulting in them spending too much time trying to complete tasks. These individuals will have less time and energy to devote to their family responsibilities. The study recommends that it is the responsibility of an organisation to ensure that each employee has access to strong wi-fi and devices that are compatible with the software and systems utilised by the organisation, and managers should set up policies to encourage employees to set boundaries, stop working, and switch off email notifications at the designated log-off time to maintain work–life balance and ensure psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Even though employees in remote settings are burdened by technostress, when they perceive positive work–life balance and adequate organisational support given by their supervisors, they tend to flourish, and flourishing eventually enhances performance. By developing favourable work–life balance policies, technostress creators, such as techno-invasion and techno-complexity, are controlled, and flourishing can be enhanced. This enhancement will, in turn, help the employees to actualise organisational and personal goals that give rise

to institutional development and flourishing. The amount of technostress experienced and its effect may be enhanced or hampered by the prevailing atmosphere of work–life balance and the perceived organisational support received by employees. Therefore, POS and work–life balance will assist employees in enhancing their ability to flourish, deal with technostress creators, and balance work and family responsibilities. Furthermore, fostering flourishing through POS and work–life balance policies is a highly viable organisational goal that impacts important organisational outcomes.

Note is taken of the findings that the ultimate path from technostress through perceived organisational support *via* work–family conflict to workplace flourishing was found insignificant with no mediating effect. These unexpected results are consistent with a recent study (Lades et al., 2020), indicating that technology presumably allows more flexibility and autonomy, in turn resulting in employees working more and feeling in control, but, at the same time, although this improves the quality and accuracy of work, it interferes with family life, and potentially fosters expectations of permanent connectivity, which may be detrimental to workplace flourishing. Hence, the remote work context provides discordant results that can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, it enhances work–life balance and perceived autonomy; however, on the other hand, it has a negative impact on the quality of life, increases technostress, and calls for more organisational support. The above notion indicates how technology can possibly influence wellbeing, something which is required to enrich the field at the moment.

The research also detaches from the previous studies that focused mainly on observing the detrimental effect of technostress and work–family conflict on employees' wellbeing, and centred on the importance of the mediating effect of POS in the interaction between technostress and workplace flourishing in the remote work setting. The new findings of the study translate to practical implications for both employees and managers operating in remote settings, who are exposed to technostress and work–family conflict, suggesting that there is a need to increase organisational support as a way to positively influence workplace flourishing and lessen work–family conflict. It is highly recommended that leaders and supervisors play an active role in providing the required support for employees. This involves incorporating measures that reduce stress associated with the use of technology, specifically ensuring the provision of technical support, which has been proved to inhibit technostress (Li and Wang, 2021). Leaders have the responsibility to ensure that organisational demands on employees do not exceed normal working hours and normal workload, as the consequences for work–life balance and wellbeing are undebatable. Accordingly, supplemental work should be reduced or avoided, workload levels need to be constantly monitored by line supervisors, and communication during virtual work settings should be balanced, since an

overload of emails can cause the development of technostress. Leaders should design proactive and family-friendly strategies to inhibit work–family conflict. Moreover, if organisations offer training and instruments to cope with the effects of technostress, the trainings should be short and interesting.

Success for both employees and organisations largely rest on the emotional, psychological, and subjective wellbeing of the employees, and for that reason it is crucial to cultivate a favourable work atmosphere that reduces technostress and work–family conflict, and to provide POS to stimulate employees to flourish rather than languish. In this regard, establishing the antecedents of flourishing and identifying its mediators are considered as the first step. Thus, understanding the mediating effect of work–family conflict and POS creates a platform for managers and organisations to enhance favourable conditions and strengthen positive mental states of employees. When individuals experience high POS, they feel secure, and they have adequate resources to control the technostress creators; thus, they are more effective and, eventually, they flourish.

Limitations and future directions

Some limitations were identified for the study. Firstly, only four constructs were explored in the model, yet evidence from the literature notes that there are a number of other constructs that may also influence workplace flourishing. Future studies should thus consider including other positive variables, such as resilience, mindfulness, and work engagement. Secondly, data were collected in only one institution and focused mainly on the residential university employees. It should be noted that the effects of technostress and the type of support the institution offers may differ between a residential and an open distance e-learning (ODeL) institution. ODeL institutions, in principle, have implemented more ways of acting through ICT, and, therefore, their academics may experience less misfit (technostress) between the demands of the institution and their own needs regarding technology. In residential universities, these imbalances may be greater due to the lack of a tradition of fully integrating technology in teaching; accordingly, this restricts generalisation of results to residential institutions only. Although the study only includes a residential institution, the ODeL institutions may take the opportunity to replicate the study within their context. Further studies should consider focusing on more different institutions and larger samples to expand applicability of the findings in different situations. The third limitation was the utilisation of a cross-sectional self-report that, according to Podsakoff et al. (2012), involves possible method bias. Due to the cross-sectional survey method, it is also possible to lose sight of the impact of the timeline, especially on the workplace flourishing construct. Future studies could consider designing a follow-up survey to examine an

overall perspective for assessing the effect of technostress on workplace flourishing. The study investigated technostress along with other variables; trying to examine technostress dynamics in particularly high-tech organisations would be helpful to identify and outline more contextualized interventions. In addition, it was difficult to completely establish whether the levels of workplace flourishing actually altered for the participants during the time they started remote working or whether it has remained constant. Although data were collected, with integrity and honest responses were gathered from the participants, it should be noted that the findings should be generalised with caution to the academic and support staff in South African institutions.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of the Free State Economic Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (UFS_GHREC) with reference number UFS-HSD2021/1827/21. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

Both authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The role of the industrial psychologist in managing the psychological impact of COVID-19 in the workplace

Thapelo Sendry Moralo and Lené Ilyna Graupner*

WorkWell Research Unit, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Recently, the world experienced dramatic changes due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Working remotely led to employees feeling isolated and experiencing fatigue and depression. The responsibility of addressing the psychological wellbeing of employees lies with industrial psychology practitioners. They support line management by counseling employees experiencing social and psychological problems. The objective of the present study was to explore the role of the industrial psychology practitioner in managing the psychological impact of COVID-19 on employees. Using a homogeneous sampling technique, a qualitative research design was employed based on social constructivism. Semi-structured interviews and a qualitative survey were utilized to gather the data from industrial psychology practitioners (*n* = 22) registered as psychologists and interns. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Most participants believed that the onset of COVID-19 led to accelerated change in the workplace. The findings suggest that an industrial psychology practitioner's role in the changing world of work enables organizations to be prepared for the changes by providing multi-level interventions. Recommendations are made to organizations to implement interventions to facilitate support for employees in their attempt to deal with the psychological impact of COVID-19 on employees.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, psychological impact, mental health, industrial psychology, workplace counseling

Introduction

The workplace has a vital role in helping employees deal with social and psychological concerns (Bergh, 2021). These typically include navigating through the ever-changing world of work, such as the dramatic changes the world experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic led to strict lockdown measures and social isolation worldwide, and employees working remotely from the workplace while managing their home lives. Studies show that people reported feeling anxious and

stressed during the pandemic due to the threat of falling ill, job insecurity, isolation and uncertainty for the future, to name a few (Giorgi et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2020). However, COVID-19 also brought about embracing new insights and capacities, thereby completely rethinking the future world of work (Volini et al., 2021). In this regard, the role of the industrial and work psychology practitioner becomes evident. The responsibility for addressing psychological issues within South African organizations lies with industrial psychology practitioners (Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA], 2019). The industrial psychology practitioner is responsible for diagnosing workplace-related psychopathology and applying skills to identify further treatment needs and psychological interventions (Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA], 2019). The practitioner can refer employees to other specialized professionals and work with them to ensure that the employee is reasonably accommodated and integrated into the workplace (Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA], 2019). The role of the industrial psychology professional is imperative to provide support to employees to adjust to the changes COVID-19 brought to the workplace. From the aforementioned, the following research objectives are presented.

> To determine the role of the industrial psychology practitioner in the changing world of work;
> To establish the role of the industrial psychology practitioner as a workplace counselor to manage the impact of COVID-19 in the workplace.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments worldwide were forced to impose regulations such as lockdowns and social distancing (Greyling et al., 2021). During the onset of this study, most employees in South Africa have already been working from home for several months. Most companies used technology for employees to do their work using new virtual ways of working, such as virtual communication platforms such as Zoom meetings and Microsoft Team meetings, among others (Williams, 2021). Working from home, enabled by advanced technologies, caused problems for some employees as it faded the line between working time and family time (Trougakos et al., 2020). Greenwood and Anas (2021) state that employers were only beginning to recognize the prevalence of mental health issues at work in 2019 when COVID-19 brought new mental health challenges. The global pandemic declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020 exacerbated existing work-related problems and how mental health-related issues were managed (Agba et al., 2020). Giorgi et al. (2020) state that several workplace factors have been identified as having the potential to increase or moderate the impact of COVID-19 on workers' mental health. During the pandemic, work-related stress and a lack of job support were intrinsically at a high

risk of influencing the wellbeing of employees (Giorgi et al., 2020).

Similarly, Qiu et al. (2020) report that the pandemic caused increased anxiety and psychological distress among people. According to Devi et al. (2019), stress is defined as a state of disharmony leading to a stress response in the body. Prolonged exposure to stress leads to health-related consequences on productivity and quality of life (Devi et al., 2019). The Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001) states that when the availability of job resources is depleted, a person could withdraw or disengage from work. High job demands lead to exhaustion and could eventually cause ill health. According to Devi et al. (2019), prolonged exposure to stress could lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which usually occurs following a life-threatening event, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Several publications report on employees' symptoms of post-traumatic stress caused by the pandemic (Restauri and Sheridan, 2020; Rock, 2022). There are various interventions organizations can implement in order to support employees to recover from the psychological trauma and distress caused by the pandemic. According to Giorgi et al. (2020), managing the psychological effect of COVID-19 would include multiple organizational and work-related interventions, such as remote working (smart working), leadership support and implementation of safety protocols. Giorgi et al. (2020) further report that a proper strategy to address employee burnout is to apply coaching psychology principles. Facilitating a development process and establishing ways for employees to improve their resources could assist in addressing COVID-19-related challenges. Identifying at-risk employees and training in psychological first aid during disasters could prevent added mental health problems (Naidu, 2020; Qiu et al., 2020). Currently, it seems that the world is in a post-pandemic phase. Early this year most countries have lifted lockdown restrictions, and some organizations require employees to return to work. Recent studies report on managing return-to-work policies since this significantly affects employees (Giorgi et al., 2020; Boissé, 2021; Cohen, 2021).

In this regard, the industrial psychology practitioner's role becomes crucial. The Health Professions Council of South Africa (Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA], 2019) indicates that an industrial psychologist should develop and apply interventions based on the principles of psychology to address individual, group and organizational wellbeing. A subfield in industrial psychology relating to work-related wellbeing, occupational health psychology focuses on the impact of occupational stressors on employees' psychological health and includes interventions designed to improve employee health (Bergh, 2021). Bal et al. (2019) state that industrial psychology practitioners are responsible for ensuring the wellbeing of the employee, as this task forms the cornerstone of their profession.

The industrial psychologist uses psychological models to alter behavior in organizations in order to improve work (Schultz et al., 2020) and resolve issues at work (Jex and Britt, 2014). Schultz et al. (2020) note that industrial psychology practitioners' responsibilities include providing psychological interventions to businesses, such as workplace counseling, to address psychological problems. Basically, through workplace counseling, an industrial psychology practitioner assists workers to function optimally at work. From an industrial psychology perspective, workplace counseling focuses on facilitating workers' personal development while also addressing stress-related problems. From this perspective, this study aimed to explore the significant role of the industrial psychologist in managing the psychological impact of COVID-19 in the workplace.

Materials and methods

A qualitative descriptive strategy was used in the study to explore the narratives of the participants, industrial psychology practitioners registered as psychologists and interns (we refer to the collective term of industrial psychology practitioner to include both psychologists and interns). The inclusion criterion for the participants consisted of being registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) as an intern- psychologist or psychologist under the industrial psychology category. It was preferred that the practitioners' job functions include rendering workplace counseling within a South African organization. The participants were expected to understand and communicate in English. After approval for the study was received from the ethics committee from the faculty, the list of registered industrial psychology practitioners from the iRegister of the HPCSA was obtained. The participants were contacted, and an overview of the study was presented. Provided they agreed to participate in the study, an informed consent form and a brief demographics questionnaire were completed.

The sample comprised 17 females (77%) and five males (22%) mainly between 33 and 41 years of age (46%). 36% of the participants were between 23 and 32 years of age, and four (18%) participants between 42 and 51 years of age. The participants were equally Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking at 36%, respectively, while 14% were isiZulu-speaking, 9% were Setswana-speaking, and 5% were Sesotho-speaking. 18% Asian represented the sample population, 31% black, 9% colored and 9% white. Lastly, 59% of the participants were registered with the HPCSA as psychologists in the category *industrial*, and 41% were registered with the HPCSA as *intern psychologists* in the same category.

Semi-structured interviews and a qualitative survey were used to gather data. Since the country was under lockdown restrictions during 2020 due to COVID-19 regulations,

the interviews were conducted online in the participants' convenient environment, such as their home or office, with internet connectivity. Before commencing with the interviews, the researcher provided the participant with more information about the study and the structure of the interview session. Pre-determined questions guided the interview:

> In your opinion, how effective is your workplace in assisting employees in the changing world of work?
> How do you view your role as an industrial psychology practitioner in the changing world of work?

The qualitative survey was completed by participants who had already completed an interview, and from whom additional data was needed. The participants completed their answers in a typed format. The survey questions were as follows:

> In your opinion, what is the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace?
> In your experience, what is the psychological impact of COVID-19 on employees?
> How do you view your role as a workplace counselor to manage the impact of COVID-19 in the workplace?

Data analysis

Deductive and inductive thematic analyses were utilized to analyze the data. Mayring (2022) indicates deductive thematic analysis as the process of data coding where new information is found in data while referring to previous research findings. The research objectives were used to form a structure of categories where the themes were categorized. Inductive thematic analysis entails working with the participants' experiences and deriving themes and codes from the data (Azungah and Kasmad, 2018; Mayring, 2022). Since new experiences were recorded from the interviews and surveys, new themes were discovered in the data. To maintain the data's quality and trustworthiness, the researchers ensured that questions related to the topic were asked and reported an accurate reflection of the participants' experiences. A qualitative survey was included as the study developed to access more data. Using the survey data, a deductive thematic analysis was followed guided by the research objectives to form a structure of categories where the themes were categorized.

Results

The study's results were grouped into three categories, consisting of themes and substantiated by responses from the participants.

Category 1: The changing world of work

The first category was formed based on the first objective of the study, exploring the role of the industrial psychology practitioner in the changing world of work. Firstly, the participants were asked how effective they view their workplace in assisting employees in the changing world of work. From the responses, the themes were grouped and are reported below.

Theme 1: Accelerated change

The data shows that from the participants' perspective, change is constantly present in the current workplace and even accelerated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants indicated that the effect of the changing world of work on employees is increased work pressure and job demands.

I think it makes work at (sic) faster pace, technology definitely puts pressure on the employees because is the emphasis to learn new systems, new technology, new social media almost on a weekly and monthly basis. There is a lot of change coming in, with change put a lot of stress on employees and it can also cause burnout. (Participant 2, Female).

The participants indicated that job demands increased in the new world of work thereby putting more pressure on employees. More work pressure results in elevated stress levels and even burnout among employees.

The impact on employees—the stress level is so much higher, lack of authentic emotional expression and the demands on them have increased. (Participant 4, Female).

The participants highlighted that employees need to ensure that their skills stay relevant and that they upskill to keep up with the changes the new world of work brings.

. . .if they do not upskill, they will become redundant and obsolete. So, obsolescence is one of those things that the employee will face if they are not upskilling or aligning their skill sets to the new challenges in the world of work. People that struggle to adjust will find it very difficult to stay relevant in the new world of work. (Participant 13, Male).

The results show that different generations react in different ways to the changing world of work. The younger generation seems to adapt faster and cope better than the older generation. The participants further felt that the older generations must upskill to a large extent, especially concerning technological changes.

Different generations are handling this differently. I think for our millennials or Gen Y are adapting much faster because job security is not that important for them as the older generation. . .. the older generation we are not that responsive to change, and we like to have job security. (Participant 3, Female).

I think the challenge we are going to face with the fourth industrial revolution is different between these generations (workforce). Your Millennials will be more inclined to the 4IR because they grew up with using technology and the baby boomers might find it difficult to adjust to it. When 4IR changes are introduced most of the baby boomers, and generation x (older employees) struggle with using it. (Participant 19, Male).

The data showed that many jobs are affected by the accelerated changes characterized by the new world of work. Some participants indicated that the effect of the changing world of work on employees benefits them by making things simpler.

. . .it makes life easier, I think it making life easier, if you look at stuff like AI within the field that I currently work, it is used to help with comparing documents and dealing with different legal areas etc. (Participant 22, Female).

The participants indicated that the changes presented by the changing world of work, save time and energy as new ways of doing things are faster and easier, and information is easily accessible. The results further showed that the changing world of work is benefiting organizations in that organizations get the opportunity to adapt and implement effective and efficient ways of work.

. . .it is relating to digitalisation things, especially from the HR perspective and most importantly with the environment we find ourselves in, is ever changing. Making sure that everything is done in effective and efficient manner in order for the organisation to achieve its success or stay relevant in their specific industry. (Participant 8, Female).

Theme 2: Virtual connections

The data showed that in the participants' experience the changing world of work was introduced by the onset of the 4th industrial revolution. In their experience the new world of work is primarily highlighted by making global connections possible through meetings, conferences and virtual office work for employees.

. . .4IR is here, it is not coming. It is not an event; however, it is something that is happening gradually. People are running conference online; you can post something online, and it has global impact. (Participant 11, Female).

. . .the 4IR will change the way we work, and it is going to have an impact on every kind of career. Moreover, organisations that want to stay productive or profitable and want to compete in the global market. . . (Participant 13, Male).

The participants also indicated that the new world of work had enabled data integration to enable HR data analysis within organizations. Also, the geographic shift that took place in the world of work allows employees to work more efficiently while working remotely.

Integration of more technology into the workplace, more focused on big data and people analytics not doing big data and people analytics the traditional way (spreadsheet individually). The increased use of technology and using technology in your work processes. We are already functioning in the 4IR and it is evident in the workplace. (Participant 7, Female).

. . .but technology has enabled us to do work remotely and more efficiently because if I am home, I am not spending a lot of time chatting to my friends in the office; therefore, I am actually doing much more with my time when I am working from home. It saves time and it is convenient. . . (Participant 17, Female).

Next, category two is discussed. The category was formed based on the first objective of the study, exploring the role of the industrial psychology practitioner in the changing world of work. The participants were asked how they view their role as industrial psychology practitioners in the changing world of work.

Category 2: The roles of the industrial psychology practitioner in the changing world of work

Theme 1: Facilitate coping

The participants indicated that their role as industrial psychology practitioners in the changing world of work was one of being a facilitator of the change process within the organization.

We have a number of responsibilities; the first thing is that we need to serve as change agents, reason being that a lot of jobs are going to have to undergo a large transition in order to remain relevant and some jobs are not going to be relevant. As IOP practitioners we have to serve as stewards for this change for these types of jobs that are coming. (Participant 6, Male).

Also making sure that you make it fun like running competitions, changing performance enhancement approach to suit the workforce, and following more contemporary approach. I recurrently lodged the project called growth for growth and the purpose of this project is to build high performing team in the sense that people are able to achieve goals, work collaboratively. (Participant 8, Female).

The participants indicated that as facilitators of change, they support and guide employees to cope with organizational change initiatives through providing group support such as peer support groups.

Help people understand 4IR and the interventions the organisation is proposing in response to the 4IR. To ensure that there is an integration between the automated process and the people. By looking at the risk involved in the process the organisation wants to implement and the reason thereof (efficiency, better profit margins, for reduction of Labour force or reduction in the production time) and what is the purpose of implementing these things. Use tools (evidence-based approaches) to understand the impact of the 4IR and address the identified impact. Help organisations to be transparent to employees and manage the relationships (e.g., union). (Participant 7, Female).

The role of personal resources has been reaffirmed, and I believe it is part of the role of the IOP to pro-actively invest in resource building, whether it be through training, counselling, coaching, peer support groups, etc. (Participant 13, Female).

A significant part of the data revealed that the practitioners' role is to provide support to management in various ways such as providing training and help building relationships.

I had to assist managers in making adjustments to support staff in order to recuperate which led to me having to look at new ways of applying the 3-intervention levels (individual, team and organisation) in this context. (Participant 5, Female).

Line managers equipped to create psychological safety;— line managers' ability to use 1 on 1 sessions to check on employees and provide adequate support;—leaders modelling appropriate healthy behaviours. (Participant 11, Female).

Theme 2: Helping

A significant role reflected from the data was that of supporting employees through counseling and coaching. The participants shared various responses relating to how support is provided to employees.

The role of Industrial psychology practitioner is to provide guidance, coaching and counselling. IOP should do a needs analysis of what people are struggling with in terms of the 4IR; therefore, counsel them accordingly. (Participant 20, Female).

I think with this industrial revolution (4IR) change is much faster than we have known it to be, and I think my role will be more of supportive role to people to adapt to changes and also to loss. I think in many cases there will be losses and then helping clients and/or employees to craft their own way of doing things and also to assist them that if they experience job loss to go on to a new career path. And helping people to cope with change. (Participant 1, Female).

By means of using coaching skills the participants felt they could provide a supportive role to employees and assist them with coping with the changes the new world of work brings.

My role will be to guidance (sic) this person through coaching. The more technology will increase the more and more they will be neglecting of people side. We (IOPs) will have to work harder to ensure that people are well looked after, they know how to balance (work and life), that they know which careers they can choose (obviously the whole career mapping will change going forward, in terms of the impact of technology on the careers). I think in the end our role will have to adapt as Industrial Psychologists providing more support to people and things impacting our workforce in the workplace. (Participant 5, Female).

The participants indicated that as a behavior-specialist, their role includes understanding behavior and what is needed to support people. The participants reflected on designing tailored interventions based on accurate diagnoses of what is needed, either on individual, group or organizational level.

In the 4IR as things are becoming more complex and challenging, people are having multiple roles; it is not necessary that you come to work and do a single role. It

is going to be having multiple portfolios, stretching your skills, having side-hustle, and having short-term contracts; not having long-term commitments. There is a lot of demands on the individual and for an individual to catch up with those requirements, requires a special touch that is where is see the Industrial Psychologists ideal role is to be able to support the individuals in those transitions. Being able to understand how you can handle that complexity, the dynamics between now that it is like a lot of challenges being faced, is the softer side of things and the harder thing to explain to people in terms of the value. (Participant 11, Female).

The participants indicated that they view their role within organizations as being responsible for managing employees' mental health and considering their psychological wellbeing. This was reflected throughout the data gathering process, such as participants 1 and 2, respectively indicated that the workplace could be more effective when they assist employees, as indicated in their extracts below:

By assisting employees who show signs of trauma or emotional stress with counselling.

Supportive role, listening to stories of experiences, exploring career changes with clients and new self-awareness that came with the pandemic. Emotion management and regulation re-building relationships at work, exploring and healing and coping with this traumatic event.

Theme 3: Gatekeeper

Lastly, the participants further indicated that their role within the organization is to highlight transparency and be stewards of ethical change management. As a gatekeeper, this included ensuring that data is managed responsibly and that considerations regarding implementing the changes flowing from the changing world of work are fair and ethical.

The biggest role is ethics. I think we need to be careful around help manage and control companies around how to capture and keep data. Because there is a lot of potential for the data to be misused and manipulated in a way…. (Participant 6, Male).

I always think our role is a bit of a check and a balance, ethical viewpoint. So, we will always want people to come to us and ask is that right, ethical and kind, all the considerations/decision around people. We also want to be looking not just making sure things are fair, safe, kind, and ethical sound for people, but also in terms of enhancing the

wellness of people. For it is the ethical foundation and making sure that things are done properly, and people are being considered because things are going fast it is easy to forget the people side as to how we ensure that people are being enhanced. (Participant 11, Female).

Next, category three is discussed, which relates to the second objective of the study, exploring the role of the industrial psychology practitioner as a workplace counselor to manage the *impact* of COVID-19 in the workplace.

Category 3: Managing the impact of COVID-19 in the workplace

Category 3 was formed when the participants were asked their opinion on the impact of COVID-19 in the workplace and the psychological impact of COVID-19 on employees. Four themes emerged from the data and are reported next.

Theme 1: Culture change

The participants indicated that the impact of COVID-19 in the workplace is evident through culture changes that took place in organizations. They reflected on how the new normal included working from home, managing a virtual office, learning new work-life balance dynamics and managing employees differently.

Impact of COVID-19 is both positive and negative. Positive; in challenging our old ways of thinking - Covid-19 opened up doors to hybrid-working cultures securing a better work life balance. The impact has also challenged individuals and companies to be more agile and adaptable. (Participant 3, Female).

The workplace moved from a physical office to a digital environment. Employees had to work from their homes and share the limited space with family members. (Participant 8, Male).

The participants indicated that the way life and work were before the pandemic had forever changed. In a positive sense, the participants felt excited about opportunities for hybrid working and a more balanced way of living. Employees working from home seemed more relaxed in this flexible environment. Furthermore, participants also indicated that organizations must relook work practices, such as providing a safe workplace within the context of COVID-19 (facilities and training staff on safety protocols).

. . . adoption of work from home at a massive scale, balancing living in a pandemic and all the new global and country regulations while trying to be productive, opportunities for companies to consider work arrangements and supporting managers to manage remotely. (Participant 9, Female).

There is more flexibility from managers who used to be clock watchers. Managers now realise that employees can work from home if they need to take care of the kids etc. (Participant 1, Female).

Theme 2: Mental health

In addition, the participants indicated that a significant part of the impact of COVID-19 was on employees' mental health. Apart from the effect on employee health, employees had to adapt to many changes, some employees showed signs and symptoms of ill health, while others showed resiliency and engagement.

At the start of the pandemic employees felt overwhelmed and anxious. Many had to dig deep to find resilience to be agile in the changing environment. As people worked through the changes in their different manners, the psychological impact ranged from negative (i.e., depression) to positive (i.e., sense of meaningfulness). However, as the pandemic continued my sense was that most people's personal resources were running low and that they experienced symptoms of burnout. As each individual's experience is so unique, the pandemic has taught us to heighten the focus on mental health in the workplace, and to provide individualised responses. Now in 2022 the culture of overwork and unreasonable expectations are surfacing again. (Participant 10, Female).

The results showed that employees who fell ill and lost loved ones due to COVID-19 were especially at risk of showing PTSD symptoms. The participants reflected on ways of addressing signs of burnout, depression, trauma and PTSD in employees.

In my consultations I have noted that employees are still extremely fatigued even after 3 months of contracting Covid. I notice an increase in reports of burnout, and depression of employees who were recovering from Covid. People who lost someone due to Covid are also left traumatised. Those who had Covid and those who didn't were equally fearful of contracting the disease which led to increased levels of stress. Working from home had a good effect on some but a negative effect on others. (Participant 13, Female).

Covid has caused a lot of trauma for employees where some have lost a loved one or there was a financial impact on the

family. In my opinion this is causing employees to be less resilient towards the normal stresses in life. (Participant 1, Female).

The participants indicated that in their experience, the impact of COVID-19 in the workplace included job loss and uncertainty, which also led to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

Due to loss people experience some degree of depression, due to being isolated some experience a degree of anxiety as well as depression, and then there's individuals that experience prolonged Covid which impacts them mental and physically. (Participant 7, Female).

The participants stated that they know of many companies that had to close their doors, lost or digitized jobs, and employees had to take salary cuts. Participant 9 supported this by writing in the survey: "*Increased pressures on mental health overall on individuals; massive job losses and increased anxiety on job security and balancing the grey area between work and home and "always-on" culture."*

The participants felt that as employees faced much loss, levels of fear also increased. One participant explained that employees experienced high levels of stress due to many different reasons such as stressors of financial strain, uncertainty about the future, concern about the possibility of infection, and travel restrictions. The participants indicated that employees felt fatigued, and a high prevalence of burnout was noted among employees returning to work.

Trauma of leaving workplace suddenly in March 2020 caused post traumatic stress. Anxiety of not knowing how the pandemic will play out. Information overload and bombardment of training availability and expectations to learn new methods in a short period increased stress levels. Emotional numbness now in learning anything new. Fear of other changes still too come. Similar to surviving a war but still exited to perform on a very high level. Returning to work very, very challenging, yet another change. (Participant 2, Female).

I think it has increased fear in general, each person's trigger around fear was pressed. Whether it was fear around income, job security, health etc. I think as a summary it removed peoples sense of certainty and increased discomfort, which has a knock on effect on all our triggers. (Participant 8, Male).

Theme 3: Availability of resources

The participants further indicated that the significant impact of COVID-19 in the workplace was how it impacted the availability of resources. As such, organizations are faced with the change of adjusting and adapting at a fast pace and should ensure the efficient availability of resources exist.

Unprecedented, this has not been seen since the Spanish flu. The workplace has to adjust and adapt at lightning speed and also figure out how to support employees who were left traumatised by the pandemic. (Participant 13, Female).

In addition, participants indicated that the impact of the pandemic could also be felt by technological advances, as employees worldwide were requested to work from home. Some employees were confronted with the challenge of not having an internet connection to be able to work effectively.

Many employees did not have adequate connectivity or data to continue effectively with their duties. Employees had to upskill very quickly regarding digital and technological capabilities. Video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams became the mode of communication and collaboration and employees had to adjust quickly and learn how to utilise these digital applications. (Participant 8, Male).

The participants indicated that working remotely had its benefits, but post-pandemic, it is clear that employees have to relearn how to function in a team and socialize as a group again. The availability of peer support as a resource is evident as Participant 1 state:

Teams have had to learn to work together again in a face-to-face environment. While working from home I had limited contact with my colleagues, now I am back at the office, and I have to face them for 8 hours a day. People need to learn how to again accept and cope with other members of the team who they don't necessarily get along with. Social traditions that were established before Covid has gone and effort needs to be put in to reinvent these traditions (socials, drinks after work etc.).

Theme 4: Meaningfulness

The participants reflected that the sense of loss they observed from employees were also seen when companies requested their employees to return to the office, and employees now faced a sense of loss of the security they had while working from home. The participants indicated that, in their opinion, the impact of COVID-19 in the workplace is that as employees searched for meaning in their experiences, many employees report having good experiences as they re-evaluated what mattered in life. A prominent shift was reported in resignations as people explored other areas of life to "find more joy" (Participant 6). The data showed that most participants

indicated that the onset of COVID-19 led to some employees living a more purposeful life.

> *It shook everyone and made them clarify what they want from their life, what is important and this has to lead to people feeling niggly in wanting to make changes, find more joy, move closer to a life they want. I believe people are trying to cope and are also stretching for more. (Participant 6, Female).*

Discussion

The results indicated that the new world of work's influence on organizations was prevalent in the rapid advancement of technology in recent years. This was especially evident from how knowledge and information were distributed and how jobs were affected, thereby accelerating change, and automation and digitalization in organizations. Mayer and Oosthuizen (2021) found in their study among managers in a South African technology organization that the challenges of the 4IR highlighted both the positive and negative experiences of the participants regarding the rapid and disruptive changes within the organizations. According to the participants the transition to the new world of work dramatically impacts work. The manner in which work is being done, having less human interaction, and simplifying organizations are a few examples the participants provided of the impact of the transition. Similarly, Schwab and Davis (2018) revealed in their study that the changing world of work is reshaping how work is performed. The participants indicated that they found that different generations coped differently with this transition. While the younger generation seemed to find it easier to transition to the new world of work, the older generation felt a sense of job insecurity because of automation and digitalization in the workplace, which forced them to upskill and learn to adapt to the changes. Mariano et al. (2021) report that older employees are often stereotyped as less technologically skilled than younger employees and thus tend to avoid using technology.

The study results also showed that the participants felt that apart from the changes employees' experience in the workplace due to the new world of work, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a further significant culture change in the workplace. The pace of work accelerated and the constant change in the workplace evolved to a next level since the pandemic started. The results show that the participants noted that the culture shift in the workplace was related to the new way of work, including working more remotely, managing a virtual office, work-life integration, and a feeling of constant change. The participants reflected on the prevalence of depression and a sense of loss at the pandemic's beginning. This was possibly intensified by the isolation of lockdown, loss of loved ones as well as the threat to the employees' health. The participants in the study observed a strong sense of job

uncertainty and insecurity among employees they supported. The participants indicated that some organizations had to close, jobs were redundant, and some jobs changed. The findings are in accordance with the study of Giorgi et al. (2020), who found that social distancing policies, the lockdown, loss of income and fear of the future led to an influence on the mental health of employees.

The results of our study show that the participants identified signs and symptoms of psychological trauma due to the COVID-19 pandemic among employees. The shock of leaving work and life as it was known so suddenly, followed by the threat of falling ill and the death of loved ones, led to a prevalence of trauma symptoms among employees. Restauri and Sheridan (2020) state that the description of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to a traumatic event as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A traumatic event is more severe than a crisis and has a more unpredictable onset. Literature states that trauma involves an individual experiencing, witnessing or being confronted with actual or threatened death, serious injury, or threat to others or the self (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). An individual's response to the trauma includes feeling intense helplessness or horror. This definition accurately describes most people's experiences during the pandemic. Exposure to a traumatic event could lead to the onset of acute stress disorder and if symptoms continue to persist, PTSD (Restauri and Sheridan, 2020). The vulnerability of South Africans to post-traumatic stress disorder is highlighted by Naidu (2020) due to the collective trauma of the past.

As employees return to work, the participants in this study indicated that they noticed a culture of overwork and unreasonable expectations of employers. Ingusci et al. (2021) state that workers are required to work under pressure for longer hours with increased workloads. It is essential for employers to, especially during the pandemic, review tasks and have realistic expectations (Ingusci et al., 2021). Post-pandemic management involves integration back to a work environment that has changed drastically (Boissé, 2021). Employees need to be supported to re-establish routines and to support anxious employees. Roberge (2020) states that management should be vigilant in supporting employees returning to work. This can be done in three stages, first focusing on the human aspect, ensuring that employees are coping, emotionally well and thriving. Secondly, in a transition period, establish more contact points during the day to check on employees as they return to a more normal routine, either at work or home. These could include enquiring if employees have what they need (resources), checking on how employees are coping and enquiring whether they are taking enough breaks. Lastly, focusing on the business aspect of an organization, management should ensure that the job is being done, and that adjustments to task agreements are made to accommodate new work as the world of work changes. Our study showed that employees need support from

management in order to cope with the new world of work. More so after the pandemic as employees need to adjust to how the world of work changed.

While the results show that COVID-19 mostly had a negative effect on work-life, some participants reflected on how they noticed a sense of meaningfulness in some of the employees they supported. The participants noted that employees seemed to revisit what is important for them in life, reshaping their work and family lives and reconnecting to what is important. An American organizational psychologist, Anthony Klotz, stated in an interview with Bloomberg that many employees are rethinking where and why they want to work (Cohen, 2021). Employees are re-evaluating meaning in terms of family time, remote work, finding joy in projects and meaning in life (Cohen, 2021). Employees can consider their choices (Smith, 2022), which led to many employees resigning and seeking other job opportunities. Much has been published about the "mass resignation" phenomenon worldwide as employees seek employment elsewhere, among others, seeking remote work opportunities (Iacurci, 2022). This involves more than resigning from a job, but also involves individuals taking control of their work and personal lives (Cohen, 2021).

The participants indicated that they felt their role prior to the COVID-19 pandemic revolved around assisting employees in crafting new career opportunities or new work arrangements, and new ways of doing work. This role has intensified significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic started. In their report, Deloitte (Volini et al., 2021) states that in the post-pandemic workplace, work should be re-defined. The report indicates that a focus should be placed on the "art of the possible" for what can be achieved using technology, thereby enabling and elevating human capabilities. Our study showed that the participants believed that organizations are exploring ways to manage employees who work remotely permanently related to managing outputs and not merely managing the hours during a working day. Increasingly, more studies show that organizations seek to attract and retain talent by providing employees autonomy over their work schedules (Cohen, 2021). More flexibility at work could lead to improved mental health and better work-life balance (Cohen, 2021).

Some participants reflected on how coming through the pandemic was like surviving a war, but they were still excited to perform at work. In recent years, publications have reported how people recover from adversity (Ryff et al., 2012), and how this positive recovery from adversity can be described as resiliency. Ryff et al. (2012) define resilience as "the maintenance, recovery, or improvement in mental or physical health following challenge" (p. 794). It is possible that the responses from the participants in our study could reflect on the post-traumatic growth theory (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). The theory states that people who endure

psychological struggles following adversity often see positive growth afterward.

Facilitating growth and development among employees is a significant part of industrial psychology. Industrial and organizational psychologists are ideally suited in organizations to support employees in the current post-pandemic phase by following an intervention approach suited for employees in their specific trajectory. A good example is Banerjee and Nair's (2020) intervention toolkit, developed to support facilitators dealing with employees' mental health during a pandemic. The approach to psycho-social interventions speaks to the industrial psychology professions and involves needs assessment, crisis management, open communication, individual and group support and interventions, and organizational restructuring. Nguse and Wassenaar (2021) state that the role of psychologists during the COVID-19 pandemic includes being at the forefront of this task and sharing resources to assist with mental health issues in the community in South Africa. Training psychologists and mental health professionals in immediate and responsive treatment measures such as psychological first aid, solution-focused brief psychotherapy and longer-lasting treatment models are vital to prepare for similar mental health challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Graupner, 2021; Nguse and Wassenaar, 2021). van Lill and van Lill (2022) recommend training in the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for Work Well-being model, particularly suitable for industrial psychologists who offer brief counseling interventions. The participants reported that their role in the changing world of work is to facilitate support such as providing services such as counseling and coaching. In this regard, the industrial psychology practitioner is concerned with talent management with organizations; in their capacity as counselors, coaches and people-developers, they equip individuals to address their personal or developmental needs (Jorgensen et al., 2016; Van Zyl and Stander, 2016). The industrial psychology practitioners in this study reported that their role as workplace counselors involves supporting employees to adjust to the workplace, especially during the pandemic. To manage wellbeing in the workplace, the industrial psychologist should be concerned with supporting employees' adjustment (Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA], 2019), more so in the post-pandemic phase. van Lill and van Lill (2022) indicate that it can be considered an obligation that industrial psychologists have to their organizations and an ethical duty as psychologists to intervene when employees present with mental health challenges.

The significant role of the industrial psychology practitioner in managing the impact of COVID-19 in the workplace became quite clear from the participants' responses. The participants indicated that an important role of industrial psychology practitioners in the changing world of work is being ethics managers. Participants reported that as ethics managers, they were responsible for managing ethics by gatekeeping

in organizations, ensuring that the organizations adhere to legislation such as the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act) in South Africa. The results also indicated that the participants felt it is their responsibility to keep the workplace fair and safe. Jorgensen-Graupner and Van Zyl (2019) assert that positive ethical behavior is a foundation of industrial psychology practitioners. In this regard, Van Zyl et al. (2016) confirm that industrial psychology practitioners maintain ethical standards and practices within organizations. It would therefore seem to implicate that industrial psychology practitioners should assist managers in making the workplace a safe space for employees to return to work after the COVID-19 pandemic or to assist in rethinking how the new workspace should be managed as a safe environment.

It is recommended that organizations invest in proactive and reactive interventions to address the employees' mental health. Organizations should focus on managing job demands and evaluating job support since new challenges emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding workload. A stronger focus on the accessibility of interventions on virtual platforms is immanent for access to employees working from home. A focused effort in training line managers in identifying signs and symptoms of psychological ill-health among staff members is necessary to provide adequate mental health support. Industrial psychology practitioners could use the findings of this study to position themselves as change agents, consultants to management, ethics managers, and workplace counselors to adequately facilitate support in organizations to manage the psychological impact of COVID-19. Industrial psychology practitioners must continuously develop counseling skills to facilitate psychological support to employees. In hindsight, it is clear that training in crisis management skills should be awarded priority to manage the psychological impact of the changing world of work, and also traumatic incidents such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in the workplace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings in the study show that industrial psychology practitioners have a significant role in supporting employees through traumatic and stressful incidents, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, using counseling theory and models. It is recommended that industrial psychologists focus on continuously developing their skills in individual, group and organizational counseling interventions to be ready to support employees optimally.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences Ethics Committee (NWU), North-West University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

TM conducted this study as part of his master's dissertation. He was responsible for the data collection, data interpretation, and writing of the dissertation and manuscript for publication purposes. LG supervised the study, helped to conceptualize the study, assisted with data analyses, data interpretation, and the writing up of the manuscript for publication purposes. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The influence of the psychological contract on employee engagement in a South African bank

Dzunani A. Ngobeni, Musawenkosi D. Saurombe* and Renjini M. Joseph

Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

The workplace is characterised by numerous contracts of agreement that an employee and employer must sign to formalise their employment relationship. The informal agreement, known as the psychological contract, is often overlooked, although it is pivotal in determining the engagement of employees in an organisation. This study aimed to probe the perceptions line managers have of the influence of the psychological contract on employee engagement in a South African bank with a particular focus on how the integration of technologies from the Fourth Industrial Revolution may have impacted the workplace in the banking sector. The study was carried out using a qualitative research approach. A purposive random sampling strategy was used to select participants who were interviewed using semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis, and verbatim quotes were used to support emergent themes. The findings of the study revealed that continuous change in the world, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, influences employee expectations. Thus, organisations must be able to quickly adapt and adjust their talent attraction and retention mechanisms. Talent management, the nature of the business, structure and operations, the nature of the work environment, and emotional needs are the themes that emerged from the study. With the constant change in the world of work, including industry disruptions continually imposed by the 4IR and other factors, employees' expectations are ever-changing. Thus, organisations must keep adapting to attract and retain talent. This study adds value by addressing various aspects aligned with competitively adjusting to the current and future world of work.

KEYWORDS

psychological contract, employee engagement, banking, line manager, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The workplace is characterised by numerous contracts between an employee and employer that formalise their employment relationship. This includes the employment contract and other formal documents such as non-disclosure agreements. However, there is an informal agreement that is often overlooked, and is pivotal in determining the engagement of employees in an organisation. Such an informal agreement is known as the psychological contract (Naidoo et al., 2019). The psychological contract is important to enhance the employer–employee relationship. The psychological contract represents the mutual beliefs, perceptions, expectations and informal obligations between an employer and an employee (Saurombe and Barkhuizen, 2020). It entails the unwritten rules that govern the reciprocal social dynamics underlying the relationship between the two parties and defines the tasks to be completed in practical terms (Gordon, 2020). While the psychological contract is informal, the literature suggests that it should not be overlooked as it sets the scene for the employer-employee relationship (Bussin, 2021; Holland and Scullion, 2021; Mmamel et al., 2021).

Employee engagement refers to the extent to which an employee feels passionate about their job, is committed to the organisation, and puts effort into his work (Saad et al., 2021). Engaged employees exude self-efficacy, a high level of optimism and resilience, and can control and achieve success in their career by having self-esteem (Koveshnikov et al., 2020). Line managers are therefore encouraged to assess employees' perceptions of the psychological contract. This study explores the perceptions of line managers about how obligations and expectations of employees and employers in the form of the psychological contract can influence employee engagement in a South African bank, specifically considering how the integration of technologies from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) may have impacted the banking workplace. The objectives of the study were to explore the perceptions that line managers have of employee expectations and employee engagement, and to explore the perceptions of how the psychological contract can influence employee engagement in a South African bank.

The study looks at the financial services sector, with a focus on the banking industry in South Africa. The study further seeks to understand how the integration of technologies from the 4IR in the workplace has changed the nature of the banking sector and how it operates, and its subsequent effect, on the psychological contract. Banks in South Africa must rethink strategies for employee attraction, development and retention as a result of the 4IR (Business Tech, 2020; PWC, 2020). Employees' expectations are rapidly shifting due to changing nature of work as a result of technological changes and advancements (Sutherland, 2020; Prakash et al., 2021). The authors' motivation to carry out this study in the South African banking sector emanates from the minimal research available on the contemporary context of the influence of psychological contracts on employee engagement given the current rapidly evolving workplace environment.

Literature review

Cognitive dissonance theory

Leon Festinger first coined the theory of cognitive dissonance at the beginning of the 1950s. The theory suggests that there can be inconsistencies among cognitions such as knowledge, opinions, beliefs and behaviour, thus generating an uncomfortable motivating feeling, also known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Whenever an employer creates an expectation in an employee in exchange for the employee's contribution and does not meet the expectation, this will limit the motivation of the employee to produce the desired work outcome (Alcover et al., 2017). According to the cognitive dissonance theory, when an employee perceives a breach of the psychological contract or the employer fails to fulfil their promised obligations, the employee may view these unfulfilled expectations as a form of wrongdoing on the part of the employer (van Gilst et al., 2020). This may consequently leave the employee experiencing cognitive dissonance, therefore feeling dissatisfied with the employment relationship.

Denial and contradiction are identified as the root causes of a breach of the psychological contract (Li and Chen, 2018). Denial occurs when an organisation creates an expectation but fails to fulfil it (Li and Chen, 2018). Contradiction occurs when there are differences in the understanding of whether an expectation exists or not (Abbas and Al Hasnawia, 2020). The resulting cognitive dissonance could result in lowered engagement, reduced performance, loyalty and job satisfaction. According to Dwivedi et al. (2018), understanding cognitive dissonance is important and helps line managers address the misaligned beliefs that result in dissatisfied attitudes, thus streamlining the expected behaviour of employees within an organisation.

Line managers can use the understanding and prevention of cognitive dissonance to encourage successful change, or otherwise impede it (Holley, 2021). Understanding the possibility and impact of the manifestation of cognitive dissonance in the workplace is also critical to ensuring and maintaining employee engagement (Perrigo, 2021). This theory postulates that when a person's behaviour is inconsistent with their thoughts and beliefs, underlying psychological tension builds up (Saurombe and Barkhuizen, 2020). This psychological tension can motivate an individual to change their attitude, thus producing consistency between their thoughts and behaviours.

The nature of the psychological contract

The concept of the psychological contract was first introduced by Argyris (1960). On analysing interviews conducted between employees and supervisors in two factories, Argyris (1960) found the psychological contract to be an implicit understanding between the group of employees and their foreman. Argyris (1960) further argued that the relationship could develop to allow employees to exhibit higher productivity and fewer grievances in exchange for acceptable wages and job security. The defining characteristics of the first explicit conceptualisation of the psychological contract was an exchange of tangible, specific and economic resources agreed upon by the two parties that allowed for the fulfilment of the needs (Argyris, 1960).

Tomprou et al. (2015) note that, unlike a formal contract, a psychological contract represents the intangible mutual beliefs, perceptions and informal obligations between an employer and an employee. Psychological contracts are informally established as an implicit agreement between the employee and the employer on the roles and activities that each party is going to perform without specifically elaborating on the details (Swanepoel and Saurombe, 2022). It is predominantly subjective and dependent on what the employee and the employer believe is acceptable or not (Rousseau et al., 2018). Although the psychological contracts are informally established, the employer and employee should explicitly live by the expectations (Prakash et al., 2021).

Holland and Scullion (2021) are of the opinion that the psychological contract is important to an organisation as it provides the framework for understanding the nature of employment relationships and the impact that they can have on the economic outcomes of the organisation.

The concept of the psychological contract has attracted attention mostly for two reasons; first, it is a way of understanding and managing the attitude and behaviours of employees within a company (Agarwal et al., 2021); and secondly, it helps us understand how the relationship between employee and employer evolves (Griep and Vantilborgh, 2018). A breach of a psychological contract occurs when either the employee or employer feels that the other party has not fulfilled a perceived expectation (Gulzar et al., 2021). A breach of this contract can lead to either party feeling psychologically and emotionally aggrieved, therefore leading to a loss of loyalty, motivation, and overall, duty underperformance (Gulzar et al., 2021).

The psychological contract in the banking sector

The banking sector is changing at a rapid pace and is becoming more competitive than ever before (Rasool et al.,

2021). The changes in the banking environment have brought a shift in the nature of the employer-employee relationship. Traditionally, the psychological contract has been geared to aspects such as trust, respect and loyalty between the employer and the employee (Swanepoel and Saurombe, 2022). These relational aspects are still important, however, the recent insecure and changing work environment has brought a shift so that we are starting to see transactional exchange becoming more prevalent (Braganza et al., 2021). Advanced technology is becoming pervasive and competition in the banking sector is increasing (Rasool et al., 2021). For banks to keep performing at their best at all times, they need a committed and motivated workforce who give their very best to achieve their strategic objectives. Employees are increasingly seeking self-actualisation more than the monetary rewards that banks are willing to offer in exchange for their skills. Self-actualisation is the highest human need according to Maslow's hierarchy (Barnes, 2021). Banks need more skilled employees at every level of the organisation as a result of new markets, tighter competition and the emergence of technologies (Braganza et al., 2021).

The psychological contract and employee engagement

According to Naidoo et al. (2019), employee engagement refers to the extent to which an employee's mind and heart are captured by an organisation, thus helping organisations to perform better. Energy, involvement, and positive interaction are regarded as employee engagement characteristics (Naidoo et al., 2019). In other words, employee engagement has the power to drive the performance of the organisation. According to Agarwal and Sajid (2017), engaged employees understand their position and purpose in the organisation, which allows them to become motivated and driven enough to perform tasks allocated to them with passion. These employees are identified by Agarwal and Sajid (2017) as the engine of the organisation and they support the organisation to achieve its mission and effectively execute its strategy, thus generating business results. According to Naidoo et al. (2019), engagement is a multidimensional construct. The emotional and cognitive dimensions are briefly explained below. The fulfilment of the psychological contract increases employee engagement, and morale for the job and in the workplace, and decreases turnover intentions (Swanepoel and Saurombe, 2022).

Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement entails connecting with colleagues and managers in a meaningful way. Employees contribute positively to organisational effectiveness when they feel that their managers are interested in their development (Naidoo et al., 2019; Jarrar, 2022). Employees put in more effort, and work and give a better performance when they feel that these make a difference in the organisation (Chanana, 2021).

In the study that Sandhu and Sharma (2022) conducted, they found that emotional satisfaction, perceived fairness, personal development, and culture, clear communication, and compensation are the drivers of employee engagement. Similarly, the study conducted by Saad et al. (2021) found that hiring and selection, training and development, and job security are important in enhancing employee engagement levels. Thus, line managers need to invest time and effort in the emotional engagement and the development of their employees (Shirin and Kleyn, 2017).

Cognitive engagement

The dimension of cognitive engagement acknowledges when an employee is aware of their mission, role in, and contribution to the organisation (Abarantyne et al., 2019). Employees are more likely to excel when they understand their purpose in the organisation and are provided with opportunities to grow (Saurombe et al., 2017). Engaged employees are those who can connect with others in the work environment and who know precisely what is expected of them (Abarantyne et al., 2019; Naidoo et al., 2019). Line managers should continuously reaffirm the employee's purpose and expectations.

For employees to be personally engaged, they must be more engaged in both dimensions (Dash, 2021). Organisations have to meet the expectations created to ensure that employees are engaged with the organisation's objectives (Dash, 2021). When employees' expectations are not met, this can result in a breach of the psychological contract, as such a breach is defined as an organisation's failure to meet the created expectations (Gulzar et al., 2021). Breach of the psychological contract may negatively affect the employee's attitudes and behaviours toward an organisation, leading to a loss of confidence, respect, and possible negative emotional responses (Abbas and Al Hasnawia, 2020). Psychological contracts are integral to helping navigate workplace dynamics because these informal agreements frame all formal transactions (Swanepoel and Saurombe, 2022). Line managers must be mindful of psychological contracts when selecting, training, retaining and promoting employees. Trust is an important aspect of the social relationship between an employer and an employee (Gulzar et al., 2021).

The psychological contract in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Organisational and employee expectations are continuing to evolve at a fast pace as a result of the 4IR. Recently, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, South African organisations have not only continued discussions on 4IR transformations but accelerated their implementation (Kwon and Jang, 2021). 4IR (digital technology) includes the Internet of Things, big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, as well as machine learning (Kwon and Jang, 2021). The accelerated technological revolution not only play a vital role in bolstering organisational productivity and competitive advantage but the creation of wealth (Aderibigbe, 2021). Digitalisation has an impact on human capital, resulting in a shortage of some and redundancy in other skills as a result of some jobs becoming automated (Magagula et al., 2020; Kwon and Jang, 2021). The nature of work is changing as a result of digitalisation, and employees have to adjust. Organisations are required to adapt and adjust their human capital practices based on the changes brought by digitalisation to meet the evolving needs and expectations of the labour market (Aderibigbe, 2021; Harris, 2021).

Some of the human resource (HR) strategies that organisations have to adjust include, but are not limited to, talent attraction needed for the 4IR, and retaining and developing employees (Dhanpat, 2021; Hewapathirana and Almasri, 2021). Additionally, the development and introduction of new organisational and work models can help address the said changes. These practices mean that employees' psychological contracts should be renewed or adjusted (Dhanpat et al., 2019). According to the study conducted by Chinyamurindi (2021), while the acceleration of the 4IR does pose threats and affect the psychological contract, there is a greater need for HR to be a strategic business partner, increasing the need for the psychological contract. Malik et al. (2022) add that the use of digital technology can be cost-effective and enhance the overall employment experience of employees and thereby resulting in employee commitment, satisfaction, and reduced turnover.

In reviewing the literature, the nature of the psychological contract and related theories were outlined. The psychological contract in the banking sector and within the context of 4IR were discussed. Specifically, the link between the psychological contract and employee engagement was probed. This review of the literature highlights the importance of exploring the line managers' perceptions of the influence of the psychological contract on employee engagement, specifically in the banking context, taking into consideration 4IR. The methodology adopted to address the research objectives are discussed next.

Methodology

Research approach and philosophy

This study followed a qualitative approach, as the targeted participants (middle managers) form a small population at the selected bank, which disqualified the use of a quantitative approach. Further, the target sample was chosen since they are close custodians of the psychological contract, while simultaneously being close influencers of employee engagement through the performance review process (van Elst and Meurs, 2016). What is more, the analysis of in-depth insights (qualitative) was more critical to this research than numbers

(quantitative). Braun and Clarke (2021a) argue that the qualitative research design seeks to understand people's beliefs, behaviours, experiences, and interactions. Non-numerical data are generated with this method, and it further helps to gain increased insight and understanding across disciplines (Bogner et al., 2018). The chosen approach was interpretative and inductive and provided insights into how participants see their reality as well as how they understand or see their experiences.

This study departed from an interpretive view, which is defined as a paradigm that considers or accepts that true knowledge can be obtained from interpreting people and understanding concepts from exploring surroundings (Saunders et al., 2016). Interpretivism is based on the consideration that humans can offer depth of meaning and can effectively attach those meanings to variables and factors (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Saunders et al. (2016) describe ontology as dealing with ideas relating to the existence of relationships between people, society and the world. The ontology was to explore and understand how participants are affected by the psychological contract as their truth. Saunders et al. (2016) further add that ontology is based on social phenomena and how meanings are constructed continually by social factors. In this study, the main author interacted with the participants to discover and understand their experiences by probing further for insight into their ability to create meaning in the world of work. Saunders et al. (2016) argue that roles, narratives, stories, and personal interpretations that are part of the study can be acknowledged as epistemology. The epistemological stance was to acknowledge the role that narratives and personal interpretations play in the psychological contract.

Semi-structured interviews can provide insight into the views and perceptions of participants. It is also important to highlight that the main author was exposed to subjectivism and committed to being objective during the interviews. The axiology acknowledged the subjective interpretation of the responses in terms of the values and ethics that exist. Further, it was important to respect the main author's values and those of the participants during the data collection process, and it is acknowledged that different values did exist, leading to possible subjectivity on the part of either party (Saunders et al., 2016).

Research participants and sampling

The participants in this study consisted of 13 middle managers as they are the first level of managers who interact with employees on matters of employee engagement. They are often also responsible for conducting employee performance conversations and reviews. The research participants were selected from a South African bank. The inclusion criteria used to select participants were that managers had to have at least 5 years of managerial working experience, had to reside in

Johannesburg, South Africa, and could be of any ethnic and gender group. Further, the participants were approached based on meeting the minimum inclusion criteria as mentioned in the preceding statement.

The authors selected the purposive sampling strategy for this study. According to Saunders et al. (2016), purposive sampling provides the researcher with a subjective criterion to select the sample of participants. Gichuru (2021) highlights that cost-efficiency and time saving are some of the advantages associated with this strategy. One of the disadvantages of this sampling strategy is the limited generalisability of the findings (Andrade, 2021). The rationale for choosing this strategy was limited time, budgetary constraints and the specific need for line manager participants to reach the study objectives. The population targeted for this study consisted of employees working in a South African bank in Gauteng. The sample size of the study was 13 participants. Sim et al. (2018) suggest that good sample size for a qualitative study would be between 6 and 15 participants. It is important to mention that in the eighth interview, no new themes emerged. The main author, therefore, did not continue exploring the subject beyond the thirteenth interview as data saturation was reached. This is in line with the study conducted by Braun and Clarke (2021b), which found that 94% of the most frequent themes emerge in the first 6 interviews and 97% by 12 interviews, implying that the sample size of this study is satisfactory to ensure valid findings.

Data collection

A research interview schedule or guide with semi-structured interview questions designed to garner profound insight into the research topic was used. The interview guide included questions about the line managers' understanding of employee expectations, the extent to which these expectations are met contractually, the role line managers play in meeting such expectations, how they understand employee engagement, the role that they play in ensuring that their employees are engaged, and how they understand the COVID-19 pandemic affected the psychological contract and employee engagement (Soares and Sidun, 2021). For the main researcher and participant to discuss some questions in more detail, the questions that were asked were open-ended in nature. Semi-structured interviews allowed more information to be collected by allowing the researcher to probe for further elaboration on answers provided by the chosen sample of employees (Foley et al., 2021). The prospective participants were contacted via email and/or telephone to set up one-on-one interview meetings. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by the main author as was permitted by the South African national COVID-19 lockdown regulations and restrictions at the time of data collection. The interviews, which were all

conducted in English, were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and used for this study. The recorded interviews were stored safely while adhering to the anonymity and protection of personal information. To achieve and verify the quality of the answers, the data collected was measured for validity and reliability by means of triangulation (Saunders et al., 2016).

Data analysis

The main author began the process of transcribing the audio recordings after the data collection process. The authors grouped the transcribed data into codes and began the thematic analysis thereafter. The process involved thematic analysis and an inductive approach to coding where themes were allowed to organically emerge. The authors manually went through the transcripts, using different colours to highlight different codes and ultimately, categorised themes (Caulfield, 2019). The inductive approach to coding gave rise to insights beyond the theoretical underpinnings of this study, contributing to its significance and value-add (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019; Eger and Hjerm, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2021a) define thematic analysis as a method used for systematically identifying, organising and offering insights into patterns about meaning across a set of data. Thematic analysis with an inductive approach allowed the authors to conclude collective or shared meanings and experiences by focusing on meaning across a set of data. The authors first reviewed the data to discover other domains by using coding that is open and selective. Once the domains were discovered, open codes were broken down from the derived data into groups to allow the identification of relationships among the codes (Jowsey et al., 2021). Data were assessed using analytical and logical reasoning. Once the data had been coded, it was arranged into common emerging themes and categories. This process ensured order, structure and interpretation of collected data (de Farias et al., 2021).

Braun and Clarke (2021a) propose six steps to thematically analyse data. First, the main author became familiarised with the data by listening to the recordings and making additional notes. Second, initial codes were generated/formulated, after which the authors met to discuss common codes, answering the research questions by using an analysis matrix. Third, the authors explored data themes by reviewing and grouping the codes according to their similarities. Once grouped, the authors brainstormed possible themes that would have emerged. Fourth, the themes were reviewed, re-examined, and regrouped by the authors. The themes were then labelled and defined accordingly and aligned with the research questions. Lastly, the authors produced a written report and supported the findings with verbatim quotes from the interview responses.

Ethical considerations

Ethics clearance was sought from and granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Business and Economics at the University of Johannesburg with Ethics Clearance Reference Number: IPPM-2021-587(M). The study was planned with the necessary thoroughness to eliminate any information that may have been misleading, and the study conformed to the expected ethics considerations. The dignity, confidentiality and welfare of the participants and anyone who had been impacted by the study were protected and guaranteed. Clark-Kazak (2017) outlines the following ethical considerations, which were observed during this study as well.

Equity
It was ensured that the relationship with interviewees was an equitable one by being aware of any dynamics of power that may have arisen, thus guarding against the same.

Right to self-determination
The participants' dignity was upheld throughout the research process by ensuring that the participants understood the voluntary nature of participation in the study, as well as their right to refuse to participate in the study without repercussions. Full information about the study was disclosed to participants.

Voluntary participation
Participation in the study was voluntary and without coercion. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the research process at any time if they felt uncomfortable or unable to continue.

Informed consent
Participants were requested to formally consent to partake in the study by signing a consent form/letter. All participants included in the study signed the consent forms.

Protection of participants
Participants were protected from any physical and or mental harm. Pseudo names (e.g., participant 1, participant 2, and so forth) were used to replace the "true" identity of participants.

Confidentiality
Participants were reassured that all personal information will be kept confidential. Participants' true identities were protected by using pseudo names. Identifiable information about the participants was not and will not be disclosed. The participants were reassured that the information provided during the data collection process will not be deliberately disclosed to others except to the University of Johannesburg and its associated stakeholders linked to this study while protecting the participants' true identities.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to obtain insights from line managers on the influence of the psychological contract on employee engagement through the employment of structured interviews. A thematic analysis using an inductive coding approach was employed to analyse the data that had been collected, and 22 codes emerged. The emergent codes were further collapsed into four main themes and 20 sub-themes, as presented in Table 1.

Main theme 1: Talent management

Talent management was the most frequently emerging theme found in the study. According to the line managers, employees expect managerial support and to be empowered to carry out their responsibilities. Performance management, remuneration and employee benefits should be fair. Employees also expect to be rewarded and recognised for a job well done and for the quality of outputs. Talent recruitment and retention strategies are expected to be applied consistently. Lastly, employees expect to be given meaningful and purposeful work, leading to their perceived job satisfaction.

Sub-theme: Managerial support, empowerment, and career growth

This sub-theme occurred most frequently within the broader theme of talent management. Many line managers indicated that employees expect a supportive work environment from their employment experience and to be empowered in the execution of their responsibilities. Below are some of the responses that support these findings:

> *"I like to have an empowered team that goes and does things but within the safeguards of the guidance that I provide, to make sure that if we are heading in that direction, we're heading in the right direction. So, my key strategy is still around that ongoing staff engagement process, so I'm always engaging them. I don't know how to put it differently, but it's, it's around empowering them."* (Participant 10, female, African, 11+ years of work experience)

Other participants added:

> *"It's the availability of the lead* [ership] *as a line leader to them* [and] *stretching* [them in terms of] *what they need to deliver. You will be able to also ensure that they are thinking beyond just the scope of their work so that there is some kind of stretch within what they can build themselves from a career perspective."* (Participant 4, female, coloured, 11+ years of work experience)

TABLE 1   Categories of main and sub-themes.

Main theme	Sub-themes
Talent management	Managerial support, and career growth empowerment
	Performance management
	Remuneration and employee benefits
	Rewards and recognition
	Talent recruitment and retention
	Quality of outputs
	Meaningful work and job satisfaction
Business nature, structure and operations	Business purpose and expectations
	Work flexibility/autonomy
	Teamwork
	Characteristics of the institutional psychological contract
	The role of technology
	Leadership
	Organisational culture and change management
Nature of work environment	Occupational health and safety
	Respect, fairness and transparency
	Job security
Emotional needs	Humanity/sense of belonging
	Emotional support and morale
	Loss

> *"People expect empowerment."* (Participant 11, female, Indian, 20+ years of work experience)

Leadership visibility was another theme that came from the participants. Participants believe that some of the employees' expectations are for their line managers to be available, present, supportive and provide guidance. Some of the comments from the participants are included below:

> *"I always encourage that if you have a problem, and you've consulted your leader, and you see it's not working, and you've escalated, and you follow the chain of command, but you see that you're just hitting a brick wall, I have an open-door policy that says come and talk to me, I have no issues with that."* (Participant 11, female, Indian, 20+ years of work experience)

> *"...Not only financially, emotionally, but also psychologically, people are going through a lot and they need support. In that regard, they're looking for avenues. You don't have to solve all of it, but can you point them in the right direction..."* (Participant 13, male, African, 11+ years of work experience)

From the line managers' perspective, growth through empowerment and learning was important to employees. Most

of the participants believed, based on their continuous engagement with their teams, that the employees in the bank expect career growth/progression through continuous learning, being empowered, and ultimately earning a higher salary, as encapsulated in the following views:

> *"I think there are two things. One is career progression, which is linked to growth..."* (Participant 3, male, African, 16+ years of work experience)

> *"I do believe, especially with the younger generations that we have now, they want to see quick changes, they want to see growth, quick growth moves, they want to see, I've learned this now and I can move on."* (Participant 11, female, Indian, 20+ years of work experience)

> *"...everybody talks about the Fourth Industrial Revolution but there is an expectation from employees to organisations where even amid the potential that AI* [Artificial Intelligence] *and robotics can take my job, how do you help me to remain secure in my job tomorrow? It is still about security. It is about the learning interventions that organisations can provide. Is there may be a bursary that can afford me to study something different so that I can make myself relevant in the world of work that is constantly changing before my eyes?"* (Participant 13, male, African, 11+ years of work experience)

Most line managers believed that employees expect career advancement opportunities from their employment experience, as supported by the below quotes:

> *"They want to learn, to grow, to be able to further their path in their career."* (Participant 2, female, African, 16+ years of work experience)

> *"I think there are two things, one is career progression..."* (Participant 3, male, African, 16+ years of work experience)

> *"...and then growth and understanding the growth path in terms of where to from here almost would be important for them as well."* (Participant 9, female, coloured, 16+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Performance management

The theme of performance management was the second most frequently occurring sub-theme under the broader theme of talent management. The performance management process in the workplace is critical because it helps organisations and line managers identify if employees are meeting the set targets toward achieving the bank's objectives. With the COVID-19 pandemic that has impacted the world of work, line managers have had to be innovative in the way in which they manage employees during the current pandemic and will continue to reshape the way performance management processes are handled post-COVID-19 pandemic, given the expected hybrid working model by employees. Below are some of the comments from line managers supporting this:

> *"I think COVID is going to be around for a while because we haven't reached that critical mass. I think the thing is around the hybrid working model will still be there and how do we really implement it. How do we contract* [performance management] *with individuals around their work deliverables?"* (Participant 4, female, coloured, 11+ years of work experience)

> *"...you're supposed to engage with a performance feedback session annually, which is your mature performance, your hearing performance. So those are the two official contractual means in place, but we also have, I think, over and above, regular engagement with the employees, so they know exactly what is expected."* (Participant 8, female, White, 20+ years of work experience)

Another participant added:

> *"You would have your performance management process where you would look at the growth of the individual you contract, where they want to go to and achieve in terms of their career... where gaps are identified then you and* [that] *individual have a responsibility to work towards closing those gaps."* (Participant 4, female, coloured, 11+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Remuneration and employee benefits

Employees expect to be remunerated accordingly and fairly, making them able to fend for their families and have a quality of life. Several participants mentioned that employees' biggest expectation is to earn fair and reasonable remuneration. Below are some of the comments that support this:

> *"They also expect fair and reasonable remuneration..."* (Participant 6, female, white, 16+ years of work experience)

"…obviously, salary benefit, you know, that that would also be critical because I think that's the reason why they work, for the salaries and the benefits and being able to feed their families." (Participant 8, female, white, 20+ years of work experience)

Other participants implied that while other factors are important, it mostly comes down to equitable and lucrative compensation, as indicated by the following perspectives:

"It's all very encompassing. It can't just be one thing. So, when I come in as a human being, I've got my own needs and for those needs to be met, we meet them from a remuneration perspective…" (Participant 5, female, African, 16+ years of work experience)

"So, the first one is to be paid…" (Participant 1, female, white, 16+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Rewards and recognition

Line managers believed that employees expect rewards and recognition by celebrating successes and being remunerated accordingly in line with the quality of outputs and efforts, as supported by the following responses:

"…if it is required, to havex more hands-on involvement, as well, but also celebrating successes." (Participant 8, female, white, 20+ years of work experience)

"They [employees] want recognition, they want people to notice them. Yeah, that's what I think they expect from us." (Participant 11, female, Indian, 20+ years of work experience)

Another participant elaborated:

"So, under employee value proposition, people are even going further to say, what can you provide for my family? Can you provide a discount for my kids' school? Can you provide anything more than that, in terms of my parents, you know, how do I make sure they are protected? So, the employee value proposition needs to touch on a lot of things in terms of what the guys [employees] actually get, others are soft expectations and others are of financial or tangible nature, which you can easily quantify. (Participant 12, male, African, 6+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Talent recruitment and retention

The ways in which companies attract and retain talent continue to change rapidly. The COVID-19 pandemic has opened new negotiating mechanisms when talents are seeking new employment opportunities and in their current employment. Some of the comments support that adjusting to pre-COVID-19 pandemic ways will be detrimental to attracting and retaining talent, which forces companies to have to adjust their practices:

"Competition is at a high and companies need to adjust their practices if they want to attract and retain talent. I think converting to the pre-COVID ways can be detrimental to talent." (Participant 9, female, coloured, 16+ years of work experience)

"That's what the guys [employees] are saying and we are saying that we need more collaboration from the office. So that is something that will be interesting as it unfolds because on the one side, you will lose good talent that will say, I prefer staying in Pretoria, I get a lot done from home and do not prefer to come to the office daily and stuck in traffic." (Participant 12, male, African, 6+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Quality of outputs

An interesting comment made by one of the line managers is that when employees are engaged, they will likely produce quality outputs that will contribute to the bottom line of the business, as supported by the following response:

"…it's just a situation and I've had that happen, where home life was falling apart, and work as well with poor performance. Again, it's not poor performance. It's poor performance because your mind is distracted and you're completely elsewhere and I think, again, it comes back to if you say you engage with employees…" (Participant 7, male, Indian, 6+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Meaningful work and job satisfaction

While this sub-theme occurred the least frequently in the findings, it still offered important insights. Employees expect to be provided with work that is meaningful and where they can find purpose in their work, as well as feeling that their work/job makes a difference in the business objectives which can ultimately lead to job satisfaction.

"...how their role can actually add value and bring this purpose to life and connecting what they do to the greater purpose." (Participant 13, male, African, 11+ years of work experience)

"It's a continuous process for us to make sure that we understand, like I said, every individual has different expectations. Others could be money, others could be a career, and others could be job satisfaction." (Participant 12, male, African, 6+ years of work experience)

Main theme 2: Business nature, structure, and operations

Line managers alluded that employees expect to understand the business purpose, vision and mission, as well as what their expected contributions to achieving the mission and purpose of the organisation are. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the structure and operation of the business. Similarly, in the South African bank where the research was conducted, line managers believe that employees will expect work flexibility, giving them a sense of autonomy in their work. Teamwork is crucial in achieving the business strategic objectives and the role of the psychological contract and meeting expectations of employees, technology, and leadership are crucial to help the organisation to achieve its competitive advantage. The world of work is changing at a fast pace and requires organisations to keep abreast of the changes and adjust their practices, thus remaining sustainable.

Sub-theme: Business purpose and expectations

This sub-theme occurred most frequently within the broader main theme of business nature, structure, and operations. Some of the participants mentioned that it is their responsibility to reaffirm the purpose of the organisation and that of their respective departments with employees, as well as where the employees fit in. Line managers believe that employees expect them to provide clarity on the expectations from employees and their contribution thereof. Below are some of the comments supporting this:

"It is reaffirming an individual's purpose. Reaffirming the why, why are you here? What is the purpose of you being here? Are you here just to be paid on the 25th day of the month and that's the tick box exercise, or are you here because you believe that we are building the best business bank in the world? Are you here because you believe that if we make a difference in

an SME's life, we [are] *changing the lives of the employees? We're changing the lives of people in the country and changing the economy of this country."* (Participant 11, female, Indian, 20+ years of work experience)

"It is the extent to which people are connected to the organisation in which they feel that they can apply discretionary effort freely and openly. It's the connection that they have with the organisation, with the colleagues at work, with the work that they do, and having a sense of purpose in the sense of alignment between the personal values [and] *organisational values."* (Participant 2, female, African, 16+ years of work experience)

On the other hand, some of the line managers took ownership of how they can be intentional in driving the business purpose and leading the employees in their teams with clear guidelines and direction. Below are some of the quotes from the participants supporting the preceding statement:

"...how do we make the people agenda that much clearer, starting with putting it on paper and making it explicit, what is it that we stand for? What is our role? What is our purpose? What is our vision? What is our mission? Why do we exist? What is the right that we have as finance to exist in this organisation, and begin to create fun and excitement and energy back?" (Participant 13, male, African, 11+ years of work experience)

"I think in my opinion, employee engagement is on various levels, I think you start, and you can almost cascade down. So, you can start with a contract that the employee has and their performance, the goals, performance deliverables that they have to achieve so that these are very clear guidelines, very clear communication of what is expected of them..." (Participant 8, female, white, 20+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Work flexibility/autonomy

This was the second most frequently occurring sub-theme under the broader theme of business nature, structure and operations. Given the current global COVID-19 pandemic, managers expressed that employees' expectations after the pandemic will be for the bank to adopt a hybrid working model as an approach to attract and retain talent. This was derived from the sub-themes that emerged from the responses of the line managers. It became clear that this expectation will be one of the expectations that employees have of their employment experience. Below are some of the verbatim quotes from the

participants highlighting the foreseeable need for flexibility and work-life balance:

> *"The flexibility element is quite a huge one. Yeah, so being able to operate effectively in this hybrid environment, they still prefer their working from home thing and being able to come into the office when they need to. That's the key thing that I'm picking up, that flexibility."* (Participant 10, female, African, 11+ years of work experience)

> *"I think the psychological contract will be one of more flexibility – with staff being able to choose for themselves whether they want to work in the office or at home, and when they work."* (Participant 6, female, white, 16+ years of work experience)

Another participant added an interesting comment regarding work flexibility. While employees may expect it, it may not be granted, as supported by the below quote:

> *"They can expect it* [remote working], *but it doesn't mean it's going to happen..."* (Participant 8, female, white, 20+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Teamwork

Some of the participants below indicated that having an inclusive team where support is provided and trust relationships are formed, is important. Below are some of the thoughts that the participants had to say:

> *"You don't pack your emotions one side and come in and function as the machine and to set the tone like that* [socially aloof work culture] *because to be vulnerable, it means you allow the opportunity for us to trust each other, and to be open and frank discussions and it fosters an opportunity to handle conflict and just to build trust..."* (Participant 9, female, coloured, 16+ years of work experience)

> *"...I think it's about those relationships that you've built with individuals as well. That personal trust and rapport that you have built."* (Participant 4, female, coloured, 11+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Characteristics of the institutional psychological contract

An institutional psychological contract, which includes open communication, trust and care, is paramount in keeping employees abreast of what is happening in the organisation

and was found to be one of the employees' expectations. It is evident that most line managers have the quality of keeping communication lines open and building trust and safe working relationships with their employees. Their employees are allowed to have freedom of speech, voicing any ideas and or concerns to take their respective departments forward. Below are some of the verbatim comments from the participants as derived from the sub-themes:

> *"All you can do is really be seen to care, but also to demonstrate that you care, through checking in..."* (Participant 13, male, African, 11+ years of work experience)

> *"They also expect fair and reasonable remuneration, along with consistent and appropriate feedback on their performance."* (Participant 6, female, white, 16+ years of work experience)

> *"They* [employees] *get demotivated* [when their expectations are not met]. *So, I've got candidates with a lot of potential, but they find themselves in a rut, you know, they don't see the way out and then that comes through in the productivity and their work ethic."* (Participant 1, female, white, 16+ years of work experience)

Some participants also highlighted the psychological contract/ expectations on the part of the line manager, as supported by the following:

> *"My first day* [with employees] *on the job is about laying the ground rules, and when laying the ground rules, you don't read the martial law pretty much. You must let whoever you're working with know how you work because each one of us has different work ethics..."* (Participant 3, male, African, 16+ years of work experience)

Other participants mentioned that not meeting the expectations that employees have of their employment experience will likely damage the employee's loyalty and trust with the organisation and line managers, and that would become a bigger problem to resolve. A trusting working relationship will help the bank achieve the objectives set. Once the loyalty and trust are broken, employees will tend to withdraw and ultimately do the bare minimum without going over and above their call of duty. Below are some of the comments that were made by the participants:

> *"If we break that trust, it breaks everything and you can't piece it back together, the way it was if that trust is broken. It's*

totally difficult." (Participant 5, female, African, 16+ years of work experience)

"Yeah, I think any breach depending on what it is, it's going to lead either to the following, right: number one, it is complete withdrawnness. . . I put nothing more, I put nothing less, I just do what I'm required to..." (Participant 7, male, Indian, 6+ years of work experience)

On the other hand, if these expectations are not met (i.e., if the psychological contract is breached), employees will likely leave the organisation to look for a more conducive work environment elsewhere. Comments supporting this statement from the participants are included below:

"It would very likely result in higher staff turnover, higher unplanned absenteeism, missed deadlines, lower participation levels, and, potentially, grievances or lower engagement scores on regular surveys conducted by the organisation." (Participant 6, female, white, 16+ years of work experience)

"We had a situation at some point with one particular branch, the guys [employees] *were disengaged for various reasons linked to the leader of that particular centre, you would just see the guys* [employees] *putting their headset as they walk in, they put their headset because, they don't want to talk, they just engage with the work that they need to do and that tends to create a situation where people resign and leave."* (Participant 12, male, African, 6+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: The role of technology

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of technology and forced businesses to adopt the 4IR concepts/way of work by using digital tools to remain able to effectively service their clientele. During the pandemic, companies have had to introduce electronic tools to serve their clients and like many other businesses, the bank where the study was conducted had to introduce the same. Electronic tools and platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom etc., will continue to be much-needed modes of communication, improving processes and helping the organisation to reach a wider range of clientele, ultimately providing employees with the flexibility of working from anywhere.

"I think the use of technology to collaborate [is one of the key employee expectations], [as well as] a*utomation

to help improve the time spent on tasks and improve processes."* (Participant 13, male, African, 11+ years of work experience)

However, another participant highlighted a challenge associated with the use of technology due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as supported by the following quote:

"So, the bigger challenge we're gonna be faced with going forward is, we become more antisocial, due to COVID. We [are] *already becoming antisocial, due to technology. One can say we were still social, but distance relationships in terms of digital that we started adopting, and how do we then balance what COVID has forced us to do, working digitally, adopting the digital tools, as well as how do we balance the social life in a different context?"* (Participant 12, male, African, 6+ years of work experience)

On the other hand, companies will need to implement tighter security measures on the devices that are provided to their workforce to protect company information. Below is a comment from one of the participants supporting this:

"New risks might also emerge as a result of working from home. Banks need to consider putting more security in the electronic devices that we use." (Participant 3, male, African, 16+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Leadership

Line managers mentioned that employees expect consistent and appropriate feedback, support and guidance from organisational leadership for their growth and development. Below are some of the comments from the participants supporting this:

". . .I think from my perspective with my team, we [are] *comfortable to have weekly or bi-weekly check-ins. Weekly check-ins concerning whether it be work performance or work deliverables, how we can help each other to remove any bottlenecks, as well as your self-development. If there is a challenge, I would like to believe they're open to letting me know,* [and if] *there is a challenge, either I contribute to the challenge, or there is a challenge too big for them and they need my help or your support, or there is a sticky situation, and they need your* [my] *direction."* (Participant 9, female, coloured, 16+ years of work experience)

"You're not able to promise someone a promotion because, for a promotion to be available, there must be a vacancy... So,

what can you do as a line manager? You can provide support, you can provide some sort of career guidance in terms of where to look, [or] how to look for it. Advise in terms of getting a mentor, and assisting them, getting someone who can help them if you [I] can't help them because I can't help them all the time." (Participant 3, male, African, 16+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Organisational culture and change management

While this sub-theme emerged the least frequently, it still presented important insights. The bank is currently going through a merger with another bank, which means that two cultures co-exist, and the change management process has to be effectively implemented to remove any potential fears from employees. However, it is important to mention that the bank has seen staff turnover increase as a result of the merger. Below are some of the initiatives of line managers to help their employees through the change and confirm the staff turnover:

"*...the bigger piece that I'm currently doing is the culture change. The purpose of that is obviously to empower from within so that you don't have to hire from external, as well as making sure that there's an integration that these guys* [employees] *understand what the parent expects*" (Participant 12, male, African, 6+ years of work experience)

"*When we went through the buyout with XXX bank, there was a lot of fear, because of the unknown. Nobody knew what to expect, which created fear in the current market regarding employment, you had a lot of guys jumping ship.*" (Participant 7, male, Indian, 6+ years of work experience)

Main theme 3: Nature of work environment

Line managers believe that employees expect their employers to provide them with environmental occupational health and safety, to be treated with respect, fairness and transparency, and ultimately to be provided with job security.

Sub-theme: Occupational health and safety

This sub-theme was the most occurring sub-theme within the broader main theme of the nature of the work environment. It is important to mention again that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lives of employees forever. Employees now expect more safety in the workplace to provide them with comfort that their employer cares about their health and safety by ensuring that protocols such as those for COVID-19 are

strictly enforced. The below quotes provide a glimpse into the health and safety expectations that employees have:

"*From a COVID perspective, following the relevant regulations and protocols, reinforcing that as an organisation* [is important].*" (Participant 3, male, African, 16+ years of work experience)

"*Organisations* [need] *to be a lot more aware of employee safety and mental well-being has become something that previously, was on the periphery, and now it's really at the centre of organisational life where organisations are expected to play a more active role in helping employees manage mental health issues. So those are the things that I think will shift.*" (Participant 2, female, African, 16+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Respect, fairness and transparency

Employees' expectations should be treated with respect, fairness and transparency. Below are some of the comments from line managers indicating this:

"*Employees in my team expect to be treated with respect, fairness, and transparency. They also expect fair and reasonable remuneration, along with consistent and appropriate feedback on their performance.*" (Participant 6, female, white, 16+ years of experience)

"*I think it's the basic things, its fair pay, fair working conditions, the support for the development, and just general support for the humanity.*" (Participant 2, female, African, 16+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Job security

While this sub-theme showed the least frequency of occurence in the findings, it still offered important insights. Job security is important to employees, and they expect it from their employment experience. Again, given the unstable economic conditions that have been perpetuated by the pandemic and merger that the bank is undergoing, employees expect their jobs to be secure so that they can fend for their families and continue to have a good quality of life. Below are some of the comments from the participants:

"*I think job security is important for them.*" (Participant 8, female, white, 20+ years of work experience)

"*...so, with that comes people feeling threatened about their job, are we still going to have a job, these guys are taking*

over everything that we've built for the past 60, 40 years." (Participant 12, male, African, 6+ years of work experience)

Main theme 4: Emotional needs

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the emotional needs of employees and the line managers confirm and pledge their support to those employees who may have been affected by either losing a loved one or being psychologically impacted. The bank has Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) to help employees with professional counselling.

Sub-theme: Humanity/sense of belonging

This sub-theme occurred most frequently within the broader main theme of emotional needs. Employees expect to have a sense of belonging from their employment experience, to be treated as individuals and to be cared for. Below are some of the comments from the participants:

"...we must never take away that human element. COVID has brought [us] *back to say, don't forget about the person behind the scenes, and I think it's allowed me to personally think a little bit differently about how I engage and it's not just go, go, go, but to stop, put the brakes on, assess the individual."* (Participant 11, female, Indian, 20+ years of work experience)

"The bigger part is spending more time on things that will have a direct impact on people's lives in terms of them being able to succeed. So, we need to go back to the basics and see how we can invest in people and support them." (Participant 12, male, African, 6+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Emotional support and morale

According to line managers, employees expect to feel that they are being provided with emotional support and in turn, their morale will increase.

"On the negative side, it has been difficult to engage personally with people and to understand their body language and their responses. It has also been difficult, without being able to "see" the people, to know when they are burning out or suffering." (Participant 6, female, white, 16+ years of work experience)

"Well, it's around engaging with them. You know, having conversations with them. You can see when a person is present, [or] *not present, it's not about always talking about*

work, you know, doing that personal check-in with the individual just finding out how they're doing . . ." (Participant 4, female, coloured, 11+ years of work experience)

Sub-theme: Loss

While this sub-theme showed the least frequent occurrence in the findings, it still revealed important insights. Many employees have either directly or indirectly suffered losses. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe negative impact on the emotional and psychological needs of employees. Emotional and psychological support continues to be a dire need for employees. Below are some of the verbatim comments from line managers that support the sense of loss.

...a staff member in another team was struggling with side effects from her second vaccine while grieving the loss of a loved one to COVID-19. . ." (Participant 6, female, white, 16+ years of work experience)

"...it was difficult for people because you were dealing with loss, and you just had to continue with life. You know, it was just the people didn't have the time to go through the bereavement cycle." (Participant 4, female, coloured, 11+ years of work experience)

Discussion

According to Argyris (1960), employees expect their managers to develop, grow and use their initiatives, in doing so respecting the right of the organisation to evolve in return. This study supports the literature as it found that line managers expect that employees want managerial support, empowerment and career growth, fair and consistent feedback on performance, fair and reasonable remuneration and employee benefits, and meaningful work and job satisfaction. It further found that if employees do not feel valued by the organisation and or the work environment is not conducive, they will likely look for opportunities elsewhere or withdraw from the purpose, which will ultimately result in lowered performance. This is supported by the existing literature, as well as the cognitive dissonance theory outlined earlier in this study, which states that a breach of the psychological contract can lead to either party feeling psychologically and emotionally aggrieved, leading to a loss of loyalty, motivation, and overall duty underperformance (Festinger, 1957; Alcover et al., 2017; Abbas and Al Hasnawia, 2020; Saurombe and Barkhuizen, 2022; Swanepoel and Saurombe, 2022). Tomprou and Lee (2022) also indicate that psychological

contracts are important to organisations because managing the expectations of employees during the induction stage has a direct influence on the performance of the organisation by the employees and their commitment to the organisation. Further, if employees believe the organisation has not kept their expectations of the psychological contract, they may neglect some of their duties and underperform, while those who have highly marketable skills may leave the company (Tomprou and Lee, 2022).

The research also found that employees expect to be remunerated accordingly and to be provided with meaningful work. This creates career growth opportunities within the organisation. Similarly, the literature highlights that the transactional psychological contract elicits insignificant commitment from the involved parties as the emphasis is placed on short-term financial requirements (Rousseau et al., 2018). In other words, the transactional psychological contract focuses on specific, short-term, and financial requirements (Rousseau et al., 2018). Liu et al. (2020) further add that it is important for employers to mutually understand the obligations and the employees' perception of the fulfilment of the transactional psychological contract. Additionally, clarity on strategic objectives leads to increasingly constructive effects on employees' psychological contracts and unambiguous messages. Unclear strategic objectives lead to the opposite, increasing the odds of adverse effects (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). According to the study conducted by Braganza et al. (2021), there is a positive relationship between work engagement and trust. A trust relationship is essentially at the core of an employment relationship (psychological contract). It influences the behaviours of the employer and employer. Trust also helps to prevent psychological contract breach from either the employer or employee. According to the findings, when the teams understand their purpose and clear expectations, trust relationships are formed, and they are willing to support each other to achieve the teams' objectives, which in turn feeds into the organisation's strategic objectives.

In support of the existing literature and unlike transactional psychological contracts, relational psychological contracts are based on broad and long-term responsibilities and social emotions, such as dedication and loyalty (Chan, 2021). This supports the findings of the research. Participants referred to trust relationships and team support as very important as represented by the theme of teamwork. This study found the following sub-themes that have direct links to employee engagement: managerial support, empowerment, and career growth; performance management; quality of outputs; business purpose and expectations; and characteristics of the institutional psychological contract. According to what was found in the existing literature, employee engagement entails connecting with colleagues and managers in a meaningful way (Naidoo et al., 2019; Jarrar, 2022).

Managers also believe that employees expect to be stretched to achieve beyond the scope of their jobs. This helps them to grow in the career direction that they choose while broadening their knowledge to excel in the current job, as found in the existing literature (Deas and Coetzee, 2021). Similarly, this study showed that line managers believe that employees expect a supportive work environment where they feel empowered to take charge in the execution of their jobs while remaining within guidelines that they (line managers) provide. Career growth was another emergent sub-theme as line managers believe that employees expect a learning environment where employees can grow in their careers through the learning opportunities and earn more (Magagula et al., 2020; Saurombe and Barkhuizen, 2020). Performance management was the second-highest sub-theme in the broader main talent management theme. Employees contribute positively to organisational effectiveness and objectives when they feel that their managers are interested in their development (Naidoo et al., 2019). Similarly, this study uncovered that most line managers agreed that this is a major component when it comes to leading their teams and contracting and communicating performance targets and expectations to employees, thus ensuring alignment between strategic objectives and employees' performance goals. Performance management also helps line managers to measure the quality of outputs in line with the contracted performance goals to identify whether employees are achieving the contracted performance goals and beyond.

Additionally, performance management is also a mechanism that line managers use to communicate the business and employee's goals and expectations in this regard to ensure that employees understand how their unique contributions can add value to the bigger business objectives (Lambert et al., 2020). According to Son and Kim (2021), employee engagement is when employees are connected to the organisation and its mission and vision. Similarly, this research uncovered that employee engagement is the extent to which employees are connected to the organisation so that they can freely and openly apply their discretionary efforts. It is also the connection that employees have with the organisation, colleagues, the work they do, and the extent of their sense of purpose or how it aligns with their personal and organisational values. Men et al. (2021) found that leadership communication fostered employee trust through the motivating language theory during the COVID-19 pandemic. An institutional psychological contract such as open communication, trust and care are essential components of employee engagement. Similarly, it prevailed in this study that line managers embody these components in ensuring that their employees are engaged and cared for using communication, thus enhancing the trust relationship.

The literature reveals that employee engagement refers to the extent to which an employee's mind and heart are

captured by an organisation, helping organisations to perform better (Agarwal and Sajid, 2017; Naidoo et al., 2019). Energy, involvement, and positive interaction are regarded as employee engagement characteristics (Naidoo et al., 2019). Literature shows employees to be the main resources or stakeholders who enable organisations to achieve their competitive advantage and objectives (Fauzi et al., 2021) and according to Agarwal et al. (2021), employee engagement has the power to drive the performance of the organisation. Agarwal et al. (2021) further add that engaged employees understand their position and purpose in the organisation. This allows them to become motivated and driven enough to perform the tasks allocated to them with passion. Fauzi et al. (2021) identifies these employees as the engine of the organisation. Similarly, this research found that employees expect to be performance contracted, thus setting the scene on the clear expectation of the purpose, vision and strategic objectives. Business purpose is when employees understand their unique contribution and the overall strategic objectives of the organisation (Agarwal et al., 2021). Leaders are vital in providing clear guidelines and expectations in an employment relationship (Heinzel and Liese, 2021; Shingenge and Saurombe, 2022). Performance management helps to set the scene for the expectations from the start of the employment relationship (Sim et al., 2018). Thus, the aim of this study to explore the perceptions of line managers about how obligations and expectations of employees and employers in the form of the psychological contract can influence employee engagement in a South African bank was achieved.

The impact of the integration of technologies of the 4IR on the workplace in the banking sector was also explored. Not only does the banking sector have to adapt to the 4th Industrial Revolution, it also has to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused an economic downturn across the globe (Wu and Olson, 2020). Most bank assets are in a form of loans such as house mortgages, personal and business loans, as well as vehicle instalments, and millions of individuals were forced to miss their monthly payments to banks due to numerous businesses closing (Rutkowska-Tomaszewska et al., 2021; The Banking Association of South Africa, 2021). The knock-on effect of the pandemic has negatively affected the banking industry and its employees as it has led to the loss of income for the institution and subsequent retrenchments (Wu and Olson, 2020). With more and more employees working remotely from the comfort of their homes, upholding the psychological contract has become more important than ever during this period to ensure that employees meet organisational targets on time (Mmamel et al., 2021).

As the study was done during the COVID-19 pandemic, some findings related to the acceleration of technology use due to the pandemic also emerged. According to Lund et al. (2021), three broad trends have been accelerated by and are likely to recede after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The three trends in question are remote work, digitalisation, and automation. According to the report, remote work after the pandemic will depend on how companies are able to adjust and introduce new worker flexibility models while not completely discontinuing in-person key activities for greater effectiveness. Businesses' potential to accelerate automation will depend on whether they are willing or able to invest in technologies that will enable them to reconfigure work to capture other opportunities after the pandemic. The report further highlighted some of the benefits that are associated with the remote working model, being greater flexibility for employees and business efficiencies. This research uncovered that the expectation after the pandemic will be greater flexibility, which has also been mentioned as one of the benefits of remote work in the report by the McKinsey Global Institute (Alexander et al., 2020). However, companies will have to keep ensuring that the place of work (office) continues to be safe from a COVID-19 perspective, thus providing comfort to employees who are expected to go to the office for office engagements or as part of a hybrid approach. Technology integration and tighter security measures as a result of automation also emerged. When employees work remotely, they are more exposed to technological risks. Companies will have to mitigate these risks to protect company information. Employees will continue to have emotional needs and a need for support as they recover from the losses that were brought by the pandemic. Talent attraction and retention themes also emerged, and companies will have to adjust their practices to open themselves up to a wider pool of talent that can help to take the company forward.

The bank where the study was conducted is undergoing a merger and while some of the employees are excited about the merger, some of the employees have been affected by the changes, making job security an emergent theme. The psychological contract is important in managing organisational change during external/internal environment changes such as COVID-19 or a merger (Smith, 2021). It is significant for embedding an organisational culture in employees (Sandhu and Sharma, 2022). The company is making strides in ensuring that their employees remain protected and secure in their jobs and that effective change management strategies to ensure a smooth integration are implemented, as was also found to be critical in the study by Saurombe and Barkhuizen (2022).

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how the psychological contract influences employee engagement in a South African bank. The study uncovered several similarities between the literature and the findings of this study on what employees expect from

their employment relationship from a psychological contract perspective. Line managers believed that employees in the first instance expect talent management strategies such as managerial support, performance management, career growth, benefits, etc., to be in place. Second, understanding the nature of the business, its structure, and the goals of the business and the role of the individual are important.

Additionally, the study highlighted the constantly changing expectations in the rapidly changing world of work, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is changing the nature of work and employees' expectations. Employees' expectations that emerged from the study as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic include flexibility and increased empowerment, teamwork, the role of the psychological contract and technology, as well as visionary and progressive leadership (Islam et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic also changed expectations of the work environment as line managers perceive an increased need for occupational health and safety, respect, fairness, and transparency, as well as job security as a result of the turbulent and uncertain times brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was evident from the findings of the study that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced how quickly organisations need to adapt and adjust their talent attraction and retention mechanisms. It is paramount that employers and line managers are fully equipped to meet those expectations.

This study contributes to and shapes the theoretical knowledge and research that has been done on the psychological contract within the banking sector in South Africa. The findings of this study are instrumental in equipping and helping current and future line managers to improve their working relationship with employees and highlight the need for the HR function to timeously adapt to the constantly changing world of work as influenced by the 4IR and technology. This study may further enable and empower line managers to openly have conversations to understand what the expectations of their employees are, and actively work on meeting those expectations. This study may also create awareness in companies and among future line managers of the importance of managing and honouring expectations, not only in the banking sector within South Africa, since employee engagement is critical to the success of any organisation, regardless of sector or country. The findings uncovered in this study can also be useful to policymakers at South African financial institutions to identify improvements and shape the future of employment policies.

The study had its limitations. A qualitative research approach was used for this study, which means that the research missed out on the strengths of alternative approaches. The study focused only on line managers' perspectives on the influence of the psychological contract on employee engagements and did not capture a mixed audience (i.e., employees' perspectives).

The study was conducted in the Gauteng region, which limits the generalisability to other populations. Since the purposive sampling strategy was used in this study, the study did not benefit from other sampling strategies and generalisability was further reduced. The study focused on line managers employed by only one and no other South African bank, so the study is not representative of other banks in South Africa. Furthermore, the physical dimension of employee engagement was not explored, as the study was conducted during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The limitations discussed above inform various recommendations for future research. The influence of the psychological contract on employee engagement in a South African bank by focusing on exploring the employment expectations of employees and comparing those to line managers' perceptions is recommended. Furthermore, future research could expand the geographic location of participants to improve the generalisability of the findings. Exploring other banks operating in South Africa and comparing the findings between the various banks could also be of value. Employing a quantitative research approach to curtail some of the limitations presented by the qualitative research approach is also recommended.

The study recommends that organisational policies include some of the possible unwritten expectations to improve talent attraction and retention. Financial institutions in the private sector should consider adopting a flexible/hybrid work model as part of their talent attraction and retention strategy. Considering the current context of the global pandemic, the 4IR and the effects that it had on employees, organisations in the financial services sector should consider making it part of their policy for employees to have an opportunity to work from home, as the findings suggest that employees would prefer working from home or at least having a hybrid working model in place.

It can therefore be concluded that line managers perceive that the psychological contract influences employee engagement in the South African banking workplace, irrespective of the changes in psychological contract caused by 4IR and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Johannesburg,

College of Business and Economics, Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management Research Ethics Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

This article was adapted from the master's dissertation of DN, who executed the research, while MS and RJ were the study leaders and provided conceptualization guidelines, assistance with data analysis and editorial inputs. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Women academics and the changing psychological contract during COVID-19 lockdown

Linda Ronnie[1]*, Marieta du Plessis[2] and Cyrill Walters[3]

[1]School of Management Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, [2]Department of Industrial Psychology, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa, [3]Department of Education Policy Studies, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

This study examines the psychological contract between academics and their institutions during a time of great stress—the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that relationships between these parties have been found to be deteriorating prior to the pandemic, we believed it pertinent to explore how environmental changes brought about through lockdown conditions may have shifted the academic-institution relationship. Through a qualitative research design, our data is from 2029 women academics across 26 institutions of higher learning in South Africa. The major shifts in the psychological contract were found to be workload and pressure, provision of resources, top-down communication, as well as trust and support. Whilst these shifts altered the transactional and interactional nature of the psychological contract, violation, rather than breach, occurred since the emotional responses of participants point to incongruence or misalignment of expectations between academics and their institutions during this time of crisis. We offer recommendations for rebuilding trust and negotiating the psychological contract to re-engage academics in the institution.

Introduction

Higher education institutions worldwide have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with resultant campus closures to enforce social distancing measures (Toquero, 2020). South African institutions of higher learning were compelled to identify and implement various strategies that contributed to sustaining the academic project, which included but were not limited to engaging in emergency remote learning and teaching, working from home arrangements for staff, finding alternative ways to support students, and reallocation of budgets to

address the emerging needs. The psychological contract between academics and their institutions also appears to be shifting during this time of great stress (Kowal et al., 2020), although relationships between these parties had already been found to be deteriorating prior to the pandemic (Bolden et al., 2014).

Over the last two decades, structural changes in higher education have impacted on the work life of the academic. Most significantly, there has been a shift from universities providing elite education to providing mass education, referred to as massification (Altbach et al., 2009; Adcroft and Taylor, 2013; Altbach, 2015). At the same time, managerialism has taken root within universities, affecting the way they operate (Churchman, 2002; Altbach, 2003; Smeenk et al., 2006). The rise of managerialism requires academics to work and behave like corporate employees, accountable to measurable performance management targets (Winter, 2009). Consequently, the balance between research and teaching duties has shifted, with greater demands placed on research output and fundraising (Harris, 2005; Billot, 2011). Working in this environment, academics have also seen an increase in administrative requirements from both government and management, increasing the academic workload and frustration (Tight, 2010; Parker, 2011).

More broadly, the rise of neoliberalism, marketization, and privatization in higher education has seen external stakeholders placing new demands on universities (Harris, 2005; Bundy, 2006; Winter, 2009). In particular, marketization has forced academics, who are already coping with increased workloads, to become more self-motivated, entrepreneurial, and adaptable (Morley, 2003). In the midst of this transformation, government expenditure on higher education is decreasing, even as many governments still control universities *via* research funding and accreditation requirements (Parker, 2011; Webbstock, 2016). Taken together, these changes have led to an increase in the diversity of the academic role, with consequences for what used to be a singular academic identity (Churchman, 2006). Academics are now responsible for obligations to their disciplines, their need to create knowledge, their desire to teach well, the state demand for employable graduates, and entrepreneurial activities that take advantage profitable local and global market-related opportunities. These increased demands and shifts have had the effect of reducing the autonomy of academics (Parker, 2011; Altbach, 2015). Managerialism and reduced autonomy have impacted negatively on the trust, morale, and commitment of academics with respect to their institutions (Ladwig et al., 2014; Shrand and Ronnie, 2019).

The shifts in the higher education sector over the past few decades have thus impacted the role, identity, and morale of the academic, both globally and in the South African context. Pertinent to our study are the claims that academic institutions are gendered environments (Acker, 1992) and that universities governed by managerialist agendas strengthen rather than reduce inequalities along gendered lines (Parsons and Priola, 2010). These gendered differences have been found in recruitment and selection processes and promotion practices (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012); in the increasing demand of academic service to students (Davies and Thomas, 2002); exhausting administrative and pastoral duties (Acker and Armenti, 2004); and in the devaluing or underestimation of the academic endeavors of women (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2013). Sims (2021) argues that the managerialist agenda—a masculinist-dominated one, in her opinion—has shaped the choices of women academics, compelling them to either accept it, and therefore their lesser status, or embark on changing the *status quo*.

Importantly, as Bailyn (2003) commented, the "ideal employee" continues to be seen as having few interests or commitments outside of the academy. In this new environment, academics have been obliged to spend extended periods at work, including taking substantial amounts of work home (Walters et al., 2021). As a result, the domestic environments have been disrupted, causing women academics, who are often more involved in the care of dependents, to suffer more adversely than their male colleagues (Elg and Jonnergård, 2003; Barry et al., 2006). These views give rise to the focus on the academic-institution interface and what this might mean for women academics who are frequently aware of gender challenges and must either find a work-around or be side-lined by the prevailing institutional culture (Teelken and Deem, 2013).

It is therefore clear that the psychological contract between academics and their institutions has been changing over the last decade (Shen, 2010). When coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, there may be long-term effects on retention, productivity, and overall performance (du Plessis et al., 2022). Lopez and Fuiks (2021) have challenged researchers to investigate whether and how psychological contracts have shifted or been breached; which elements need updating, e.g., work tasks, schedules, and performance appraisals; how academic psychological contracts can be clarified and negotiated during this time of uncertainty and crisis; and how anxiety and burnout can be reduced while optimism and organizational commitment are sustained. Our paper responds to this challenge by examining the psychological contract from the perspectives of women academics in South Africa at a turbulent time for universities. This study explores a timeous issue that is currently pressing in higher education, and likely to increase in importance as pandemic-era changes carry into the future.

Through a qualitative analysis of the critical experiences of women academics during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic, as reported in an online survey, this study aims to detect changes that may be currently occurring to the psychological contract in order to understand how higher education institutions can respond and mend the contract, if appropriate. Whilst the unexpected circumstances of the pandemic-related lockdown provide contextualization to our

findings and explain the causes of the shifts in practice, the experience of the psychological contract between academic women and the employer was affected.

Literature review

The psychological contract

The psychological contract—first conceptualized by Argyris (1960) as the mutual expectations between employee and employer—is best described by Rousseau (1989, p. 123) as "an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the focal person and another party." The concept therefore exemplifies the relationship between employee and employer and encompasses the beliefs that each party holds of the relationship (Hui et al., 2004). However, because each party holds their own perceptions, the contract may be understood uniquely by employees and employers despite the belief that obligations and commitments exist between them (Rousseau, 1995). Significantly then, individual choice—through increased or decreased engagement—underpins the psychological contract. Exchanges that transpire over a considerable period, combined with an understanding that the employment relationship will continue almost indefinitely, give rise to beliefs premised on explicit promises and elements that both the employee and employer take for granted (MacNeil, 1985). These beliefs may increase the dependence of both parties on the relationship (Rousseau, 1995). A central key issue, however, is that the psychological contract is reliant on a belief that promises, whether implicit or explicit, have been made and that a consideration has been made in exchange for it (Rousseau, 1989). This belief connects the employee and employer to a set of reciprocal obligations and responsibilities.

Types of psychological contracts

The psychological contract has been categorized into three main types: transactional, relational, and balanced (Robinson et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1995). The fourth type—transitional— is not a psychological contract type *per se* but rather a cognitive state that mirrors an absence or breakdown of the exchange relationship between the two parties without specific performance terms (Hui et al., 2004). **Table 1** highlights the features of the three key types based on two crucial dimensions—timeframe and performance terms—of the employee-organization relationship.

Recent studies have suggested an evolution in psychological contracts in terms of contract makers, location, and timing (Ashford et al., 2007; Alcover et al., 2017; Baruch and Rousseau, 2019; Griep et al., 2019; Knapp et al., 2020). While the original

conceptualization by Rousseau (1989) of an exchange and reciprocal relationship still holds true, research indicates that employees and employers may have differing views of its terms and the degree to which the other party has fulfilled their obligations (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019).

Breach and violation

Many, if not most, employees experience a breach of their psychological contract in the course of their employment (Montes and Zweig, 2009). Morrison and Robinson (1997) explain that these perceptions of breach come about through the misalignment between what is understood to have been promised and what is actually delivered. In essence, it is a failure of the organization to fulfill one or more of their obligations. Breach is, according to Conway and Briner (2005, p. 64), "subjective and based on a perceived rather than an actual agreement, and can occur in relation to any explicit or implicit promise."

Pate (2006) describes three triggers of psychological contract breach—distributive, procedural, and interactional aspects of justice—as a result of an organization's inability to meet their obligations. "Distributive breach occurs when outcomes are perceived to be unfairly distributed for example, financial rewards. Procedural breach refers to the perception of the unfair application of procedures, such as promotion. Finally, interactional breach is linked to employees' perception of trust of superiors and the organization as a whole and occurs if employees feel they have been treated badly" (Pate, 2006, p. 34).

Literature points to a distinction between violation and breach where violation captures the emotional response that may arise from breach itself. As Pate (2006, p. 36) explains, "[b]reach is therefore confined to a calculative identification of injustice but at this stage emotional responses are not engendered." Incongruence and reneging are two types of violations of the psychological contract (Conway and Briner, 2005; DelCampo, 2007). Incongruence occurs when there is a difference in perception or understanding between the employee or the employer. Reneging transpires when either party knowingly breaks a promise which may occur purposively or come about through unforeseen circumstances.

Academic psychological contracts

Universities, through their leadership, need to understand their role in shaping the academic-institution relationship. If the psychological contract which underpins this relationship is well managed, this is likely to have positive implications for all parties as it has been shown to positively influence motivation, performance, and commitment (Rousseau, 2004; Walker, 2013; Conway et al., 2014). In contrast, breach of trust or failure

to deliver on expectations have been shown to have a lasting negative impact on such attitudes and behaviors (Jensen et al., 2010; Griep and Vantilborgh, 2018).

A cascading effect can also take place when psychological contracts are fulfilled or breached (Bordia et al., 2008). In the context of higher education, if middle managers—as in Deans and Heads of Divisions/Departments—believe that the university has reneged on promises regarding health and safety and online learning support, this could have a negative trickle-down effect on academics, potentially

TABLE 1 Types of psychological contracts.

Specified performance terms		

Short term duration

Transactional contract
Low ambiguity
Easy exit/high turnover
Low member communication
Freedom to enter new contracts
Little learning
Weak integration/identification

Dimension	Employee commitment	Employer commitment
Narrow	Perform a fixed, limited set of duties only. Only does what they are paid to do	Offers limited involvement in the firm and little training or development
Short term	Employee has no obligation to remain with the firm. Committed to work a limited period of time only	Employer has no obligation to future commitments. Offers a limited period of employment only

Long term duration

Relational contract
High member commitment
High effective communication
High integration/identification
Stability

Dimension	Employee commitment	Employer commitment
Stability	Remain with the firm and to do what is required to keep job	Offer stable wages and long term employment
Loyalty	Support the firm, manifest loyalty and commitment to the firm's needs and interests. Be a good organizational citizen	Support the wellbeing and interests of employees and their families

Long term duration

Balanced contract
High member commitment
High integration/identification
Ongoing development
Mutual support
Dynamic

Dimension	Employee commitment	Employer commitment
External Employability	Develop marketable skills	Enhance employee's long term employability inside and outside firm
Internal advancement	Develop skills valued by current employer	Create career development opportunities within the firm
Dynamic performance	Perform new and more demanding goals that may change to help the firm remain competitive	Promote continuous learning and support employee in executing performance demands

Adapted from Rousseau (1995).

influencing their interaction with students and consequently their learning (Lopez and Fuiks, 2021). Alternatively, if promises are fulfilled, a positive cascading impact may occur, likely resulting in productive outcomes, such as promotion and career advancement for researchers and concomitant benefits such as increased research productivity for universities (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004).

There is also the idiosyncratic and active nature of the psychological contract. As the contract is based on perceptions between the parties, each psychological contract is specific and distinctive to each individual (George, 2009). Studies have shown that academics desire recognition and treatment as professionals and have expectations of being recognized for their commitment to the academic profession, the university, and their students (O'Neill and Adya, 2007). Mousa (2020) noted the role of responsible leadership in mediating the relationship between the perceptions of inclusion felt by academics and their psychological contract type. According to Shen (2010), transactional contracts were more prevalent amongst academics and their expectations of university management were focused on the provision of a safe workplace, resources to conduct academic work, equal and competitive pay, and a reasonable workload.

Results also showed that differences across gender "did not demonstrate significant influences on the perception of the psychological contract fulfillment, except that male staff tended to be more satisfied with the fulfillment of reasonable workload" (Shen, 2010, p. 586). However, a possible explanation offered for this was that women may have felt the current workload unfair given the likelihood of more family responsibilities than their male counterparts. Differences across gender in terms of psychological contract fulfillment have been found in a variety of settings such as the public sector (Morley, 2003); manufacturing (Abela and Debono, 2019); healthcare, public administration and business (Kraak et al., 2018); and the service sector (Karani et al., 2022). However, there is a paucity of research that focusses on the psychological contracts of women in the academic profession. Our study addresses this gap in the literature.

Methodology

Using a purposive sampling approach, we selected women academics at higher education institutions countrywide to participate in a larger survey study about the experiences of women academics in South Africa during the COVID-19 lockdown period, which lasted from March to September 2020. During this period, universities were closed for all in-person classes and activities, and all staff and students were required to work from home. We sought the experiences of women in particular as research has shown that, in South Africa, the role of childcare, homecare and care for parents typically falls to women (Hatch and Posel, 2018; Casale and Shepherd, 2020).

We therefore argue that women provide a far richer and deeper understanding of changes to the psychological contract.

Sampling

The study aimed to survey females in academic roles at South African universities: researchers, lecturers, professors, faculty, and adjunct faculty. Working with the universities to either access their mailing lists or share the survey link, a survey was distributed to the entire population of female academics at each institution. Our sample consisted of 2029 participants from 26 institutions. Information about participants' positions, discipline, departments, or research areas was not collected to ensure confidentiality.

Data collection

The survey sent to female academics consisted mainly of Likert scale questions and one open-ended question. This study focuses on the open-ended responses the survey. Drawing on the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954, cited in Bryman and Bell, 2018), participants were asked to share stories of their experiences and specific situations that were significant ("critical") to them while working during the lockdown period. This line of enquiry is in keeping with Herriot et al. (1997), who argued that few employees would provide pertinent information about their expectations of their employer directly. Upon review of the 2029 responses, 494 participants highlighted and discussed the relationship with their manager and/or institution. This narrowed the data set for qualitative analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the critical incidents. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted using the procedures by Braun and Clarke (2006), which include familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes in the incidents, reviewing the themes, and defining the themes. The first two authors conducted the thematic analysis, while the third author acted in a data validation role to review and check the interpretations of the other authors.

The dependability of the study was ensured during the code generation, theme identification, and review processes, first by extracting the exact phrases and words of participants in their descriptions of "critical" experiences for use in the findings and analysis (Given, 2008). The analysts reviewed these incidents for common themes or recurring phrases, sentiments, ideas, and concepts. The validity and reliability of the findings, in terms of the meaning of these excerpts, were confirmed using a code-recode procedure as well as peer examination between the data

analysts to ensure the consistency of the findings. Once the findings were consistent with the data throughout, they were documented and reviewed by the third author as an addition validation measure. During this stage, alternative interpretations were raised and clarifications to the themes added where needed (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the project was granted by the University of Stellenbosch. Individual access was negotiated with each university. To protect the privacy of individuals and their institutions, no identifying demographic information has been used in the reporting of the findings.

Findings

The experiences and stories shared by participants about their managers and institutions constitute different types of "shifts" in their overall working experience compared to pre-pandemic conditions. We discuss the various shifts and their impact on the psychological contract of participants: workload and pressure, provision of resources, top-down communication, and trust and support.

Shift 1: Increase in workload and pressure

Participants experienced a shift in the way work was done, i.e., the need to provide emergency remote teaching and working from home, but more so the volume and intensity of work changed. Participants noted:

> The basic academic expectations have not changed to cope with the pandemic, but rather have increased to include new items which reduces research time significantly. [P1445]

> During the weeks of lockdown [. . .] I was extremely tired, more so than what I was working on campus. Between administration work and lecturing and getting ready for online mode was exhausting. Therefore during lockdown [. . .] I hardly was able to even sit behind the microscope. [P1123]

> Teaching online resulted in more time needed for preparation of teaching and learning material. [P533]

Participants needed to adapt to the shift in work, with the clear consequence being that hours required to complete the work increased. For instance:

> During lockdown and up until now I am often working 10–12 hours daily just to deal with teaching, admin, responding to student, student referral (emotional labour with many distressed students) and last minute instructions to change/amend plans. [P1251]

> My daily workload has increased from before 8 to 9 hours to now between 12 and 13 hours. [P1312].

Not only were more hours required, but participants experienced the expectation of being available outside of traditional working hours.

> My day never ends as students' WhatsApp questions till late in the night—last night till 1am! There are no boundaries. Meetings go on till 7 p.m. at night sometimes even later. [P42]

> Students also want help over weekends, after hours and even at night, so there is never a break at all. [P216]

This notion of being available at all hours of the day was reinforced not only by university management, but through understanding the plight of students who received limited data for educational purposes. Participant P1976 explained:

> The students are given 30 gigs a month. 10 G are anytime, the rest are night owl (after midnight and before 6 a.m.). This has made data-dependent online teaching (live teaching, Zoom with video) all but impossible. The only colleague I know of who has "lectured" after midnight is a single woman with no children. [P1976]

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic presented unusual circumstances, organizational expectations of performance were upheld.

> I have two children. All of a sudden both of them had to be home schooled. I felt that the [the university] gave no support to this situation that many parents (not only mothers) found themselves in. Our performance management continued as usual, with no seeming understanding for this situation. I told my line manager that my days have been cut in half, but other than a sympathetic acknowledgement, it changed NOTHING with regards to what was expected of me. [P1553]

... the institutional message in this regard, also included an explicit reference to the institutional disciplinary code and procedures. The implied message is that if you don't sustain a high level of academic productivity despite the lockdown, you will be disciplined. Such messages makes the institutional commitment to staff wellbeing (and the money spent on it) null and void, and it flies in the face of an ethic of care. [P106]

I feel bombarded with too many invitations to training for Teams/Moodle/other support, and repetitive requests for reporting on various aspects of work. It's as if management imagine that we are not gainfully occupied during this time and feel the need to constantly chivvy us. [P1267]

The responses from participants point to the organizational expectation of performance was not lowered, whilst even more tasks and work hours were required. Whilst most participants seemed to do what they can to adapt to the increase in workload, the consequences of such efforts came to light. For example:

Through protests and pandemics we are just told that we need to complete the year without any consideration of our wellbeing. [P1553]

I don't know how we are going to manage completing this year without suffering with burnout or having a mental breakdown. There is no physical, emotional or psychological support for what we are having to endure. [P1803]

Participants experienced the breach of increased workload with no additional support and recognition of circumstances as a violation of the psychological contract. This is evident in further responses from participants:

It feels like management is always asking more and more from us and offering nothing in return. [P2116]

To be honest I believe the support from the university was sorely lacking and no care or concern was shown for the academic staff who were teaching in this block, with almost 24/7 working. [P418]

I often felt like resigning and I did feel unsupported. [P305]

There is very little sympathy from senior management for the workload placed on working mothers during any type of crisis—and the pandemic brought that into clear focus. Teaching and meetings are difficult when you have to share resources e.g., computers, wifi, space etc. [P313].

Shift 2: Provision of resources

Shifting from an office-bound work environment to working from home presents many challenges for organizations. Amongst these challenges are the provision of physical resources (i.e., computers) and timeous capacity development. Our participants experienced that their institutions were slow to respond to the need for increased resources. For example:

I feel very let down by my university. I ended my face-to-face lectures on the Friday and was expected to miraculously move everything online with no data, no laptop and no support the following week. [P1942]

Some colleagues had trouble with accessibility and technical issues that hindered their productivity, I am fortunate to have all the resources at home that I pay for myself (fast internet, etc.). [P763]

The lockdown showed the kind of management we have. I believe management could have done better to ensure that productivity is high, for example I had to use my own laptop as the institution I am at did not provide any laptop to me. If I did not buy my own laptop I was not going to be able to work. Secondly, I also had to get a work desk and table to work on, I had to buy my own data. [P1617]

Many participants, like P1942, P763, and P1617 above, defaulted to using their personal equipment and resources to continue with their work. However, dissatisfaction started to emerge as this became the norm.

I feel that I was not provided with sufficient resources in terms of laptop, printing equipment, etc., and I would need to fork out of my own pocket without the possibility of reimbursement. [P1344]

Having to depend on a university that did not have technological gadgets in place and having to improvise using my personal resources and skills was emotionally draining. [P1664]

The need for resources was, however, not limited to physical resources such as laptop computers, printing equipment, and microphones. Participants expressed how the inadequacy of administrative and technical support further exacerbated time constraints. For example:

The administrative load was relentless as we had no help at all from administrators who would usually assist with some

student queries, assignment submissions, mark recording and managing class groups. [P1251]

Most of the time was spend on student queries and it would to some extent be difficult to promptly respond as resources were not adequate. [P690]

The amount of pressure from [my university] during COVID-19 was overwhelming. More was expected with less resources. [P948]

Participants also mentioned the lack of personal and organizational resources to assist students to deal with emotional burdens resulting from the students' own challenges. In many cases, students lacked adequate resources for learning (specifically data and devices). Participant P1714 explained that whilst the lecturer is not responsible for assisting students with physical resources, students still expected answers and accommodation in terms of deadlines from lecturers.

The students vented all their frustrations on us and the lecturers were just told to deal with it as best we can, not a fair situation as most academics are not trained in providing emotional support in any way. [P1714]

Time boundaries have been erased as my students contact me any day, any time and I feel compelled to respond immediately because they are probably struggling more than I am. [P1147]

The biggest challenges that I experienced are (1) the students needed much more support, we went into multiple modes of connecting with students, even using my personal social media accounts, encountering students who would need support 24/7, providing data at my own cost to students, and converting everything to synchronist teaching); (2) reaching out to the "missing" students; (3) I have to use my own internet and data (the university did not provide this to academic staff); (4) working off campus now places higher demands on me being available at longer hours even over weekends. [P663]

Therefore, whilst the organizational expectation was for staff to work from home and adapt to emergency remote learning, participant' expectations of receiving adequate physical and human resources to do so was not met. This required participants to be innovative to find solutions. However, this was emotionally taxing and was experienced as a violation by participants as they expressed unfairness in needing to deal with the situation without adequate support from their universities.

Shift 3: Confusing communication from the top

Whilst participants commented broadly on the communication from university executive leadership, communication from line managers was an important factor. For instance, Participants P71 and P166 commented:

I do have a very supportive line manager and he has encouraged me throughout the lockdown. [P71]

I am also grateful for an understanding and supportive manager who constantly checked on us and guided us on working effectively during these unprecedented times. [P166]

However, during times of crises, employees require direction and clarity from the leadership of the institution. This was, however, not the experience of study participants from all the institutions.

The leadership did not provide timely direction. [P1164]

Mixed, ambiguous confusing messages, change of assessment methods without training. In summary: HELL. [P1839]

The messages from top management changed and we had to redo a lot of work. [P673]

I would have liked and expected to see more communication coming from all managerial levels above me (from HoD, to mostly Dean and upper management), as well as from HR in terms of checking on us employees about our wellbeing. [P481]

Even for those in leadership positions at the faculty level, there was also a sense of frustration:

This lockdown was incredibly time-consuming as we were at the frontline of dealing with student and staff queries [and I found] the incredible increase in admin as [a head of department] overwhelming and exhausting. [P67]

The constantly changing environment and the emotional toll of being a head of department has been overwhelming. It means I need to support and help staff in the department, whereas support from my managers are missing as they are probably running around attending to "more important matters" than their middle management. [P111]

I often feel overwhelmed at the sheer scale of the academic work—having to finish the academic year and support others to do so in my management role. [...] Giving input on normal university or sectoral matters like policies seem a distraction from completing the year and I wish that this could be the sole focus. [P127]

I am in management so the lockdown has been a nightmare. We work day and night and during weekends, I feel drained at the end of the day. Over and above the normal meetings and reports, the Lockdown meant shutting the university completely and thereafter planning to open under restricted conditions—we had almost daily meetings for the COVID issues, moving budgets, and ridiculous amounts of reporting. [P195]

As universities shifted to online learning and staff members working from home, communication shifted exclusively to digital means, as participant P1089 explained.

The loss of interaction with fellow colleagues, academic facilities/resources and support is one big negative aspect of the lockdown. The additional burden of home schooling has also been a big derailer. And even though technology bridges the gap to a large extent, the inability to have one-on-ones with supervisors, team/group members, friends and family has been brutal. [P1089]

There were also elements of increased managerialist behavior in terms of reporting, additional meetings, and top-down decision making.

Management seem to be disconnected from the problems experienced on the ground and their decisions create more work, stress and uncertainty instead of reducing it. [P153]

The main difficulty I experienced was having to get onboard very quickly with online teaching, and also dealing with an overwhelming amount of instructions, materials, courses generated by management. [P277]

There could be so many ways in which the university could have lightened its load on academics, but endless demand for reporting, surveys, routine 'business as normal' things like School evaluation reports continued as normal. Monthly meetings now needed weekly—and I spend hours every day in admin and management meetings that are really reporting meetings. [P285]

Academics were told to do things we knew would not work, but we were not only ignored, but instructed (as if we were robots) to implement whatever management dreamt

up overnight. Naturally this was a complete disaster and management even had to go onto [radio] to apologise. [P658]

I was bombarded with emails from management that showed no respect for our time. Countless reports had to be written and I felt it was a way of management controlling. [P664]

The impact of lockdown was significantly more challenging in the absence [of] strong, communicative and forthright management structures. Email is not sufficient communication; it suggests authoritarian undertones and telegraphs apparent tone-deafness. Top heavy structures are failing students on mass. [P1515]

Whilst most participants adapted to this shift, a breach was experienced as the content and frequency of the communication were not always aligned to needs.

Management still wants everything to be done, but don't talk directly to those staff members who are not doing their work. It's very frustrating and unfair. [P1916]

The university management did not send the information that was sent out to the students to the lecturers also —as if the lecturers do not need to know that. However, when the students have problems they actually turn to us as lecturers, and if we are not informed then it takes us extra time to find out how they can be helped. [P30]

The communication received from the institution also negatively impacted my emotional wellbeing. Example, one email we received regarding our leave reflected the fact that academics had leave during the initiation of lockdown. Yet, my colleagues and I were working trying to save the term from the resultant student protests. I am in the second week of 'leave' for the break between semesters, yet I am spending my time preparing for a subject I have never lectured before. We are at the risk of serious burn out. [P1553]

I am tired of asking for support from my faculty, [head of department] and line manager, as well as our online learning team as I am ignored. [P1942]

I have been in a single (group) meeting since the lockdown in March, and have had no individual meetings with my line manager at all, only a single 5-minute phone call...it leaves me kind of directionless, as a young academic. [P253]

These responses from participants indicate a misalignment between what was promised and what was delivered. In

some cases, participant experiences indicate experiences of violation as the organization reneged on what had been considered fair practice.

Shift 4: Trust and support

As much as academic staff were ill-prepared to engage in emergency remote teaching, most managers were ill-prepared to manage staff in a virtual manner. Participants expressed different opinions on how they experienced trust from their managers.

> The lack of trust from Deans/Academic Heads was disheartening. Lecturers were not 'taking a holiday.' Many were working excessively more during this period to complete academic work and the sudden excess of admin reporting. These various aspects did not even start to factor in family care. [P1755]

> It was great to know that my line manager trusted me. He never breathed down my neck trying to see what I was doing. [P1332]

The theme of trust and support was also most closely aligned with gendered expectations.

> The lockdown has emphasised for me how out of kilter my faculty and institutional leadership and managers are with the realities of their broader workforce—particularly that of women. The running narrative within my faculty has been centrerd around that working from home is a luxury and a privilege (as you are supposed to have more time not having to travel to and from work), and (as a result) you are supposed to be academically more productive. Those in powerful positions do not have small children. [P106]

> Some of my colleagues and managers don't have a family or children and they boasted about how much work they got done at home and how productive they were during the lockdown. I am usually very efficient and productive at the office, but my productivity decreased drastically during the lockdown. I was so exhausted from domestic responsibilities and balancing meetings and other 'admin' that I couldn't keep it up. [P1451]

> It brought tension in the household and in time lead to deterioration of my relation with my husband (soon to be ex-husband) . . .The personal circumstances brought by the lockdown associate with a very bad management in the work place lead to demotivation and taking strain every day. [P619]

The responses indicated that academic women and parents may have needed additional support.

> The lockdown has caused a lot of stress for the academic staff in my department, especially those with young children. They have required a lot more emotional support from me, as their line manager, than under normal circumstances. [P326]

> In addition to being an academic and in a leadership position within my department, I am now also a housekeeper, a child carer, a primary school teacher (for which we as parents are both ill-equipped), and a support structure for the extended family affected by the pandemic—including aged and vulnerable parents. Even though I have a very supportive partner, I am still the primary carer. There has been no institutional support or much recognition for this. [P106]

> At the start there was confusion of how to proceed and lots of uncertainty. Lack of support from management and poor communication. Management increased anxiety with rumours concerning job loss, leave without pay and work arrangements. There was more concern about financial impact on the department than about safety of staff. [P154]

It is clear that participants in our study expected more from organizational leaders at all levels. This points to interactional breach, leading to a violation of the psychological contract. Not feeling trusted, inadequate communication, and lack of recognition left participants devalued, disheartened, and less committed to their institutions. For example:

> I see this lack of communication and clarity in guidance as a fail in leadership, and I actually carry some resentment towards the management of my University for not performing this very important task of leadership (i.e., reaching out to employees, keeping an open line of communication, leaving us confused) during this crisis. I have definitely much less faith in our management than I had before the lockdown. [P481]

Discussion

The psychological contract for participants in our study not only shifted during the lockdown period of the pandemic

but brought to the surface the disconnect between academics and their institutions. There is general agreement that context impacts the employment relationship and therefore contextual factors also directly or indirectly influence triggers of breach (Guest, 2004; Pate, 2006). The circumstances of the pandemic—its unexpected nature and the fact that higher education institutions were simply ill-prepared for dealing with the lockdown conditions—therefore contributed to the rise in the lack of fulfillment of the psychological contract of the women academics in our study. Shen (2010) has already noted the transactional nature of academic psychological contracts and the findings of this study have highlighted the fault lines in South African universities. In particular, Shen's study showed that having a fair and reasonable workload was one of the least fulfilled items for academics in her study. In conjunction with the sharp increase in workload brought on by the pandemic, it is not surprising that our participants highlighted this as a crucial debilitating factor.

Being denied resources and then having to provide these by using personal devices and purchasing mobile data in order to work from home appears a clear violation of the psychological contract and can be considered a failure to provide acceptable working conditions (Vantilborgh et al., 2016). This is a clear example of a shift of conditions and job expectations that are likely to contribute to increased job dissatisfaction in academia (Pienaar and Bester, 2006). Despite these challenges, women academics in our study focused on maintaining their psychological contracts with students through the provision of support, an element highly prized by students (Naylor et al., 2021).

Our participants provided numerous examples of interactional breach (Pate, 2006). In particular, they spoke to a form of interactional breach where one lacks access to information (Rousseau, 1995), in this case due to poor communication or non-transparency from university management. The lack of proper communication resulted in feeling a sense of betrayal—which has a stronger possibility of inducing higher levels of psychological contract breach (Rigotti, 2009)—and ultimately shapes poor relationships between academics and their institutional managers through perceptions of low interactional justice (Rousseau, 1995).

In many of the cases, violation, rather than breach, appears to have occurred since the emotional responses expressed by our participants point to incongruence or misalignment between the parties' expectations during this time of crisis. Violation has been described as the "intense reaction of outrage, shock, resentment, and anger" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 129). A prime example of violation is the consequence of the unanticipated extension of the workday resulting from the shift to online teaching and the almost relentless nature of ongoing student engagement. The lack of appreciation and care, low levels of trust and support, and the negative impact on academic wellbeing were keenly felt by our participants.

Past studies have found that psychological contract breach is negatively related to mental health with manifestations of increased anxiety, tension, and distress (Parzefall and Hakanen, 2010; Garcia et al., 2017; Reimann and Guzy, 2017). The middle management layer of university structures was not exempt from these experiences, with heads of departments expressing frustration, exhaustion, and feelings of being overwhelmed. The middle management experience is particularly alarming given the potential of a trickledown effect to staff (Lopez and Fuiks, 2021).

Examples of managerialism showed in the focus on organizational policies, daily reporting, increased meetings, a focus on the financial bottom line, and the like. Thus, it appears that beyond the low influence and lack of shared governance already present (Parker, 2011), a further erosion in academic autonomy took place during the lockdown phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (as confirmed in a study by Hardman et al., 2022). In contrast to universities worldwide, South Africa experiences a shortage of academic staff and, in light of that reality, it is concerning that management did not involve academics more directly but instead mainly issued top-down directives. Trust, morale, and commitment—elements all central to the maintenance of the "employment deal" (Guest, 2004)—were shown to have been negatively affected.

The effects of a lack of fulfillment of the psychological contract are not to be underestimated. Breach and violation can be considered disruptive signals and are likely to prompt negative reactions (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019). These include disconnection and disengagement (Soares and Mosquera, 2019), lower trust (Zhao et al., 2007), reduced job satisfaction (Raja et al., 2004), and an increase in organizational cynicism and counter-productive work behaviors (Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly, 2003; Doden et al., 2018). Uncertainty—such as the situation arising during the COVID-19 pandemic—results in more transactional and transitional contract types with an emphasis on an almost absolute economic exchange to meet an organization's immediate talent requirements (Jeske and Axtell, 2018; Holland and Scullion, 2021). Our findings show a strong inclination toward a transitional psychological contract type, which is an employment relationship that is eroding between the parties—in this case, women academics and their institutions—creating a cognitive state due to organizational change and transition (Rousseau, 2000). This is the least stable of all contract types and is characterized by highly ambiguous expectations as the organization operates in a reactive rather than proactive manner (Rousseau, 1995). This contract type arises when the employee has reservations about the motives and objectives of the employer and is maintained when employees continue to receive confusing organizational signals (Avey et al., 2009). Fortunately, this type of contract is not typically maintained over the longer term but is likely to move to a transactional type as lockdown measures are removed and face-to-face interactions resume at universities.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, our paper makes several recommendations, not only for women academics, but for academics more generally. The changes in psychological contract described in this study may not solely apply to academics who are female, but to any academic faced with the same set of pressures in their working environment, through some combination of environmental change and work-life demands. As the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the crucial relationships between academics and their institutions, we suggest what higher education institutions can do to regain and restore trust, reinforce healthier psychological contracts, begin the process of rebuilding support within the academic base, and ensure retention of their most valuable knowledge workers.

We acknowledge that the academic landscape is shifting in the post-pandemic environment and therefore changes to the psychological contract between academics and their institutions will need renegotiation. Dhanpat (2021) suggests that employers become aware of the impact a digitized workspace will have on the employment relationship. Hybrid forms of teaching are on the rise and academics will have to adapt to those realities. However, in terms of support, university management must ensure that staff are suitably supported in a manner that enables them to optimize their overall academic roles and responsibilities (Shrand and Ronnie, 2019). In addition, relationships within the workplace need to be maintained and individuals, teams, and their management need open communication, and a sense of continuity and community. When a sense of value in the relationship permeates the parties to the employment relationship, individuals are likely to experience not only a sense of self-worth but have a belief in processes and practices being fair. This is because a sense of trust has been created (Colquitt and Rodell, 2011).

In their meta-review, Kähkönen et al. (2021) describe trust as a triple-layered construct that combines psychological process and group dynamics with organizational actions at the macro-level. These authors suggest trust repair between employees and their leader—in our case, the academic and their head of department—should be considered in the broader context, i.e., as a group or a team, while trust repair at the collective level should be approached in an organizational context, i.e., between academics and the institution's senior leadership. At a macro level, this requires more than just verbal exchanges but a more substantive, active response and co-created organizational reform to repair employee trust. Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021) argue that self-awareness, compassion, empathy, vulnerability, and agility are essential leadership characteristics to navigate through the crisis.

Sverdrup and Stensaker (2018) propose a trust restoration process in a three-stage model: (a) restoring reciprocity through re-establishing balance in the relationship; (b) re-negotiating the transactional terms of the psychological contract *via* clarifying the rules and expectations for future collaboration; and (c) extending and deepening the re-negotiated psychological contract to include relational terms. The model is particularly useful as it is applicable to change contexts typified by high levels of uncertainty—such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In applying this model to the academic setting, we suggest that restoring reciprocity might come about through acknowledgment that trust between academics and their institutions had broken down due to a violation of the expectations academics held of their institution. Whilst the pandemic crisis required relinquishing control in favor of more collective leadership approaches (D'Auria et al., 2020), managerialist reactions were experienced by academics such as those in our sample. Thus, university management should admit their shortcomings and apologize for those. This is a crucial first step in restoring and rebuilding trust between the parties— essentially a recalibration of the relationship—before moving on to discussion around future-orientation.

It is becoming clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face and shape of higher education as, for one, it has accelerated the addition of remote learning for traditionally residential universities (Srivastava et al., 2020). As remote learning may now be permanently added to the job description of academics, renegotiation of the contract, and more specifically, the psychological contract is needed. Lastly, relational terms should be included in the psychological contract. Collaboration and team efforts were found to be critical to managing the COVID-19 crisis period in higher education (du Plessis et al., 2022). Thus, utilizing collaborative approaches to navigate the post-pandemic higher education landscape will be essential to re-engage academics and their institutions for the future.

Limitations

The dataset analyzed for this study come from a wider study of women academics in South African universities. As a result, the findings may reflect the unique aspects of higher education in South African and the lockdown conditions instituted by the South African government. While women academics were purposively sampled for this research, the study would have benefitted from the inclusion of male academics to gauge the gendered nature of the experiences. In addition, other demographic categories, such as career stages, disciplines, and geographical sites, may be relevant differentiators that future studies could explore. Although the open-ended research instrument allowed for rich descriptions of individual experiences, an in-depth qualitative study exploring how women academics have attempted to repair their psychological contract might be a promising future research direction.

Conclusion

Our findings show that the relationships between women academics and their institutions were reshaped during the

COVID-19 lockdown period through a series of mostly unmet expectations. Aspects such as low levels of communication; the added workload—seemingly unappreciated by institutions—and resultant pressure of extra tasks; the inadequate provision of resources to deal with online student interaction and to continue to engage with colleagues; and a seemingly poorly prepared leadership response, resulted in a shift in the psychological contract.

While there are some limitations in the study, we believe that the acknowledgment of breaches and violation of the psychological contract opens up opportunities for trust building and renegotiation. As such, recommendations were offered to renegotiate the psychological contract between academics and their institutions in the post-pandemic higher education landscape.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because, as part of the agreement for access with all universities, we undertook to keep the dataset completely confidential. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to CW, cyrillwalters@sun.ac.za.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Stellenbosch University Ethics Committee.

The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

LR and MP conceptualized the manuscript's focus, proposed the objectives, prepared the draft manuscript, and wrote all the sections. CW conceptualized the original broader study from which the data were drawn and collected all the data. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Comparative reflections of Australian and African female academics on working from home during COVID-19

Upasana G. Singh[1]*, Rashmi Watson[2] and
Chenicheri S. Nair[1,3]

[1]Department of Information Systems and Technology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa, [2]Medical School, University of Western Australia, Perth, WA, Australia, [3]Victorian Institute of Technology, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on women globally, and female academics were no exception to the unprecedented, forced shift to working from home. Increased workloads, additional domestic responsibilities, and extended working hours have led to high levels of dissatisfaction among this group of academics. This disruption has also impacted mental and physical wellbeing. There has been limited research on the experiences of female academics during the transition to the new work environment in the early stages of the pandemic. This research compares the opportunities and challenges faced, as well as the support received, by female academics in Australia and Africa. Specifically, this study reports on the changing roles; demands of increased workloads; challenges, and opportunities faced both personally, and in general, an exploratory, qualitative approach was adopted in this study. An online questionnaire was developed and distributed through mailing lists in Africa and Australia; LinkedIn; as well as a personal invitation by the researchers on WhatsApp and email. Purposeful and snowballing sampling female academics in Australia and Africa were targeted, Inclusion criteria for this study were female academics employed at any higher education institution (HEI), private or public, in contract, and part-time and full-time employment in Australia and Africa since the start of the pandemic (February 2020). A total of 171 respondents (144 from Australia and 27 from Africa) were received from a larger, global study with 260 responses gathering data about female academics' experiences during COVID-19. The data were analyzed using thematic and inductive analyses. The study sheds light on workload, motivation, perceptions about career progression, and work status. The research contributes to the body of knowledge of femaleacademic work, gender disparity, and higher education impact during

COVID-19. The research aims to add value to the literature that supports the growing feminism in academia to ensure HEIs support this cohort of academics.

Introduction and background

Work–life balance of women employees is an integral issue in the employment world globally. There is ample evidence in the academic literature which shows the issues, benefits and need for policies to help women in their work environment (Mani, 2013; Ravi and Anulakshmi, 2021). However, although these factors are well known, little has been researched with the recent disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the effects on female academics. This study aims to compare the opportunities and challenges of female academics in Australia and Africa during this period of disruption so as to understand the female academics workloads and related issues when the world of higher education was forced to deliver programs digitally mainly from their homes. Research by Lunyolo et al. (2014) reports that socio–cultural barriers hinder women not only in academia but also in other areas. Further, Morley (2013) explains that the culture in academia is frequently viewed as unfriendly and unaccommodating to women. In Africa, Nomadolo's (2017) work shows that the gender stereotypes and prejudices are exhibited by a number of organizations with males classed as privileged. Although gender equality in Africa and Australia are at different stages, some countries in Africa have policies in place to ensure gender equality, e.g., South Africa, although women remain marginalized (The Conversation, 2022). However, Australia is much advanced; for example, with the Australian Equal Opportunity law promoting women in the workplace.

Literature review

Working from home: The balancing act

The rapid transition almost overnight for many from working at a desk in an office to working from home (WFH) has been reported to have many positive benefits. These include increased flexibility (Mattey et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2022a) which may have led to the reported decreased burnout (Hoffman et al., 2020), increased work–life balance satisfaction (Dockery and Bawa, 2020), and

where many stated they could sustain WFH indefinitely (Watson et al., 2022a). The remote work has shown to strengthen employee and employer relationships through its support of employee wellbeing (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). The nature of work and women's roles in the pandemic period has shown that women have adapted in numerous ways such as sacrificing work and non-work roles and boundaries have been managed through structural support such as flexibility and social support such as empathy (Kossek et al., 2021, Wethal et al., 2022). The term "boundary-work" has been used by Wethal et al. (2022) to describe the changes that have been made to recalibrate work and home duties and can also be referred to as "boundary traffic" as a congestion between home and work.

The shift to WFH has shown many benefits and positive outcomes, many issues in work–life balance have also been reported. These include increased work in traditional gendered role responsibilities, blurred delineation between home and work lives and increased depression, exhaustion and burnout (De Vos, 2020; Bezak et al., 2022). Female academics, in particular, are managing multiple and demanding roles in their home environment (household work, children, extended families, home schooling, and teaching and research demands) pre- and during COVID-19 (Günçavdi et al., 2017; Madgavkar et al., 2020; Parlak et al., 2021; Bezak et al., 2022). It is reported that in the Middle East and in North Africa, it is as high as 80–90% (Madgavkar et al., 2020).

Gendered issues

Females have been impacted during COVID-19 with increased care roles, increased household responsibilities, being able to manage home schooling while managing their own workloads (Feng and Savani, 2020; Mattey et al., 2020). High-powered women balance professional and home lives "spectacularly" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 248). Ethnicity and cultural context play a role in barriers to how well female academics have been able to manage work and life balance where those of African/Black females stated greater issues in cost of communication, connectivity, social isolation and a high burden of care responsibilities with external

family members (Leal Filho et al., 2021; Bezak et al., 2022).

Greater gender gaps have now been reported since COVID-19 with perceived job satisfaction (Feng and Savani, 2020) and distractions and disturbance from family (Watson et al., 2022a) and decreased motivation toward career progression (Watson et al., 2022b). The current pandemic has deepened the inequalities among genders and is an issue that needs attention and adequate response by higher education institutions (Parlak et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2022b). Madgavkar et al. (2020) are pushing the key message that the sooner the policy makers and leaders act on gender equality as COVID continues, the greater the benefits for economic growth.

Academic transition to online teaching and learning

Online teaching and learning have now become the "new norm," the way academics and HEIs have had to adapt in a short space regardless of their academic preparedness (Bezak et al., 2022). Digital technologies have taken the interest of HEIs due to its ability to manage the high volumes of in-person teaching, the most commonly used mode of teaching prior to the impact of COVID-19. Academics have certainly transformed themselves in their understanding of online pedagogy (Daniela, 2019) and have been thrust into learning about digital technologies, academic online integrity, (Singh, 2021) and managing online engagement with their students in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. Evidence since the start of COVID-19 supports the need for academics to create an engaging online environment to encourage student interaction, communication, motivation, and learner achievement; all of these require a great amount of effort to accomplish (Oliver et al., 2014), especially if it is a new mode of teaching.

The support mechanisms for academic staff thus have become a critical element of HEI importance during this pandemic. Adequate support and resourcing are critical at classroom level for pedagogical support, quality professional development, academic integrity of teaching and assessment practices and at institutional level including adequate resourcing, technological infrastructure (Stone and Springer, 2019). Numerous online tools and technologies have been applied with the learning management system (LMS) being one of the most common platforms across HEIs for information management, communication, and assessment upload. Regardless of the digital technologies, if academics are not properly supported through their online methods, then the students can be passive learners who are disengaged with academic staff, their peers, and with content (Oliver et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2019). Online engagement, just as in face-to-face engagement remains a key component of maintaining quality pedagogy and assessment practices (Martin et al., 2019).

Methodology

The research was led through Australia where the ethics approval was received through the University of Western Australia (REF: ET000781). Due to COVID-19 social distancing and with the intention to capture a broad scope of global responses, an online survey was developed to collect data from the female academics across the world, using a mixed-method approach with both open and closed questions. There were 33 questions in total with 24 being closed questions including demographics, and 9 open-ended questions, asking specific perceptions about the academic workload (teaching and research), career progression, support, motivation, and academic leadership. The specific questions being reported from the larger online survey are s follows:

1. What are some of the changes to the academic role being experienced during COVID-19 (workload, ease of managing from home)?
2. What are some of the opportunities being perceived by female academics as a result of the changing roles during COVID-19?

The key method used to gather responses came from email invitations from each of the researchers, email lists from their universities (permission as per ethics protocols), social media including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, and the researchers' own academic networks. The data were collected from July 2021 to October 2021 with the participants spanning across the globe to seek participation. This study explores a comparison between the Australian and African respondents as this is where the researchers are based.

The data were analyzed by applying thematic analysis for the open-ended questions and descriptive statistical analysis for all closed questions. Thematic analysis is a commonly used tool in qualitative research adopted to identify, analyze, describe, organize, and report themes found within a data set (Nowell et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2017; Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The specific thematic applied was inductive thematic analysis, often used in mixed-method designs as the theoretical flexibility of thematic analysis makes it a more straightforward choice than approaches with specific embedded theoretical assumptions (Creswell, 2003). An inductive thematic

approach allows research findings to emerge from frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data as used in grounded theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Liu, 2016).

Results

There were 260 responses from female academics across the globe (55% were from Australian academics and 10% from African academics). A total of 171 respondents (144 from Australia and 27 from Africa) were included in this study from the larger, global study gathering data about female academics' experiences during COVID-19.

Role changes (due to COVID-19)

As listed in Table 1, the majority of respondents claimed their workload *had increased* since the start of COVID-19 in varying degrees. The Australian cohort was (85%) agreement and the African respondents were (89%). Most respondents claimed that their workload had increased "a great deal"; Australia (43%) and Africa (48%) followed by "increased somewhat." A smaller (10%) of the Australian respondents stated that the workload had stayed approximately the same and (7%) from the African respondents. The lowest response was in relation to the "workload decreasing" in overall responses, with the Australian cohort (4%) and African cohort (3%).

In response to having to work remotely, the responses were 100% for both cohorts of respondents; Australia = 144 (100%) and Africa = 27 (100%).

Managing working from home with others

As reported in Table 2, the majority of respondents in both cohorts stated it was "easy" managing working from home with others, which could have included children, partners, parents, friends, or co-residents.

In the Australian cohort of academics, most (59%), found it more difficult managing their workload followed by no difference (26%) in the pandemic period with the lowest response (15%) that it was easier to manage workload (see Figure 1).

A large majority (70.4%) of the African cohort found it more difficult to manage their workload since the start of the pandemic, especially with balancing both work and home duties (see Figure 1).

Challenges faced, as a female academic, since the onset of the pandemic

An open-ended question in the survey asked respondents to comment on what they perceived were the greatest challenges they faced with their workload, as a female academic, since the pandemic started. As reported in Table 3, the Australian female cohort rated work–life balance as the number one theme (59%) followed by health and wellbeing challenges (28%) and a perceived lack of support by their higher education institution leadership (21%). Other lower rated themes included research related challenges, gender disparities, and managing online teaching. From the top theme, comments such as the following were reported highlighting the challenges of work–life balance (WLB): *"Trying to work from home with a 2yr was an absolute disaster – had to work while he napped and at night after he went to bed (Respondent 5)"*; *"Managing family and care needs of family whilst juggling never ending virtual online meetings at all hours (Respondent 8)."*; *"A work–life balance is really important for health and wellbeing but we are pushed and pushed to do more. This is not okay, especially when we are women and also raising children and looking after household duties. We are not superwomen although we are expected to be (Respondent 70)."*

Health issues were also stated as follows:

"health is in an issue and I prefer to work at home also have elderly parents in the home and do not want to expose them- this is seen as weak and not committed. Perhaps a male with similar problems would be given greater slack. In females health and home and carer issues are minimised (Respondent 30)."; "My children have struggled with mental health (Respondent 70)."

Lack of support was stated as follows:

"Coping with initial heavy workload, no support and subsequent job loss due to redundancy after 21 years (Respondent 130)."

Research has been impacted due to the pandemic and this has also caused challenges for female academics as stated as follows: *"Inability to conduct fieldwork (etc) overseas, which is a major part of my research needs (Respondent 35)"* and gender issues were also raised in perceived inequities in research opportunities: *"Males used lockdowns and online teaching to write papers, while females took on extra admin/engagement, domestic and carer roles (Respondent 104)."*

TABLE 1   Workload changes since the start of the pandemic.

Workload changes	Increased a great deal N (%)	Increased somewhat	Increased at the start of COVID-19, but has settled back to the normal pattern	Stayed approximately the same	Decreased somewhat	Decreased a great deal
Australia	62 (43%)	43 (30%)	17 (12%)	14 (10%)	2 (1%)	4 (3%)
Africa	13 (48%)	9 (33%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)

In the "Gender" theme, there were many statements about perceived lack of care for female academics: *"No one cares about what is happening to women academics (Respondent 121).";* *"females identify challenges of procedures and process and are identified as posturing for power; the rhetoric in online zoom meetings are generally male voices in meetings and in the decision making process (even if females have more experience and expertise in the decision-making area (Respondent 115)."*

Another major challenge has been identified as the theme of "Online teaching":

> *"Lack of resources/tight budgetary constraints and no adequate training in online education are my main concerns.ne teaching (Respondent 33")* and *"Zoom fatigue. Being more exhausted as I am doing household work and work at the same time (Respondent 140)."*

While 14 themes emerged from the open-ended question on personal challenges which the African cohort faced since the onset of the pandemic, as summarized in Table 4, the top-3 personal challenges faced by the African cohort of female academics were WLB (56%), Extended working hours (15%), and access to a private workspace (15%). Four (4) respondents (15%) indicated that they faced no personal challenges since the onset of the pandemic.

A complete list of emerging themes on personal challenges faced are presented in Table 4.

Work–life balance was difficult to maintain as some academics did not have access to a domestic assistant. Respondent 143 stated *"I no longer have domestic help (it is not safe health wise for either of us) so I am doing more domestic work. I have a capable husband who shares the load though. He does all the cooking, so all in all it is an equal load, with extra work for both of us."* Respondents 9 and 143 added that both *"Family responsibilities and Employment duties"* increased. This was

supported by Respondent 28, who highlighted that *"At work they forget that if you work from home you are juggling."* Respondent 31 also stated that she faced a *"Struggle between work tasks and house chores." "…it is also difficult to completely ignore undone household chores during "work hours" which results in tension within the household"* added Respondent 161. The absence of *"time for self"* (Respondent 182), resulted in *burnout* for some.

"Long working hours" (Respondent 35) was cited by a number of respondents. Knowing when it was *"time to stop working"* and end *"meetings and discussions"* (Respondent 260) was difficult. Respondent 145 stated that she found that *"work responsibilities take longer in an online way,"* forcing you to work beyond normal hours of duty, *"I cannot work around the clock and yet the university management seems to expect it,"* added Respondent 161.

Not all academics were blessed with a home office setup as the forced transition to work from home was made in the early stages of the pandemic. Comments related to the absence of a conducive *physical workspace* highlighted this issue, e.g., *"Working from home, with a new baby around"* (Respondent 45). Respondent 258 added, *"the consciousness of the four walls of the workspace"* with *"distractions"* becomes more difficult when *"it is difficult to ignore family members when they want to talk, especially as I do not have a separate office space to use"* (Respondent 161).

Access to *institutional resources* also posed a challenge, as Respondent 258 outlined *"inability to physically access reading materials from the library."* Respondent 161 shared how this impacted on her own research, stating that *"a research project had to be put on hold as it required students to engage in laboratory-based practical activities throughout 2020 and 2021, and these were completely suspended due to the move to online teaching initially, and then the practical difficulties with implementing COVID protocols with limited space/equipment and large classes."* Respondent 260 shared her challenge of *"accessing students work on all platforms."*

"The lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues has resulted in me feeling isolated… their isn't anyone to share experiences and concerns with or engage in regular discussions with my colleagues around issues pertaining to teaching/learning/research," Respondent 161, highlighted the social isolation academics faced. Respondent 261 supported

TABLE 2   Managing working from home with others.

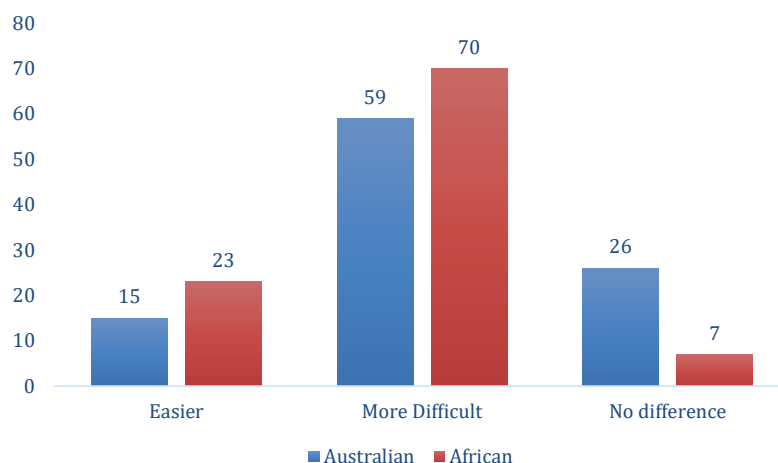|	Difficult	Easy
Australian	57 (40%)	87 (60%)
African	8 (30%)	18 (67%)

FIGURE 1
Experiences in managing workload.

this, adding, *"I miss the stimulation and encouragement of work colleagues. I feel isolated and not sure what is happening in the academic world."* Even non-work-related social isolation was cited, *"the ongoing lockdowns and being unable to see family have been challenging"* (Respondent 188).

"Health deterioration" (Respondent 63) and *"COVID sickness"* (Respondent 182) contributed to *health issues* faced.

Respondent 45 indicated that *"finding support/mentors…"* in particular *"finding the right support for where I am at,"* was challenging. In Africa, in particular, the lack of mentorship for females is more prevalent *"…hard to get men or women to really mentor other women"* (Respondent 15). She further highlighted that in Africa, there are *less opportunities "for women to get real practical IS skills"…"most organisations want men"… "Culturally, women have other duties to do. housework, childcare etc."*

Respondent 161 indicated that she was *uncomfortable with online teaching* as she found it *"alien and disconnected."*

"Significant increase of cost of living" was highlighted by Respondent 63. In addition, Respondent 161 added she was gripped with *fear and uncertainty, "I have felt emotionally stressed and drained by the worry of Covid, and how it might affect my world which affects my work."*

TABLE 3   Australian challenges.

Australian challenges	Number	(%)
Work–life balance (WLB)	85	59
Health/wellbeing	40	28
Lack of support (HE Leadership)	30	21
Research	20	14
Gender	17	12
Online teaching	14	10

Opportunities created, personally, and as a female academic, since the onset of the pandemic

Another open-ended question asked respondents to comment on what they perceived as the top3 "work-related opportunities," referring to positive opportunities from the challenges of a pandemic, and what academics could take forward beyond the pandemic period. Slightly more than 50% of respondents stated "online" opportunities as the top theme followed by teaching (31%) and flexibility (26%). A complete list of emerging themes on work-related opportunities perceived by Australian academics are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 4   African challenges.

African challenges	Number	%
WLB	15	56
Extended working hours	4	15
None	4	15
Private workspace	4	15
Institutional resources	4	15
Social isolation	4	15
Health issues	2	7
Lack of support	2	7
Less opportunities	2	7
Uncomfortable with online	2	7
Burnout	1	4
Economic difficulty	1	4
Fear and uncertainty	1	4
Lack of professionalism	1	4

TABLE 5 Australian work-related opportunities.

Australian work-related opportunities	Number	%
Online	75	52
Teaching/Learning/Assessment	45	31
Flexibility	37	26
Nil/None	31	22
Conferences/PD	26	18
Time efficiency	23	16
Collaboration	23	16
Research	20	14
Time for self/others	12	8
Leadership role	8	6
Innovation	5	3
Other	4	2

TABLE 6 African work-related opportunities.

African work-related opportunities	Number	%
Flexibility	13	48
Virtual collaboration	7	26
Virtual networking	6	22
Professional development	5	19
New technologies	5	19
Research time	3	11
Multitask	2	7
Funding	2	7
Family time	2	7
None	2	4
Self-reflection	1	4
New types of students	1	4
Economical	1	4
Access to research	1	4
More relaxed atmosphere	1	4

A number of online work-related opportunities were realized during the pandemic such as ease of remote work and meetings, ability to develop new relationships, and increased online education and related skills as reported by respondents:

"Virtual consultations (multi-campus institution), relationship building, up skilling in online education" (Respondent 111); *"Opportunities to upskill in delivery of online content"* (Respondent 61).

The online theme extended into the teaching theme: *"Learning how to use different technologies (Zoom/Teams, Slido, …)"* (Respondent 13); *"Ability to develop online teaching practices"* (Respondent 136) and *"learning how to manage the transition of in person teaching mode to fully online"* (Respondent 77).

Flexibility was mentioned as a key opportunity allowing the academics to manage work and home giving them a greater WLB:

"easier to manage family care responsibilities; greater work– life balance." (Respondent 8); *"more flexibility in working hours, no commuting"* (Respondent 29).

An interesting response by just over 20 percent of respondents was that they could see no opportunities coming from the pandemic:

"If asking for opportunities for positive change in some way – none, I was drowning before and am drowning much more now" (Respondent 104); *"None, the university has less need for my skills. My workload as a sessional tutor has decreased by 75%"* (Respondent 32); *Do you mean good things that have come of this? NONE"* (Respondent 58)

As presented in Table 6, not all was gloomy in Africa during the pandemic. Respondent 47 shared that in the *more relaxed*

atmosphere, she *"felt more content…no stress of needing to present an appearance of being together."* Respondent 143 stated that she was engaged in *self-reflection* during *"the pandemic and ongoing lockdowns… given me a lot more time, and reflective, thinking opportunities."* Respondent 146 noticed that there was an opportunity for new student types during the pandemic stating a *"growth in student number and diversity for postgraduate degrees – mostly working students who enjoy the flexibility of online learning."* While many academics battled with *student engagement* in the fully online environment, Respondent 260 enjoyed better engagement citing that *"Class discussions are great."*

Notably the greatest opportunity came from the *flexibility* which the new work setup brought with it. Respondent 33 enjoyed *"teaching from home,"* which as Respondent 258 added allowed for *"increased flexible tutoring."* The flexibility also allowed some academics to *"dedicate additional time to students,"* Respondent 9, with uninterrupted *"chunks of time,"* Respondent 27, as well as *"flexibility to attend to family duties,"* Respondent 9. The ability to reach a wider spectrum of students was highlighted by Respondent 31, *"more teaching opportunities, not controlled by geographic proximity-online."* Flexibility with personal time was also indicated – *"some flexibility with time … am able to attend webinars at all hours,"* Respondent 161.

Increased *virtual networking and virtual collaboration* were highlighted by a number of respondents. *"One of the ironic and unexpected consequences of the pandemic is that fellow academics and researchers all over the world are now much more comfortable communicating in online formats. This has made international collaboration much easier. I have also been able to participate in global events without physically traveling which is a real blessing on the whole. I have met and worked with fellow researchers; we have developed such strong connections that I completely forget that we have never actually met face-to-face"*

stated Respondent 143. This was supported by Respondent 188, who stated, *"I feel that I have had more opportunity to pursue my research career…I feel this is due to the ability to attend global conferences virtually."* Respondent 31 added that she experienced an *"increase(d) interaction with academics across borders…"* thus creating *"more research opportunities with people from all over the world"* (Respondent 146). An increase in *"Faculty research collaboration"* was noted by Respondent 8, with more *"opportunities for sharing and peer discussions"* (Respondent 63).

Opportunities for *Professional Development* were created in *"online learning, teaching & assessment… being able to attend free webinars/conferences online that are presented all over the world that either did not exist previously or I was not able to access previously due to lack of funds to travel"* (Respondent 161). This was supported by Respondents 182, 260, and 261 *"attending online conferences I would not be able to attend easily as a single parent."*

Respondent 35 spoke about the ability to experiment with *new technologies* like *"RPA"* in online teaching. Respondent 146 highlighted the *"growth in innovative approaches to teaching using online tools like Mural, Mentimeter, Kahoot, etc."* Even in the Arts there was the introduction of new technologies in *"online programmes for teaching music education,"* Respondent 149.

Respondent 63 alluded to having *"more time for research when working from home."* This was supported by Respondents 79 and 148.

Respondent 35 supported the notion of working from home stating, *"Let's stay at home. It is better to be a good parent as you can multitask."*

Funding *"for online research"* (Respondent 258) and *"research grants"* (Respondent 25), increased during the pandemic.

Respondent 9 indicated that working at home gave her the *"flexibility to attend family duties and"* allowed her to give *"quality time to children."* This was supported by Respondent 28 who stated that she appreciated *"spending more time with family… and I actually got time to see my daughter grow and was there for each milestone."*

"Working online is more economical" according to Respondent 9.

Respondent 15 felt that she had *"access to more online journals"* during this period.

Supervisor responsiveness to the needs of a female academic work–life balance

As can be seen in **Table 7**, the highest selected response for both the Australian and African respondents was that they felt their immediate supervisor was responsive to their needs as female academics. The lowest response was to the "not at all" category. Overall, (83%) of Australian based academics and (89%) of the African based academics, stated that their supervisor was responsive to their work–life balance needs (see **Table 7**).

Discussion

The result from this research supports the previous work that the female academics face challenges, which need to be considered by policy makers in institutions (Morley et al., 2006). However, this comparative study clearly demonstrates that although challenges are present, geographic locations have brought different challenges within the context of teaching in a HEI.

The result clearly demonstrates the work from home was perceived very positively by female academics both in Australian and Africa, with both cohorts reporting the ease of managing working from home with others; children, partners, parents, friends, or co-residents. Although this was a positive outcome, further analysis on managing workload show the need for support for the female academics. Supporting this premise is that seven out of 10 African female academics found it more difficult to manage their workload since the start of the pandemic, especially with balancing both work and home duties compared to just 6 out 10 Australian female academics. In terms of challenges faced by the cohort, there were distinct differences between the cohort. The Australian female cohort reported the top-3 challenges to be work–life balance, health and wellbeing and the perceived lack of support by their higher education institution leadership. The African cohort's top-3 challenges were WLB, extended working hours, and access to a private workspace. This finding also supports the research work of Ravi and Anulakshmi (2021) and Mani (2013) that work–life balance of women employees is an integral issue in employment but is specific to regional settings (Singh et al., 2022). This study further shows that both the Australian and African respondents felt their immediate supervisor was responsive to their needs as female academics. The study suggests that there has been development of support mechanisms during the pandemic for female academics during the pandemic environment. However, even with this advancement of support for their institutions the study suggests that during the pandemic, workloads were an issue and impinged on the work–life balance, suggesting that the leadership in higher education institutions develop policies and procedures to support this balance. An approach would include female academics in the process for change at the institutional level.

Though challenges were prevalent, this study also showed that during the pandemic setting there were also work-related opportunities. The Australian cohort listed their three top opportunities as "online" opportunities which included remote

TABLE 7 Supervisor responsiveness.

	Yes, all of the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all	Total
	My immediate supervisor is responsive to my needs as a female academic (work–life balance):				
Australia	52 (36%)	38 (26%)	30 (21%)	24 (17%)	**144 (100%)**
African	7 (26%)	9 (33%)	8 (30%)	3 (11%)	**27 (100%)**

work and meetings, ability to develop new relationships and increased online education and related skills; teaching; and flexibility. The African cohort on the other hand listed flexibility; virtual collaboration; and virtual networking as the top-3 opportunities. Both cohorts had similar perceptions that the online opportunities and flexibility was critical positives in the pandemic setting.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this current study including this being a small sample of a large cohort of female academics' experiences during COVID-19 across the globe. In particular, the African cohort was much smaller than the Australian sample, despite numerous attempts to reach out to female academics in Africa to participate in the study. There were differences in the Australian and African isolation and lockdown times, rules, and freedoms afforded in both locations which is acknowledged as a limitation of the study. Another limitation, due to COVID was the inability to run any focus groups in person and the organization of online formats would have been difficult to arrange within given timelines at the time of preparing research articles.

The future research looking at policies and practices within Australia and Africa will shed further light on female academics' experiences during this period.

Conclusion

This study adds to the academic literature of female academics on their work–life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Effects such as increased workloads, additional domestic work, and extended works have impacted on the health and wellbeing among female academics.

This research compares the opportunities and challenges faced, as well as the support received, by female academics in Australia and Africa. The study shows that the geographic locations of the female cohort results is differing support needs suggesting that policy makers have to be aware of the specificity of the cohort. Interestingly, this comparative study also highlighted that notwithstanding the geographic locations, female academics were on the same page in terms

of work-related opportunities, primarily the online learning opportunities, and flexibility in the pandemic setting.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Western Australia. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Check for updates

Emotional intelligence as a contributor to enhancing educators' quality of life in the COVID-19 era

Prashanti Maharaj and Anisha Ramsaroop*

School of Management, Information Technology and Governance, College of Law and Management Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

The basic education fraternity is constantly evolving with various stressors among others, curricular changes, adaptation to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, poor educator development, excessive workload, and brain drain, thus negatively affecting educators' quality of life. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) has expedited the importance of emotional intelligence, as an essential resilience skill for enhancing the quality of life during adversity. The objective of the study is to ascertain the relationship between emotional intelligence and the quality of life of educators. A quantitative approach was utilized using simple random sampling. A sample of 108 educators from a population of 154 was drawn from six schools in the Reservoir Hills precinct of KwaZulu-Natal. The findings revealed a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and the quality of life of educators. A practical research model was advocated for key stakeholders in the South African basic education sector.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, educators, emotional intelligence, quality of life, resilience

Introduction

The Future of Jobs Report by the World Economic Forum (2020) ranks emotional intelligence as one of the top 15 in-demand skills required to thrive in 2022 and beyond. Three sole theorists have evolved the concept of emotional intelligence, namely: Mayer and Salovey (1990), Goleman (1998), and Bar-On (2006). Goleman (1998, p. 137) defines emotional intelligence as the "capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships." However, Bar-On (2006) argues that emotional intelligence is a multifactorial set of competencies, skills, and facilitators that determine how people express and understand themselves, understand and relate to others, and respond to daily situations. The Ability Model by Mayer and Salovey (1990) who are the pioneer researchers of the construct emotional intelligence underpins this study. The Ability Model proposes that emotional intelligence entails the following abilities: appraisal and expression of emotion: the ability to show and to understand own and others' verbal and non-verbal emotion expressions, regulation of emotion: the ability

to control own and others' emotions, and the utilization of emotion: the ability to use emotion to enhance flexibility, creativity, and motivation by facilitating logical thinking processes. The model posits that emotionally intelligent people can feel emotions of the self and others and use that knowledge to influence and change the environment thus enhancing resilience and quality of life (Mayer and Salovey, 1990; Katungu, 2018). Therefore, in a school setting, emotional intelligence will equip educators to manage daily stressors with patience, insight, and innovation, as well as to navigate interpersonal interactions with empathy (Park and Rhee, 2020). Drigas and Papoutsi (2020), advocate that people in the face of a crisis tend to stand together and cooperate because people understand that the risk is shared and are worried not only about themselves but also about others, which helps foster resilience in themselves and in others. Therefore, McDonald (2021) emphasizes that high emotional intelligence enhances adaptive regulation of distressing emotions as well as successful management of daily stressors and challenges.

Zeidner et al. (2012, p. 54) describe emotional intelligence as the "ability to identify and manage your own emotions and the emotions of others." Quality of life can be described as the "individuals' perception of individuals' positions in life, in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (Pinto et al., 2017, p. 7). Pavliscak (2018) confirms emotional intelligence is a gateway to a balanced-life as it is essential to every quality of life component. Studies therefore indicate that emotional intelligence can enhance the quality of life, because people feel a sense of well-being when one's work and lives are meaningful (Hsiang, 2016; Anjum and Swathi, 2017; Koçak, 2021). The role of the educator continues to be a challenge (Carroll et al., 2022). Educators encounter not only heavy workloads and time constraints in teaching, but also student discipline and behavioral difficulties, pressure from insensitive administrations, ongoing curricular challenges, work–life balance challenges, and an overload of responsibilities (Mapfumo et al., 2012; Mukwamu, 2019; Velle, 2020; Sindhya, 2022). This environment creates psychological and physical ill-health, as well as emotional distress in educators (Mohamad and Jais, 2016; Sindhya, 2022). Therefore, by indoctrinating emotional intelligence in educators, educators will have the ability to cope with such insurmountable demands by being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations, control impulse and delay gratification, regulate one's mood, minimize distress from the overwhelming the ability to think; and establishing empathy (Goleman, 2017). As a result, emotional intelligence promotes enhanced quality of life, as emotional intelligence assists the individual to cope with life situations, and understanding emotional intelligence within multiple perspectives (Al-Huwailah, 2017). Studies have confirmed that emotional intelligence increases with age, being married and having high educational levels (Madahi et al., 2013; Kanesan and Fauzan, 2019; Addae and Ofosuhene-Mensah, 2021). Therefore, individuals with high emotional intelligence will have

an enhanced quality of life. This is as a result of emotional intelligence having a positive relationship with the quality of life (Keefer et al., 2018; Pavliscak, 2018).

The 2011 State of the Heart Report by Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence network has been tracking global developments in emotional intelligence (Freedman, 2018). The network is the world's most comprehensive research on emotional intelligence strengths, challenges, and possibilities. After surveying 200,000 people in 160 countries, the findings give significant insights on the shifting capabilities to construct a better future, indicating important trends for global emotional intelligence comprising personal well-being, effectiveness, relationships, and quality of life (Freedman, 2018). The value of emotional intelligence in Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and North America was determined by comparing national-average emotional intelligence scores to World Health Organization data on well-being (Freedman, 2018). It was observed that the majority of Asia Pacific and Middle Eastern countries had low well-being and emotional intelligence (Freedman, 2018). Furthermore, Africa was viewed as having the potential for high emotional intelligence to improve well-being (Freedman, 2018). Teaching in primary, secondary and special needs schools is widely regarded as one of the most stressful occupations in the world because it demands empathy, love and affection for students (Viac and Fraser, 2020). An educator is an emotional laborer who must continuously cope with ascertaining emotional intelligence. According to Kant and Shanker (2021), educators are supposed to exhibit positive emotions at all times, regardless of what is going on in their inner cognition.

Throughout the years, South Africa's basic educational system underwent a variety of curriculum changes, namely Curriculum 2005 was introduced in 1997, Revised National Curriculum Statement introduced in 2002, National Curriculum Statement introduced in 2007, and Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements was introduced in 2012 (Adu and Ngibe, 2014). The Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga stressed that the education system would have to be overhauled to meet the demands of the 4IR (Davis, 2018). As a result, President Cyril Ramaphosa confirms that a draft coding and robotics curriculum for schools would be gazetted in the course of 2021 and rolled out in 2023 (South African Government News Agency, 2021; Mndende, 2022). Adu and Ngibe (2014) affirm that constant changes in the curriculum affect effective teaching and learning because these changes present a challenge to educators to reach the expected student performance. Molapo and Pillay (2018) posit that educators do not feel well-equipped to implement new curriculum changes because most educator-training is offered as short-term programs involving several hours or days of workshops. Govender (2018) explains that challenges exist in the design of sustainable and ongoing activities for professional development, related to lessons in the classroom that improve teaching

and focus on educators' needs, rather than reliance on once-off workshops.

A London-based publication, The Economist, stated that South Africa has one of the worst education systems due to the poor quality of education, with one of the factors being the lowered pass rate requirements actioned by the Department of Basic Education (Mukwamu, 2019). Allan Thompson Deputy Chairperson of the National Teachers' Union, mentioned that instead of lowering the pass mark, there should be an increase in educators in the classroom and a reduction in the class size (Nkosi, 2018). However, it is not possible to have an increase of educators in the classroom due to the challenging working conditions, lack of resources and budgets (Du Plessis, 2020). Challenges have an adverse effect on educators' quality of life resulting in a high attrition rate (Miya, 2017; Niekerk, 2017). Govender (2018) discovered that countries such as the United Arab Emirates were offering better working conditions and support to South African educators (Govender, 2018). This has consequences for the brain drain thus leaving South Africa with a lack of valuable and experienced educators (Govender, 2018). Educators' emotions are heightened adversely as educators have limited support mechanisms for coping and managing challenges (Bearschank, 2010; Navsaria et al., 2011; Nel et al., 2016). For example, South Africa has undergone a number of curriculum changes, but educators still find it difficult to transition smoothly (Phakgadi, 2018).

Such challenges have now been exacerbated by a new set of challenges brought on by the Coronavirus (COVID-19), which has altered all aspects of educators' quality of life. Educators were summoned to support students' academic development and well-being throughout this continuous transition, while also navigating adversity in their own lives provoked the inability to manage stress, anxiety and fear (Niekerk and Gent, 2021; Sindhya, 2022). The University of KwaZulu-Natal's Professor Anja Philipp advocates that the profession of the educator has evolved dramatically to support remote teaching and learning while progressively returning to contact teaching (Ishmail, 2020). Additionally, educators are managing "techno-stress" that is caused by the introduction of technology thus posing psychosomatic consequences with the development of high levels of burnout (Muñoz et al., 2020). Research indicates several challenges such as, adaptation to online teaching, economic uncertainty, educators being pressured to deliver the school curriculum timeously, fear of health and safety caused by the pandemic, educators being blamed for poor performance, the inability to read students verbal and non-verbal cues with a mask on, and the challenge for students to understand educators verbal and non-verbal cues, and managing work–life balance, exist (Allen et al., 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021; Sindhya, 2022). These stressors have created contentious distressing emotions and burnout, hence negatively impacting educators' overall well-being (Ishmail, 2020).

There has been little evidence in the education fraternity to establish the critical significance of emotional intelligence in enhancing educators' quality of life, particularly in the current setting of the pandemic, where emotional intelligence is paramount. This study therefore has relevance and value and contributes to enhancing well-being from a global South perspective. Bhuvaneswari and Baskaran (2020) and Uniyal and Rawat (2020) agree that there is limited research; hence emotional intelligence in a school setting is needed. The need for emotional intelligence has been popularized by COVID-19, and it will become increasingly vital in the post-COVID-19 period as work becomes more flexible, more remote and ambiguous (Drigas and Papoutsi, 2020; Uniyal and Rawat, 2020). This is the first time that the education fraternity in South Africa experienced a sudden life-changing catastrophe which will soon become the largest pandemic of the 21st century in a form of a natural disaster (Schroder et al., 2021). Therefore, this research is valuable for South African educators to acquire skills to appraise, regulate, and utilize their emotions positively, as this will promote resilience strategies to help maintain educator's physical, social, psychological, and environmental well-being.

From a global South perspective, with Africa being the focus, there is a potential for high emotional intelligence to improve well-being (Freedman, 2018). Abdel-Fattah (2020) highlights that COVID-19 has expedited the need to understand the role of emotional intelligence when confronted with adversity. This study advocates that COVID-19 has caused disruptive innovation with the need for creativity to flourish through devising mindful strategies for enhancing educator quality of life during COVID-19 which is reiterated in the practical research model (Appendix G). Creativity is established through emotional intelligence enabling positive emotions (Goleman, 2017). One of the focus areas that emerged at the 10th African Confederation of Principals Conference held in 2018 was the use of emotional intelligence, which will aid in revolutionizing the teaching profession in Africa (Association for the Development of Education in Africa, 2018). Furthermore, Yale President and one of the founders of the concept of emotional intelligence, Peter Salovey, who spoke at Lagos Business School in Nigeria for Yale Africa, emphasized the need to develop emotional intelligence skills for thriving in life (Lagos Business School, 2020).

The concept of quality of life assumes that a job is more than just a job because it is the core of a person's life (Sanchez et al., 2019). Quality of life encompasses three facets. Firstly, physical health, comprising pain, discomfort, work capacity, and dependence on medicinal substances and aids, sleep, and rest. Secondly, psychological health, which entails negative and positive feelings, body image, self-esteem and concentration; social relationships evolving into personal relationships and social support. Lastly, environmental health, which constitutes financial resources, freedom, home environment, health and social care, physical safety, security, and the physical environment" (Dubey, 2012, p. 64). Educators who have a high

quality of work life are more likely to report higher levels of job motivation and a greater commitment to remaining in the profession (Viac and Fraser, 2020). Pre-COVID-19, educators across the world were already experiencing a low quality of life perception, with a major impact on psychological and physical health owing to numerous stress factors linked to work overload (Lizana et al., 2021). Research indicates that stressful working conditions can cause occupational illness, resulting in a low quality of life that impacts educators' motivation, self-efficacy, and job commitment (Toropova et al., 2020). Viac and Fraser (2020), argue that educators who feel supported by their colleagues and principals in the school setting during the pandemic have a higher sense of quality of life because they have greater self-efficacy, less work pressure, and are more pupil-orientated, making educators better equipped to deal with external pressures. The psychological well-being of educators in a time of COVID-19 has become an increasing concern not only in South Africa, but also across the world with educators feeling fearful that the pandemic will worsen (Mahamba, 2021). Psychological health of educators is often neglected and has been exacerbated by COVID-19 (Niekerk and Gent, 2021). The United Nations (2020) observed an increased rate of stress and anxiety being the most cited reaction during the pandemic.

Emotional intelligence increases an educator's quality of life by assisting in many areas such as the educator being less impulsive, less controlling, the ability to manage stress, increased self-assertiveness, expression of emotion, maintaining positive outlooks, making better judgments, improved communication, positively influencing people, enhanced work–life balance, and being emotionally resilient (Mustafa et al., 2020). However, having high emotional intelligence does not mean that a person will not suffer stress or anxiety over everyday difficulties, much less a more stressful event like COVID-19 (Drigas and Papoutsi, 2020). Rather, the individual will be conscious of his/her circumstances and the feelings he/she is experiencing by employing resilience techniques in order to have self-control, self-management, and not be deceived by his/her anxiety, with serious physical and psychological effects (Drigas and Papoutsi, 2020).

Materials and methods

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To measure the level of emotional intelligence of educators.
- To measure the level of the quality of life of educators.
- To examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and the quality of life.
- To establish if there is a significant difference on each biographical variable (gender, age, race, marital status, education, number of years in the teaching profession, level

currently teaching, and employment status) on the quality of life and emotional intelligence of educators.

Participants and procedure

A descriptive design with a quantitative research approach was used to provide adequate data to test the relationship between emotional intelligence and the quality of life. The study site consisted of primary, secondary, and special needs schools. The target population adopted in this study was permanent and part-time school educators, from six schools. The sample design adopted was simple random sampling and was chosen using a population list that was provided by the six school administrations. The population was numbered consecutively, and thereafter, participants were selected from the list by means of a computer-generated method. The total population size of educators being 154, the sample represented 108 educators, mostly females (82.4%) with the dominant race being Indian (82.4%). The majority of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 29 with 54.6% married, 96.3% employed permanently, 33.4% in possession of an undergraduate degree, 31.5% teaching at junior level, and 51.9% with a length of service more than 10 years. Reasons for non-participation by all educators were not made known to the researchers. Non-participation could have been attributed to several reasons, among others, non-availability of educators or a disinterest in the study.

Measures

Close-ended personally administered questionnaires were utilized. Biographical details of participants were elicited using nominal and ordinal scaling.

Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test on a five-point Likert scale (Schutte et al., 2009). The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test is a 12-item self-report questionnaire that comprises three sub-scales: appraisal of emotions (four items—"I know why my emotions change"), regulation of emotion (four items—"I seek out activities that make me happy"), and utilization of emotion (four items—"I am aware of the non-verbal messages other people send").

The World Health Organization Quality of Life Assessment on a five-point Likert scale (The Whoqol Group, 1998). It consisted of 12-item that measures the following sub-dimensions: physical health (three items—"I am satisfied with my capacity for work"), psychological health (three items—"I often have negative feelings such as blue mood, despair, anxiety, and depression"), social relationships (three items—"I am satisfied with the support I get from my friends"), and environmental health (three items—"My physical environment is healthy").

Appendix A reflects the Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha score for all the individual items that constituted the questionnaire.

Data analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized in the study. Frequencies and percentages were used for interpreting biographical data. Measures of central tendency were used to help the researcher interpret the characteristics of the sample, and finally measures of dispersion was used to help measure how spread out a set of data is. Chi-square tests were performed to determine if the scoring patterns per statement had a statistical difference between the nominal (gender, race, marital status, and employment status) and ordinal (highest level of completed education, number of years teaching, level currently teaching, and age) biographical variables.

Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was used to measure the statistical relationship and strength between emotional intelligence and the quality of life. A principle component factor analysis was used as the extraction method with the rotation method being Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and Orthogonal Varimax Rotation. All of the conditions were met for factor analysis. That is, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy value should be greater than 0.500 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity sig. Value should be less than 0.05. Factor analysis was done for Likert scale items resulting in certain components divided into finer components. Appendix B illustrates the results and showcases the inter-correlations between variables.

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha measured at an overall score of 0.798 for the 22 items that constituted the questionnaire. The results indicate acceptable high internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

Results

Data collected from the responses were analyzed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 25.0.

Objective 1

Scoring patterns of the respondents were analyzed per variable per section. The results in Appendix C are presented using summarized percentages for the sub-dimensions of emotional intelligence against each statement. The following patterns were observed:

- all of the statements show significantly higher levels of agreement;
- there are no statements with higher levels of disagreement; and
- chi-square $p < 0.05$ values imply that the differences between how respondents scored were significant.

Applying emotional intelligence data pertaining to educators indicates that those with high emotional intelligence are more empathetic and better at fostering a learning environment that supports the development of students' socio-emotional skills, hence enhancing resilience for educators' quality of life (Huang and Xu, 2019; Cristóvão et al., 2020; McDonald, 2021). Therefore, if an educator fosters emotional intelligence, emotional intelligence can lead to a fulfilling life (Abiodullah et al., 2020). Educators in the present study exhibit high levels of emotional intelligence, implying that they have the ability to appraise, regulate, and utilize their own emotional competencies, enabling them to cope with stressors and adversities, thereby improving resilience in their personal and professional lives. Objective 1 is thus achieved.

Objective 2

Scoring patterns of the respondents were analyzed per variable per section. The results in Appendix D are presented using summarized percentages for the dimensions of quality of life against each statement. The following patterns were observed:

- all of the statements show significantly higher levels of agreement;
- there are no statements with higher levels of disagreement; and,
- chi-square $p < 0.05$ values imply that the differences between how respondents scored were significant.

Stressful working conditions can cause occupational illness, resulting in a low quality of life that impacts educators' motivation, self-efficacy, and job commitment (Toropova et al., 2020). Furthermore, the frequency and quality of relationships with others (that is, the school community, family, friends, and peers) can have a favorable or unfavorable influence on educators' quality of life. This is supported by Viac and Fraser (2020), who argue that educators who feel supported by their colleagues and principals in the school setting have a higher quality of life because there is greater self-efficacy, less work pressure, and a more pupil-centered orientation, making them better equipped to deal with external pressures. Educators in the current study have a high level of quality of life, indicating that adversity showcases vulnerability such as looking to loved ones for help and emotional support, utilizing social media platforms for engagement, turning to spirituality and mindfulness, increasing one's self-care, and focusing on aspects of the situation that are under the individual's control, for example, refraining from exposing oneself to propaganda that elicits distressing emotions. Therefore, educators in the study are content with their professional working conditions due to organizational support, and self-developed coping techniques. Objective 2 is therefore achieved.

Objective 3

Pearson's Correlation Coefficient presented in Appendix E was performed on the ordinal data. The results in Appendix E indicated all significant relationships by a * representing a 1% level of significance and ** representing a 5% level of significance.

Emotionally intelligent educators are capable of balancing emotional demands (Kant and Shanker, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, educators frequently experienced loneliness, a lack of motivation, burnout, emotional stress, and distressing emotions which have further been exacerbated by COVID-19 (Ishmail, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Pioneer theorists Mayer and Salovey (1990) confirm that appraising and expressing emotions in oneself and others, regulating emotions in oneself and others, and utilizing emotions all contribute to determining coping behaviors and subsequent adaptive outcomes, hence improving one's quality of life (Keefer et al., 2018). Appendix E thus confirms a significant relationship between emotional intelligence (sub-dimensions being appraisal, regulation, and utilization) and quality of life (encompassing sub-dimensions such as physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and environmental health) of school educators at a 1 and 5% level of significance. This implies that educators in the study utilize their emotional intelligence abilities as a resilience tool to assess stressful situations generally and advocate customized coping behaviors that will protect their quality of life from deteriorating. Hence, objective 3 is achieved.

Objective 4

A second chi-square test was performed to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the nominal and ordinal variables. Appendix F indicates that there is a significant difference between gender, race, marital status, education, number of years in the teaching profession, level currently teaching, and employment status influencing emotional intelligence and quality life of educators ($p < 0.05$). Notably, employment status followed by highest level of education and marital status yielded the most significant differences. Uniyal and Rawat (2020) argue that people who are successful in controlling their stress levels in spite of an increased workload, have stronger emotional intelligence, which improves their quality of life.

In relation to employment status, when educators are pursuing a profound purpose or engaging in work that is personally important, educators experience significant positive effects (Fourie and Deacon, 2015; Whittington et al., 2017). Positive outcomes include increased levels of commitment, empowerment, satisfaction, and a sense of fulfillment (Davis, 2017; Whittington et al., 2017). As a result, meaningful work leads directly to higher levels of engagement but it also impacts on the levels of employee satisfaction, educator commitment to the organization, and the educator's willingness to go beyond role expectations to serve others (Rainey, 2014; Martela and Pessi, 2018). Therefore, when work is perceived as meaningful, educators have a sense of fulfillment and purpose that provides a psychological sense of well-being (Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Rainey, 2014; Martela and Pessi, 2018). The experience of meaningful work and well-being contributes to the overall sense of an individual's life purpose (Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Rainey, 2014; Martela and Pessi, 2018).

Educational qualification is a useful statistic as it indicates that the responses gathered would have been from an informed (learned) source and the distribution of the study's responses had more educated respondents. Many educators have an honors degree due to their wanting to further their knowledge in the field (Jennifer and Delia, 2018). Additionally, the Department of Basic Education requires future educators to undergo a 4 year Bachelor of Education degree or a 3 or 4 year Bachelor's degree, followed by a 1 year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE; Department of Basic Education, 2019).

Teaching as a career allows for many holidays thus posing flexibility (Fransman, 2014; Barik, 2017). This suggests that the career of teaching allows work–life balance for married couples, and partners, especially if these individuals have children (Reddy et al., 2010; Barik, 2017). Educators who are single could imply that the growing demand for educators in the past decade has brought in many younger educators than before, hence young people (possibly university graduates) are more likely to be single than older people (Joan and Henry, 2014; Odanga et al., 2015).

Age, however did not influence educator's emotional intelligence and quality of life. Mayer and Salovey and Goleman argue that emotional intelligence is ability based and not a trait (that is, it is consistent behavior over time) as it increases by age and training (Kanesan and Fauzan, 2019). Objective 4 is therefore achieved.

Contribution

From a global south perspective, provinces in South Africa and ultimately Africa have the potential for high emotional intelligence to improve well-being (Freedman, 2018). Therefore, based on the study's findings and considering the new stressors educators experience, a practical research model (Appendix G) was proposed for key stakeholders in order to continue fueling emotional intelligence in Africa hence enhancing quality of life. Appendix G depicts the variable emotional intelligence with its essential tailor-made strategies demonstrating a significant relationship with the quality of life, which will serve as a resilience mechanism for the South African basic education fraternity to thrive in the face of adversity, like COVID-19. Consequently, when key strategies are executed fully by the relevant stakeholders, it will aid in the development of skills to appraise, understand, manage, regulate, and utilize emotions positively during challenging situations, hence improving the quality of life. A few recommendations among others, stemming from the findings of the study are briefly outlined below:

Department of basic education

Employee assistance programs

Comorbidities remain a critical health risk for educators since educators increase their chance of contracting COVID-19 due to a weaker immune system or the necessity for more care that exposes them to others, hence deteriorating the quality of life (Gillespie, 2021). With educators back to classroom teaching, the executive director of the National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa, Basil Manuel, believes that schools must safeguard the well-being of educators, with health and safety regulations so that educators do not become ill (Hlati, 2021). Additionally, UNESCO (2020) confirms that educators who have developed their own psychosocial skills through regular professional debriefing and learning sessions with internal counseling services are better equipped to provide psychosocial support to their students and help themselves and their students navigate the uncertainty and anxiety that the pandemic brings.

The problems caused by the COVID-19 virus are multifaceted. While the resulting concerns generate health, economic, social, and psychological issues, such challenges also trigger each other (Koçak, 2021). Unemployment, isolation, fear, stress, and anxiety of ill-health, all have a negative impact on psychological health during the pandemic (Koçak, 2021). The growing awareness of psychological health and people being more open about it began long before the COVID-19 outbreak, but the current circumstance has accelerated the trend (Singleton, 2020). Qiu et al. (2020) find that fear of insecurity and uncertainty brought on by COVID-19, as well as the separation and loss of crucial relationships and significant lifestyle changes, have elicited strong emotional responses that pose a threat to psychological health. History has showcased that the effect on psychological health from disasters outlasts the physical impact, implying that the present increased psychological health requirement will continue far beyond the COVID-19 outbreak itself (Panchal et al., 2021). As the weight of the crisis begins to lift, health experts predict a long-term impact on people's psychological health (Joseph, 2021; Koçak, 2021). Considering the adverse effect on psychological health and well-being, the need for the implementation of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are imperative for aiding post-traumatic growth (Lichtman, 2020).

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are designed to provide a variety of psychological services to employees (Baskar et al., 2021). Miller (2019) argues that Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are underutilized because employees do not know about them, do not understand what they provide and employees may feel there is a stigma around using these services. COVID-19 has however resulted in an increased focus on Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Veldsman and Van Aarde (2021) postulate that employee quality of life and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) came under scrutiny as organizations struggled to remain productive while assisting employees in dealing with unprecedented change. Higher levels of stress, anxiety and fear had a significant impact on the workforce, hence Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) were utilized to provide security and support (Couser et al., 2020). The study recommends organizations design and utilize Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) which are aligned to organizational culture and practices and the latest well-being trends popularized by COVID-19.

School leaders

Support groups

According to the study, support groups for educators should be formed for educators to connect with their peers and improve educator well-being. Support groups can concentrate on:

- self-care;
- provision of teaching tips and professional development;
- examining strategies and activities for a healthy work–life balance;
- creating work boundaries for what is deemed a healthy work environment, such as ceasing to glorify overworking after hours and instead encouraging rest; and
- identifying trending themes on which educators can share their knowledge and assist one another.

There are numerous examples during the pandemic of educators virtually connecting to support one another through peer, professional and psychosocial support, including mobile coaching and mentoring, even in crisis scenarios. Costa Rica, Croatia, and the Philippines, for example, are leveraging virtual platforms to provide support to educators for professional and personal development (UNESCO, 2020).

Educators

Self-affirmations

Self-affirmations are "self-generated thoughts or experiences that bring about an expanded and positive view of the self and can reduce resistance to situations perceived as threatening" (Hill et al., 2020, p. 1). Self-affirmations can help ease anxiety, mitigate negative emotions, decrease stress, increase well-being, make people more open to behavior change, boosts confidence, and stay on track with recovery goals (Cohen and Sherman, 2014; Hinders, 2020). According to the self-affirmation theory (1988), people are motivated to preserve a positive self-view; therefore, when an individual's self-competence is endangered, self-affirmations can restore self-competence by allowing individuals to reflect on sources of self-worth being the individual's core values (Cascio et al., 2016). Self-affirmations have become crucial for coping with COVID-19 stressors. While COVID-19 is a negative circumstance, using affirmations can help one respond and react to one's emotions in a more positive way (Epton et al., 2020; Van der Veen,

2021). For example: "I believe in my ability to get through tough times," or "I will not stress over things I cannot control" (Gillman et al., 2022). There are mobile self-affirmation apps, for example, "ThinkUp: Positive Affirmations," founded by Irit Wald and Jenny Shalev. The app is a leading self-affirmation app that has favorably increased user well-being (Springer et al., 2018; Pangilinan, 2020). The self-affirmation mobile apps are an effect technique to assist users in manifesting positive affirmations, hence improving well-being.

Li et al. (2020) show for the first time that an experimental intervention involving personal value affirmation can buffer psychological stress response during the COVID-19 outbreak. Values consisted of discipline and character, ability and talent, public interest, family and kinship, money and wealth, fame and status. Participants who validated their values, in particular, did not experience increased levels of anxiety as compared to control participants. Furthermore, a spontaneous self-affirmation study was conducted through determining predictors of time spent accessing news about COVID-19, adherence to United Kingdom government recommendations, and worry from COVID-19 related news. Each predictor was regressed onto spontaneous self-affirmation (Epton et al., 2020). Self-affirmation such as "If I am feeling threatened or anxious then I will remind myself of my strengths or values" (Epton et al., 2020). Results indicated that threats arising from the pandemic and the measures used to mitigate it seemed to increase the use of spontaneous self-affirmation in the United Kingdom population which assisted with a change in behavior and stress management (Epton et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that educators possessing high levels of emotional intelligence add value to the different facets of their lives when presented with adversity. The practical research model (Appendix G), generated in the study demonstrates how the dimensions of emotional intelligence (appraisal, regulation, and utilization of emotion) influence each facet of quality of life (physical health, psychological health and environmental health). The positive association of the variables therefore enhances the quality of life of educators thereby allowing educators to develop resilience, to thrive and cope in the post-COVID age, and during adversity.

Several limitations had a bearing on the study. Time constraints were a barrier because it was a lengthy process to gain authorization from the Department of Basic Education, hence causing the study to be delayed. The sample size was inadequate to generalize to all school educators at large. The educators' time constraints in filling out the questionnaires also impacted the study's deadline. In terms of recommendations, firstly, for future research, the authors recommend a mixed methods approach in an attempt to determine the richness of the data and to increase validity in the findings. A comparative study using a mixed methods approach between two districts in KwaZulu-Natal to further enhance outcomes is also

recommended. The study was located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Other provinces in South Africa should be analyzed for ascertaining a fuller South African impact.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/**Supplementary material**, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Research & Ethics Committee, UKZN. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work. This research has been extracted from a Masters dissertation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary materials

The Supplementary materials for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.921343/full#supplementary-material

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![frontiers] Frontiers in **Psychology**

Exploring the value of organizational support, engagement, and psychological wellbeing in the volunteer context

Grace Dekel[1]*, Madelyn Geldenhuys[2,3] and Jemma Harris[1]

[1]Department of Psychological Sciences, Australian College of Applied Professions, Sydney, NSW, Australia, [2]Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Notre Dame, Sydney, NSW, Australia, [3]Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

In Australia, young adults are more likely to experience psychological distress than other age-groups. Accordingly, volunteer work engagement may act as an important tool for supporting psychological wellbeing. The present study relies on the job demands−resources model and self-determination theory to help understand the negative consequences of high work demands and the importance of effective organizational support to enhance positive mental health outcomes. To address research gaps, the current study explores these concepts for the young adulthood cohort in not-for-profit organizations. The study aims to explore the relationship between psychological wellbeing, volunteer work engagement, and perceived organizational support. The study used a quantitative, cross-lagged, longitudinal method for collecting data from two online surveys completed 4 weeks apart. The inclusion criteria of participants were volunteers who worked a minimum of 4 h a month (on average), resided in Australia, and were between 19 and 40 years old (N = 202). The main study findings were that perceived organizational support mediated the relationship between psychological wellbeing at time point 1 and volunteer engagement at time point 2. However, perceived organizational support did not mediate volunteer engagement at time point 1 and psychological wellbeing at time point 2. There were no bidirectional effects between volunteer engagement and psychological wellbeing. The findings contributed to the existing literature, suggesting there are overlaps between support mechanisms and motivation between paid and unpaid work. The practical implications for not-for-profit organizations are the importance of providing organizational support for young adult volunteers to improve wellbeing outcomes. Limitations and future study recommendations are presented.

Introduction

Over the years, philosophers and researchers have asked why does one help another when there is no visible reward? Various studies have found that helping behavior, such as volunteer work and community service increases psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and happiness (Lauri and Calleja, 2019). Volunteer work can be a combination of prosocial behavior and altruism and has significant impacts on both the individual and the community (Lay and Hoppomann, 2015). Psychologists argue that people likely help others for either intrinsic or extrinsic purposes (Legault, 2020). Volunteering for career development is an example of extrinsic reward. Alternatively, the positive emotion experienced after responding to a fire as a rural fire service volunteer would be an example of an intrinsic reward. Therefore, volunteer work is multifaceted in the benefits and consequences it can provide an individual. Helping others can be further explained through prosocial behavior which is considered the "social glue" that enables cohesiveness among people of different ages (Lay and Hoppomann, 2015).

Volunteering, altruism, and prosocial behavior can be regarded as antecedents to positive wellbeing, happiness, personal health, and public health (Post, 2014). The current research refers to volunteer work where an individual freely chooses to provide unpaid services to a community organization (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018). Volunteer work is an important research topic because it may contribute to increases in psychological wellbeing for the individual and social cohesiveness of the community. The local community and Australian government heavily rely on volunteer contributions across many sectors, including health, youth support, and emergency services (Volunteering Australia, 2021). Volunteers have made significant contributions, although in recent years, there has been a decline in the proportion of Australians volunteering. In April 2021, close to one in four people (24%) engaged in volunteer work; however, this also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. In comparison, this number was closer to one in three (36%) people in late 2019 (Biddle and Gray, 2021). This may be partly attributed to the reduction in volunteer hours due to COVID-19; however, Australia also saw a 20% decrease in volunteering hours from 2014 to 2019 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Therefore, volunteer organizations would benefit from enhancing their understanding of the volunteer experience to identify effective methods to support volunteers' wellbeing and improve engagement.

There is a range of theories that explores the human experience with volunteer work. The volunteer process model follows a series of stages that explores the volunteer experience (Omoto and Snyder, 2016). First, the antecedent stage includes the individuals' circumstances and motivation to volunteer. Second, the experiences stage describes the relationship that develops between volunteers and organizations. Finally, the

consequences stage represents whether the individuals had positive or negative outcomes from the experience. Moreno-Jiménez and Villodres (2010) research used this model to explore the potential negative outcomes from volunteer work. They found that total time devoted to volunteering (measured in hours per month and number of months in the organization) related to feelings of being worn out and burnt out. Burnout can relate to negative consequences, including cynicism, exhaustion, and lack of professional efficacy. Moreover, when volunteers were motivated by career development, it predicted higher levels of cynicism, whereas when they were motivated by learning new skills, it had the opposite effect with cynicism. The study is limited as it did not identify interventions that could support volunteer wellbeing and retention in the organization. Thus, the volunteer process is important in predicting the mental health outcomes of the volunteer; in addition, the motivation of volunteering appears to be an important factor.

The self-determination theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan, 1980) suggests that one's behavior is motivated by wanting to satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Autonomy refers to freely choosing the activity, while relatedness refers to the need for social cohesion, and competence refers to feeling effective in a task. McCarty et al. (2018) conducted a comparative study and found that those who were forced to volunteer devoted significantly less time than those who freely chose to. The theory predicts that those who are intrinsically motivated to volunteer are more likely to have a personally enriching experience than those who are extrinsically motivated. The theory is limited as it cannot be generalized to all cultures. Previous studies in non-Western cultures have not supported the SDT to the same extent as in Western cultures (Ghose and Kassam, 2014).

The functional approach identifies specific types of motivations and examines how this affects the volunteers' psychological outcomes (Clary et al., 1998). This approach suggests that it is important for the psychological outcome of the volunteer experience to match the individual's motivation to volunteer. For example, if an individual's motivation to volunteer is to meet new people and later develop good friendships, they will likely be satisfied by their volunteer experience. This was supported by Finkelstein (2008) who found that volunteers reported greater satisfaction the more their experiences matched their reasons for helping. In addition, those that had greater fulfillment also increased the amount of time they devoted to volunteering work. There was a weak relationship between career goals and volunteer satisfaction; this may be reflective of the age-group which had a mean age of 65 years. Therefore, the study and theory appear to be limited in predominately showing effects for an older age-group, which may not be reflective of the broader volunteer population. Thus, the current study aims to further investigate the generalizability of these findings in the young adulthood contexts.

Various studies have investigated the benefits of volunteering across different life stages. Van Willigen (2000) found a positive relationship between the number of hours spent volunteering and self-reported levels of life satisfaction in older volunteers (aged 60 years and over). Alternatively, for the younger volunteers (aged under 60 years), there was a negative relationship, which suggests that different types of motivation and engagement exist between these two age-groups. However, despite these differences, the current literature tends to focus on the volunteer experience of older populations, rather than more comparative samples. One age-group that would benefit significantly from a more focused investigation is younger adults.

Erikson's (1994) theory of psychosocial development suggests that the young adulthood group (19- to 40-year-olds) is a formative life stage, and it is important for the individual to develop their sense of identity. Schwartz et al. (2021) identified that during young adulthood, there is a greater risk of engaging in personally and socially destructive behavior, which may negatively impact integration into full adulthood. According to a recent Australian (2017–2018) survey, 15% of people aged 18–24 years experienced high or very high psychological distress (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). Therefore, there is a greater need to create effective strategies to reduce levels of psychological distress in this age-group. The current study aims to better understand the volunteer experience of the young adulthood cohort. Future research needs to encompass a range of measures that capture the motivational and behavioral elements, such as self-reported measures of volunteer engagement, psychological wellbeing, and perceived organizational support.

In previous research, volunteer work has predominately been measured by asking participants to recall how many hours they have volunteered (Son and Wilson, 2012). This method could reveal recall and social desirability bias for individuals who may want to show they volunteer more than they do or cannot accurately recall how often they volunteered. In addition, the number of hours spent volunteering can be a limited measure of the overall volunteer experience, and it does not provide a clear and effective indication of how volunteer work can be related to psychological states of wellbeing.

To address this limitation, the current research considers volunteer work engagement as an alternative psychometric tool (Vecina et al., 2012). Work engagement is a positive affective-motivational state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, which is commonly investigated in organizational psychology (Schaufeli, 2011). Vigor refers to high levels of willingness to invest effort, dedication refers to strong involvement in work, and absorption reflects a pleasant state of total immersion in work. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006) when applied in the volunteer context may improve the understanding of the quality of the volunteer experience over simply stating the amount of volunteer work.

The current research aims to further validate this measure in the volunteer context and explore whether the engagement can be measured over a short period (i.e., 4 weeks).

Previous studies have used longitudinal data to explore the relationship between psychological wellbeing and volunteer work overtime. The findings of Thoits and Hewitt (2001) revealed a bidirectional relationship between psychological wellbeing and the number of hours spent volunteering. Volunteers with higher psychological wellbeing volunteered more frequently and those who volunteered more frequently were more likely to experience higher psychological wellbeing. Their study refers to the personal wellbeing model (Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, 2008), which highlights the importance of physical and mental health resources to increase the likelihood of community involvement. Volunteer work requires an investment of personal resources to the extent that those volunteers who score higher on self-reported measures of psychological wellbeing may be more likely to volunteer and may also see an increase in psychological wellbeing as an outcome of the volunteer experience.

The longitudinal data of Thoits and Hewitt (2001) were collected across two time points over 3 years. The use of this methodology, to the extent that it is bidirectional, improves the understanding of the relationship between volunteer work and wellbeing. There is no generally appropriate time lag for all relationships. In the present study, a time lag of 4 weeks was employed, which was guided by theoretical and applied considerations. At a theoretical level, previous research indicates that psychological wellbeing can change in as little as 1 month (Podsakoff et al., 2012), as well as the effect of support and job demands on the employee (Cieslak et al., 2007). At an applied level, volunteering might be used as a much-needed mental health intervention for younger adults. There are limited studies that explore the effects of wellbeing in the volunteer context over shorter periods, such as 4 weeks. Therefore, the current study time lag of 4 weeks is guided by these theoretical and practical considerations.

The job demands–resources (JD-R) model provides a comprehensive assessment of the health and motivational indicators of work-related wellbeing, and how these are a function of the work environment (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). In both paid and unpaid work, an overload of physical and emotional work demands can relate to negative consequences, such as burnout. Burnout is characterized by exhaustion and physical and psychological health problems. In addition, a lack of supportive resources may decrease engagement and motivation at work (Hakanen et al., 2008). Job resources, such as fairness, support, and job autonomy may protect against stress and burnout and increase organizational commitment (Boyd et al., 2011). Cox et al. (2010) established the JD-R model in HIV/AIDS volunteers; the findings suggest that volunteers may experience burnout when job demands are too great. Therefore, further strategies should be developed to

address the imbalance of individual resources and job demands in the volunteering context. An example of how organizational support can be beneficial is represented in humanitarian not-for-profit workers.

Aldamman et al. (2019) conducted research on humanitarian volunteers who experienced increased anxiety, depression, and burnout. They investigated whether psychological stress measured by perceived helplessness and perceived self-efficacy was mediated by perceived organizational support and mental health outcomes. The results identified that perceived organizational support was positively associated with mental wellbeing and negatively associated with adverse mental health such that organizational support was a key determinant of the mental health of humanitarian volunteers. Perceived organizational support represented the level to which the volunteers believed their organization respected their wellbeing and valued their contributions. The study was limited by the cross-sectional design, which limits further investigation of the direction of the relationships. For instance, beyond levels of organizational support, humanitarian volunteers experience adverse mental health due to the nature of their work. Consequently, without a bidirectional analysis, it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions.

The current study will extend upon existing research by using a longitudinal design with a bidirectional analysis and a sample of Australian young adult volunteers. The current research has two main objectives: first, it investigates the bidirectional relationship between psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement (Thoits and Hewitt, 2001), and second,

it explore whether organizational support indirectly affects psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement. The present research addresses gaps including limited research exploring these variables in volunteers from the young adulthood life stage. In addition, volunteer work has predominately collected data on how many hours and how long an individual volunteers, and consequently, there are limited psychometric tools that have been designed to measure volunteer work. The current study attempts to address this by evaluating and replicating work engagement in the volunteer context. In addition, consistent with the JD-R model, the current study argues that organizational support has a significant role in supporting volunteers' psychological wellbeing and engagement. Therefore, the current research seeks to extend upon existing literature by emphasizing the importance of organizational support in volunteer organizations. The first aim of the present research is to show a bidirectional effect between psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement over a period of 4 weeks. The second aim is to show that organizational support has a mediating effect between psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement in the 4 weeks.

Hypothesis 1 is that volunteer engagement at time point 1 (T1) has a significant positive direct effect on psychological wellbeing at time point 2 (T2). Hypothesis 2 is that psychological wellbeing at T1 has a significant positive direct effect on volunteer engagement at T2 (see Figure 1). Hypothesis 3 is that psychological wellbeing at T1 and volunteer engagement at T2 will have an indirect effect through perceived organizational support (see Figure 2). Hypothesis 4 is that volunteer

FIGURE 1
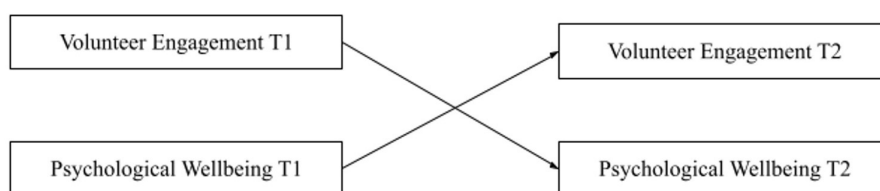Bidirectional effects model of volunteer engagement and psychological wellbeing. Single headed arrows represent regression, unbroken lines represent direct effects.
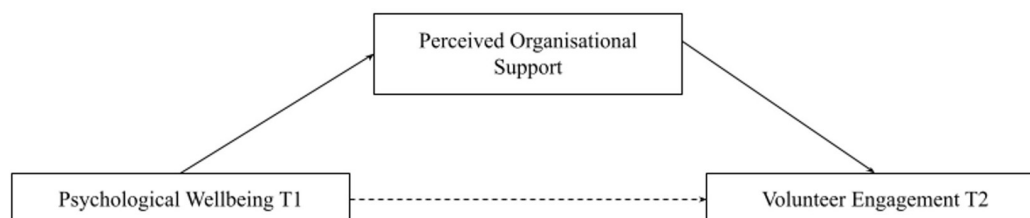

FIGURE 2
Mediation model of perceived organizational support mediating psychological wellbeing Tl and volunteer engagement T2. Single headed arrows represent regression, unbroken lines represent direct effects, broken lines represent indirect effects.
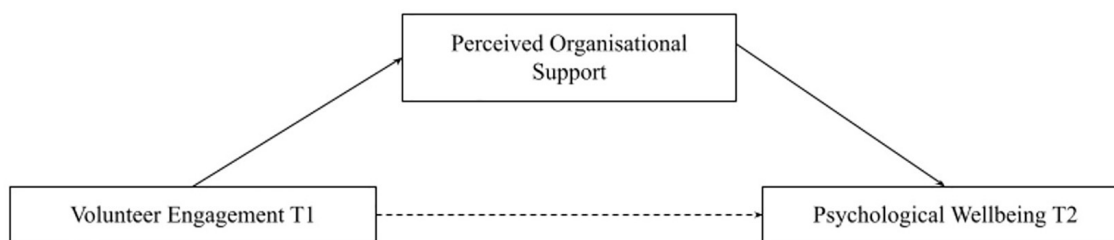
FIGURE 3
Mediation model of perceived organizational support mediating volunteer engagement Tl and psychological wellbeing T2. Single headed arrows represent regression, unbroken lines represent direct effects, broken lines represent indirect effects.

engagement at T1 and wellbeing at T2 will have an indirect effect through perceived organizational support (see **Figure 3**).

Materials and methods

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample from the public made up of active volunteers who volunteered a minimum of 4 h a month (on average). The inclusion criteria were individuals aged between 19 and 40 years (M = 27.7 years, SD = 5.2) residing in Australia. The exclusion criteria were those who did not meet the criteria and were not proficient in English. The sample comprised 138 men (68.3%) and 64 women (31.7%). Further general demographic information is presented in **Table 1**. Individuals who did not consent or who did not complete both surveys (n = 244) were excluded. In total, two surveys were completed by the participants in 4 weeks. This was managed through the Qualtrics survey platform, whereby participants who consented to participate in the second survey were automatically sent an email 4 weeks later with a new survey link. A total of 524 volunteers participated in survey 1, of which 446 provided consent to receive the link for survey 2. Of those 446 participants, 252 completed survey 2. After cleaning the data and matching the participants' responses from survey 1 and survey 2, 202 participants completed both surveys and consented to their data being used. This led to 404 numbers of occasions.

The participants had been volunteering an average of two and a half years (M = 30.79 months, SD = 14.41) and volunteered on average 4.14 h per month (SD = 2.90) between January 2021 and July 2021 when there were minimal COVID restrictions. In total, 34% of participants (n = 67) identified as having reduction in volunteer hours due to COVID-19, while 66% (n = 130) said they did not. From July 2021, the participants indicated they volunteered an average of 2.20 h per month (SD = 1.17). For the second survey (4 weeks later), the participants volunteered 14.17 h in the month (SD = 2.03), with an average of 1.75 organization (SD = 1.15). **Table 2** shows details on how

participants were impacted by COVID-19, along with their volunteering status and type of involvement.

Procedure

This research received approval from the Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP) Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 757200921; see **Supplementary Appendix B**). Participant recruitment involved online advertisements posted on volunteer-related social media pages (Facebook; see **Supplementary Appendix C**) and the university recruitment platform SONA for first-year students in psychological sciences. Participants were informed the study involved completing two online surveys investigating the relationship between volunteer engagement, psychological wellbeing, and organizational support (see **Supplementary Appendix D**). The first survey took approximately 30 min to complete. Those who consented to participate in the second survey were sent the new survey link *via* email 4 weeks after completion. Survey 2 took approximately 20 min to complete (see **Supplementary Appendix A**).

The participants were informed that they would remain anonymous, and submitting the survey was an indication of their consent to participate (see **Supplementary Appendix F**). The participants could withdraw by closing the web browser at any point during the survey; however, after submitting responses, withdrawal was no longer possible as names were not tied to responses. In recognition of their time, for each survey in which they participated, the participants were eligible to win one-of-three $40 e-gift vouchers through a voluntary raffle draw, and student participants from ACAP were eligible to receive one credit point. To support participants if they experienced distress, they were provided with a free service sheet (see **Supplementary Appendix E**). The debriefing page contained further study information and directed participants to the study's Facebook page for results (see **Supplementary Appendix G**). Collected data were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed using SPSS v. 27 and PROCESS v. 4 for SPSS.

TABLE 1 General demographic information of participants.

Baseline characteristic	Participant demographics	
	n	%
Work Status		
Full-time	147	72.80
Full-time, part-time	2	1.00
Part-time	42	20.60
Casual	3	1.50
Contractor, part-time	1	0.50
Contractor	3	1.50
Marital status		
De-facto	2	1.00
Divorced	6	2.90
Married	93	46.00
Never married	100	49.50
Separated	1	0.50
Area of residence		
City	95	47.00
Suburban	85	42.50
Rural	19	9.40
Regional	1	0.50
Level of education		
Never attended school, year 12 or equivalent	1	0.50
Year 11 or equivalent	14	6.90
Year 12 or equivalent	54	26.70
Year 12 or equivalent, certificate III/IV	4	2.00
Year 12 or equivalent, certificate I/II	3	1.50
Year 12 or equivalent, certificate I/II, bachelor's degree	1	0.50
Certificate I/II	14	6.90
Certificate III/IV	26	12.70
Graduate diploma	11	5.40
Advanced diploma	21	10.30
Bachelor's degree	19	9.40
Postgraduate degree	34	16.70
Religious status		
Buddhism	25	12.30
Christianity	43	21.40
Catholicism	73	36.00
Hinduism	12	5.90
Islam	26	12.80
Judaism	8	3.90
No religion	14	6.90
Other		
Significant personal life events		
Yes	32	16.80
No	158	83.20

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics about participants volunteer involvement and COVID-19 impacts.

Baseline characteristic	Survey one		Survey two	
	n	%	*N*	%
Volunteer status	199	98.50	201	99.50
Volunteer involvement				
Freely chosen	159	79.50	189	93.60
Forced to volunteer	2	1.00	0	0.00
Work requirements	35	17.50	10	5.00
University requirements	3	1.50	3	1.50
Episodic volunteer (once off/irregularly)	1	0.50		
COVID-19 impacts				
Self-isolation	76	37.60	9	2.50
Government lockdowns	28	13.90	5	2.50
No impact	95	47.00	96	47.50
Fully vaccinated and able to resume work			74	36.60

analysis was performed using the Hayes PROCESS approach with bias-accelerated bootstrapping (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). Jose (2016) recommends the Hayes PROCESS approach in testing longitudinal mediation as it provides a valid estimate of the indirect effects through bootstrapping. The bootstrapping method used 5,000 bootstrap samples of randomly selected observations from the data set that was drawn with replacements (Lockwood and MacKinnon, 1998). The results from the bootstrap sample were then used to create an estimate and confidence interval for each model path. A confidence interval that did not contain 0 indicated a significant model path (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). We generated an estimate and confidence interval for the path from the predictor variable to the mediator (a path), the path from the mediator to the outcome (the *b* path), the overall mediated path (the *a*b* path), and finally, the direct effect of the predictor on the outcome after controlling for the mediator (the *c'* path). We chose this mediation procedure as traditional mediation tests have low power (MacKinnon et al., 2002; Shrout and Bolger, 2002). Internal consistency of each questionnaire was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.70$ as acceptable (Cohen, 1988). For the analysis, bivariate associations among variables were examined using Pearson's correlation, and correlations were interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) conventions.

Measures

The participants completed two similar online surveys (**Supplementary Appendix A**) which collected eight demographic variables, including gender, age, work status, area of residence, marital status, religious status, and level of education. Volunteer impacts also collected related statistics,

Statistical analysis

A linear regression analysis was used to test the bidirectional effects of H1 and H2, using the SPSS data program. To test indirect effects for H3 and H4, a mediational regression

including volunteer status, volunteer involvement, and COVID-19 impacts. In addition, the participants completed assessments of psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction, happiness, volunteer satisfaction, organizational satisfaction, volunteer engagement, and perceived organizational support (not included in survey 2).

COVID-19

To measure COVID-19 impacts, the participants were asked whether they had experienced a reduction in hours volunteering with a "yes" or "no" response option. The question was "has there been a reduction in the level of volunteer work due to COVID-19?". If they had a "yes" response, they were also asked to respond to an open-ended statement, "please provide a short sentence description of how your volunteer work has changed due to COVID-19."

Psychological well-being

An eight-item Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB; Diener et al., 2009) was used to assess the individuals' level of subjective wellbeing. Items were rated using a seven-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*. A sample item is "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life." Following Diener et al. (2009), items were summed to yield a total, with higher scores indicating higher levels of overall positive functioning. Internal consistency for psychological wellbeing in the current study was strong ($\alpha = 0.78$).

Volunteer engagement

A shortened nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$; Schaufeli et al., 2006) was adopted for the volunteering sample. The scale has been validated in a sample of volunteers, where the terminology "work" was made more specific to "voluntary work" (Vecina et al., 2012). Items were rated using a seven-point Likert scale from 0 = *never* to 6 = *always*. A sample item is "I get carried away when I am volunteering." Following Schaufeli et al. (2006), each item was summed, where higher scores reflected greater vigor, dedication, and absorption when executing their voluntary work. In the present study, the reliability coefficient for volunteer engagement was strong ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Perceived organizational support

A shortened eight-item perceived organizational support (POS; Eisenberger et al., 1986) scale was used to assess the globality of n employees' or workers' perception of how they are being supported. The scale was adapted to the volunteer context, where "the organization" was replaced with "the volunteer organization." The shortened adopted measure was used in a volunteer sample by Aldamman et al. (2019), with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$. Items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 6 *strongly agree*. A sample item is "The volunteer organization values my contribution to its well-being." Higher scores indicated a more positive perception

of organizational support. The internal reliability of the scale was sub-par, $\alpha = 0.61$. To adjust for the low internal consistency, a new variable was created with five items, and the items removed were based on whether the corrected item total correlation was $r < 0.30$ (Hajjar, 2018). When removing items 4, 6, and 8, Cronbach's alpha improved, and the final internal consistency was strong ($\alpha = 0.72$).

Results

Preliminary analysis

The final sample included 202 participants who completed both surveys and therefore 404 data entries, sufficient for testing a longitudinal model with a complex cross-lagged design (Fields, 2013; Newsom, 2015). This is a sufficient number as some attrition rate is acceptable due to the longitudinal nature of the design (Hedeker et al., 1999). An initial process of listwise deletion in SPSS was conducted on survey 2, and 52 participants were removed from the data because they did not consent, their USERID did not match, or they did not complete the survey. Missing value analysis using Little's missing completely at random test was conducted on the final sample, revealing data were missing at random, $\chi^2(96) = 87.51$, $p = 0.720$ (Fields, 2013).

Normality and assumptions

Table 3 displays descriptive statistics that include means, standard deviations, standard skew, kurtosis, outliers, and Shapiro–Wilk scores. Data from psychological wellbeing at T2 and volunteer engagement at T1 were normally distributed as Shapiro–Wilk tests were non-significant. However, psychological wellbeing at T1, volunteer engagement at T2, and perceived organizational support were not normally distributed as they yielded significant Shapiro–Wilk tests. Kline (2011) suggests that skewness between −3 and 3, and kurtosis between −10 and 10 were appropriate when the sample was more than 200. This recommendation was appropriate, given that the sample consisted of 202 participants who completed two surveys which sum to 404 data points. According to Kline (2011), psychological wellbeing at T1, psychological wellbeing at T2, and volunteer engagement at T1 did not violate normality. However, volunteer engagement at T2 and perceived organizational support were positively skewed.

Researchers conducted further analysis to assess outliers in the variables. Psychological wellbeing at T1, volunteer engagement at T2, and perceived organizational support had univariate outliers (see **Table 3**). Winsorizing was implemented to deal with these outliers. Any data value above the 95th percentile was replaced by the value of the 95th percentile, and any value lower than the fifth percentile was replaced by the value of the 5th percentile

TABLE 3   Summary table of normality assessment for variables.

Variables	M	SD	Modality	Skewness	Kurtosis	Outliers	Shapiro–Wilk
Psychological wellbeing T1	43.5	5.1	Unimodal	−4.25	8.10	8 with $\|z\| > 1.96$ (4.1%). 2 with $\|z\| > 2.58$ (1%). 3 with $\|z\| > 3.29$ (1.6%).	$W(160) = 0.93***$
Psychological wellbeing T2	42.5	4.7	Unimodal	−0.46	−1.18		$W(160) = 0.99$
Volunteer engagement T1	36.6	6.4	Unimodal	−0.50	1.49		$W(160) = 0.99$
Volunteer engagement T2	28.1	7.4	Unimodal	5.44	1.45	13 with $\|z\| > 1.96$ (6.7%). 3 with $\|z\| > 2.58$ (1.5%).	$W(160) = 0.94***$
Perceived organizational support	13.6	4.5	Unimodal	5.08	1.09	4 with $\|z\| > 1.96$ (2.1%). 4 with $\|z\| > 2.58$ (2.1%).	$W(160) = 0.93***$

TABLE 4   Means, standard deviations, and normality statistics for winsorized scores.

Variables	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro–Wilk
Psychological wellbeing T1	43.4	4.2	0.34	−0.38	$W(175) = 0.98*$
Volunteer engagement T2	28.2	6.9	4.08	0.41	$W(175) = 0.93***$
Perceived organizational support	13.5	4.4	3.70	−0.52	$W(175) = 0.92***$

$N = 202$, the outliers of original scores were trimmed by changing scores over 95th and 5th percentiles to the respective scores.
$*p < 0.05$, $***p < 0.001$.

(Ghosh and Vogt, 2012). After winsorization, psychological wellbeing at T1 improved the Shapiro–Wilk score, perceived organizational support, and volunteer engagement at T2 yielded improvement in skewness and kurtosis, although not in Shapiro–Wilk scores. Table 4 represents the new means and standard deviations. Homogeneity of variance was met for both predictors, multicollinearity was met, and no multivariate outliers were identified in the dependent variables. There were no other issues of mathematical assumptions (see Supplementary Appendix H).

Bivariate correlations

There was an overall trend of weak–moderate correlations (see Table 5). There was a significant weak negative correlation between volunteer engagement at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2. We found a large positive significant relationship between volunteer engagement T1 and psychological wellbeing T1. Psychological wellbeing at T2 and perceived organizational support have a large significant positive relationship. No correlation was found between volunteer engagement at T2 and perceived organizational support, psychological wellbeing at T2 and volunteer engagement at T2, and perceived organizational support and volunteer engagement at T1.

Bidirectional effects

Hypothesis 1 was tested using linear regression analysis. The results showed that volunteer engagement at T1 had a

TABLE 5   Pearson's correlations for measures.

Variables	1	2	3	4
(1) Psychological wellbeing T1	–			
(2) Psychological wellbeing T2	0.08	–		
(3) Volunteer engagement T1	0.41**	−0.20**	–	
(4) Volunteer engagement T2	0.10	0.08	−0.17*	
(5) Perceived organisational support	0.39**	0.34**	−0.05	0.16**

$*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$.

negative significant effect on psychological wellbeing at T2. Although a significant direct effect was found, the hypothesis was not met since this relationship is negative. Volunteer engagement at T1 had a negative significant relationship on psychological wellbeing T2, $F(1,186) = 7.81$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.04$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.035$. The regression coefficient ($\beta = -0.15$, 95% CI $[-0.26, -0.05]$) indicated that an increase in volunteer engagement at T1 corresponded, on average, to a decrease in psychological wellbeing at T2 of 0.15 points. Hypothesis 2 stated that psychological wellbeing at T1 would be positively significantly predicted by volunteer engagement at T2, to test whether a linear regression analysis was used. The hypothesis was not met, psychological wellbeing at T1 was not significantly predicted by volunteer engagement at T2, $R^2 = 0.01$, $F(1,182) = 1.65$, $p = 0.201$, 95% CI $[-0.09, 0.39]$.

Mediation analysis

Hypothesis 3 stated that volunteer engagement at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2 would be mediated by perceived

organizational support. The first model which tested Hypothesis 3 resulted in no mediation (see **Figure 4**). There was a non-significant relationship between volunteer engagement at T1 and perceived organizational support, $R^2 = 0.008$. There was a significant positive direct effect between perceived organizational support and psychological wellbeing at T2. In addition, volunteer engagement at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2 had a significant negative effect when mediated by perceived organizational support, $R^2 = 0.14^{***}$ (weak effect). Contrary to prediction, the indirect effect of perceived organizational support on volunteer engagement at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2 was not significant, $b = -0.02$, BCa 95% CI [−0.08, 0.02].

Hypothesis 4 stated that psychological wellbeing at T1 and volunteer engagement at T2 would be mediated by perceived organizational support. The second model which tested Hypothesis 4 yielded a full mediation effect (see **Figure 5**). There was a significant positive direct effect of psychological wellbeing at T1 on perceived organizational support, $R^2 = 0.15^{***}$ (weak effect). In addition, a significant positive direct effect of organizational support on volunteer engagement T2, $R^2 = 0.04^*$ (weak effect). The pathway (c') between psychological wellbeing at T1 and volunteer engagement at T2 mediated by perceived organizational support was not significant. Following the prediction, the indirect effect of perceived organizational support on psychological wellbeing at T1 and volunteer engagement at T2 was significant, $b = 0.12$, BCa 95% CI [0.009, 0.249].

Additional analyses

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to investigate perceived organizational support as a predictor of psychological wellbeing at T1 and T2, and volunteer engagement at T1 and T2. **Table 6** shows the regression coefficients of these analyses. Perceived organizational support significantly positively predicted psychological wellbeing at T2 (medium effect size) and psychological wellbeing at T1 (medium effect size). Volunteer engagement at T1 had a negative significant effect on perceived organizational support (weak effect size), and volunteer engagement at T2 was not statistically significant.

An additional multiple linear regression was run to identify the impact of whether a reduction of volunteer hours due to COVID-19-predicted change in psychological wellbeing at T1 and T2, as well as volunteer engagement T1 and T2. The model was significant and indicated the four predictors explained 14% of the variance [$R^2 = 0.14$, $F(4,163) = 6.43$, $p < 0.001$]. COVID-19 significantly predicted a decrease in volunteer engagement at T1 ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < 0.05$) and a significant increase in psychological wellbeing at T2 ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$). COVID-19 did not significantly predict psychological wellbeing at T1

TABLE 6   Multiple linear regression coefficients of perceived organizational support on wellbeing and engagement.

Variable	*B*	β	*SE*
Constant	−13.98		4.02
Psychological wellbeing T1	0.42***	0.40	0.08
Volunteer engagement T1	−0.11*	−0.16	0.05
Psychological wellbeing T2	0.26***	0.29	0.06
Volunteer engagement T2	0.08	0.13	0.04
R^2	0.31***		
Adj. R^2	0.29		

$N = 202$. We examined the impact of perceived organizational support on psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement across time point 1 and time point 2.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

($\beta = 0.13$, $p = 0.104$) and volunteer engagement T2 ($\beta = -0.02$, $p = 0.760$).

Discussion

The objectives of this research were to explore whether volunteer work had a significant personal benefit for young adults. Specifically, perceived organizational support indirectly affected the relationship between volunteer work engagement at time point 1 (T1) and psychological wellbeing at time point 2 (T2). We found no evidence to support a bidirectional relationship between volunteer work engagement and psychological wellbeing. There was a negative relationship found between volunteer work engagement at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2. Furthermore, we found no significant relationship between psychological wellbeing at T1 and volunteer work engagement at T2. Regarding indirect effects, psychological wellbeing at T1 did not have an indirect effect on volunteer work engagement at T2 through perceived organizational support; however, volunteer work engagement at T1 had an indirect effect on psychological wellbeing at T2 through perceived organizational support. This study addressed research gaps because previous studies had not used these variables in the model, did not use a time lag of 4 weeks, or the young adulthood sample.

Bidirectional effects: Hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2

Although the relationship between volunteer work engagement at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2 was significant, no bidirectional relationship between volunteer work engagement and psychological wellbeing was found. Therefore, the results of this study do not support previous studies that explored the bidirectional effects between volunteer
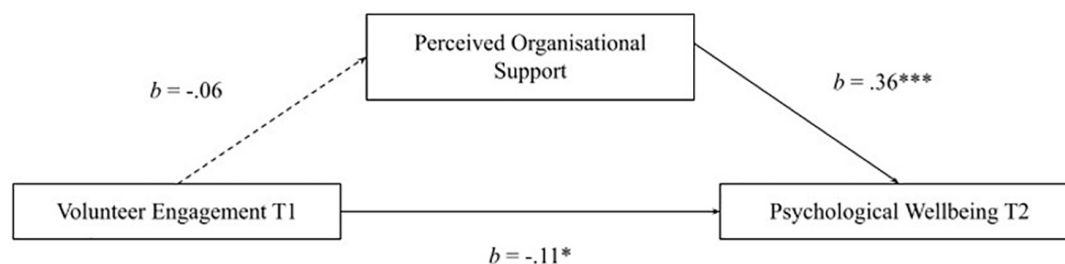
FIGURE 4
No mediation model of volunteer engagement Tl and psychological wellbeing T2 through perceived organizational support. No mediation in the model, $n = 202$. Unbroken lines are direct significant pathways between variables; broken lines represent indirect pathways between variables. Unstandardized effects are shown and represented by b values. $*p < 0.05$, $***p < 0.001$.
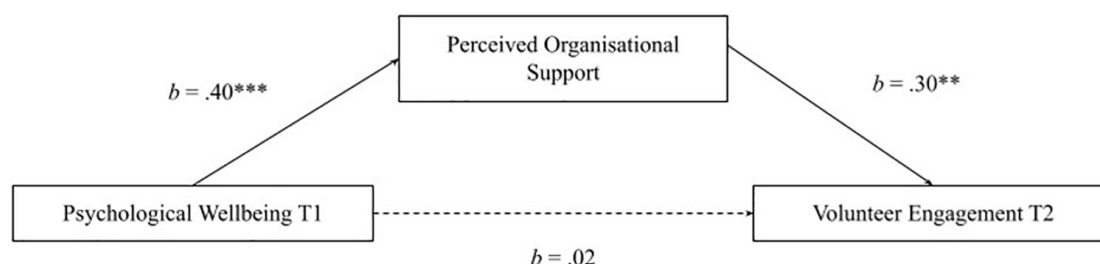

FIGURE 5
Full mediation of psychological wellbeing Tl and volunteer engagement T2 through perceived organizational support. Final model of mediation effects measuring young adults' psychological wellbeing time point 1 (Tl) and volunteer engagement time point 2 (T2) through perceived organizational support, $n = 202$. Unbroken lines are direct significant pathways between variables; broken lines represent indirect pathways between variables. Unstandardized effects are shown and represented by b values. $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.

work and psychological wellbeing over longer periods of 3 and 10 years (Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Son and Wilson, 2012). The direct effect between volunteer work engagement at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2 was negative. Therefore, suggesting a decrease in psychological wellbeing over time, while no significant effect was found between psychological wellbeing at T1 and volunteer work engagement at T2. This result supports hypothesis 3 that the third variable of perceived organizational support may indirectly affect the relationship between psychological wellbeing at T1 and volunteer work engagement at T2.

Volunteer work engagement at T1 and volunteer work engagement at T2 were significantly negatively correlated, which shows a negative relationship with engagement over time. This suggests that there is likely variability in how volunteers engage and how their wellbeing changes across different time points. There may be contributing organizational factors, such as unexpected changes in the volunteer work environment that limited the participants' ability to develop high levels of engagement. In addition, there was no correlation between psychological wellbeing at T1 and T2. Previous research has found psychological wellbeing to be variable overtime, although it is relatively stable over shorter periods (Cieslak et al., 2007). In

addition, participants may have been in a generally good state of wellbeing, and it may take more than one variable time point to perceive a severe change in wellbeing.

Previous studies applied the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) to understand the positive and negative outcomes for employees and volunteers. When there are greater demands than resources, this may negatively impact psychological wellbeing and volunteer work engagement. In the current study, the participants may have been exposed to greater demands in the form of personal stressors, which may be reflected by hours spent volunteering. In the current survey, additional analyses suggested that COVID-19 significantly impacted volunteer work engagement at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2. The participants were asked how their volunteer hours changed throughout the year. They reported volunteering an average of 4 h per month between January 2021 and July 2021 before COVID-19 restrictions, which reduced to 2 h per month during July 2021, and then increased to 14 h at T2. This could suggest that the increase in hours volunteers worked increased the demand and workload for the individual, negatively impacting their engagement and wellbeing. In addition, there were greater stressors associated with this period due to COVID-19, including lockdowns, higher risk of infection, and change of

in-person volunteer activities to online forums. Volunteer work engagement is a state of absorption, dedication, and vigor in which individuals feel fulfilled by their task (Schaufeli, 2011). When reaching a high level of work engagement, individuals may often feel energized after the experience, developing a sense of fulfillment and greater wellbeing. The discrepancy in findings may be attributed to the 19- to 40-year-old sample, which is likely busier than that outside of this age-group. Their lifestyle may include a combination of work and personal commitments, including full-time work, a young family, and higher education studies. These personal and social factors may contribute to the challenges of immersing oneself in volunteer work.

Indirect effects: Hypothesis 3 and hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 3 was not supported as there was no indirect effect of wellbeing and engagement through perceived organizational support. The unexpected results may be due to a weak correlation between engagement at T1 and T2 in the current study, which likely resulted in limited interaction with the organization. During the period of data collection (July – October 2021), there were higher rates of COVID cases, alongside local government lockdowns. Thus, volunteers likely spent less time with organizations in general. In the model, perceived organizational support significantly predicted psychological wellbeing at T2, which suggests that those who observed that the organization valued their contributions were more likely to present with an increase in psychological wellbeing at T2. Moreover, through further analyses, perceived organizational support had a positive relationship with psychological wellbeing at T1 and psychological wellbeing at T2, although a weak negative relationship with volunteer work engagement at T1. These findings suggest that perceived organizational support may have a greater effect on wellbeing than engagement.

Hypothesis 4 was supported as perceived organizational support had a significant indirect effect on psychological wellbeing at T1 and volunteer work engagement at T2. These findings are in line with previous studies as they suggest that perceived organizational support contributes to volunteer mental health through its effect on wellbeing and engagement (Aldamman et al., 2019; Pahlevan Sharif et al., 2021). Windsor et al. (2008) suggested that volunteers in the young adulthood life stage (younger than 60 years) do not derive the same psychological benefits as older adult volunteers (over 60 years; Windsor et al., 2008). The present study contrasts these results and indicates that a presence of perceived organizational support may mediate the relationship between wellbeing and engagement for younger volunteers. Similarly, Clary and Snyder (1999) suggest those in young adulthood are driven to volunteer for extrinsic purposes, such as developing skills and making

connections for their careers. The current study findings did not support this as most participants (79.50% in the first survey and 93.60% in the second survey) indicated they were freely choosing to volunteer, in contrast to being extrinsically motivated by work requirements. In survey 1, 17.50% of the participants indicated they were volunteering for work requirements, but this reduced in the second survey to 10%. The change in volunteer involvement may be a consequence of organizational support such that when volunteers have well-established resources, it may encourage them to continue volunteering of their own volition.

Implications of the findings

The contributions of the present research are the previously unexplored variables of work engagement in the volunteer context for the young adulthood cohort tested using the regression and mediational model. Findings from this study produce opportunities for further investigations into the relationship between these variables, across different time lags, and demographics. These findings contribute to both theory and empirical evidence as they provide support for Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) JD-R model. The current findings encourage a balanced approach where not-for-profit organizations should implement strategies to provide appropriate support resources. In addition, the present study further supported the SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000), which suggests that when volunteer work is freely chosen and the individual has good relatedness in the form of perceived organizational support, then they may experience competence in the form of engagement.

The practical implications from this research suggest that on an individual level, people may experience a positive relationship between psychological wellbeing and volunteer work engagement with the presence of organizational support. For example, organizational management may proactively provide feedback to volunteers to show them that their work is being appreciated and recognized. In addition, organizations can provide weekly or monthly "check-ins" by assigned mentors where volunteers can express any concerns they may have. There are potential implications for the young adulthood cohort in Australia that encourage volunteer participation. The present findings depict an increase between levels of freely chosen volunteer involvement from time point 1 to time point 2. This suggests that young adults that freely choose to volunteer may derive personal benefits from the experience. Organizations may choose to provide greater resources to support the young adulthood demographics to increase volunteer work engagement and wellbeing. These findings may inform not-for-profit organizations on how to develop better recruitment and volunteer retention strategies for the young adulthood cohort.

The macro-level implications of the study are the Australian ideologies for prosocial and helping behavior in the local and

wider community. Not-for-profit organizations would benefit from increased funding to hire high-level professionals, such as organizational psychologists to advise on how to best support their volunteers. There may be smaller volunteer organizations that cannot learn and create avenues that will ensure professional development, organizational support, and subsequently volunteer retention. Thus, the present study contributed to the volunteer and not-for-profit organizational research field from a multitude of levels that can lead to further research.

Limitations and future directions

The present study did not use a control group of non-volunteers. Therefore, the study was not able to assess whether the results were significantly different from the natural changes of engagement, wellbeing, and support over time. Hence, the current study does not imply causation, and the findings were correlational. The current model can be used in future research to assess whether similar findings are present in a non-volunteer sample working in for-profit organizations. In addition, there are limitations in generalizing Western findings to non-western populations. Hence, future research can investigate how the current model fits with young adult samples from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There was a negative correlation of volunteer engagement between the two time points, as well as no correlation between psychological wellbeing across time points. These unexpected results represent a limitation of the cross-lagged effects as they do not explain weekly or monthly variations, in comparison to multilevel analyses accounting for lagged effects. Therefore, future research should measure across multiple time points to assess the variability over time of volunteer engagement and psychological wellbeing for the young adulthood cohort.

The study was not able to measure the emotional and cognitive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study measured the behavioral impact of COVID-19 through the reduction in hours of volunteer work. However, it is important to acknowledge that the volunteer experience may have been impacted to a greater extent by COVID-19, for example, by necessitating work from home with limited social interaction and the fear of contracting COVID-19. The period of data collection may have contributed to the unexpected findings, and future research should explore the psychological impacts of COVID-19.

The type of volunteer work was not measured in this study. Therefore, the study cannot provide organizations with specific recommendations that reflect the nature of their volunteer work. Future studies should focus on types of volunteers, for instance, comparing the levels of engagement and wellbeing between emergency service volunteers and volunteer telehealth workers. Finally, there is much research required on the impact of volunteer work in young adulthood such that future research should explore the relationship between wellbeing and other psychological states associated with unpaid work. For example, burnout can contribute to the understanding of how to improve volunteer retention and organizational commitment, further enhancing the volunteer experience for this age-group.

Conclusion

This study was the first to investigate the bidirectional effects between psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement across a time lag of 4 weeks, and the mediating effect of perceived organizational support of psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement for a young adulthood sample. The findings highlighted the importance of organizational support in mediating the relationship between psychological wellbeing and volunteer engagement, providing new insights into the volunteer experience of young adults. Future research should replicate the present model and include new variables to assess the psychological impacts of COVID-19, re-testing the variables across multiple time points, and exploring new volunteer-related outcomes in the young adulthood life stage. Nevertheless, the present findings are significant and contribute to a richer understanding of the factors supporting volunteer work in young adulthood. Indeed, it appears that helping others can help oneself, with the appropriate support resources in place.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/**Supplementary material**, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Australian College of Applied Professions Human Research Ethics. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

GD, MG, and JH contributed to the conception and interpretation of the study and results. MG developed the study design. JH assisted with framing the literature review. GD managed the data collection, performed the analysis, and wrote the completed drafts of the manuscript. All authors

contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.915572/full#supplementary-material

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Check for updates

The work identity of leaders in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic

Stephanie Meadows and Roslyn De Braine*

Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, School of Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

The world of work is being changed at an unprecedented rate as a result of the rise of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This rate of change was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which left organizations and their leadership to deal with myriad of challenges. These changes also impacted leaders' identities in their work and their roles in their organizations. We examine how leaders responded to the various workplace challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and what this meant for their work identities as leaders. To do this, we made use of role identity theory, social identity theory, and leader identity. A qualitative study was conducted with a group of eight senior leaders from various South African and global organizations who had between five and 10 years' work experience, and some had even more. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted virtually and in person. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The main finding that emerged from the research was that leaders employed virtual leadership to ensure that customers' expectations were met, and to manage team-and organizational performance. These leaders achieved this by fostering a digital culture and building effective teams. They achieved their leadership goals by ensuring social identity continuity amongst their teams. This required them taking on extra roles, such as strategist, technology expert, entrepreneur, coach, mentor, and member of the team. Their leader role identity, as part of their work identity, was amplified by the pandemic. The implication is that organizations should develop leadership development programs to increase and strengthen leader identities to capacitate them for times of crisis.

KEYWORDS
work identity, leader role identity, COVID-19 pandemic, social identity continuity, virtual leadership, role identity, leader identities

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in unprecedented change for organizations globally. Leaders had to design fit-for-purpose operating models, which included new ways of doing things, new roles, and new ways of leading self and others (Jost et al., 2020).

COVID-19 was first identified in November 2019, in Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei province. The disease causes severe acute respiratory illness, which was

sometimes fatal. The disease rapidly spread around the world, and no continent escaped the disastrous health consequences and socio-economic impacts.

Leaders worldwide were forced to design and implement strategies to deal with the pandemic at a very fast pace. National lockdowns were instituted globally, which compelled people to remain in their homes, in an attempt to control the spread of the virus. In South Africa, the economy slowed down, job losses increased, and other existing socio-economic challenges were exacerbated as a result of the lockdown regulations. During the lockdown period, the tools and technology of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) were implemented at an accelerated rate (High, 2020) to establish a "new way of working" (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2020, p. 28). One of the immediate requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic was for organizations to ensure continuation of their business through virtual working, enabled by technology, and reskilling their employees. Remote workplaces became the "new normal," which came with its own set of challenges for leadership and leadership identity.

Little is known about how a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic affects the way leaders leads and the influence this has on their identities as leaders. There is a clear link between identity and leadership (Karp and Helgø, 2008), which is why, in this study, we examined how leaders responded to the various workplace challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and, in particular, what this meant for their work identities as leaders. To do this, we made use of role identity theory, social identity theory, and leader identity theory.

Work identity

Work identity can be considered a "multi-identity, multifaceted and multi-layered construction of the self" (Lloyd et al., 2011, p. 4). Gini (1998) posited that, fundamentally, "individuals form their identities through the work that that they do" (p. 707). Walsh and Gordon (2007, p. 5) defined work identity as a "work-based self-concept, comprised of a combination of organizational, occupational, and other identities, that affects the roles people adopt and the corresponding ways they behave when performing their work." Popova-Nowak (2010), similarly, defined the concept as "a multidimensional work-based self-concept reflecting individual's self-image that integrates organizational, occupational, and other identities shaping the roles and behaviors of individuals when they perform work" (p. 2).

Work identity is formed through the personal experiences, occupational skills, work context, work practices, and social memberships of an individual. It is considered "the importance of work for a person's sense of self" (Bryan and Nandi, 2018, p. 1) and "how you define yourself through your engagement

with various aspects of your work, such as your occupation, work-roles, and organization" (McQuaid, 2019, p. 1). Another definition is that a work identity is "a socially constructed representation of an individual's unique self-perception of his/her own interactions within the employment environment" (Buche, 2008, p. 134). Caza et al., 2018) found that work identity causes individuals to perform their work in ways that reflect how they think and feel about their creativity, belief systems, and personal relationships with others.

Social identity theory

Social identity theory describes how selves are personally, contextually, and socially derived (Sinclair, 2011). An individual's self-concept is partly derived from the groups of which he or she is a part (Tajfel and Turner, 1985), which could include the departments and organizations in which they work and their professional affiliations. In this process, the self-concept becomes depersonalized (Brewer, 1991).

Organizations are social entities comprised of groups of people who collaborate and interact to perform work, and these groups of individuals develop and sustain socially derived identities (Sinclair, 2011). The identity of the group has a significant influence on the interests and motivations of group members (Sinclair, 2011). Membership of a group strengthens one's position as a leader and a professional (Lloyd et al., 2011). Social identity allows individuals within groups to experience connection (Haslam et al., 2021). In the pandemic, it was shown that social identity continuity helped to reduce loneliness amongst employees (Krug et al., 2021).

Role identity theory

Role identity theory seeks to explain the various roles we hold in our lives, and that "these roles come with prescriptions of how individuals should behave" (Van der Horst, 2018, p. 2). A role identity stems from an individual occupying or possessing a specific role (Farmer and Van Dyne, 2010). According to Walsh and Gordon (2007, p. 2), "a work identity is a reflection of the claimed central character of employees performing their work-related roles."

If individuals have a strong role identity, they are more likely to take part in the role-based behaviors associated with the role, thus meeting role expectations (Farmer and Van Dyne, 2010). According to identity theory, role identities are formed as individuals work and interact with others in order to fulfill role expectations (Burke and Stets, 2009). One such role is that of leader.

How a leader's identity is formed at work may also be explained through role theory (Kwok et al., 2018). Kwok et al. (2018) argue that leaders develop leader role identities when

they perceive themselves as leaders, which influences the extent to which they behave in a leader-like way. This then strengthens others' perception of them as leaders which leads to a stronger acceptance of them as their leaders.

Leader identity and leadership identity

Leader identity is defined as "a sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader" (Day and Harrison, 2007, p. 365). Leadership identities are defined as "experienced and projected selves or personas that aspire to "look" like leadership" (Sinclair, 2011, p. 509). Leaders are increasingly compelled to manufacture and project a sound and convincing sense of themselves, wanting to be seen as strategists and visionaries (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2014). Leaders are both "authors of and objects of identity production" (Sinclair, 2011, p. 509). This phenomenon is referred to as identity work (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2014).

Materials and methods

A qualitative approach was used in this study, as we sought to understand the perceptions and related actions of leaders in the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive convenience sampling, augmented by snowball sampling, was used, as it enables researchers to select participants who will make a valuable contribution to understanding the problem under study (Creswell, 2014, p. 239).

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews. This method was utilized because it offers flexibility by allowing new topics to emerge for exploration and further discussion (Saunders et al., 2009). Additional questions were posed to some participants to probe and obtain additional in-depth information. While some interviews were conducted in person, the majority were conducted virtually, using, amongst others, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. All interviews were recorded, with permission of the participants, using the cell phone application Voice Recorder Lite. The voice recordings were then transcribed using Otter.ai.

Participation was voluntary, and each participant signed an informed consent form. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research. Prior to the commencement of data collection, ethical clearance (#IPPM-2020-465M) was obtained the Ethics Committee of the Department Of Industrial Psychology and People Management at the University of Johannesburg.

The sample for this study consisted of a group of eight leaders from various South African and international organizations who led projects, business units, and/or teams during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 provides the biographical information of the participants.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data," and is widely used in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Using an Excel spreadsheet, the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed, which are as follows: familiarization with the data, whereby the transcribed data are read and re-read several times; noting key points; generating initial codes; and organizing the codes into meaningful groups, distinguished using color coding. The next phase was to search for themes, which involves taking a broader view of the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Different sets of codes were combined to form a theme. Thereafter, the themes were refined or narrowed down by choosing the themes that appeared most in the data set and checking if the themes were aligned to the coded extracts and the entire data set. The themes were also refined by looking at the data in a particular code to see if there was a pattern that made sense (cf. Braun and Clarke, 2006). A further review was done on the entire data set, to see if the patterns that had emerged made sense. The last phase involved defining and naming the themes. Each of the themes was then checked and evaluated against the dataset and the research questions.

Findings

Overall, participants related that the pandemic regulations introduced issues such as endless online meetings, burnout because of longer working hours, impacts on family life, negative

TABLE 1 Biographical information of participants.

No.	Gender	Job title	Years' work experience	Industry
1	Female	Head of customer retention	20+	Insurance
2	Female	Head of department	40+	Private schools
3	Female	Head of distribution	20+	Fashion
4	Male	Head of data storage management	20+	ICT
5	Female	Head of commercial property: Africa regions	20+	Banking
6	Female	International affairs director	20+	Tobacco
7	Male	Managing director	20+	Management consulting
8	Female	Head of human capital management	30+	Consulting and public sector

effects on physical and mental health, increased customer needs, and supporting teams with issues such as fear of job loss, illness, and death in the family, working from home with limited office space, and stress. Many participants indicated that it was both challenging and enriching to lead themselves and their teams during this time. It is clear that the leaders occupied multiple roles during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to keep up with the change.

The detailed findings of this study are presented according to five themes, namely (a) Customer centricity, (b) Managing performance, (c) Building effective teams, (d) Building a digital culture, and (e) Work identity.

Theme 1: Customer centricity

The *Customer centricity* theme emerged mainly when the participants were asked what they liked most about their role. The leaders in this study mentioned that it was key to understand customer needs so that they could build products and services that would satisfy their customers' needs and expectations. The codes that emerged under the customer centricity theme were: (a) *understanding the business*, (b) *understanding customer needs*, (c) *building solutions for customers*, (d) *judgment and risk-taking*, and (e) *building great relationships with customers*.

For example, with regard to understanding the business, participants noted a renewed focus on certain aspects. Participant 1 said: "I like the outcomes of this role. Being able to retain the client, understanding the outcomes of the customer research, relooking product information and pricing in order to retain clients, and achieving customer retention targets for a large insurance company is satisfying." Statements to support this included "I have to meet my customers delivery dates" (Participant 3) and "We used basic technology to help with research to understand why our customers were leaving us" (Participant 1).

Many participants indicated the need for building solutions for customers, for example: "In an ever-changing environment, the organization looks to its leaders to provide the solutions during times of change. I must provide strategies and solutions" (Participant 4).

With regard to judgment and risk-taking, some leaders indicated that, in a highly regulated environment such as banking or insurance, there is little room for judgment and decision-making, and that this can be frustrating when it slows down delivery and meeting customer expectations. Participants indicated that they preferred a work environment where they are empowered to use their judgment in making decisions in a collaborative way, provided they do not place the business at risk. In support of this, Participant 1 stated: "I would make a judgment call and go outside the boundaries, as long as it was legal and not putting the business at risk …. There has to be

room for strategic thinking, planning, and flexibility to allow for non-conventional decision-making, and I must be able to use judgment in decision making." Participant 8 stated: "I like an environment where people are empowered and expectations are clear."

Concerning building great relationships with customers, participants indicated that key to business success is the ability to remotely build relationships with customers and partners. Participant 6 proudly noted: "I am a trusted business partner," while Participant 5 said: "I build great relationships with my client base." However, some participants indicated that building customer trust was very challenging during lockdown.

Theme 2: Managing performance

Leaders in this study mentioned they had to assume the role of performance manager for their organization, their team, and for themselves. In addition to this, they had to also see to the wellbeing of their individual team members. According to Participant 8, "COVID has affected people's mental health. It has affected their ability to engage externally, it has affected their ability to even engage in the company. So, now you must pay much more attention to mental health and wellbeing instead of staff performance only." Participants stated that, during the COVID-19 lockdown, they were "dealing with staff wellbeing…, especially mental wellbeing" (Participant 5), and "loss of loved ones, general fear, and manual processes" (Participant 8). This led to participants adjusting the way in which they managed staff performance and led during this period. This theme is supported by the codes (a) *organizational strategy*, (b) *setting clear goals and expectations*, (c) *providing open and honest feedback*, (d) *coaching*, (e) *acknowledging one's team*, (f) *building relationships with the team*, and (g) *trust*.

With regard to organizational strategy, participants indicated that they had to get involved in formulating strategy in a collaborative way with internal and external partners. This is evidenced by the following extracts: "I spend an awfully long time coaching rather than leading. I play different roles—strategy, coaching, implementation, alignment. My brain had to change six or seven times a day, depending on what kind of call I have" (Participant 6).

Leaders indicated that setting clear goals and expectations was key in managing their own performance and that of their team, and that this aspect became crucial during lockdown, when teams had to work virtually. Participant 2 noted having to get "something sorted out" to meet targets. Participant 1 mentioned a focus on "outcomes of the role, being able to retain the client, achieving the targets."

The participants indicated that, in building an effective team, providing open and honest feedback to their peers, their managers, and the people who report to them is crucial in achieving desired outcomes that would ultimately

address customer needs and ensure achievement of performance objectives. This was made clear through statements such as "I must have a positive attitude, let go and move on, be open and honest, have no hidden agenda, and provide honest feedback" (Participant 3), "I will confront issues that I believe needs to be changed for the good. I will speak my mind" (Participant 2), and "Coaching becomes very key in giving real-time feedback" (Participant 7).

The code coaching was mentioned several times by participants during the discussion of team performance. This code was mentioned by two participants as the element they enjoyed the most in their job. Participant 7 had taken on "coaching people to be their best in their current role," while Participant 6 stated, "I spend an awfully long time coaching rather than leading." Participant 2 said that she had enjoyed the "opportunity to display natural leadership, interacting with people, giving guidance to others, setting the example, coaching, and mentoring." Participant 8 indicated: "I have check-ins with the team once a week, sometimes impromptu meetings, not about work, but about their lives. I create a platform for people to discuss their issues—mental health, dealing with loss of family due to COVID-19, fear of losing jobs, combining home life and work life while working from home, etcetera" (Participant 8).

The participants all mentioned the importance of acknowledging one's teams, and most of the participants spoke at length about the importance of having a high-performing team and the leader's role in building such teams. Participants indicated that their ideal work environment was one where everyone understood what they must do, and that they do it. Participant 4 stated, "What I like most in my role is team involvement and teamwork," and added: "I view myself as one of the guys, as a team member. I don't enforce my position." Participant 2 stated: "What I like most in my role is the opportunity to display natural leadership, i.e., being a leader without necessarily having a leadership title, interacting with people, giving guidance to my team, setting the example, coaching, and mentoring."

When participants were asked what they enjoyed least about their role, the trust code emerged. Leaders all indicated in some way that building trust was vital. Participant 3 indicated that she trusted her team, but that this became challenging when employees worked virtually. This meant working harder to build trust: "I do trust them, but I know the staff well-enough to know that they're not going to do the work when you need them to do it. So, I've got to double check, unfortunately." Participant 6 noted: "I think the biggest challenge is where you have relationships, where you have established, mature trusted relationships before COVID. Those relationships continue, and you can continue to build on them virtually. But, where you do

not have relationships, it's almost impossible to build new ones, and that is the impact of COVID."

Theme 3: Building effective teams

Building effective teams is a theme supported the following codes: (a) *effective leadership,* (b) *changed leadership style*, (c) *resilience*, (d) *making decisions*, and (e) *upskilling teams*.

With regard to effective leadership, Participant 3 described the challenges of managing a team in this time, stating: "There are many moving pieces in the shipping logistics world. This aspect became even more challenging during COVID-19. It is very stressful." Participants indicated that certain leadership attributes have become more important than ever. "I lead from the front, and I am an entrepreneurial leader. I have received award for being an innovative leader and doing things differently during COVID," said Participant 5. Participant 8 stated that she was "an inspiration to my team. I expect a lot, I am very self-aware," while Participant 1 described herself as "committed, dedicated and passionate." Participant 2 stated, "I want to influence horizontally, I am assertive, I express myself." Participant 3 mentioned, "I lead by example; I make sure I am available for my team, and I jump in and work with them." Participant 5 indicated: "I led from the front during this crisis, I met all my people online, managed the team electronically, got in the same room at the same time, built new portals... Find new ways of doing things—new financial checks, deal with uncertainty, deal with sickness, losing loved ones etcetera, this is leadership on another level."

The code changed leadership style emerged from participants' discussions about how they dealt with the new challenges. They indicated that they had had to change the way they led, and that they had to learn new ways of doing things. For example, Participant 7 commented: "Managers are having to deal with the wellness component. "Is the person that I'm dealing with, okay?" "Are they feeling alone?" "Are they heading for burnout?" "Are they stressed?" As a leader, that's another element that you have to manage" (Participant 7). A number of participants supported the sentiment of Participant 3, who noted: "Before COVID, I was not a hovering manager, because I was with the team. Now, I have to check in all the time to see if work has been done. I don't like doing it, but I have to make sure it is being done." Participant 6 mentioned the positive aspect of now "having a better understanding what the impact of COVID is on your business. We know for example, how many people [staff members] are sick—we get a weekly update. Participant 5 advised: "Lead with humanity." Participant 3 noted that "being able to manage people remotely requires a mindset change to manage people where you don't see them." Other participants expressed similar changes in mindset: "I have to define boundaries; for example, I said to

my team, "No meetings, after a certain time." I am flexible with my team; it's a give-and-take mindset. Different people's work styles require different approaches. Some people need to be micro-managed: "Now you have to sit down" . . . schedule teams meetings, talk to them about the fact that they have to be self-reliant. We don't have time to micro-manage people. Also, you're getting involved in their personal lives . . . must approach people more holistically. . . more empathetic. More understanding is required, not only a manager of work, but of context and socio-economic conditions" (Participant 8).

Participants noted that resilience, both their own and their team's, was vital in coping with the new uncertainties and fears. Participant 5 noted: "It has taught me that human beings are wired up to just cope regardless of the odds. The best leaders led their teams to find ways to cope during this time." Participant 5 noted the importance of developing resistance, both your own and that of others.

With regard to making decisions, most participants indicated that, to effectively lead self, others, and the organization, they had to make decisions quickly. However, some participants indicated their frustration with being in a highly regulated environment (such as banking and insurance), where quick decision-making is vital in order to attract and retain customers.

Many participants noted the importance of upskilling teams to effectively deal with the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Participant 2 explained: "We experienced challenges mostly in the beginning of COVID-19, where staff did not have access to online tools. We had to ensure tools are available and staff are proficient in using the tools." Participant 5 stated: "I think leaders must be honest about their lack of skills and ask for help," while Participant 7's strategy was to "learn on the go."

Theme 4: Building a digital culture

The crisis brought about by the pandemic forced these leaders to fulfill their roles through a digital culture. The theme is supported by the following codes: (a) *emerging technology*, (b) *new ways of working*, (c) *work–life balance,* (d) *ideal work environment*, and (e) *a new way of leading.*

With regard to emerging technology, some of the leaders indicated that only through emerging technology could they perform their work during the lockdown. They indicated that it was a steep learning curve, but one that was well-worth it. "Technology is the only reason I can work," admitted Participant 6. She continued, "I have a laptop, I have unlimited data, and the company is migrating us from our current phones to iPhone 12 . . . She noted that she was able to migrate to the new phone "with zero support from IT," adding, "Everything that is transactional can now be done in a digital way." Participant 1 also noted the ease of technology: "Technology has made my work easier; many processes were smoother and faster. It

allowed me to learn new skills and multi-task." Participant 5 noted the need for technology "to make people-related decisions to enhance organizational performance, and added: "I have had to reflect on my ability to utilize technology. I have had to upskill myself."

New ways of working came up frequently, with leaders noting that emerging technology and COVID-19 ushered in new ways of working, where virtual working in a flexible way became the norm, requiring continuous learning, adaptability, collaboration, and a change in mindset. Participant 5 remarked: "I'm not a big techie. . ., but I have to learn to do things differently. Everything is fully automated and, in property, one now needs to understand how to fund green buildings. Drone technology is also used to see and inspect our properties . . . but, at the end of the day, one must walk the assets to get a real feel for the property. It has been a massive disruptor, and I am still figuring out if I really like it or not (Participant 5). Participant 2 also noted the impact of technology: "I had to learn new ways of doing things very fast, for example, Google Classroom. This also meant dealing differently with class discipline. I had to provide a blended approach to learning." Participant 1 noted: "It allowed me to learn new skills better and multi-task. It also made my work easier. Many processes were smoother and faster."

Most leaders found that technology and working virtually positively impacted their work–life balance. "There is now technology to enhance what I am doing, and it afforded flexible working hours" (Participant 1). Participant 4 noted: "It has had an impact on work–life balance, since I spend more time with my family."

Leaders shared their views of an ideal work environment, with Participant 8 commenting: "I like an environment where people are empowered and expectation is clear" (Participant 8). "Red tape was diminished; processes were optimized" (Participant 2). Participant 6 suggested "30% in the office, 30% with external stakeholders, 30% in the field with your people, and then 10% thinking, reflecting, reading." Participant 6 also expressed concern around the over-digitizing of the work environment, which leads to culture of anonymity.

Theme 5: Work identity

Participants had to adopt several roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected their work identity. The theme is supported by the following codes: (a) *strategist/visionary*, (b) *entrepreneur*, (c) *high performer*, (d) *one of the team*, (e) *influential*, and (f) *self-aware.*

The participants found that one of the new job roles that they were expected to participate in was that of strategist/visionary. Participant 6 mentioned: "I play different roles—strategy, coaching, implementation, alignment. My brain changes six or seven times a day, depending on what kind of call I have. Participant 4 also indicated that he has to get involved in

developing the vision and strategy to produce new ideas for his organization, in collaboration with others: "In an ever-changing environment, the organization looks to its leaders to provide the solutions during times of change. I must provide strategies and solutions. What makes it easier is that we collaborate with our partners to assist with this task."

With regard to being an entrepreneur, the participants, particularly Participant 5, noted the importance of an entrepreneurial leader: "I innovate and have innovated during 4IR and COVID-19 pandemic—doing things differently."

Participants encouraged their teams to be high performers by role-modeling the behavior. As Participant 5 put it: "I lead from the front." Participant 3 noted: "I lead by example. I make sure I am available for my team, and I jump in and work with them."

Participants indicated that they became one of the team to achieve objectives. Participant 4 explained: "I view myself as one of the guys, as a team member. I don't enforce my position. I speak Afrikaans and English to accommodate the team members."

A number of participants indicated that an aspect of their work identity was being an influencer. "I influence horizontally, I am assertive, I express myself" (Participant 2). Participant 8 noted: "I am an inspiration to my team. I expect a lot. I am very self-aware."

Discussion

The present study explored how leaders responded to the workplace challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and what this meant for their work identities as leaders. To do this, we made use of role identity theory, social identity theory, and leader identity theory. The leaders in this study had mainly two broad responsibilities: first, to ensure that they performed in their roles as they did before the pandemic and delivered on objectives, and, second, maintained team cohesion and performance. This they had to achieve in the context of remote working and virtual leadership.

Recent research indicates that many companies made use of virtual leadership to maintain their organizations during this period (Bizilj et al., 2021). Leaders had to learn new ways of doing things, and also had to guide their teams in learning new ways of doing things, all while maintaining a fast pace. This supports the findings of Högberg (2022). Participant 5 summed it up as follows: "We adjusted." The pandemic forced the leaders to upskill themselves, which further enhanced their work identities as leaders, as learning opportunities are known to strengthen work identities (Collin, 2009; De Braine and Roodt, 2011). Leading from a distance presented additional challenges to the leaders, in that they had to secure the trust in existing relationships and build trust relationships with new employees, customers, and peers.

As part of overcoming challenges, the leaders fostered a digital culture to ensure that customer expectations were met and team performance was managed. Most welcomed technology and used it to enhance delivery of products and services. One participant referred to the threat of a culture in which people become "anonymous" as a result of over-digitizing procedures, and noted that this was not ideal when attempting to build effective teams. Some leaders focused on building and enhancing teamwork to compensate for the challenges that came with over-digitizing procedures.

Technology changes the organizational context, which reshapes work identities. Technology artifacts become standards in "self-narratives" when the function thereof aligns with the work identity of an individual (Stein et al., 2013, p. 178). Individual, in this case, the leaders, position themselves and others in relation to the technology artifacts, and a preferred self is expressed (Stein et al., 2013). The roles and behaviors of these individuals were altered as their use of information communication technology increased, and their work identities were reshaped on a continual basis. This reshaping of the identity through the use of technology is also shaped through technological interactions with others (Piszczek et al., 2016). The role of leadership is thus to support and align with technology to reduce potential threats to employees' identities (Mirbabaie et al., 2022). This would then also influence team performance.

One of the main themes was building effective teams, which, according to one participant, entailed becoming "one of the team." This required self-awareness. By becoming one of the team, the way a leader strengthens his/her position as a leader and as a professional is now informed by a different or additional team members. By leading the team and being one of the team, it is argued that the leaders helped to strengthen the social identity continuity for themselves and their employees. In a study on leaders and their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, social identity continuity was found to be related to job satisfaction (Krug et al., 2021). As work identity is a form of social identity, we argue that, as the leaders become "one with their teams," their work identities are enhanced and strengthened. This was achieved through the leaders employing identity entrepreneurship, which entails the behaviors that bring about group cohesion (Reicher et al., 2005). Ultimately, a new role is added to their work identity.

Work identity is multidimensional, consisting of roles (Walsh and Gordon, 2007) or "selves," which are now being added at a much faster pace than before. Leader identity is also regarded as social identity (Hogg, 2001). The leaders under study exerted their leadership through the roles and relationships they had with others. Adopting new roles and new ways of doing things greatly influenced their work identities. In addition, they also viewed themselves as strategists, technology experts, entrepreneurs, coaches, mentors, and a member of their team.

The participants shared that their leader role identity, as one of the multiple facets of their work identity, emerged stronger during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their aim was to ensure effective staff performance and, ultimately, organizational survival. This is aligned to the view of Kwok et al. (2018) that leader identity impacts outcomes such as organizational performance and customer retention.

The leaders under study were also required to deal with matters related to employee wellness and work–life balance. As a result, many of the leaders took on the extra role of coach to guide their teams through personal struggles such as the loss of family members, the fear of losing their jobs, illness, and longer working hours. The pandemic had a tremendously negative effect on the wellbeing of employees (Krug et al., 2021; Mähring et al., 2021), and the participants indicated that building an effective team required that they behave differently as leaders.

Theoretical contribution of the study

The main finding that emerged from the research is that the leaders fostered virtual leadership to ensure that customer expectations are met, and to manage and enhance team-and organizational performance. They achieved their leadership goals by ensuring social identity continuity amongst their teams. To do this, they had to take on extra roles, such as strategist, technology expert, entrepreneur, coach, mentor, and member of their team. Based on these findings, we argue that leader identity, as part of a leaders work identity, is enhanced and lived out by leaders ensuring social identity continuity amongst their teams and fulfilling the respective leadership roles that come with their leader role identity. This study has linked role identity, leader identity, and social identity theory with work identity in examining the ways in which leaders lead and identify with their leadership role during a time of crisis.

Methodological implications

There are two methodological implications in this study, which could also be considered limitations of the study. The first one, being that most of the semi-structured interviews were conducted using online platforms, due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. As a result of this, important social cues that are easier to pick up on in face-to-face interviews may have been missed. Secondly, six of the participants were female and only two were male, as a result of purposive convenience and snowball sampling may have created gender-bias implications.

Policy and practical implications for organizations and HR

Organizations should focus on the development of leaders' work identities in their leadership development programs and initiatives, coupled with taking into consideration the multiple complexities associated with leadership roles. Aspects such as role congruity need to receive greater focus for development programs, to create better leader–job fit, which ultimately would enhance leader-role identity and overall work identity. There should also be a focus on crisis management within the broader organizational context. The study revealed the importance of leadership playing a role in ensuring the wellbeing of their employees, and HR practitioners and leaders therefore need to prioritize organizational initiatives around wellbeing during times of crisis.

Limitations of the study

As this was a qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalized to the greater population. This study consisted of a sample of eight leaders from different organizations.

Recommendations for future studies

Future studies should be conducted on a larger sample with participants from multiple countries, in order to gain a broader understanding of identity formation of virtual leaders in times of crisis. Researchers should ensure a representative sample, which would yield insights according to gender and ethnicity. Future research could also be longitudinal, in order to gain an understanding of developments over time. Such research could include quantitative instruments to complement the data.

Conclusion

The leaders who participated in this study had a stressful task in leading and creating social identity continuity amongst their teams in order to lessen the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was achieved by virtual leadership *via* technology. In this process, leader role identity, as one dimension of the work identity, emerged more strongly, with the leaders viewing themselves as strategists, coaches, and team members. They had to learn to lead differently. As the new world of work continues, leaders need to strengthen their role identities as leaders, in other words, their leader self-concept, to lead effectively in times of change and crisis. In this way, leaders will be able to strengthen the social identity of their teams and followers.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data has not been made publicly available due to the

restrictions imposed as a result of privacy and ethics. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to RD, roslynd@uj.ac.zal.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee of the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, School of Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, ethical clearance number: IPPM-2020-465(M). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

This article was adapted from the Master's mini-dissertation of SM, who conducted the research. RD was the study leader, and provided conceptualization guidelines and editorial inputs.

Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The intended and unintended consequences of remote working: Narratives from a sample of female public service managers in South Africa

Willie Tafadzwa Chinyamurindi*

Department of Business Management, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world of work. Stemming from this, new forms of work arrangements are proposed. One such arrangement concerns the use of remote working. Scholars appeal for more empirical inquiry into such work arrangements as an unintended consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study narrows its focus to investigating remote working experiences from the lens of female middle managers operating within the South African public service. A qualitative research approach utilizing narrative inquiry of 23 female middle managers was used. Based on the analyzed data, remote working is illustrated from the participant experience as having intended and unintended consequences. In illustrating these dual consequences is a nexus between opportunities and challenges. Based on the identified intended and unintended consequences as findings, interventions have been proposed that impact not just the experience of being a middle manager in the public service but also strategies in dealing with remote working. At the core are strategies for individuals and organizations. These strategies potentially allow for middle manager contributions to be enhanced while also enhancing organizational outputs while working from home.

KEYWORDS

managers, COVID-19, female, remote working, South Africa

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected society. The world of work has not been spared from the impact of the pandemic (Hooley et al., 2020). In developing countries such as South Africa, proposals have been made for the need for interventions that are not only reactive but also proactive in response to the pandemic (Dowdeswell and Kriek, 2021). Remote working has emerged popular and preferable as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Taser et al., 2022). Within remote working, employees have the opportunity to work from home or away from the office enabled by technology (Molino et al., 2020). This allows for the pursuit of not just individual but also organizational goals, albeit challenges such as those created by the COVID-19 pandemic (Potgieter et al., 2021).

From the literature, calls exist in understanding the impact of remote working as a work arrangement stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic (Motamarri et al., 2022). For instance, how managers exercise managerial responsibilities within a remote working setting is argued as needing further inquiry (Henry et al., 2021). Equally important, how employees respond to such managerial influence is deemed key in informing understanding around aspects related to remote working (Potgieter et al., 2021). The focus here is on understanding the range of individual and organizational resourcing tactics and how they manifest in making remote working a success (Koekemoer et al., 2021). In seeking such an understanding, interventions can be proposed around ensuring individual and organizational resilience capabilities are created stemming from the disruptions of the pandemic through remote working (Maruping et al., 2021).

The world of work is noted to be changing due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hossain, 2020). The functionary tasked to deal with people issues must be seen to be responsive to these changes (de Klerk et al., 2021). For the consideration of remote working to be incorporated, the human resource component must align the individual and organizational ideals together (Donnelly and Johns, 2021). In achieving this, the needs of employees must be considered (Chinyamurindi et al., 2021). Such alignment becomes crucial and places into focus the need for a competency-based framing to be in place (Cooke et al., 2020).

In allowing for flexible work arrangements, a need exists for organizational architecture that supports this (Williams et al., 2021). There is a noted scant focus in studies that investigate remote working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jamsen et al., 2022). Furthermore, how remote working influences managerial actions, including the gender aspect, remains an angle not explored within the literature. Managers are deemed crucial as response agents for the organizational interventions to succeed (Ahlqvist et al., 2020). Based on this, this study aimed at exploring the remote working experiences of a sample of female middle managers in the South African public service. The following research question was set:

> What are the consequences of remote working from a sample of female middle managers working in the South African context?

Informed by the quest to answer the proposed research question, the next section details a literature review for the study consisting of the theoretical and empirical literature.

Literature review

Theoretical lens

In setting the theoretical position of the study, there is a need to consider some views from the literature. First, there appears to be no one theoretical lens that can be useful in understanding aspects related to remote working (Matli, 2020). This also extends to the very definition of what remote working is (Sullivan, 2003). This could be due to the multiple interpretations that can be deduced with regard to the concept of remote working. At the core, though, should be the view that remote working serves the ideal of assisting in developing human capability (Doern, 2016). The ultimate aim is the attainment of competitive advantage (Bag and Gupta, 2019). Technology in varying forms allows for such attainment (Spicer et al., 2021). This has been noted to be important, especially given the challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic (Mariani and Nambisan, 2021; Mariani et al., 2021).

In developing a theoretical lens for this study, social exchange theory is considered (Homans, 1958). The underlying premise here is that human behavior is an exchange between goods and services within a social context. In essence, the exchange between these goods and services results in behaviors by individuals (Blau, 1964) and is a source of motivation and attitudes (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Through remote working, a set of intended and unintended consequences can emerge (Choi, 2018). Through such exchange, some demands and resourcing behaviors can potentially emerge, as also espoused in the job demands-resources model (JD-R; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2017). The combination of social exchange theory and the JD-R provides a useful framework that tries to explain the role that working conditions may have on individual psychological wellbeing.

When individuals perceive a work situation and its demands to be high and support services limited, this may result in negative experiences. Noted experiences here include burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduction in professional efficiency (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2011). Given that remote working exists as a new form of work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this may elicit responses from individuals. These responses may either be positive or negative, depending on the work situation or support services in place.

Empirical literature

The literature affirms some benefits and challenges around remote working.

Concerning the benefits of remote working, these are acknowledged to impact individuals and organizations in general. Chiefly, remote working is praised for how work and private life can be integrated together (Allen et al., 2015). Such flexibility has the potential to promote work-life balance and also the wellbeing of the employee and the organization (Wang and Haggerty, 2011).

Potentially such flexibility between the home and the workplace may also reduce work-family conflict (Allen et al., 2013). Others apportion an added benefit to an environmental

gain. Working from home has been noted to reduce the time spent in traffic and potentially reduce carbon emissions (Sutton-Parker, 2021).

In allowing for remote working, the technology interface is noted to be important and crucial for success (Blagoev et al., 2018). The desire here is for technology to be in place that supports remote working and reduces any anxiety associated with this. Technological investments may need to be in place in the form of hardware and software that allow for home and office support (Meijerink et al., 2018; Song et al., 2020). This must also be supported by an organizational culture that supports remote working ideals (Donnelly and Johns, 2021). In essence, an investment is needed not only financially but also through support structures, including policies for remote working to be a success (Kornberger et al., 2017). Much of the failures around the remote working stem from technological failure and hence the need to address and put in place support services for this (Karl et al., 2021).

In developing countries like Ghana, the interacting role of factors such as technology, organizational design, and environmental characteristics has been found to affect the adoption of remote work systems (Ofusu-Ampong and Acheampong, 2022). In essence, remote working in tandem with organizational support efforts offers some flexibility for employees (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

In some contexts, employee support was needed in adjusting to the new normal way of work. Estrella (2022) noted a lack of preparedness toward remote working as a contributor to its failure in some organizations. This was heightened given the uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of preparedness and support structures in place has led to stressful conditions, especially for employees (Cristea and Leonardi, 2019). Others note remote working challenges from an organizational perspective as leading to exhaustion and permanent feelings of disengagement (Walker et al., 2022) including also job insecurity concerns (Ghislieri et al., 2022).

In allowing for employees to work from home, some precursors need to exist. Some place caution on the challenge that comes with the excessive use of technology as potentially leading to technostress and loneliness (Taser et al., 2022). In the long run, these negative psychological effects may have far-reaching consequences on the performance not just of the individual but also of the organization (Charalampous et al., 2019). In curbing this, remote working should be supported by digital resilience and sensitivity awareness in assisting all employees (Tramontano et al., 2021).

The existence of supervisor support is needed and is coupled with a work culture that allows for this (Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014). Internal mechanisms of support need to be in place to assist a remote work learning culture (Blagoev et al., 2018). This can include the necessity for continuous employee engagement and organizational buy-in (Syed, 2020). Management support becomes crucial in the support of a remote

working environment (Christianson and Barton, 2021). The role here is to use the management capability in implementing policies and practices that allow for remote working.

Another angle advocated for is the need to pay attention to the individual worker as an important conduit in allowing for the new work arrangements to emerge. Some ideas here include the necessity to understand the ensuing complexity that accompanies remote working (Mayer et al., 2021). Remote working has been attributed to lead to professional and social isolation (Carillo et al., 2021) and an increase in psychological distress (Saura et al., 2022; Van Zoonen and Sivunen, 2022). From here, support mechanisms can be provided to assist employees to adjust, especially with remote working arrangements (Mahadevan and Schmitz, 2020).

This study narrowed its focus on understanding remote working experiences from a gendered lens by paying attention to women working within the public service. Furthermore, a noted area of inquiry is how those in managerial responsibilities experience aspects such as remote working (Chinyamurindi et al., 2022). This is an aspect that has not received attention, especially from a developing nation context. Potentially, such an inquiry can assist in advancing understanding of the experience of female managers, especially within a public service deemed important for service delivery outcomes (Mahlasela and Chinyamurindi, 2020).

Methodology

In answering the research question, the study incorporated a qualitative research approach, relying on the use of interviews with a sample of female public service managers. Such an approach and technique assisted in understanding not only human experience but also the ensuing complexity of this (Bryman et al., 2018). Furthermore, the usage of such an approach and technique assists in understanding human experience and sense-making processes individuals make in their context (Chinyamurindi et al., 2021). A list of questions asked is found in Appendix 1.

Sample and data collection

A convenience sampling technique was used. Participants were recruited from provincial government departments in the Eastern Cape of the Province of South Africa. For the purpose of the study, a sample of female middle managers working at these provincial offices took part in the study. Letters of invite were sent to provincial heads of department, detailing the purpose of the study. From this, the heads of department were to circulate the correspondence to all members of their units who fit the criteria. A total of 23 female middle managers were recruited for the study. Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of the

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of participants.

Participant	Race	Years in middle manager position	Middle manager position
1	Black African	7	Human resources
2	Colored	6	Supply chain
3	Black African	4	Accounting
4	White	3	Information management
5	Colored	6	Supply chain
6	Black African	4	Legal
7	Colored	3	Human resources
8	Indian	6	Accounting
9	Colored	3	Information management
10	Black African	2	Human resources
11	Colored	6	Supply chain
12	Black African	7	Procurement
13	Colored	5	Human resources
14	Black African	3	Information management
15	Black African	7	Legal
16	White	4	Human resources
17	Black African	6	Accounting
18	Black African	4	Supply chain
19	White	7	Human resources
20	Black African	8	Procurement
21	Colored	10	Supply chain
22	Black African	4	Information management
23	Colored	6	Legal

participating female managers. The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to select participants: a participant had to be (1) a middle manager who had been in their position for at least 2 years and (2) a female. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1, notably the middle manager position that is occupied.

Ethical statement

Ethical guidance was adhered to as part of the study. First, ethical clearance was applied for before the research took place at the participating university. Second, and related to the first point, attention was given to the guidance of the Helsinki Declaration of 1972, which stipulates that when research is being conducted and the participants include humans or animals, the researcher has to get a

clearance from the ethics committee (Parsa-Parsi, 2017). The researcher complied with regulations stipulated that include informed consent, right of participation, and confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants. Third, the researcher sought to avoid prejudice and ensure all participants enjoyed equal rights and participation in this critical project. Pseudonyms were used to avoid identifying the participating individuals, including the public service entities they work for.

Strategies to ensure data integrity

Strategies were used to ensure data integrity. First, an interview schedule was developed, guided by the literature-informing questions asked to participants. This assisted in providing a theoretical foundation on which the study was based (Creswell, 2014). Second, in ensuring integrity, the formulated interview guide was also vetted by a panel of qualitative experts who assisted in improving aspects related to the questions to be asked to the participants. Such an expert pool assisted greatly in leading to the interview questions (Denscombe, 2003). Third, transcriptions were sent back to participants after the interviews (Wolcott, 1990); any changes were made as per the wishes of the participants. Finally, as proposed by Wolcott (1990), in undertaking data analysis, our goal was to bring to light issues we regard as critical in order to arrive at an informed interpretation of the findings.

Data analysis

The study adopted a narrative analysis technique relying on the three levels of meaning-making (McCormack, 2000). Narrative inquiry assists in understanding the lived experiences of individuals based on the experiences they are or have gone through (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000; Brown, 2012). The three levels help assist in deducing meaning from a large set of data (Toolis and Hammack, 2015). The first of these levels assists in creating a vignette of each interview transcript, with the potential of this being developed into a longer narrative about each participant. Second, the developed narrative participant experiences are then compared to those of each participant that took part in the study. In the final stage, an elaboration of the developed narratives with the aid of quotations and experiences shared by the participants is then provided (McCormack, 2000). Narrative inquiry has been used previously in organizational behavior research and lauded for its effort in understanding human behavior and experience (Chinyamurindi et al., 2021; Mpetile and Chinyamurindi, 2021; Harry and Chinyamurindi, 2022).

Results

Based on the data analysis, remote working was found to have intended and unintended consequences. Intended consequences consisted of those expectations that the female managers attributed to being part of the effect of remote working. These consisted of positives such as remote working (a) as a safety measure from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) allowing for work-life balance; and (c) allowing for time to spend time with children and partners. However, remote working had some unintended consequences. These effects were mostly the emergence of issues not expected by the female middle managers as part of the experience of working from home. These also consisted mostly of negatives such as (a) technology failure; (b) people management challenges, especially with senior managers and subordinates; (c) extension of working hours, resulting in the blurring of work boundaries. These findings about the intended and unintended consequences of remote working are discussed next.

Intended consequences

The first identified intended consequence was remote working as a safety measure from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants appreciated the value of working from home as a safety net from the challenges posed by the pandemic. This appreciation came about based on the challenges the world and South Africa were facing as a result of the pandemic. This was a common narrative among participants. One participant expressed this succinctly:

> "There was definitely benefit of working from home—key was that we were at the height of the pandemic. The biggest benefit—we were sheltered away from the spread of the pandemic. Especially given the open floor system we used—we were going to be at risk. Working from home allowed us a safety net." [**Participant 19, Human Resources Manager**].

Another participant expressed the remote working model as much needed especially given the personal challenges they had faced surviving the COVID-19 pandemic.

> "I got COVID just at the start of the pandemic. I went through a hard long journey of recovery. With this was an appreciation of our health care system especially given the uncertainty of the pandemic. Given this experience, I just appreciated more the remote working model. We needed to work from home. Our health needed this." [**Participant 7, Human Resources Manager**].

Some participants continued to appreciate the value of remote working, especially as a response to the challenges stemming from the pandemic. In view of this, there was a clarion call from the participants for the need to rethink how we work given future pandemics.

> "Remote working has indeed a future. We are probably going to experience future pandemics. We must be able to evolve with our work systems to the changes happening. Remote working definitely will limit the spread of any disease and protecting the health of employees. The COVID-19 pandemic experience was a useful learning period in preparation for the future." [**Participant 1, Human Resources Manager**].

The second identified intended consequence was remote working, which allows for work-life balance. Participants had general praise for remote working in allowing for work-life balance. One participant bemoaned the time they spent in traffic and how during the remote working experience use that time for exercise.

> "Remote working helped restore the pact I had with my gym club and also a love for exercise especially when COVID-19 restrictions were being lifted. I would have had the opportunity to do all this unless I had been working at home." [**Participant 6, Legal Manager**].

For some, remote working allowed participants to be able to also balance their lives in view of expected societal roles.

> "During the height of the pandemic, I could spend more time connecting with other facets of my life outside work. I could read more at home. Do some gardening. Even connect more with the world around me. Yes I got to do some work but I also managed to do things I could not do." [**Participant 10, Human Resources Manager**].

Remote working also allowed participants the opportunity to also take part in hobbies as a way of escape from the difficult conditions emanating from the pandemic. One participant appreciated this.

> "Being at home allowed for convenience to also just escape from the work duties—do the school run and even attend extra mural activities for the kids. Yes, I would have my phone with me, but I appreciated being away from the desk and being able to manage other aspects of my life." [**Participant 4, Information Management Manager**].

Finally, remote working allowed time for the middle managers who took part in the study to spend time with their children and partners. One participant

expressed appreciation for assisting their children with their homework while also doing their own while working remotely:

> "I enjoyed remote working because it also fit in with my role as a care giver to my family. One of my children has special needs and working from home assisted me in spending more time with my kids. Yes I managed to get work done but I also managed to also monitor the development of my children especially during the height of pandemic with lockdown in place." [**Participant 12, Procurement Management Manager**].

To some participants, remote working also led to an appreciation of family values and also created time for the family structure. This became evident, especially since most of the family members were spending time at home. For some, remote working allowed participants in the study the opportunity to also be more present in the lives of their children.

> "Home schooling was supported well with the remote working arrangement. I could easily monitor how the children were doing with their schoolwork while at the same I am doing my work." [**Participant 8, Accounting Manager**].

Finally, some participants appreciated the value of remote working as allowing them time to spend time with their partners.

> "I think remote working also saved my marriage. My partner and I are appreciative of being in professions where we can work remotely. This assisted both of us to work in the same room at home. Such time was just the bond we needed. Remember in a week we usually spent half of the week at the office pre-pandemic. It was wonderful to work from home not just for the work aspect but also our relationship." [**Participant 3, Accounting Manager**].

Table 2 illustrates additional quotes supporting the first finding of the intended consequences of remote working. Based on Table 2, the participating managers using their functional areas illustrate the benefits of remote working.

The second finding presents the unintended consequences of remote working. These consequences were negative and expressed concerns around remote working. These unintended consequences included (a) technology failure; (b) people management challenges, especially with senior managers and subordinates; and (c) extension of working hours, resulting in the blurring of work boundaries. These findings on the unintended consequences of remote working are discussed next.

Unintended consequences

The first unintended consequence consisted of challenges related to the technology interface. A challenge here could be the abrupt nature of the transition to remote working. One participant attributed to a lack of readiness within the public service sector in general.

> "We were not ready for remote working. The start of the process was really messy. All our computers needed to be loaded with software that allowed for remote working. Then we had worked around that challenge, the support service part was also an issue. What made this difficult was that our support services really never featured online but were stronger face to face. We were just not ready." [**Participant 16, Human Resources Manager**].

A second participant attributed this lack of readiness and technological failure to being caused by the inherent structural challenges within the public service.

> "The entire public service system has its faults. Inherently the system was based on a face to face interface. Transitioning to technology would be a big challenge. When the technology was in place, we also had find ways to support especially our managers as we noticed more reports of technology failure. This placed need for us to invest more in training people in dealing especially with these technological challenges." [**Participant 20, Procurement Manager**].

Technology failure appears to be related to the challenges of old computer infrastructure that, in some cases, needed to be revamped. Furthermore, there was also a need for software support. Given the challenges of people working remotely, technology failure appeared inevitable.

> "Challenges with remote working had much to do with technology failure. As a person in supply chain and I think given what we know, we need to be more savy especially for the future. Our Information Technology team attributed much of the challenges of remote working to technology issues." [**Participant 21, Supply Chain Manager**].

The second unintended consequence consisted of people management challenges, especially with senior managers and subordinates. This mostly involved challenges around working away from the office. One participant working in legal expressed as follows:

> "When we started working remotely, I noticed some challenges especially working with both our managers and sub-ordinates. Most of the personnel had to submit their documents for legal opinions and vetting. I think our reliance on the face to face system really spoiled us.

TABLE 2 Intended consequences of remote working.

Remote working as a safety measure from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic	Remote working allowing for work-life balance	Remote working allowing for time to spend time with children and partners.
"At the time of the pandemic and the lockdown, our surety was avoiding contact. Working remotely assisted us greatly." [**Participant 23, Legal Manager**].	"Being at home was an eye-opener. It allowed me a chance to have some form of control of my days in the early days. At the height of the pandemic, it became very difficult. There was uncertainty — we got tired of remote working — we missed the office spaces. The office had some of restriction. Working from home had convenience but there were no boundaries." [**Participant 8, Accounting Manager**].	"Remote working allowed us as parents to actually see our kids more. At the start of the lockdown it was tough — as we got used to the setting — it became better. Yes it was challenging but as parents we feel more involved in the lives of our kids as we work remotely." [**Participant 12, Procurement Manager**].
"Working from home has definite health benefits. For starters it allowed us not spreading the rate of infection. The working remotely model actually promotes better health." [**Participant 5, Supply Chain Manager**].	"I was able to attend to some other issues which I would not otherwise do. As a priority allowing for work-life balance. Something the day to day routine pre-pandemic would not allow." [**Participant 20, Procurement Manager**].	"Working remote allows me and my husband to have time for each other. We spend at least two days at home and add another two days of the weekend. So in a week we at least speak half of our time together. This assists our relationship given we just got married." [**Participant 8, Accounting Manager**].

Source: Based on the data analysis.

Documents were always late and not done correctly. This created strain. Worse all our interaction had to be done online." [**Participant 23, Legal Manager**].

Concerning the technology failure presented earlier, one of the study managers placed blame on a top management structure, not in tune with remote working.

"Most of the senior managers were not technologically savvy. The face to face interface at least for interaction. So now imagine the situation where you do not see each other. The middle managers had to do most of the work especially working remotely. You just don't know what is happening with our seniors. Most of which I think were merely managing over the phone. This does not work for me and even affects how we also relate with those below us." [**Participant 20, Procurement Manager**].

The middle managers also expressed concern with aspects related to working with senior managers who appeared to be using the remote working set to be absent from aspects of work. One participant expressed as follows:

"The remote working system if adopted well needs a working structure which breaks the traditional hierarchy system found within the public service. I think everyone is just curious if people are really working on the other side. This level of distrust brings a lot of questioning

to a perfectly good model of working that I believe we should be adopting." [**Participant 14, Information Management Manager**].

A final unintended consequence of remote working puts into focus concerns around the extension of working hours, resulting in the blurring of work boundaries. Generally, participants generally felt that they were most accessible at any time for work-related issues. One participant expressed as follows:

"Working remotely has made me overly accessible. It simply means, your phone must be always open. In normal times you could just close the door or even use a secretary to stop being disturbed. This is not the case working from home." [**Participant 3, Accounting Manager**].

Another participant attributed this idea of being available at any time to be hidden in the idea of working from home but in a subtle use for surveillance. This view attributes concern to lie with top-tier management within the public service.

"I think with remote working we are deemed to be available due to some concerns that our senior managers have. This is no different to the big brother is watching mentality. We must be there to shield responses as is required." [**Participant 15, Legal Manager**].

Some participants then narrated concerns of a psychological nature, especially when deemed to be most accessible. This was expressed by one participant.

> "Literally fatigued not with remote working but its unintended consequences. I cannot switch off my phone—I must sit in front of the desk at home all the time. This has led to stress for me. Even now when my phone rings, I am just shaking." [**Participant 22, Information Management Manager**].

Boundaries were blurred with remote working. The source of this could be attributed to the way in which reporting mechanisms work within the public service. Remote working, as expressed by one participant, showed these gaps.

> "The organizational structure within the South Africa public service is still that one command and control. This work well within physical spaces. With working from home that command and control manifests in the excessive calls. Someone can call you late at night. That was salient nightmare for remote working for me." [**Participant 17, Accounting Manager**].

Table 3 presents additional quotes supporting the second finding of the unintended consequences of remote working. Based on Table 3, the participating managers using their functional areas illustrate their concerns with remote working.

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the remote working experiences of female middle managers operating within the South African public service. The findings reveal the positives and negatives associated with remote working. These are expressed as intended and unintended consequences. These findings respond to how organizations and their members are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through these findings of intended and unintended consequences, the impact of the pandemic on the world of work is illustrated. In essence, the study also shows how the public service in South Africa as a context of work has not been spared from the documented challenges of the pandemic (Hooley et al., 2020; Dowdeswell and Kriek, 2021). As a contribution, the study answers calls for studies that show such responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as a basis for enhancing understanding (Hossain, 2020).

In South Africa, as illustrated by this study, remote working appears to be a popular option, especially stemming from the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Dowdeswell and Kriek, 2021). For the participating female middle managers, remote working appears to serve a utility that allows them to be able to achieve work-life balance. This finding confirms previous findings about the benefits of remote working (Molino et al.,

2020; Potgieter et al., 2021). The call should therefore be for organizations that seek to align the work-life interface deemed important to workers in contemporary society (Donnelly and Johns, 2021). Flexibility here is crucial (Wang and Haggerty, 2011). The type of flexibility also allows for employees to be able to do those things they wish to do of their volition in terms of time and place. A convenience that remote working could offer (Sutton-Parker, 2021).

However, the participant findings reveal a caution around the blurring of boundaries, especially during office hours due to remote working. Based on the two findings, capabilities can be developed that assist employees, including managers, adjust to remote working (Maruping et al., 2021). The two findings proffer and assist understanding of not just the experience of remote working but also the needs to heighten focus toward an understanding of the needs of managers. Stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, such an understanding assists in the roll-out of interventions to support employees within organizations (Chinyamurindi et al., 2021). As shown in this study, the needs and experience of managers for remote working are crucial as this leadership cohort is an important vehicle for change efforts within organizations (Ahlqvist et al., 2020).

Another interesting angle to the findings of the study stems from the sample base used as part of this study. The focus was on using female middle managers. The participants in the intended and unintended consequences of remote working place focus on priorities that are deemed important to their functioning based on their managerial tier. Furthermore, this appears to also inform responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Motamarri et al., 2022). This study and its findings thus contribute to the call for research that also understands remote working from the managerial lens (Henry et al., 2021).

The finding around remote working resulting in extended working hours becomes crucial. The findings reveal the importance of the private lives of individuals (Allen et al., 2015). It becomes concerning when that private space is impeded in the name of work. In turn, as shown in previous research, when employees deem their personal spaces not respected, this may affect their wellbeing. This finding differs from previous research that mostly attributes remote working to fail due to technological failure (Karl et al., 2021). The challenge, as shown in this study, stems from people-related issues. An aspect here is the perception that working remotely makes one always available on technological devices. This was something the participating middle managers did not appreciate.

To the participating managers, remote working appeared to allow for convenience intentionally, but some challenges emerged. This seems consistent also with previous studies (Taser et al., 2022). From the findings, suggestions can be gleaned that can assist in improving aspects of remote working. Notably, the need to address technology and people issues around aspects of remote working (Molino et al., 2020). In addressing these issues, there is also a need to align individual and organizational

TABLE 3 Unintended consequences of remote working.

Technology failure	People management challenges	Extension of working hours resulting in blurring of work boundaries
"Our supply chain processes were heavily dependent on paper-based working. So when submitting documents there is a reliance on signatures on the physical paper. Remote working revealed two things. The first thing was not sustainable. Second, remote working did not help me. Much of the responsibility in transitioning to online forms was the responsibility of my office. I was busy round the clock." [**Participant 11, Supply Chain Manager**].	"The pandemic gave us so much to think about as HR professionals. We were just not ready. Then we are told to work from home. One of the things that we needed to have (which we did not have) a policy around working from home. We had to pass this quickly—all this fell on me as the HR manager. So I need d to up my game. Sadly, it also meant attending to work issues at ridiculous hours at night." [**Participant 7, Human Resources Manager**].	"We were the interface of the organization as part of the ICT team. We got calls at any time of the day to assist especially those working from home. So yes I enjoying working from home but it seemed like we were still at the office." [**Participant 14, Information Management Manager**].
"Managing after-hours that's how I summarize remote working. You are just stretched to the limit. The limit is often framed by the one above you or below you. The early days of working from home where tough. After some time I mustered enough courage and would now set boundaries of what I can or cannot do. It was always clear I had to save my work schedule as I found myself going beyond the call of duty effort wise and also with my time." [**Participant 20, Procurement Manager**].	"Definitely observed more conflict working remotely. I think the face to face office structure allows people to see each other. This can create an impression of uniformity and that everyone is pulling together. Not having people at the office heightened some suspicion. What is really happening behind the computer at home was really a mystery and a source of apprehension." [**Participant 19, Human Resources Manager**].	"Remote working for some people implied a breaking away from the structure that comes with having appointments. Online meetings became painful – too many happening at the same time. The added challenge was that outside the meetings I had to have other meetings. This means working over-time and even meetings as late as 8 at night." [**Participant 23, Legal Manager**].

Source: Based on the data analysis.

goals to enable efficient processes of work (Potgieter et al., 2021).

Implications

Practical implications

The findings of the study can proffer useful practical implications, especially for functionaries such as the human resource management utility. Based on this, sound people management strategies can be proposed based on the body of evidence from this study (de Klerk et al., 2021). First, given the challenges presented with remote working, strategies can be drawn around this to assist female managers in dealing with remote working. For instance, the finding around the extended office is a cause of concern. The female managers participating in this study shared concerns on how working remotely merely extended their duties even beyond the hours of work. Managers must be assisted in exercising their managerial responsibilities, especially within a remote working setting (Henry et al., 2021). The need here is for organizational architecture that also supports remote working (Williams et al., 2021).

Practical steps can be drawn around assisting employees, especially in dealing with remote working. Second, there appears to be a positive support for remote working based on the narratives of the female managers. Organizations may need to start incorporating remote working proactively stemming from the revelations and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Policies can be put in place inside the organization to support this new normal of working (Jamsen et al., 2022). Furthermore, employees may need to be capacitated through training interventions in them improving their technological competencies that assist with remote working. Finally, linking performance management systems to remote working can be useful in achieving the balance between the home and work interface. It would appear that remote working assists in allowing individuals to have control of their time. Such control may have a dual impact that benefits the home and work sphere. These suggested steps could fit in with individual and organizational resourcing tactics and how they can assist with remote working (Koekemoer et al., 2021).

Limitations and future studies

Some limitations can be pointed out in this study. First, the research is not generalizable to the entire population of female middle managers working in the South African public

service. The sample used assisted in generating understanding around remote working experiences. Therefore, caution is to be exercised when interpreting the findings. Future research could also draw on the comparison between male and female managers and improve on the sampling challenges from this study. Second, the study notes a limitation experienced, especially during the data collection process. The data were collected at the height of the pandemic. Future research may use longitudinal measures or multiple points of data collection with the sample. This could assist in addressing the challenge of collecting data at one single point in time. Future research could also incorporate quantitative research methods in testing determinants of remote working experiences through model testing. This potentially (like the qualitative method used here) assists in enhancing the understanding of remote working as a construct.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because, data sharing requirement at the request of the participants. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to wchinyamurindi@ufh.ac.za.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Fort Hare Institutional Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The ethics committee waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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Appendix 1

Interview questions

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself [Probe: years of work experience, position, and managerial duties].

- Based on your experience, what have been the positives of remote working?
- Based on your experience, what have been the negatives of remote working?
- Overall, do you think working remotely will suit the South African public service context? [Probe: what must be done to allow for this?].

Check for updates

Psychological health, wellbeing and COVID-19: Comparing previously infected and non-infected South African employees

Carin Hill*

Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, School of Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, South Africa

Most COVID-19 and work-related well-being research is centred around the adverse effects on employees' psychological well-being and is not focused on the work-related well-being of those infected by SARS-CoV-2. Furthermore, COVID-19 and work-related well-being research is generally aimed at healthcare workers. The current study focused on investigating the difference in the level of burnout, anxiety, depression and stress between previously infected and uninfected participants. This study used a cross-sectional survey design and non-probability quota sampling to collect data. A retrospective pre-post design was used to determine the difference between the level of burnout of the participants before and after infection. Working adults in South Africa were targeted and divided into those previously infected (*n*=245) and those not yet infected with COVID-19 (*n*=221). Participants completed questionnaires relating to burnout, depression, anxiety, and stress. A comparison of means revealed a significant increase in burnout after being infected. Infected participants had significantly higher burnout, anxiety, depression, and stress levels than their non-infected counterparts. Emotional exhaustion, withdrawal, and stress were the most prevalent psychological ill-health problems. The results of this study indicated that a SARS-CoV-2 infection has a detrimental impact on participants' psychological well-being and mental health compared to their own initially reported levels of burnout before infection, as well as compared to the levels of burnout, depression, anxiety and depression of the non-infected participants. Based on the findings, specific recommendations to industrial psychologists were made to manage the psychological impact of COVID-19 on employees.

Introduction

Since 20 December 2019, the globe has experienced a 'significant life event' due to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2) and the subsequent COVID-19[1] pandemic. The world underwent a critical change comparable to what people went through during World War II (Coleman, 2022), with profound economic, social, political, mental and physical health consequences (Douglas et al., 2020; Coleman, 2022). People across the globe have gone through stages of shock, unbelief, grief, bereavement and trauma, depression, sadness and fear (Berinato, 2020; Sahoo et al., 2020; Motamedzadeh et al., 2021; Pop-Jordanova, 2021). Everyday conversations focused on the uncertainty of the pandemic, when it would end, the effect of the pandemic on employment and the economy, and the possibility of contracting the virus. Several studies (Horesh and Brown, 2020; Qi et al., 2020; Salari et al., 2020; Bo et al., 2021; Janiri et al., 2021; Mohammadian Khonsari et al., 2021) showed that people worldwide experience the COVID-19 pandemic as a traumatic event and present with ensuing psychological symptoms, such as post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety, especially individuals recovering from COVID-19. Horesh and Brown (2020) reported that the COVID-19-induced stress-related mental health issues were highly correlated with characteristic elements of mass traumatic events.

Early in the pandemic, it became evident that employees were distressed and even traumatised by their experiences in the workplace. Workplaces had to reinvent how they operated and made decisions, confronting changing geographies, supporting staff virtually, and adapting to COVID-19 workplace regulations (Reuschke and Felstead, 2020; de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Lee, 2021). Consequently, in the aftermath of COVID-19, employees had to learn new coping mechanisms that did not exist before the pandemic (Horesh and Brown, 2020) to deal with altered workplace practices and psychological stressors, such as fear of infection, job loss, social isolation and confinement (Hamouche, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021).

More than 2 years into the pandemic, many organisations have embraced a 'new normal' way of work instead of anticipating a return to the status quo *after* the COVID-19 pandemic. Mckenzie et al. (2022) suggested that there "…may never be a '*post*-COVID world', in the literal, posterior sense" (p: 1). Instead, the workplace has been forced to evolve due to redesign, social distancing, remote working, and security, so there will not be a return to the way the workplace used to operate (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021). Vyas (2022) expected the changes in the world of work to accelerate changes already being implemented pre-COVID-19, normalising ways of work previously thought of as unconventional or remodelling the pre-pandemic way of work. In this emerging

'new normal' way of work, with its inevitable changes, organisations must re-look and rethink policies and procedures from a different perspective to support staff members in the workplace (Greenwood and Anas, 2021). The consequence of these changes and 'new normal' work environment means that employees now have to adjust again to their work requirements and operationalisation after experiencing a traumatic event in their lives, some having been severely ill due to SARS-CoV-2 and some losing loved ones.

Greenwood and Anas (2021) found that mental health issues have seemingly become the norm in organisations; consequently, more people leave their jobs due to these issues. This supports the view of Sasaki et al. (2020) that vulnerable employees should be carefully supported during and after the pandemic to reduce employees' psychological distress and maintain mental health and work performance. It is estimated that employees who recovered from being infected with SARS-CoV-2 need specific support, which warrants new support-programme designs and research (Vostanis and Bell, 2020). In general, all employees, those who were previously infected with SARS-CoV-2 and those who were not, need support as the long-term after-effect of COVID-19 needs to be identified effectively and managed accordingly (Horesh and Brown, 2020; Vostanis and Bell, 2020). To support employees optimally during the pandemic, new information is needed to inform managers on how to address the work-related well-being of employees affected by COVID-19 (Greenwood and Anas, 2021). With this in mind, to support staff functionally, it is essential to have information about the work-related wellbeing of employees who were infected with SARS-CoV-2 and to determine whether there are differences between previously infected and non-infected employees.

This study focuses on filling the knowledge gap pertaining to the psychological health and well-being experiences of previously infected *and* uninfected employees. Khawand and Zargar (2022) noted that there had been an upsurge in research endeavouring to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the psychological health of employees. However, not much is yet published on the psychological health and well-being of those infected by SARS-CoV-2, nor have there been many studies comparing work-related well-being between previously infected and uninfected participants. The studies focusing on infected patients' psychological health and well-being (Badru et al., 2021; Mohammadian Khonsari et al., 2021) are primarily from the medical, health care and emergency professions (Giorgi et al., 2020). Giorgi et al. (2020) and Vostanis and Bell (2020) reviewed recent COVID-19 and well-being research and concluded that patients who suffered from SARS-CoV-2 and were hospitalised were more likely to present with anxiety, depression, and fatigue in the months that followed. Klaser et al. (2021) were among the few researchers who measured the prevalence of anxiety and depression symptoms in non-healthcare workers with and without prior SARS-CoV-2 infection. They found that the depressive and anxiety symptoms were related to a SARS-CoV-2 infection with a significant,

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1 For the purposes of this study, COVID-19 refers to the pandemic in general, while SARS-CoV-2 refers to being infected with the actual SARS-CoV-2 virus.

albeit small, odds ratio, where infected participants had a 1.08 higher chance of experiencing these symptoms than those who had not been infected. Klaser et al. (2021) also noted that the relationship between depression and anxiety symptoms and having been infected with SARS-CoV-2 was the strongest for those participants who completed the questionnaire less than 30 days after being infected. Therefore, the current study aims to advance the knowledge base of employee psychological health and well-being within the context of COVID-19 by answering the following questions: (1) to what extent is there a difference in psychological health and well-being before and after being infected with SARS-CoC-2?; (2) is there a difference in psychological health and well-being experiences between previously infected and uninfected employees? and (3) which psychological health and well-being constructs are more prevalent among previously infected and uninfected employees?

To address these questions, the research reviewed psychological health and well-being literature, incorporating recent findings relating to the COVID-19 context, and explored the findings through the lens of the biopsychosocial model. The method section explains the research design, data collection, and measures used, followed by the data-analysis strategy, results, discussion of the findings and limitations of the study.

Literature study

Describing psychological health and mental well-being

Psychological health and mental well-being is a multi-faceted concept related to engaging activity, economic, emotional, mental, moral, physical, psychological, social, and spiritual functioning, as well as quality of life, life satisfaction and domain-specific satisfaction (Dodge et al., 2012; Mukhtar, 2020; Bergh, 2021). It should be noted that psychological health and well-being are correlated with but distinct from mental illness (Follmer and Jones, 2018). Gamm et al. (2003) differentiated between mental illness and mental health: Mental illness collectively represents all diagnosable mental disorders, when a person's thoughts, behaviour, and mood are altered, causing some form of impairment and problems (for example, schizophrenia, affective disorders, anxiety disorders), while mental health "is a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity" (p: 97). According to Follmer and Jones (2018), psychological health and well-being (or the lack thereof) are a work outcome where the affective state is generally momentary and a normal response to specific circumstances.

Psychological health and well-being can be depicted as a continuum that is evident in the bipolarity of its psychological constructs (Johnson and Wood, 2017): happiness vs. depression, calmness vs. anxiety, distress vs. eustress, vigour vs. fatigue,

optimism vs. cynicism, dedication vs. apathy, and cognitive weariness vs. cognitive absorption (González-Romá et al., 2006; Rothmann, 2008; Asiwe et al., 2014; Johnson and Wood, 2017). In general, psychological health and mental well-being represent the absence of affective states such as depression, anxiety, fear, and stress (Bergh, 2021) and syndromes such as burnout (Fraga, 2019). Thus, a low state of well-being can presumably indicate the presence of psychological ill-health that includes depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout, while higher states of well-being may reflect engagement, eustress, happiness, and flourishing (Hall et al., 2016; Johnson and Wood, 2017; Querstret et al., 2020). The current article focuses on burnout, depression, anxiety, and stress.

Burnout

Burnout differs from stress since it often involves prolonged exposure to work-related stress, causing burnout (Schaufeli, 2021). Experiencing chronic fatigue because of high job demands, detachment from work and colleagues, increased cynicism, and a sense that the person does not accomplish as much in their work as usual (Maslach, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001) all characterise a state of burnout. Studies show that burnout symptoms often appear similar to symptoms of depression, such as loss of concentration, exhaustion and fatigue (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998; Koutsimani et al., 2019). However, depression can develop irrespective of a person's environment or psychosocial situation, while the onset of burnout is specifically related to a person's work environment (Koutsimani et al., 2019).

Depression

According to Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), depression is "characterised principally by a loss of self-esteem and incentive, and is associated with a low perceived probability of attaining life goals of significance for the individual as a person" (p: 342). Causes of depression are generally clustered under adverse life events on the one hand, and factors related to achievement, characterological, childhood, existential, hormonal, interpersonal conflict, intimacy, neglect, physiological, and relationships on the other (Addis et al., 1995; Piccinelli and Wilkinson, 2000; Beurel et al., 2020). Kessler and Bromet (2013) review of the literature summarises the burden of disease for depression as:

> Difficulties in role transitions (e.g., low education, high teen childbearing, marital disruption, unstable employment), reduced role functioning (e.g., low marital quality, low work performance, low earnings), elevated risk of onset, persistence and severity of a wide range of secondary disorders, and increased risk of early mortality due to physical disorders and suicide (p. 119).

Certain somatic consequences include the risk of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, stroke, obesity (Wulsin et al., 1999; Penninx et al., 2013) and sleep disturbances (Fang et al., 2019).

Anxiety

Anxiety represents an emotional state that can change over time and in intensity and represents a personality trait that differentiates how dangerous and threatening people perceive the world around them (Spielberger, 1966, 1972). Anxiety can be described as a complex reaction to a perceived threatening situation that includes feelings of tension, apprehension, fear, and worry (emotional reaction), intensified arousal of the autonomic nervous system and skeletal muscle effects (physiological reaction), as well as fretting and experiencing unpleasant thoughts and worries (cognitive reaction; Spielberger, 1972; Clark and Watson, 1991; Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995; Psychountaki et al., 2003).

Stress

Stress is defined as a physical and psychological response of the body to any demand that threatens a person's physical and mental well-being (Sharma, 2018; Bergh, 2021). According to Peters et al. (2021), stress is generally regarded as pathogenic and detrimental to a person's immune system. Stress causes physical and psychological ill-health, including symptoms such as a weakened immune system (Peters et al., 2021), effects on the digestive system (Sharma, 2018), cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Sharma, 2018; Seiler et al., 2020), colds and flu (Seiler et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2021), problems in sleeping, emotional problems, depression, anxiety and panic attacks (Devi et al., 2019). Moreover, Seiler et al. (2020) report that the vulnerability to certain types of cancer could be increased by the influence of chronic stress on protective immune responses in the body.

Psychological health and well-being during COVID-19

According to Qiu et al. (2020), adverse psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and panic disorder were triggered or exasperated during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic in general, regardless of infection status, adversely affects individuals' psychological health, resulting in the prevalence of stress, depression, burnout, trauma, post-traumatic stress, and anxiety (Qiu et al., 2020; Restauri and Sheridan, 2020; Yıldırım and Solmaz, 2020). Examples of these studies include that of Campbell and Gavett (2021), who reported mental health declines during the pandemic, indicating the prevalence of burnout, anxiety, feeling exhausted and isolated, increased job demands and growing disengagement at work. Pretorius and Padmanabhanunni (2021) found in their study among young adults in South Africa that exceptionally high levels of anxiety, loneliness, and decreased life satisfaction were present during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a 2021 study of mental health, 76% of full-time employees in the United States reported that during the past year they experienced an effect on their mental health in the form of symptoms of burnout, depression, and anxiety (Mind Share Partners' Mental Health at Work, 2021). However, these studies focused on psychological health and well-being within the general context of the pandemic and did not take infection status into account.

Several international studies indicate that SARS-CoV-2 survivors show a risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (Qiu et al., 2020; Stamu-O'Brien et al., 2020; Janiri et al., 2021; Sekowski et al., 2021; Tarsitani et al., 2021), fatigue, anxiety and depression (Qiu et al., 2020; Sahoo et al., 2020). Mohammadian Khonsari et al. (2021) described how health care professionals in Iran who had been infected with SARS-CoV-2 showed a high risk of displaying psychological symptoms such as depression, stress and anxiety. Similarly, other studies (Qi et al., 2020; Sahoo et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) found an increased prevalence of depression and psychological morbidity among patients hospitalised for SARS-CoV-2. Qi et al. (2020) reported on their study among recovering patients that their mental health problems were alarming. The patients reported that COVID-19 was not merely an illness for these individuals but rather a "life-changing disastrous experience which not only impairs physical well-being but also their mental health" (Qi et al., 2020, p: 9). Of these studies, only Mohammadian Khonsari et al. (2021) included non-infected participants in their samples. Kim et al. (2021) found that 20% of uninfected South Koreans reported high levels of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Rehman et al. (2022) established that among the uninfected Indian population, mean values of depression, anxiety and stress decreased significantly despite an increase in confirmed SARS-CoV-2 cases. These two studies, however, focused only on uninfected participants.

Only a few studies compared the psychological health and well-being of infected and non-infected participants (Risal et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020; Mohammadian Khonsari et al., 2021; İkiışık et al., 2022) and the results are diverse. According to Shi et al. (2020), compared to the non-infected, Chinese individuals previously infected with SARS-CoV-2 were twice as likely to develop mental-health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and acute stress. Healthcare professionals infected with SARS-CoV-2 also showed a higher risk of displaying psychological stress than their colleagues who were not infected (Mohammadian Khonsari et al., 2021). Depression was significantly more prevalent among healthcare workers (Mohammadian Khonsari et al., 2021), medical students (Risal et al., 2020) and the general Chinese public (Zhang et al., 2020) who were positive for COVID-19, while no significant differences in depression were found between infected and uninfected patients with multiple sclerosis (Broche-Pérez et al., 2021) or among Turkish municipal workers (İkiışık et al., 2022). Anxiety was significantly more frequent among patients with multiple sclerosis (Broche-Pérez et al., 2021), medical students (Risal et al., 2020), and healthcare workers (Mohammadian Khonsari et al., 2021) who experienced SARS-CoV-2 infection. In contrast, no significant differences in anxiety were found between infected and uninfected participants from the general Chinese public (Zhang et al., 2020) or Turkish municipal workers (İkiışık et al., 2022). Though these studies compared the infected and uninfected, most

of these studies focused only on depression and anxiety and none included burnout. Furthermore, no studies have been found that compare the level of psychological health and well-being of the infected and non-infected within the South African context or that compare pre-and post-infection burnout levels.

Theoretical setting

In Engel (1977), introduced the biopsychosocial model as an alternative approach to how physicians can deal with patients and their problems by taking into account physiologic, psychological, and social factors. The biopsychosocial model incorporates the disease, an objective biological event that damages individuals physiologically, and the illness, which refers to the psychological and social response of the sick individuals and their relations to the sickness (Turk and Monarch, 2002; Gatchel and Kishino, 2012). Although the model is generally applied within the medical field, it can be operationalised within the context of COVID-19. Jadoo (2020) explained the biopsychosocial model within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as follows: the *bio* entity relates to the actual viral infection and the physiological effect it has on a person's body; the *psycho* entity relates to the thoughts and behavioural and emotional reactions to being infected and to the sudden changes in lifestyle; and the *social* entity incorporates social aspects such as isolation and a lack of interaction with others that can influence a person's recovery and rehabilitation. According to Wainwright and Low (2020), the rehabilitation process of someone recovering from SARS-CoV-2 requires a holistic approach that takes the person and their physical, psychological and social factors and supportive needs into account. Therefore, the biopsychosocial model offers a comprehensive framework to aid in understanding the interplay between psychological health and well-being and being infected with SARS-CoV-2.

Materials and methods

Ethical clearance was obtained from an institutional review board (IPPM-2021-567) and, in accordance with the clearance granted, the study adhered to all ethical requirements.

Data collection

To determine the sample size to compare pre-and post-scores where an effect size of Cohen's $d_z = 0.50$ with an 80% power (alpha = 0.05, two-tailed) would be ensured, G*Power (Faul et al., 2007, 2009; Bartlett, 2019) indicated a sample size of 34 participants was needed for a paired-samples t-test. For an effect size of Cohen's $d_z = 0.50$ with a 95% power (alpha = 0.05, two-tailed), G*Power suggested a sample size of 54 participants was needed. To compare the infected and uninfected participants

while ensuring an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.50$ with 80% (alpha = 0.05, two-tailed), G*Power recommended that a sample of 64 participants per group ($N = 128$) would be needed to conduct an independent samples t-test. For an effect size of Cohen's $d_z = 0.50$ with a 95% power (alpha = 0.05, two-tailed), G*Power suggested a sample size of 105 participants per group ($N = 210$) was needed.

This study used a cross-sectional survey design and non-probability quota sampling to collect data. Participants were screened based on whether they had been infected with SARS-CoV-2. A retrospective pre-post design was used to determine the difference between the level of burnout of the participants' pre and post being infected with SARS-CoV-2. The retrospective pre-post design allows the researchers to collect retrospective pre-test and current (post-test) data at the same time (Little et al., 2020) and is "ideal for assessing variables related to events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, that occur without notice or intent" (p: 4; Miller et al., 2020). According to Drennan and Hyde (2008), using a retrospective pre-post design reduces response shift bias – a person's overestimated evaluation of the impact or level of a certain construct. Participants who reported that they had been infected previously with SARS-CoV-2 were invited to complete an additional section in the questionnaire where they had to evaluate their level of burnout prior to being infected with SARS-CoV-2 in addition to answering questions relating to their current level of burnout. A total of 500 participants completed the questionnaire; however, after removing multivariate outliers, the original dataset was reduced to 466.

QuestionPro was used to collect data. The researchers obtained participants through their personal networks and working South African adults on the Prolific platform.[2] The study was presented on the Prolific platform as a study on 'The work-related well-being of employees who have/have not had COVID-19', and participants were financially rewarded for completing the short survey. Participants had to be 18 years old and be an employee in South Africa for at least 1 year. The participants consented to complete the survey, understanding that their participation in this study was voluntary and that they could discontinue or withdraw without any adverse consequences. The confidentiality of the questionnaire and research process was explained and the electronic datasets were anonymised and stored on a password-protected computer. The participants were informed that only the researchers involved in the project would have access to the data. Since some of the items could seem potentially sensitive (for example, questions regarding COVID-19 status), the participants were notified that all the answers would be kept anonymous and they could therefore feel free to answer honestly. Lastly, for those participants who may have needed immediate support for any suspected mental health condition or COVID-19 related help, the local contact numbers for the South African Depression and Anxiety Group and the

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2 https://www.prolific.co/

South African COVID-19 Hotline were provided at the beginning and at the end of the survey.

Sample

For the current study, data were collected from employed South African participants ($N = 466$) who had been infected with SARS-CoV-2 ($n = 245$) and those who had not been infected with SARS-CoV-2 ($n = 221$). Table 1 shows that most of the participants ($n = 23.4\%$) who had previously been infected with SARS-CoV-2 experienced a moderate level of infection severity. Participants were primarily female (66%). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 68 years (M = 32.63; SD = 7.72), mainly employed full-time

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Previous SARS-CoV-2 infection	Yes	245	52.6%
	No	221	47.4%
If yes, how severe was the infection?	Mild	72	15.50%
	Moderate	109	23.40%
	Severe	59	12.70%
	Critically ill / hospitalized	4	0.90%
	Other	1	0.20%
Sex	Male	157	33.7%
	Female	309	66.3%
Age	<31	217	46.6%
	31–40	185	39.7%
	>40	60	12.9%
	Missing	*4*	*0.9%*
Type of employment	Fulltime	416	89.3%
	Part-time	44	9.4%
	Missing	*6*	*1.3%*
Work-level	Entry level	39	8.4%
	Intermediate level	160	34.3%
	First-level management	91	19.5%
	Middle management	128	27.5%
	Senior management	29	6.2%
	Top-level management	8	1.7%
	Owner	11	2.4%
Industry	For-profit	241	51.7%
	Non-profit	22	4.7%
	Government	69	14.8%
	Education	49	10.5%
	Healthcare	21	4.5%
	Other	64	13.7%

(89%). The intermediate work positions (34.3%), as well as first-level management (19.5%), and middle management (27.5%) positions were mostly represented by the sample. Lastly, the respondents worked mostly in for-profit industries (52%). However, non-profit organisations (5%), government entities (15%), and the educational (11%) and healthcare (5%) sectors were also represented.

Measures

All the measures used in the current study were open-access instruments.

The South African burnout scale

The South African Burnout Scale (SABOS) was developed by Asiwe et al. (2014) to measure cognitive weariness (six items; 'not being able to concentrate while at work'), emotional exhaustion and withdrawal (six items; 'feeling less connected to my work'), and fatigue (five items; 'not having enough energy to go to work in the morning') aspects of burnout among working individuals. Participants were asked to respond to the 17 statements that described ways they may feel about their work responsibilities and work environment and rate their experiences on a seven-point frequency scale ranging from 'never' to 'always'. Asiwe et al. (2014) reported high internal consistency for the three scales, ranging between 0.82 and 0.88. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the current study were 0.96 for Cognitive Weariness, 0.93 for Fatigue, and 0.92 for Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal. The model fit of the SABOS was acceptable after allowing the correlation of certain error co-variances [$\chi^2 = 474.87$ ($n = 466$), $\chi^2/df = 4.24$, RMSEA = 0.08, TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96].

Participants who had previously been infected with COVID-19 were asked to provide two sets of ratings simultaneously: the first was a retrospective rating on how they felt about their work responsibilities and work environment prior to being infected with COVID-19, and the second related to how they felt about their work responsibilities and work environment at the time of survey completion (i.e., after being infected with COVID-19). The retrospective rating's internal consistency for this sample was 0.91 for Cognitive Weariness, 0.80 for Fatigue, and 0.87 for Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal. After allowing certain error co-variances to correlate, the model fit for the retrospective SABOS proved to be acceptable [$\chi^2 = 239.37$ ($n = 245$), $\chi^2/df = 2.18$, RMSEA = 0.07, TLI = 0.94, CFI = 0.95].

The depression, anxiety and stress scale

The 21-item version of the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21) was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) and includes three self-report scales intended to determine a person's emotional states in terms of depression (seven statements), anxiety (seven statements), and stress (seven statements). According to Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), the DASS-21 measures depression symptoms, including inertia, lack of interest/involvement,

dysphoria, hopelessness, self-deprecation, and inability to enjoy normal activities and to appreciate life (for example, 'I felt downhearted and blue'). The anxiety scale measures a person's autonomic arousal, skeletal muscle effects, situational anxiety, and subjective experience of anxious affect (for example, 'I was aware of dryness of my mouth'; Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995). Lastly, the stress scale measures the extent to which a person has difficulty relaxing, nervous arousal, and how easily upset, agitated, irritated and impatient a person gets (for example, 'I found it difficult to relax'). Participants had to indicate how much the statement applied to them over the past week on a four-point rating scale ranging from 'Did not apply to me at all' to 'Applied to me very much or most of the time'. Lee (2019) found internal consistency coefficients of 0.90 for the Depression scale, 0.82 for the Anxiety scale, and 0.87 for the Stress scale. The reliability coefficients for the current study were excellent (Depression $\alpha = 0.91$; Anxiety $\alpha = 0.87$; Stress $\alpha = 0.89$). The initial model fit was acceptable [$\chi^2 = 239.37$ ($n = 245$), $\chi^2/df = 2.18$, RMSEA $= 0.07$, TLI $= 0.94$, CFI $= 0.95$], but after allowing certain co-variances to correlate, the model fit for the DASS-21 was good [$\chi^2 = 528.03$ ($n = 466$), $\chi^2/df = 2.97$, RMSEA $= 0.07$, TLI $= 0.94$, CFI $= 0.95$].

Data analysis

Data were cleaned and analysed using SPSS 27.0. Paired-samples t-tests and independent-samples t-tests were used to analyse the data. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed), and the exact p-values were given for all analyses. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was inspected to determine whether equal variances could be assumed. If equal variances could not be assumed for the factor, the results for 'equal variances not assumed' were reported.

A paired-samples t-test was used to compare the level of participants' burnout prior to and after being infected with SARS-CoV-2. For the current study, 245 cases were subjected to the paired-samples t-test, and this sample size was sensitive to the effects of Cohen's $d = 0.18$ with 80% power or 0.23 with 95% power (alpha $= 0.5$, two-tailed). Therefore, the study would not reliably be able to identify effects smaller than Cohen's d of 0.18. Cohen's d uses the sample's standard deviation of the mean difference to indicate the effect size of the results.

Independent t-tests were applied to measure the differences in burnout, depression, anxiety and stress between participants who had previously been infected and those who had not been infected with COVID-19. In this study, the sample sizes adhered to this recommendation, since there were 245 participants for the group that had been previously infected with SARS-CoV-2 (group 1), while there were 221 participants for the group that had not been infected with SARS-CoV-2 at the time of the study (group 2). A sensitivity power analysis (G*Power; Faul et al., 2007, 2009) showed that an independent samples t-test with 245 participants for group 1 and 221 participants for group 2 ($N = 466$) would be sensitive to the effects of Cohen's $d = 0.26$ at 80% power or 0.34 at 95% power

(alpha $= 0.05$, two-tailed). Therefore, the study would not reliably be able to detect effects smaller than Cohen's $d = 0.26$.

Results

Mean differences in burnout scores pre-and post-SARS-CoV-2 infection

A paired-samples t-test was performed to assess the difference in the level of burnout of participants before and after having been infected with SARS-CoV-2. The pre-and post-means for the three burnout scales are presented in Figure 1. There were statistically significant increases for all three burnout scales before being infected to after being infected: Cognitive Weariness [M increase $= 4.29$, SD increase $= 7.71$, CI $= 3.32$–5.26, $t(244) = 8.71$, $p = 0.000$], Fatigue [M increase $= 3.96$, SD increase $= 7.23$, CI $= 3.05$–4.87, $t(244) = 8.58$, $p = 0.000$], and Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal [M increase $= 4.11$, SD increase $= 6.55$, CI $= 3.29$–4.93, $t(244) = 9.82$, $p = 0.000$]. Cohen's d indicated the increases were moderate too large for all three scales (Cognitive Weariness $= 0.56$; Fatigue $= 0.55$, Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal $= 0.63$) and indicative that the test was sufficiently sensitive to the minimum effect size at 95% power.

Psychological well-being differences between previously infected and non-infected groups

Burnout

An independent-samples t-test was executed to measure the difference in the level of burnout among those who have been infected with SARS-CoV-2 and those who have not yet been infected with SARS-CoV-2 (Figure 2). The overall results indicated significant differences between the two groups for all three burnout scales: Cognitive Weariness [M difference $= 4.37$, SD difference $= 0.70$, CI $= 2.99$–5.74, $t(449.63) = 6.25$, $p = 0.000$], Fatigue [M difference $= 5.66$, SD difference $= 0.64$, CI $= 4.39$–6.92, $t(461.36) = 8.81$, $p = 0.000$], and Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal [M difference $= 3.42$, SD difference $= 0.79$, CI $= 1.88$–4.97, $t(464) = 4.35$, $p = 0.000$]. Cohen's d indicated the increases were moderate too large for the different scales (Cognitive Weariness $= 0.57$; Fatigue $= 0.81$, Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal $= 0.40$). The test was therefore sufficiently sensitive based on the minimum effect size at 95% power.

Depression, anxiety and stress

An independent-samples t-test was also executed to measure the differences in depression, anxiety, and stress among those previously infected with SARS-CoV-2 and the non-infected participants (Figure 3). Significant differences existed between participants who had been infected with SARS-CoV-2 and those who had not been infected, for all three DASS-21 scales:
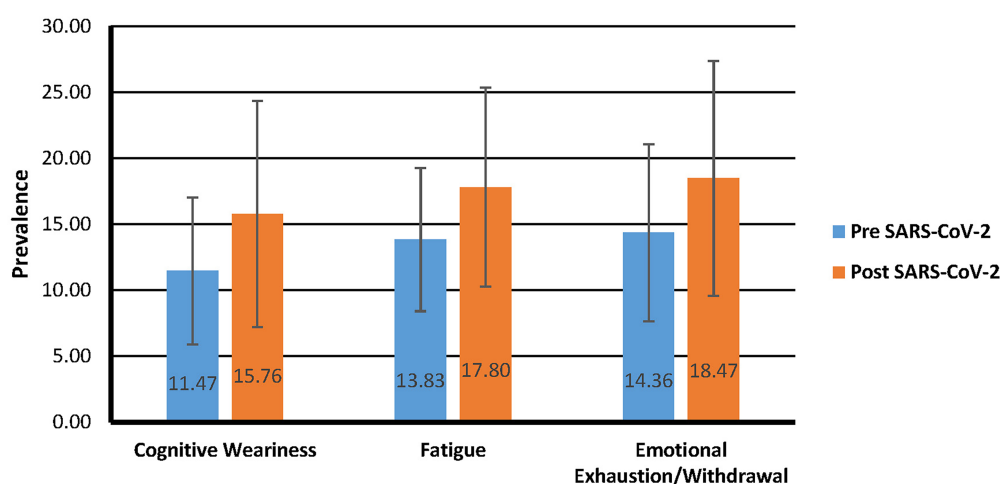
FIGURE 1
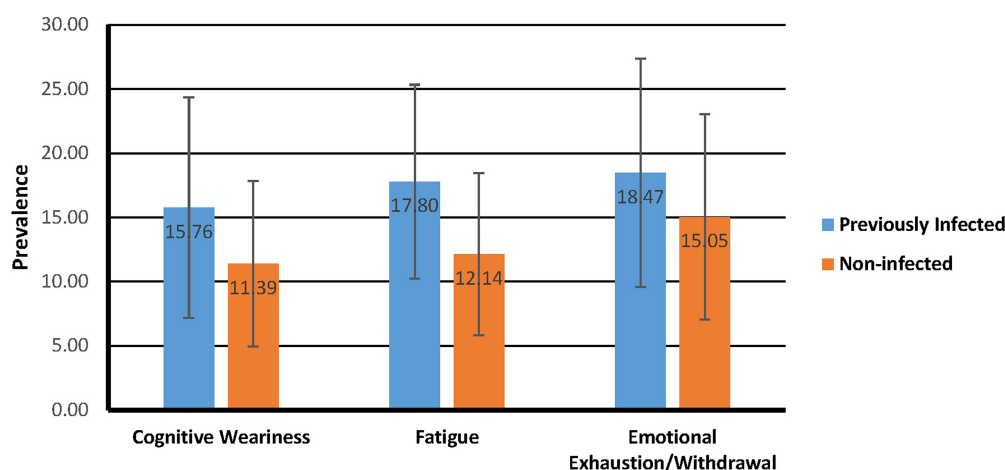Pre vs post SARS-CoV-2 infection comparison of burnout mean scores.

FIGURE 2
Infected vs non-infected comparison of burnout mean scores.

Depression [M difference = 3.66, SD difference = 0.44, CI = 2.79–4.54, $t(451.33) = 8.26$, $p = 0.000$], Anxiety [M difference = 4.56, SD difference = 0.41, CI = 3.76–5.36, $t(430.40) = 11.25$, $p = 0.000$], and Stress [M difference = 4.12, SD difference = 0.43, CI = 3.27–4.97, $t(459.58) = 9.57$, $p = 0.000$]. Cohen's d indicated that increases were large (Depression = 0.76; Anxiety = 1.02, Stress = 0.88). The test's sensitivity was, therefore, realistic at 95% power.

Discussion

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, several studies reported on employee mental health (Harvey et al., 2017; Greenwood et al., 2019; Kyron et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has seemingly exasperated the prevalence of declining mental health among employees. The psychological burden the pandemic placed on infected and uninfected employees in various industries is evident from the vast amount of research on the effect of the pandemic on psychological health and mental well-being. A title search of the terms 'COVID-19 or coronavirus or 2019-ncov or sars-cov-2 or cov-19' and 'psychological well-being or mental health or psychological well-being' in the EBSCOhost search engine generates more than 270 peer-reviewed academic articles. What is evident from the considerable COVID-19 research done in the psychological sphere is that, regardless of whether a person has been infected with SARS-CoV-2, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced psychological health and well-being.

The current study investigated the prevalence of burnout pre-and post-SARS-CoV-2 infection and determined whether
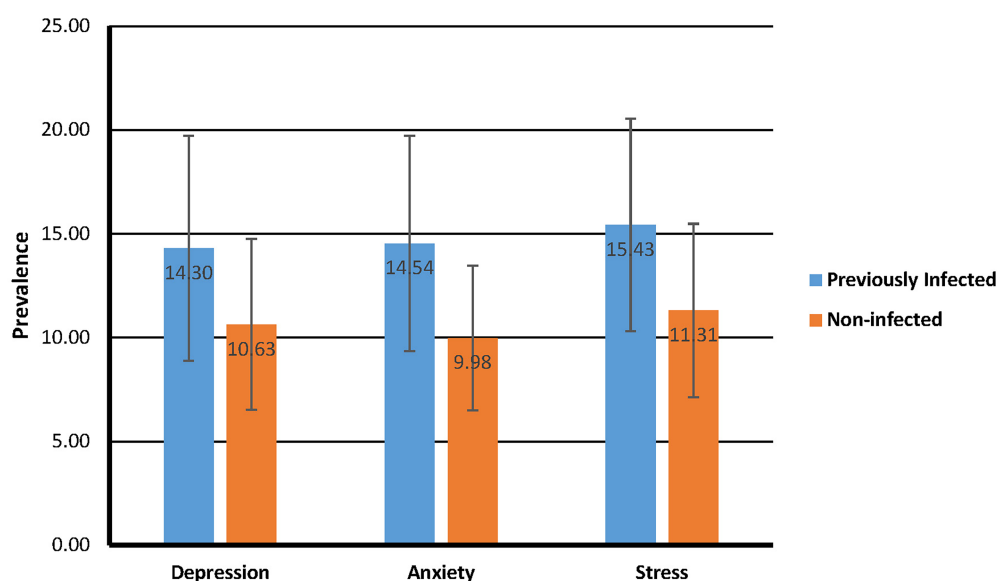
FIGURE 3
Infected vs non-infected comparison of DASS-21 mean scores.

differences in psychological health and well-being existed between SARS-CoV-2 infected and non-infected individuals. The difference in the level of burnout before and after having been infected with SARS-CoV-2 was statistically significant for Cognitive Weariness, Fatigue, and Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal. Like the findings of Hwang et al. (2021), Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal was the most prevalent, both pre-SARS-CoV-2and post-SARS-CoV-2 infection. The COVID-19 pandemic disturbed many people's way of life, and if they were already experiencing burnout-related symptoms, the pandemic may have aggravated those symptoms. The uncertainty and fear surrounding the possibility of being infected with SARS-CoV-2 and the physical and emotional challenges that a person faces during actual infection seem to significantly increase emotional and interpersonal exhaustion and to increase detachment from work. Furthermore, participants' levels of Cognitive Weariness, compared to Fatigue and Emotional Exhaustion/Withdrawal, increased the most from before to after SARS-CoV-2 infection. The outcomes of systematic literature reviews by Ceban et al. (2022) and Daroische et al. (2021) found cognitive impairment to be one of the most reported symptoms of the post-COVID-19 syndrome.

Participants who have been infected with SARS-CoV-2 reported significantly higher levels of burnout, anxiety, depression, and stress than those who have not been infected. While Emotional Exhaustion and Withdrawal were the most prevalent among both previously infected and non-infected groups, the most significant difference was the level of fatigue experienced. Brusaferri et al. (2022) found that the chronic stress of COVID-19 lockdowns may have caused neuroimmune activation in infected and non-infected individuals. Neuroinflammation can trigger symptoms such as mood

alterations, mental and physical fatigue, discognition or "brain fog," depression, and social withdrawal (Li et al., 2017; Brusaferri et al., 2022). Generally, burnout is caused by prolonged exposure to work-related stress (Koutsimani et al., 2019; Schaufeli, 2021). Interestingly, patients who suffered from long-COVID-19 were more likely to experience burnout (Selvaskandan et al., 2022). Coleman (2022) stated that long-COVID-19 can present similar symptoms to burnout and requires a different intervention approach. COVID-19 presented an unprecedented challenge to individuals, which exhausted the availability of their psychological, social and physical resources. Since well-being relates to the availability of psychological, social and physical resources an individual needs during a particular challenge, it makes sense that patients whose resources were depleted could show symptoms of burnout (Dodge et al., 2012).

In terms of anxiety, depression and stress, in both groups stress levels rose. However, a more significant increase took place in levels of anxiety. In their systematic literature review, Nagarajan et al. (2022) confirmed consensus across studies that people who survived severe SARS-CoV-2 infection were at a high risk of developing PTSD. A few studies also found that anxiety was significantly higher in participants who experienced a SARS-CoV-2 infection (Risal et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020; Broche-Pérez et al., 2021; Mohammadian Khonsari et al., 2021). During the pandemic, within the various stages of lockdown, people with medical conditions who had SARS-CoV-2 may have struggled to get to their medical appointments during or after infection (Broche-Pérez et al., 2021). According to Mohammadian Khonsari et al. (2021), people infected or previously infected with SARS-CoV-2 are more anxious about dying, infecting family or friends, being quarantined, and being re-infected with SARS-CoV-2.

Theoretical implications

The biopsychosocial model was used to guide the current study in understanding the interaction between the COVID-19 pandemic, the SARS-CoV-2 infection, and psychological health and well-being. Within the principles of the biopsychosocial model, a previously infected person had to firstly deal with SARS-CoV-2, a biological event, and its physical consequences. Kevadiya et al. (2021) summarised the clinical presentation of SARS-CoV-2 infection and noted it could include "fever, sore throat, cough, chest and muscle pain, dyspnoea, confusion, anosmia, ageusia and headache. These can progress to life-threatening respiratory insufficiency, also affecting the heart, kidney, liver and nervous systems" (p: 593). Second, a previously infected person had to manage the psychological consequences of SARS-CoV-2 infection, which include increased levels of anxiety, stress, depression, burnout, trauma, and post-traumatic stress. A scoping review by Shanbehzadeh et al. (2021) that showed various physical and mental health problems such as anxiety, arthralgia, declines in daily functioning and activities, depression, fatigue, pain, post-traumatic stress disorder, and reduced physical capacity were present up to 3 months after SARS-CoV-2 infection. Lastly, a previously infected person had to endure social challenges such as isolation and quarantine due to their infection. Within the current study, the participants who have been infected with SARS-CoV-2 during the first 2 years of the pandemic were mandated by South African law to quarantine and stay in isolation for at least seven to 10 days.[3] While a person who had not yet been infected could experience COVID-19-related psychological and social difficulties, given the additional biopsychosocial burden that an infected person experiences, it is understandable that there is a significant difference between the psychological health and well-being of these two groups.

Practical implications and recommendations

Norris et al. (2002) found that mental health problems generally peaked a year after a disaster, followed by an improvement. Therefore, organisations must remain vigilant and implement psychological interventions to support distressed employees. The timely identification and precise diagnosis of psychological distress can aid in developing targeted psychological interventions for individuals exposed to a critical incident, such as the pandemic (Zhang et al., 2020). Mohammadian Khonsari et al. (2021) suggested that governments can help reduce the psychological burden of the COVID-19 pandemic and a SARS-CoV-2 infection by creating targeted interventions, distributing correct information about the psychological health and well-being effects of such an infection on various groups, and making a uniform COVID-19

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[3] https://www.gov.za/Coronavirus

mental health counselling service available to the public. Holmes et al. (2020) and Xiang et al. (2020) pointed out the importance of proactive steps to address the effect of COVID-19, which would likely require collaboration across disciplines, involving social workers, medical professionals and psychologists. Several studies point out that psychological counselling using electronic devices and applications (for example, smartphones and WeChat) and regular screening for depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies should be performed for COVID-19 patients, as well as health workers. An agile organisation that considers employee health, safety, and well-being, especially those infected with SARS-CoV-2, can survive and thrive in the uncertain times of the pandemic.

Limitations and recommendations

The methodological limitations of this study include the cross-sectional and, more specifically, the retrospective nature of the study. The study used a retrospective approach to collect the pre-and post-SARS-CoV-2 burnout data. While retrospective studies have proved to be valid, reliable and useful, the descriptive and observational features of the research design limit the extent to which causal relationships between variables can be established (Talari and Goyal, 2020). Furthermore, recall bias, a type of systematic error, is introduced when asking participants to recall certain information and therefore relying on imperfect human memory to report certain events (Talari and Goyal, 2020) and as such the results should not be over-generalised to the whole population. It is suggested that future studies employ a longitudinal approach to see how the psychological health and well-being variables change over time. A procedural limitation of the current study is the use of a crowdsourcing platform to collect the data. According to Rice et al. (2017), disadvantages of using online populations include unrepresentative samples, financial motivation and potential fraud issues, limited length of study, and research can usually only measure attitudes and perceptions and not behavioural data. Alternatives to collecting data include using social media, personal networks, adverts, word of mouth, and emails. Another technical limitation is the lack of access to participants' mental health history, which could bring a broader perspective or clearer context to the results. It is also important to research why some employees' well-being improved during the pandemic, as a means for organisations to identify ways to support employees in the future (Campbell and Gavett, 2021).

Conclusion

While there has been evident psychological well-being and mental health decline during the pandemic in general (Qiu et al., 2020; Restauri and Sheridan, 2020; Yıldırım and Solmaz, 2020; Campbell and Gavett, 2021; Mind Share Partners' Mental Health at Work, 2021), being infected with SARS-CoV-2 significantly decreases a person's psychological well-being and mental health.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, Research Ethics Committee, University of Johannesburg. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Get vaccinated or else… employees' perspective on mandatory vaccination in the retail sector in Zimbabwe

Martha Mapuranga*, Farai Maunganidze and Shaun Ruggunan*

School of Management, IT and Governance, College of Law and Management, University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban, South Africa

The emergence of COVID-19 has resulted in many changes in the world of work. Measures such as remote working, physical distancing, compulsory use of face masks, sanitization among others. With time, a number of medical interventions to deal with the pandemic were developed and availed. Zimbabwe's retail sector was not spared of different vaccines which were meant to curb the virus. Most Zimbabwean organizations made it mandatory for their employees to get vaccinated or risked losing employment. However, less is known about the perceptions of employees toward voluntary vaccination. This gap is important given the strategic nature of employees in an organization. This paper poses the following questions (1) to what extent were employees consulted on the compulsory vaccination? (2) What are the employees' perceptions toward compulsory vaccination? (3) How are employees coping with the mandatory vaccination? The study was premised on the classical work of Kurt Lewin on types of leadership, specifically autocratic-democratic styles. Twenty shopfloor employees from two major retail outlets with functional human resource departments and works councils in Masvingo were purposively sampled and interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The sample composed of women and men of different age groups. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The paper argues that employees have a right to be involved in issues that concern them. The study has established four levels of consultation existing on a continuum namely formal and genuine consultations, formal but less genuine consultations, informal consultations, and no consultation at all. The fourth level emerged to have been the most popular among most participants. With regards to employees' perceptions of mandatory vaccination by management, findings have revealed three categories which are, perceived good decision, perceived tight hands on the part of management and the them and us perceptions. Concerning reactions to mandatory vaccination, the study has shown that employees in the retail sector had a number of options to follow. Some went for full vaccination willingly or under duress, while others settled for a single dose. Most participants highlighted that they fraudulently obtained some vaccination cards. These findings support the relevance of engaging employees on matters that affect them. The study has therefore established the importance of genuine consultations between management and employees on issues that pertains the latter.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, vaccination, employee, retail sector, perspective

Introduction and background

Toward the end of 2019, the world woke up to the emergence of COVID-19, also known as corona virus. The pandemic was first discovered in Wuang, China (Yang et al., 2020) and quickly spread to the rest of the world (Sultana et al., 2020). COVID-19 is caused by the recently discovered severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). Due to its devastating effects, Watkins (2020) describes the pandemic as a global threat. As of 3 July 6.3 million people had succumbed to COVID-19, with an average of 4.6 million new cases being reported (WHO, 2022). It is these alarming figures that forced governments, with the assistance of the World Health Organization (WHO) Guidelines to come up with measures meant to reduce the spread of the pandemic.

A raft of measures including promoting physical/social distancing as well as persuading the population to follow health behavioral guidelines (Nofal et al., 2020) were outlined. Zimbabwe was not spared from the efforts of controlling the spread of the pandemic (Chigevenga, 2020). Of interest in this study was the "voluntary" COVID-19 vaccination. In several countries, the vaccination was met with mixed reactions. On one hand, some people saw it as a positive move meant to save lives (Coe et al., 2022) while on the other side, some saw it as risk as they argue that this was an opportunity by some people to wipe away some sections of the population (Qiao et al., 2020).

In Zimbabwe, although the vaccination was voluntary, most organizations, including the government started subtly forcing their workforce to get vaccinated. Unvaccinated employees were told not to report for duty until they are vaccinated (Aaron and Tafadzwa, 2021; Matikiti, 2021). Failure to report to work meant no remuneration and eventually would lead to loss of employment. Most employees saw the move by their respective employers as abusing their freedom to choose as they had no choice but to get vaccinated so as to save their jobs (Kugarakuripi and Ndoma, 2022), especially considering the high rate of unemployment which has characterized Zimbabwe in recent years. Government and other business experts argued that they wanted to protect their vaccinated employees, customers and other stakeholders against unvaccinated employees.

It is against this background that the study seeks to establish the perceptions of retail employees with regards to voluntary vaccinations which has been interpreted in some circles as mandatory. Less is known about the perceptions of these employees, especially considering the precarity of work in the retail industry. In addressing the gap in literature, the paper was guided by 3 questions namely (1) to what extent were employees consulted on the compulsory vaccination? (2) What are the employees' perceptions toward compulsory vaccination? (3) How are employees coping with the mandatory vaccination?

Previous studies on COVID-19 in the workplace have focused on implications, issues, and insights for future research and action (Kniffin et al., 2021), making a workplace ready for COVID-19 (WHO, 2020), workplace COVID-19 vaccination (Riva et al., 2022) and COVID-19 related mental health effects in the workplace (Giorgi et al., 2020). This study took a different perspective by focusing on the perceptions of employees of mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations, particularly in a precarious environment such as the one obtaining in Zimbabwe.

The paper will start by focusing on the concept of autocratic-democratic leadership styles before proceeding to a brief discussion on the economic trajectory traveled by Zimbabwe from independence. Thereafter attention is turned to COVID-19 in the workplace before attending to issues pertaining to dynamics and debates around COVID-19 vaccinations. The paper proceeds to look into aspects involving employee involvement and participation. Methodology used in the paper is discussed Barthold et al. (2022) before the presentation of findings and discussion. The paper continues to attend to recommendations before it concludes with a conclusion section.

Democratic leadership

The study is premised on the work of Lewin (1944) on democratic leadership, which is also known as participative leadership or shared leadership. This is a leadership style that entails members of a group participating in the decision-making process. In participative leadership, there is collective decision-making between managers and subordinates.

In the context of this study, democratic leadership meant retail managers creating an environment where employees would formally and freely participate on issues to do with COVID-19 vaccination. As noted by Kilicoglu (2018), through democratic leadership, a sense of ownership is developed with the participation of all members of an organization. Regarding COVID-19 vaccination, myths and misunderstandings surrounding the issue would be addressed and dispelled, leaving employees prepared to go through the process without a sense of being coerced.

On the opposite of the spectrum lies autocratic or authoritarian leadership. This often comprise of leaders in possession of ultimate authority and power over others. These leaders make choices based upon their ideas alone and do not listen to their team members or seek input from others. Autocratic leadership has gained through such aspects as punishment, threat, rules and regulations and demands (Chu, 2014; Erdem, 2021).

However, with caution, autocratic leadership style works in some situations. Researchers concur that in times of a crisis, some autocratic traits of leadership style must be practiced (Du Plessis and Keyter, 2020; Ma and Yang, 2020). When dealing with a crisis, leaders are expected to make difficult decisions, communicate and execute a strategy with an unwavering focus.

By its very nature, COVID-19 was an issue requiring urgent attention in organizations (Hodder, 2020). There was need to quickly come up with ways that would save the organizations, its operations and stakeholders and Zimbabwe was not spared of this need. From an autocratic leadership perspective and within the context of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, managers had to make quick decisions to protect both the organizations and stakeholders.

We submit to the notion that COVID-19 required an urgent approach to decision making and at the same time, employees also needed to be taken on board in one way or the other. There was therefore a need to balance an autocratic leadership style with the democratic leadership style. It was also important to keep formal communication channels between managers and employees open, especially pertaining COVID-19 vaccines and the vaccination process.

Employee involvement and decision making

Employee involvement entails direct participation of staff meant to help an organization fulfill its mission as well as its objectives by applying their own ideas, efforts and expertise toward solving problems and making decisions. It has been argued that employee involvement makes employees feel part of the family. The result is that employees become more responsible about their work. Such an environment cultivates possibilities of innovative thinking and ideas to address challenges in the workplace (Bratton et al., 2021).

Job satisfaction increases when employees are involved in decision making (García et al., 2018). Similarly, Dahmardeh and Nastiezaie (2019) has it that employees are bound to be committed to decisions they would have participated in. Employees feel honored and valued when they are consulted and the other way round is true (García et al., 2018).

There is actually more need for organizations to engage their employees during times of crisis. Times of crisis call for organizations to continuously engage their workers in decision making processes. This has been argued to harness a feeling of commitment and a high level of motivation required by both parties during a period of a pandemic (Chanana, 2021).

However, Hodgkinson (2018) opines that a sense of managerial prerogative in making decisions may be seen in efforts by management to avoid involving unions and employees when it comes to crucial decisions. Kougiannou et al. (2021) echo similar views when they argue that management's perception of risk about sharing and discussing information with employees and employee representatives influences their decision whether to involve employees or their unions in decision making processes in organizations. In the case of a pandemic and its devastating effects, like that involving COVID-19, management may see it un-worthwhile, risk and time consuming to involve employees and may proceed to make unilateral decisions

Zimbabwe's economic trajectory and employment

Zimbabwe got its independence from Britian in 1980. The first few years after independence were characterized by steady growth (Mashizha and Mapuva, 2018; Musavengane, 2018). The economy started showing signs of distress. Economic decline was precipitated by a myriad of events including payment of gratuities to veterans of the liberation war (Mazorodze, 2020), the introduction of the Movement for Democratic Change as a new and powerful opposition party (Hadebe, 2019), land reform (Mkodzongi and Spiegel, 2019), corruption (Muzurura, 2019), and economic sanctions (Mazorodze, 2021), among other factors.

An unstable economic environment in Zimbabwe has led to company closures (Gukurume, 2018), downsizing (Chirasha and Sauti, 2020), and depressed foreign direct investment (Bonga, 2020). These developments in organizations have worsened an already battered economy, thus making it more difficult for those in employment as well as those in search of employment.

COVID-19 and the workplace

COVID-19 has reconfigured the workplace, not only in Zimbabwe but around the world (Kniffin et al., 2021). In most organizations, in line with their respective governments' directives and World Health Organization COVID-19 regulations, had to change the way they have been operating (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021). Organizations had to start practicing social distancing (Noh et al., 2020), workplace sanitisers (Bhaumik, 2021), office decongestion (Balisi and Madisa, 2021). Of interest to this study, these measures were later followed by voluntary vaccination. Zimbabwe was not spared of COVID-19 mandatory vaccination in its quest to control its devastating effects (Murewanhema et al., 2022).

COVID-19 vaccination

Some world pharmaceutical companies reacted to the pandemic by coming up with drugs which were meant to protect people from getting infected. The drugs included Sinopharm BIBP, Covaxin, Sinovac and Sputnik V and Zimbabwe adopted the use of all the 4 drugs. However, just like in many other countries, citizens had mixed perceptions regarding the vaccinations. As noted by McAbee et al. (2021), vaccines remain one of the most effective public health strategies meant to protect against infectious diseases yet vaccine hesitancy has emerged as a health threat globally. The same hesitancy has characterized the uptake of COVID-19 vaccination roll out in Zimbabwe (Murewanhema et al., 2022). Kugarakuripi and Ndoma (2022) acknowledges that lack of trust in government exacerbated by reliance on social media for facts have been instrumental in Zimbabweans resisting COVID-19 vaccinations. However, as noted by Mugari and Obioha (2021), there is always need for responsible authorities to emphasize the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination so that people voluntarily participate in such activities without a sense of being forced.

Although on paper, in Zimbabwe vaccination was said to be voluntary it was subtly made compulsory. Some people got

vaccinated so as to access public spaces, some complied in line with directives from their employers while others complied to satisfy school requirements (Chigevenga, 2020; Makadzange et al., 2022).The government of Zimbabwe also introduced mandatory vaccination for its employees (Makadzange et al., 2022). Of interest to this study was the mandatory vaccination of employees in the retail sector in Zimbabwe. Frontline workers have not only been mandated for vaccination in Zimbabwe but it has been a global trend in other countries as well, for instance in United States, (Prince et al., 2022), in India, (Bagcchi, 2021), and in Italy, (Craxì et al., 2021).

Regarding mandatory vaccination in Zimbabwe Kugarakuripi and Ndoma (2022) have it that the Zimbabwe Congress Of Trade Unions (ZCTU) unsuccessfully tried stop the exercise. Employees were left with no other option besides being vaccinated. Most organizations compelled their employees to be vaccinated. Retail employees were not spared of this vaccination wave.

Materials and methods

Design

The study adopted a phenomenological approach which is a type of qualitative inquiry that emphasizes experimental, lived aspects of a particular construct. The focus is on how the phenomenon is experienced at the time of its occurrence (Coolican, 2018). In this context, retail employees had to express their lived experience regarding the mandatory COVID-19 vaccination in Zimbabwe.

Participants and procedure

Braun and Clarke (2021) recommended a minimum sample size of at least twelve for quantitative studies, therefore twenty employees (males: $n = 10$, females: $n = 10$, age range 18–47 years) were purposively sampled from two major retail outlets in the town of Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants because of the defining characteristics that makes them holders of the data needed (Olurotimi, 2018). Retail employees was one of the categories of workers who continued attending to their duties at work even when other categories made such arrangements as working from home. The choice of two major retail outlets was reached on the realization that such organizations have full-fledged human resource departments as well as works councils representing employees. It was assumed that having a human resource management department in place meant the existence of a structure that can be used in addressing and consulting employees on issues that affect them. Furthermore, it was also assumed that the existence of a works council meant interests of employees were negotiated between the employer and the employees. Anonymity of participants was maintained and pseudonyms were used.

The inclusion criterion was that participants were retail shop employees who had worked for the respective shops in Masvingo, Zimbabwe branches for not less than 5 years as they have better experience of working in the retail sector. Researchers were assisted by the human resource officers of the respective retails shops to purposively sample the participants according to the inclusion criterion. Detailed information about the study, including all ethical related, issues was provided to all the participants prior to their participation. After explaining the research to prospective, participants, those who were willing were given consent forms to complete. Thereafter, confidentiality was explained to all participants. Participants were also told that they were free to withdraw from the interview anytime during the process without any repercussion. In addition, participants were also told that there were no right or wrong answers. Participants were also consulted before recording them. Gender and age were taken into consideration to ensure that the sample encompassed represented different categories of participants. Table 1 below depicts the sample characteristics.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted by MM and FM and SR analysed the data. MM is PhD student with the University of KwaZulu Natal, department of human resource management in South Africa. FM is a research associate with the University KwaZulu Natal, South Africa and a senior lecturer with the Great Zimbabwe University, department of human resource management. SR is a Professor at the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.

Data collection was conducted between March and April 2022. Although in Zimbabwe, COVID-19 vaccination started in 2021, the move gained momentum at the end of 2021 and early 2022 when vaccines were made available to all adults aged 18 and above in Zimbabwe. Interviews were conducted in person with all World Health Organization COVID-19 protocols fully observed. The interviews had a duration of between 27 and 48 min. Each interview session was recorded transcribed. Data collection periods were arranged by the respective human

TABLE 1 Sample biographical characteristics.

Retail outlet A		Retail outlet B	
Males	5	Males	5
Females	5	Females	5
Age ranges (years)		Age ranges (years)	
20 and below	2	<20	1
21–25	3	20–25	2
26–30	1	26–30	2
31–35	2	31–35	1
36–40	1	36–40	1
41+	1	41+	3

resource officers during working hours at the employers' premises. After each interview session, participants were thanked, and no rewards were provided for participating. Conducting such a study at the employer's premises posed some risk to employees as the former could have made a conscious effort to overhear the interviews, possibly leading to the victimization of some employees. The researchers however took the word of the senior managers that the organization is a learning organization and wanted to learn on how best they can take care of the interests of their workforce. However, in an effort to make sure employees were safe, the interviews were conducted in the middle of the conference room, doors and windows were all closed to guarantee as much privacy as possible. The study is presented in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), (Tong et al., 2007).

The study made use of a semi-structured interview guide/ schedule to collect data (Hamilton and Finley, 2019). The instrument composed of four sections namely;

    a. Demographic information
    b. The extent to which employees have been consulted regarding mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations,
    c. Perceptions of employees relating to mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations and,
    d. Ways through which employees are coping with mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The analysis took an inductive logic reasoning approach. First, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Thereafter, the first author (MM) read through the transcripts several times to have a detailed understanding of the data. Second, initial codes were made across the data. Thereafter, these codes were collated into initial themes. Fourth, initial themes were reviewed by examining possible connections between them. Afterwards, final themes were generated by bunching initial themes based on commonality. Finally, the most salient quotations were selected to represent final themes.

Trustworthiness of the study

There are four criteria that should be considered by qualitative researchers in their pursuit of a trustworthy research study, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Efforts were also made to ensure that the study meets the trustworthy criteria.

Credibility addresses the extent to which findings are congruent with reality (Shenton, 2004). According to Lincoln and Guba (1986), one way of ensuring credibility is for researchers to ensure they are using well established research methods. In this research,

phenomenological design was used. This is a tried and tested design in qualitative research methodology and has been used in many social research studies around the globe. In addition, as a way of confirming credibility, researchers are recommended to employ the process of iterative questioning. The interview guide's length as well as the number of questions that probed the phenomenon of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination enabled the iterative nature of questioning. The questioning focused both on past and present in so far as the changing nature of professional work in Zimbabwe is concerned. It is also important to note that several debriefings were held between the two authors to come up with a sound interview guide which will measure what is should measure.

Transferability relates to external validity of a study. Since the findings of a qualitative project are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations (Shenton, 2004). The notion of transferability has been a highly debatable issue in qualitative research. Several authorities argue that transferability is impossible owing to the fact that all observations are defined and are a product of the context in which they occur (Erlandson et al., 1993). It is, however, important to note that the key issue in qualitative research is not to search for the usual and traditional generalizability: rather, the objective is to seek an understanding and appreciation of the conditions under which a particular finding or phenomenon appears and operates (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). The sampling methods employed in this study are not representative. However, purposive sampling attempts to represent to an extent operations in Zimbabwe's retail outlets regarding COVID-19 mandatory vaccination.

Dependability in qualitative studies corresponds to reliability. Reliability is addressed by employing techniques which show that if the work is to be repeated in the same context, using the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be achieved. However, owing to the changing nature of issues addressed by qualitative researchers, such provisions of reliability are problematic in their work (Fidel, 1993; Marshall and Rossman, 2014). The dependability issue can be directly addressed by reporting the processes in the study in detail; by doing so, one would be enabling future researchers to repeat that particular study. Under such a scenario, the research design is viewed as prototype mode. In order to address the issue of dependability, the researchers devoted a section to describe the research methodology used in this study.

Relating to the notion of confirmability in qualitative research, scholars argue that it goes hand in hand with the aspect of objectivity (Patton, 2014). Objectivity in science is associated with the use of instruments that are independent of human skill and perception. However, real objectivity is difficult to achieve since tests and questionnaires are designed by human beings and so the researcher's intrusion is inevitable (Patton, 2014).

Miles et al. (2018) noted that an important criterion for confirmability in qualitative research is the extent to which the investigator admits his/her own predispositions, agendas and

assumptions. The researcher should declare and acknowledge his/her beliefs underpinning certain decisions made as well as methods adopted. Emphasis should also be on why the researcher favored a particular approach to research at the expense of other approaches. In this research, a section has been devoted to explain the qualitative approach which was deemed fit.

In addition, the researchers clearly highlighted their academic and professional background and confirmed that they have no interest in the way employees in the retail sector are managed.

Confirmability can also be ensured by the researcher's ability to provide an "audit trail" (Shenton, 2004). This would allow an independent reader to trace the research step by step through the decisions made as well as procedures described. The researcher provided a detailed methodology section in an effort to address the notion of confirmability in this study.

Findings and discussion

The findings are presented in three broad subsections. The focus is first on the extent to which employees have been consulted with regards to mandatory COVID-19 vaccination. The section continues to look into the perceptions of employees relating to mandatory COVID-19 vaccination. Ways through which employees are coping with mandatory COVID-19 vaccination marks the end of this section. Through continuous engagement with the data, inductive reasoning was used to discover themes. Table 2 below presents thee themes and sub-themes with each of these explained in detail in following sections:

The magnitude of employee consultation

The study reveals that employees in the retails sector have been consulted on a continuum. The continuum ranges from high level consultation to non-consultation with regards to COVID-19 mandatory vaccination.

Formal genuine consultation

It has emerged from the study that employees in the retail sector were rarely consulted on the issue of mandatory vaccination. Only two of the participants highlighted having been formally consulted. One participant, a 42-year-old make till operator had to say:

> I was called by my manager to his office, and he asked me about the issue, and I gave my opinion on the matter. It was a good moment as I know that whatever the decision made, my voice was there as I had an opportunity to be heard.

TABLE 2 Themes and sub-themes of findings.

Theme	Sub-themes
The magnitude of consultation	Formal genuine consultations
	Formal less genuine consultations
	No consultation
Employees' perceptions of COVID-19 mandatory vaccination	Perceived good decision
	Perceived tied hands of management
	Them and us perception
Coping with mandatory COVID-19 vaccination	Full vaccination
	Obtaining a vaccination card fraudulently
	Half-baked vaccination

In accordance with the arguments by Chu (2014), managers in the retail sector adopted an autocratic style of leadership. From these findings, it is clear that adequate formal consultations were not made in as far as mandatory COVID-19 vaccination. This is in contrast with the ideas of Bratton et al., 2021 who argue that contemporary organizations must seriously consider employee involvement as this yields positive results both for individuals and corporates. Findings of this study are also out of sync with the sentiments by Chanana (2021) who has it that management must make sure they involve employees in decisions made during a crisis. Above all, the approach taken by management is against the spirit of democratic management where participation of employees especially on issues that affect them is encouraged (Kilicoglu, 2018).

It is important to note that as highlighted by Du Plessis and Keyter (2020) and Ma and Yang (2020), particularly in the context of COVID-19, managers and employers could have had limited time to consult employees as this was a crisis. However, communication of the urgency in COVID-19 related issues mighty have helped employees understanding the predicament of managers. Furthermore, managers might have combined autocratic leadership style with some communications meant to demystify social media content that was circulating that led to COVID-19 vaccination resistance.

Formal less genuine consultations

Although 2 of the participants indicated that they were formally consulted on mandatory COVID-19 vaccination, they argued that the consultations were mere window dressing efforts. Participants indicated that management had already made up their mind and the nature of consultation only required employees to rubber stamp a position. Participant 12, a 58-year-old male argued:

> Yes, I was consulted on the issue of the mandatory covid-19 vaccination. However, they just brought the issue with an already existing position. They had already concluded the matter and all I had to do was to rubber stamp.

Participant 12 also indicated that while he was happy to be consulted and to have his view heard, he was not sure why management chose to consult him ahead of all other employees. He was not equally sure whether he was the only employee consulted or more other employees were consulted. In this regard, he had to say:

> Up until now, I am not sure why management chose to consult me ahead of all other employees at this branch. On that note, I am not sure whether others were also consulted but I never heard anyone saying so. So, chances are high that they consulted me only.

In this case, it is clear that although management may argue that it has consulted some employees on the issue of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination, employees had a feeling that the COVID-19 vaccination was rather imposed on them. There was inadequate consultation. Employees after such perceived low-level consultation, may not feel as part and parcel of decision makers, especially on issues that concerns them. As predicted by Kilicoglu (2018), perceived use of an autocratic style of leadership may result in compromised commitment to decisions arrived at.

No consultation

The majority of participants, indicated that they were not even consulted on the issue of COVID-19 mandatory vaccination. In this case, contrary to the position by Naqshbandi et al. (2018) advocating for employee consultation on issues that pertains them, managers in the retail sector in Zimbabwe did not consider it important to engage their employees on the issue of COVID-19 mandatory vaccination.

Possible direct and indirect reasons can be cited for management's position of failing to consult employees. First and foremost, it is highly likely that management took advantage of prevailing economic environment obtaining in Zimbabwe where demand for employment exceeds its supply. In such a situation, management could have been fully aware that employees were unlikely to leave the organization and they were also highly likely to comply with the directive to get vaccinated. Second, management, In line with the argument by Kougiannou et al. (2021) who indicated that there are moments when management should make quick decisions. Health related aspects such as those relating to COVID-19 require quick decisions which may render major employee consultations time consuming. The need to protect other stakeholders such as customers and suppliers. This might have compounded management not to consult employees as they had to make a quick decision. However, even though managers had inadequate time and as argued by Du Plessis and Keyter (2020) and Ma and Yang (2020), crisis moments require quick decisions that may not allow adequate consultations, related communication regarding COVID-19 and its associated risks should have been done.

On the other hand, management might have just felt that it is their right and prerogative to make important decisions on behalf of their employees (Hodgkinson, 2018; Kougiannou et al., 2021). This is against the contemporary spirit of employee engagement and has serious reparations (García et al., 2018; Bratton et al., 2021).

Although COVID-19 presented a crisis to organizations and called for management to act in accordance with the autocratic management style, there was need to compliment this approach with some aspects of democratic management. Furthermore, management might have considered combining autocratic management style with formal engagements with employees meant to justify their position at the same time, demystifying vaccination myths and misunderstandings which were circulating mainly on social media platforms.

Employees' perceptions of COVID-19 mandatory vaccination

The study has established different perceptions of COVID-19 vaccinations by retail employees. Generally, these perceptions revealed satisfaction to dissatisfaction as outlined in the following sections.

Perceived good decision

Four participants highlighted that management of the retail sector took a good decision by forcing employees to undergo a forced vaccination exercise. Participant 18, a 32 year-old female had this to say:

> Forced vaccination was good as it was meant to save the life of everyone in and outside an organization. Given the nature of the pandemic, had I been holding a management position, I would have done the same.

The findings of this study resonates with the work of Bridoux and Vishwanathan (2020) who argue that management decisions must be in the interest of all the stakeholders of an organization, in this case, stakeholders of a retail outlet. The stakeholders include employees, customers, and suppliers. One participant, although he was in support of the move by management, he argued that management should have consulted employees as a major stakeholder as outlined below by a 27-year-old male participant.

> The idea of forced vaccination was good; however, management should have consulted employees. They should have made joint decisions together with us. I just wonder why they did not engage us. Maybe they see us as dull and unable to understand the risk associated with COVID-19.

The above quotation clearly indicates that although some retail employees agreed with the decision of mandatory

vaccination, they were not happy for not being consulted on the issue. In this context, some employees were satisfied with the decision made regarding mandatory COVID-19 vaccination but were dissatisfied with the decision made by management of not engaging them. Literature (García et al., 2018; Dahmardeh and Nastiezaie, 2019; Bratton et al., 2021) has it that when involved in decision making, employees are happy and are committed to the decision made. The exclusion of employees from decision making, especially on issues that pertains them may result in disgruntlement and resistance to organizational initiatives.

Perceived tied hands of management

Another theme which emerged from the study was that of management having no option but to proceed and make it mandatory for employees to undergo a mandatory vaccination process for them to continue rendering their services to the employer. Five of the participants highlighted that although they were not consulted on the issue of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination, management had no option but to proceed given the severity of the pandemic. Participant 14 a 33-year-old male argued as follows:

> Covid-19 has been very ruthless and because of this, management had no option but to quickly decide. I am sure there was no time for consultations. Management would have been naive to consult employees whilst covid-19 was ravaging day in and day out.

Unlike participants in the previous section, these ones were comfortable with the decision by management regarding COVID-19 and understood the position of management of not consulting employees given the seriousness of the pandemic. Perceptually, these participants exonerated management for not consulting them. The fact that these participants acknowledged the dilemma faced by management meant that chances of the former being up in arms with the latter were minimal.

Them and us perception

The majority of participants 13 argued that management did not consult them because they consider themselves superior to the employees. In this context, participating employees were not happy not being given a chance to contribute to the decision on COVID-19. According to them, the decision by management not to consult them emanated not from the severity of the pandemic, and not from the limited time management had to make a decision, but from the fact that management considered themselves superior to employees. Management considered themselves as more intelligent and in a class of their own opposed to employees who were seen as inferior and unable to make sound

decisions. Participant 7, a 26-year-old female employee had this to say with regards to mandatory COVID-19 vaccination'

> They are the managers, they are the decision makers. They say, and we do. No one can question them…their word is final. They are convinced we are dull and they are clever. All they want us to do is to get vaccinated even against our will. Our choices are limited.

The tone and choice of words by the above participant clearly brings out a strong level of dissatisfaction against being excluded from making a decision on an issue that directly affect employees. The findings of this study pertaining to the perceived exclusion of employees and their subsequent feelings concur with the arguments of some scholars (García et al., 2018; Dahmardeh and Nastiezaie, 2019; Bratton et al., 2021) who have it that workers gets disgruntled when they are not involved in decision making processes, especially on issues that concern them.

Findings clearly reveal the concept of othering at play as perceived by some participants. Othering entails an out-group and an in-group where perceived differences do not allow the 2 groups to formally meet and discuss issues at the workplace. Inadequate or lack of formal interactions between management and employees have been argued to cause the former to have a prerogative to make unilateral decisions even on issues that affect employees directly.

It is evident from the findings that employees can easily recognize the demarcation between them and the managers leading to the latter having power over the former. Sentiments from most participants clearly reveals their disgruntlement of not being consulted, particularly on issues that pertains them. The power and importance of a democratic leadership style was emphasized (Kilicoglu, 2018).

Coping with mandatory COVID-19 vaccination

It has emerged from the study that employees reacted differently to the mandatory COVID-19 vaccination. To cope with the mandatory COVID-19 vaccination, some participants complied with the order, regardless of whether they wanted to or not. Some settled to just fraudulently obtain a vaccination card, while some just went for a first dose and never returned for a second dose. These reactions are explained below.

Full vaccination

Five of the participants admitted having paid heed to the call by management for mandatory COVID-19 vaccination. These participants reported to have gone through both doses of the vaccination. Findings further reveal that 2 of these were convinced that this was a good idea and were happy to get vaccinated. As

alluded to by participant 13, a 33-year-old employee the only way to fight the pandemic was to get vaccinated. He had to say:

> Look at how people have been dying…it is so pathetic. Vaccinations have always proved to be effective since we were young. We previously had a pandemics such as polio and measles, but were conquered by vaccinations. At least as of now, that is what we have at our disposal as we navigate into the future.

This could have resulted from the massive campaigns by the government and other not for profit organizations on mass media platforms encouraging Zimbabweans to get vaccinated in order to contain the pandemic.

Although the remaining three participants also went for full vaccination, they felt they had no option because their respective organizations had made it mandatory. As indicated by participant 19, a 44-year-old male employee, the move by his organization was coercive; in this regard, he argued:

> What was I supposed to do? Failure to comply with the directive meant that I would lose employment. Honestly, I did not want this, but I had no option except to be vaccinated.

The prevailing economic condition in Zimbabwe characterized by an excess supply of labor might have contributed to some participants opting to get vaccinated even when they did not want to. As alluded to by Mudzonga (2021), the balance of power in the workplace has tilted in favor of the employer and against the employee who can easily be replaced in Zimbabwe. Although the five were all fully vaccinated, their motivations to do so was different with others out of conviction and others out of fear of losing their employment.

Obtaining a vaccination card fraudulently

Findings have it that some employees connived with some health personnel to obtain vaccination cards using unorthodox means. This category composed of 9 (45) of the participants. Participant 16, a 36-year-old employee shared his experiences regarding an ill-gotten vaccination card:

> A friend's girlfriend is a nurse…we approached her for some [vaccination] cards with all the details. She provided these cards at a cost citing that it is a syndicate and she shares the money with her superiors. The syndicate wanted the money, and we wanted the vaccination cards.

Obviously, this category of employees did not want to be vaccinated at the same time, they did not want to lose their employment. They then met health personnel who were eager to earn extra money through corrupt behaviors. Corruption in the acquisition of COVID-19 cards not only in Zimbabwe, but in other countries has also been noted by other scholars (Maketo and Mutizwa, 2021; Tshabangu and Salawu, 2021; Sorooshian et al., 2022).

It is possible that had management earnestly and fully consulted employees on the need to get vaccinated, the latter would have expressed their fears and management together with other stakeholders would have collectively worked on that to make sure the fears are dealt with. The majority of employees had fears derived from some unfounded arguments which circulated on social media platforms. In line with this, Dzinamarira et al. (2021) have it that COVID-19 vaccination was negatively seen in some social and religious circles, thereby leading to some sectors resisting it.

In this case, findings show that participants had inadequate knowledge regarding COVID-19 vaccination as they were not [adequately] consulted. For commitment to organizational decisions, employees must be involved in the process as managers exercise democratic leadership style (Kilicoglu, 2018). Although the decision for mandatory COVID-19 might have been perceived to be autocratic, providing formal communication pertaining to COVID-19 vaccination could have gone a long way in preparing employees for vaccinations on a rather willing basis.

Half-baked vaccination

It has been revealed from the findings of this study that some participants only settled for the first dose and were reluctant to go for the second dose. Six of the participants constituted this category. The idea, as highlighted by the majority in this category was to lie somewhere in the middle, having started the journey, but not bringing it to completion. In line with this reaction to mandatory COVID-19 vaccination, participant 17, a 24-year-old male employee presented his case as follows:

> We were afraid to lose our employment, so my close friends and I agreed that we go for the first dose, then wait and see. We presented to the human resource department a card with a single dose and they filed it. Since then, nothing has been said regarding the second dose and as of now, we are happy that way. We will consider the second dose the moment they start making noise about it, but as of now, they are quiet.

The above quote clearly reveals that some people responded to the mandatory COVID-19 vaccination out of fear of losing employment more than the fear of getting infected with the pandemic.

As previously highlighted and in line with autocratic leadership style, Chu (2014), employees are naturally reluctant to commit to decisions they would not have participated in. In most cases, if they decide to follow the directives, it would be out of fear of possible punishment from management. Autocratic leadership

thrives on instilling fear of punishment (Chu, 2014; Erdem, 2021). Having included some tenets of democratic leadership in their approach to mandatory COVID-19 could have helped employees unpack the dynamics of the pandemic and made informed decisions.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study findings reveal that although organizations in the retail industry made it mandatory for their employees to get COVID-19 vaccination, the decision was made in the absence of employees. The exclusion of employees by management was largely interpreted by the former as unfair and unnecessary given the fact that they were going to be directly affected by the decision. It has emerged from the study that most retail workers saw themselves being at the mercy of their managers with the latter making unilateral decisions, even on matters that pertains to employees. Employees generally reacted to the exclusion by engaging in corrupt acquisition of the COVID-19 vaccination card as well as going for a single dose as they adopted a watch and see attitude. Employees revealed tendencies of indirectly defying the mandatory COVID-19 vaccination directive by their respective organizations but could not directly air out their views because they feared losing employment.

As recommendations, even during a crisis, organizations must thrive to include employees in making decisions, particularly on issues that pertain the latter. Democratization of the workplace has been found to go a long way in making employees comply with the organization's resolutions, even in times of a crisis. This can be achieved through making use works councils or internally organized surveys. In life threatening situations, such as COVID-19, management may consider conducting some workshops to clarify issues. Future studies may benefit from engaging managers on the extent to which employees are consulted and the platforms as well as the strategies used.

Future studies may consider taking on board other sections of the economy such as SMEs, institutions of learning, transport among others. Different sectors may reveal different perceptions. It could also be interesting to investigate perceptions of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination of professionals such as lawyers, medical doctors among others.

Contributions of the study

Unlike previous studies on COVID-19 in Zimbabwe (Chigevenga, 2020; Mbunge et al., 2020; Murewanhema and Makurumidze, 2020; Mackworth-Young et al., 2021) which attended to such issues as responses toward the anticipated vaccines, role of emerging technologies, health service delivery and community perspectives, this study focused on the perceptions of retail sector employees on mandatory vaccination from an autocratic-democratic perspective by management. In addition, the study contributed by linking the perceived level of consultation to their responses to mandatory COVID-19 vaccination. Furthermore, looked at the perceptions of mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations from an economically devastated country where unemployment rate is high.

Limitations of the study

Interviews were conducted and employers premises nowadays due to technology they might be cameras hence employees could have left out some important information and in most cases they were conducted during working hours hence employees were in a hurry to respond to questions. It is possible that some important information could have been left out by participants due to limited time. In addition, these employees might have felt restrained since the study was conducted by strangers.

Author's note

The pandemic COVID-19 brought a number of uncertainties to the organizations and these organizations introduced mandatory COVID-19 vaccination to curb the spread of the pandemic. This paper therefore helps to bring the reactions and perceptions of employees to mandatory COVID-19 vaccination using a qualitative approach in a precarious environment.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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