


# Evaluating a desire to telework model: The role of perceived quality of life, workload, telework experience and organisational telework support

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Received: 10 Dec. 2021

Accepted: 12 Apr. 2022

Published: 21 Dec. 2022

**How to cite this article:**

Sanhokwe, H. (2022). Evaluating a desire to telework structural model: The role of perceived quality of life, workload, telework experience and organisational telework support. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 20(0), a1848. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v20i0.1848>

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**Orientation:** Beyond the motivation paradigm that underpins most telework research, the meaning paradigm offers a complementary vantage point to appreciate employees' desires in the face of emerging threats to the traditional workplace.

**Research purpose:** The research developed and tested a multilevel moderated mediation model to explain the desire to telework.

**Motivation for the study:** A high-performance culture based on leadership excellence dictates that organisations keep a pulse and act on desires of their employees, an urgent priority given the pandemic-induced structural changes to the traditional workplace.

**Research design or approach and method:** Data were collected from a non-probability sample of 185 non-governmental sector employees. Mplus v8 was used to test the multilevel moderated mediation model.

**Main findings:** The mediated relationship between quality of life and the desire to telework was significantly influenced by perceptions of workload and organisational support for telework. Organisational telework support had a compensatory effect on workload. There were significant differences in the desire to telework by gender, level and location of work.

**Practical and managerial implications:** Despite the intensification and extensification of work characterising teleworking environments, the results affirm a growing desire to utilise telework opportunities as circumstances permit. Ensuring access to and availability of appropriate telework resources is paramount to satisfying this desire.

**Contribution or value-add:** Insights on employee desires and the associated influence levers offer leadership teams an opportunity to translate them into dedicated actions that enhance the employee experience, and by extension, create thriving organisations.

**Keywords:** desire to telework; multilevel moderated mediation; desire fulfilment theory; COR theory; changing workplace.

## Introduction

The multiple-wave COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the structure of the traditional workplace in developing countries (Bennett, 2021). In rapidly evolving contexts, leadership excellence dictates that organisations keep a pulse and act on the realities and desires of their employees, a high-performance culture orientation (Setiawan et al., 2021; Suardhita, Rafik, & Siregar, 2020). The desire to telework is influenced by different mechanisms at multiple levels. Satisfying that desire could be a source of fulfillment, allowing employees to flourish.

Anchored on the desire for fulfillment of well-being and conservation of resources (COR) theories, this study developed and tested a multilevel moderated mediation model to explain the desire to telework. The premise is that the quality of life of employees could indirectly effect their desire to telework. This mediated relationship is contingent on the perceived workload and organisational telework support. By seamlessly integrating the work and nonwork domains, the model places talent at the centre of organisational decisions regarding conditions of work, employee wellbeing and the future of the workplace.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (1995), quality of life is 'an individual's perception of his or her position in life in the context of the culture in which they live and in

relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns'. Pandemics such as COVID-19, which affect the lives of employees, impact the social, physical, economic and psychological aspects of employees, as well as their well-being (Algahtani, Hassan, Alsaif, & Zrieq, 2021). There is limited empirical research on the quality of life of employees during the pandemic and whether this has an impact on the telework experience and their desire to telework. Understanding the conditions under which quality of life predicts the experience of teleworking and the desire to telework could help organisational leaders reimagine the future of work. Given the high risk of organisational inertia, this investigation is timely and could address some of the cognitive biases that threaten the very existence of the organisations.

## Objectives of the study

The study satisfied the following objectives:

1. Evaluate the moderating role of perceived workload in the relationship between employee quality of life and teleworking experience.
2. Evaluate the moderating role of perceived organisational telework support in the relationship between employee teleworking experience and the desire to telework.
3. Evaluate the conditional indirect effects of perceived workload and organisational telework support on the mediated relationship between employee quality of life and desire to telework.

## Literature review

### Theoretical underpinning of the study

The study is anchored on the desire–fulfilment theory of well-being and the COR theory. Desire is a state of mind which shapes how employees perceive, think and act (Schroeder, 2020). The desire–fulfilment theory emphasises that employees desire what is good for them. Fulfilment (or otherwise) of this desire may define survival and levels of employee engagement that could influence organisational performance (Schroeder, 2020; Veldsman & Johnson, 2016).

Given that desiring is a paradigmatic way to find something compelling or attractive, the theory suggests a strong link between welfare and desire (Fletcher, 2016). Employees are viewed as subjects of welfare. In this vein, the theory posits that the stronger the desire, the more beneficial its satisfaction is (Heathwood, 2016). Furthermore, the theory recognises that desires are an experiential quantity (self-experience and/or the shared experience of others) that evolves, hence the need to mindfully monitor the changes.

According to the COR theory, employees 'strive to obtain, retain, foster and protect those things they centrally value' (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 105). Acts of discomfort arise when central resources to satisfy a need or a desire (work-related or otherwise) are lost or threatened, or when there is limited

opportunity to (re)gain them. The COR theory recognises the important role that work and nonwork resources play in enabling employees to attain their goals (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018). A high workload can exhaust employee resources, cause stress and affect the teleworking experience. In contrast, mechanisms that generate or provide additional or complementary resources create a positive impetus for employees by satisfying their needs and desires.

## Model and hypotheses

The premise for the multilevel moderated mediation model presented in Figure 1 is that the moderated effects (workload and perceived organisational support for telework) and the mediated effects (telework experience) on the desire to telework are influenced by different mechanisms at each of the two levels. The study hypothesises that employee quality of life influences the desire to telework. Employee telework experience the study argues mediates this relationship. Furthermore, the study argues that perceived workload and organisational telework support moderate the aforementioned mediated relation.

### Quality of life, workload and experience of teleworking

Teleworking experiences manifest in the form of positive or negative emotions, the degree to which the employee is engaged in the telework situation, the sense of achievement and the general meaning under the circumstances (Seligman, 2012).

The myriad of preventive measures enacted by governments to mitigate the effects of the pandemic can affect employee quality of life, including general functioning and well-being (Algahtani et al., 2021). The term 'coronaphobia' has been presented in recent literature depicting the anxiety and stress created by the COVID-19 pandemic (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020; Lee, Jobe, Mathis, & Gibbons, 2020). On the other hand, research also acknowledges the benefits of teleworking on other dimensions of quality of life (Chong, Huang, & Chang, 2020; Loia & Adinolfi, 2021). The quality of life could shape the experience of teleworking.

Furthermore, emerging data show that teleworkers worked longer hours (De Filippis, Impink, Singell, Polzer, & Sadun, 2020). Work intensification and extensification have become synonymous with teleworking (Palumbo, 2020; Thulin, Vilhelmson, & Johansson, 2019). Perceived workload could

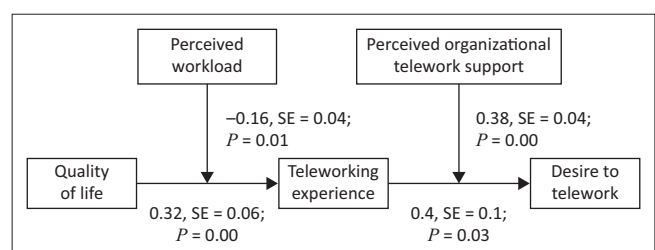


FIGURE 1: Hypothesised moderated mediation model.

affect the strength of the relationship between quality of life and teleworking experience, that is:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived workload moderates the relationship between perceived quality of life and the experience of telework.

### Teleworking experience, organisational support for telework and desire to telework

A study by Georgescu, Gherghina, Duca, Postole and Constantinescu (2021) reported that a bias towards telework depended on an individual's evaluation of a previous teleworking experience. Existing research affirms the role of organisational resources in expanding employees' ability to meet their personal and organisational goals (Li, Zhang, Yan, Wen, & Zhang, 2020). Under a teleworking regime, organisational telework support can include information technology (IT) support (including data availability, IT gadgets, effective platforms for communication and troubleshooting support); availability and access to timely information and relevant work documents (or other material) as well as role clarity and decision-making processes (Chong et al., 2020). The quality, including the sufficiency, of such support could magnify the extent to which telework experience influences the desire to telework, that is:

Hypothesis 2: Perceived organisational telework support moderates the relationship between the employee's experience with telework and the desire to telework.

### Accounting for the two-stage moderated mediation

According to the COR theory, 'resource loss is not only more powerful than resource gain in magnitude but also tends to affect people more rapidly and at increasing speed over time' (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 105). This explains why perceived workload, a resource-depleting attribute, is placed as a first-level moderator whose influence, it is hypothesised, dilutes the teleworking experience, as it is a survival-threatening aspect of work.

The second principle of COR theory emphasises the direct replacement of resources to compensate for real or perceived resource losses. Mass teleworking pushed employees out of their traditional workspaces. Therefore, the access to and availability of telework resources have a protective effect. As posited by the third principle of the COR theory, the infusion of resources through organisational support for telework can have a powerful impact on employees. It is argued that sufficient organisational telework resources offset the effect of high workload and inculcate a desire to telework. Furthermore, it is argued that without sufficient organisational telework resources, employees resort to alternative survival strategies, including pushing for a return to the traditional workplace, as they would have failed to adapt. It is hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 3: The strength of the mediated relationship between quality of life and desire to telework is positive under high (viz. low) organisational telework support conditions regardless of the perceived workload.

### Effect of control variables

Control variables such as gender, age, level and location of work have been shown to reliably differentiate employee preferences on a variety of work-related outcomes and choices. A study by Lyttelton et al. (2020) suggested that teleworking had a greater impact on women's time than men. Despite this, Brynjolfsson et al. (2020) found that women were more likely to transition to teleworking than men. A 2016 Gallup report on the State of the American workforce showed that 47% of millennials and 31% of baby boomers would switch to jobs that gave them the opportunity to telework. Study contexts influence these choices.

In most organisations, senior staff enjoy better packages, and have access to better telework-related resources. Further, national level staff are typically located in the capital cities that offer better services such as internet connectivity. This study argues that:

Hypothesis 4: Control variables such as gender, age, level and location of work reliably differentiate employee preferences on teleworking.

## Methods

### Participants and setting

A non-probability sample of 185 NGO employees in Zimbabwe and Eswatini informed the study. Fifty-one per cent were men and about 97% of the overall sample reached higher (tertiary) education. Sixty-five per cent of the sample were married. The average age was 35.6 years (standard deviation [SD] = 7.13). Junior-level employees constituted 48% of the sample, with middle-level and senior-level employees making up 32% and 20% of the total sample, respectively. The average tenure was 6 years (SD = 5 years).

### Measures

Five constructs were used in the study. These are described here.

#### Quality of life

This construct was measured using the 26-item eight World Health Organization Quality of life Instrument, that is, WHOQOL-BREF (WHOQOL, 1995). Employees self-reported their physical health, psychological health, social relationships and environment, as well as their overall quality of life and general health, using a five-point Likert-type scale. The sample items included 'how satisfied are you with your ability to perform your daily living activities?', 'how would you rate your quality of life?' and 'how often do you have negative feelings such as blue mood, despair, anxiety and depression?'

#### Employee teleworking experience

Four questions were used to describe the experience of teleworking employees. Employees self-rated their responses

using a five-point Likert-type scale ('1 = strongly disagree'; '5 = strongly agree'). The sample items included: 'I exude positive emotions when teleworking', 'I am fully engaged with the teleworking situation', 'I feel a strong sense of accomplishment under the circumstances'.

### Perceived workload

Three items were used to gauge the perceived workload under the teleworking regime. Employees self-rated their responses using a three-item Likert-type scale ('1 = decreased', '2 = continued the same', '3 = increased'). Sample items included 'my working hours have ...', 'The number of deliverables expected from me have ...' and 'ad hoc and planned meetings have ...'.

### Desire to telework

The 'desire to telework' was derived from the question 'would you like to telework in the future?'. Participants self-rated their responses using a binary response code, that is, '1 = Yes'; '0 = Otherwise'.

### Perceived organisational telework support

Seven items were used to measure this construct (e.g. 'clear goals, objectives and activities were defined during the remote working period'; 'we were organised into teams with clear tasks'; 'an array of routine remote working support was available to us'). Employees self-rated their responses using a 5-point Likert-type scale ('1 = strongly disagree'; '5 = strongly agree'). To calculate the variable 'perceived organisational telework support', the responses were recorded in a binary form where 1 denoted those who agreed or strongly agreed or '0 = otherwise'. The sum of the seven interactions determined the degree of perceived organisational support for telework.

### Procedure

Similar to most of the research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study utilised the online data collection platform SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) to collect data using the snowball technique. The survey link was shared with a few preselected contacts who were encouraged to share it with their colleagues in the NGO sector. Participants completed the online survey in their individual capacities. All participants gave their informed consent (opt-in approach). The purpose of the study was clearly explained on the survey landing page. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary. No personally identifiable information was collected and the study adhered to strict confidentiality and anonymity rules.

### Statistical analysis

The hypothesised multilevel moderated-mediation model was tested using Mplus v8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) using the five observed variables detailed earlier. Simple slopes between quality of life and teleworking experience at

different levels of perceived levels of work are presented in Figure 1. Similarly, simple slopes between employee telework experience and desire to telework at different levels of perceived organisational telework support are presented in Figure 2.

To quantify the indirect effects at different levels of the two moderators (perceived workload and organisational telework support), the subgroup approach proposed by Edwards and Lambert (2007) was used. The hypothesised opposite effects of perceived workload and organisational telework support were used to facilitate subgroup comparison; that is, the indirect effects of perceivably 'higher workload and lower organisational telework support' subgroups were compared against the 'lower workload and higher organisational support' subgroup to determine the significance of moderated mediation. The results are presented in Table 2. Logistic regressions, using odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals, were used to test hypothesis 4.

## Results

The results of the moderated mediation analysis are detailed in Tables 1 and 2, as well as Figures 1, 2 and 3. Quality of life was positively associated with the experience of telework (0.32; standard error [SE] = 0.06;  $p = 0.00$ ). Perceived workload moderated the relationship between employee quality of life and teleworking experience (-0.16; SE = 0.04,  $p = 0.01$ ), thus supporting hypothesis 1.

Figure 2 shows the simple slopes between quality of life and telework experience at different levels of perceived levels of work. The positive relation between quality of life and the teleworking experience was subdued at high (vs. low) workload levels.

Telework experience was positively associated with the desire to telework (0.4; SE = 0.1;  $p = 0.03$ ). Perceived organisational telework support significantly moderated the relationship between telework experience and desire to telework (0.38; SE = 0.04;  $p = 0.000$ ), thus supporting hypothesis 2. The simple slopes in Figure 3 show that the strength of the relationship between the experience of teleworking and the desire to telework was greater in the presence of high (vs. low) organisational support for telework.



**FIGURE 2:** Simple slopes between the quality of life and teleworking experience at different levels of workload.

**TABLE 1:** Full hypothesised random slopes model with cross-level moderations.

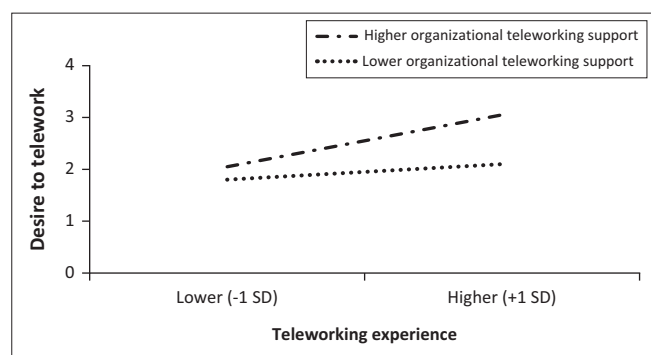
| Variable   | Full hypothesised random slopes model with cross-level moderations |      |          |          |
|--|--|------|----------|----------|
|  | <i>B</i>   | SE   | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
| <b>Predicting teleworking experience</b>                           |  |      |          |          |
| Quality of life  | 0.32   | 0.06 | 2.11     | 0.00     |
| Perceived work load  | -0.16  | 0.04 | 1.67     | 0.01     |
| Quality of life × perceived work load                              | 0.19   | 0.05 | 1.49     | 0.00     |
| <b>Predicting desire to telework</b>                               |  |      |          |          |
| Teleworking experience   | 0.40   | 0.10 | 2.36     | 0.03     |
| Perceived organisational telework support                          | 0.38   | 0.04 | 2.74     | 0.00     |
| Teleworking experience × perceived organisational telework support | 0.68   | 0.20 | 2.96     | 0.00     |
| <b>Within-person residual variance</b>                             |  |      |          |          |
| Teleworking experience   | 0.56   | 0.02 | 17.61    | 0.01     |
| Desire to telework   | 0.63   | 0.01 | 18.93    | 0.00     |
| <b>Between-person residual variance</b>                            |  |      |          |          |
| Teleworking experience   | 1.9  | 0.13 | 7.69     | 0.00     |
| Desire to telework   | 0.80   | 0.20 | 6.21     | 0.00     |
| Random slope (X–M)   | 0.12   | 0.01 | 3.67     | 0.00     |
| Random slope (M–Y)   | 0.15   | 0.02 | 2.33     | 0.00     |
| Random slope (X–Y)   | 0.21   | 0.04 | 1.97     | 0.00     |
| <b>Model fit</b>   |  |      |          |          |
| AIC  |  |      | 3149.11  |          |
| BIC  |  |      | 2946.13  |          |
| Log-likelihood value   |  |      | -1351.55 |          |

SE, standard error; AIC, Akaike information criterion; BIC, Bayesian information criteria. X - Quality of life; M - Telework experience; Y - Desire to telework; *n* = 185.

**TABLE 2:** Conditional indirect effects at different levels of perceived workload and organisational telework support.

| First stage moderator (perceived workload) | Second stage moderator (perceived organisational telework support) | Conditional indirect effect | 95% CIs of the conditional indirect effect | 95% CIs of difference between the conditional indirect effects |
|--|--|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Lower (-1 SD)                              | Lower (-1 SD)  | -0.007                      | -0.016, 0.001                              | -0.002, 0.016  |
|  | Higher (+1 SD)   | 0.073                       | 0.045, 0.101                               | <b>0.001, 0.002</b>  |
| Higher (+1 SD)                             | Lower (-1 SD)  | -0.319                      | -0.639, -0.001                             | <b>comparison baseline</b>                                     |
|  | Higher (+1 SD)   | 0.258                       | 0.191, 0.326                               | <b>0.001, 0.011</b>  |

SD, standard deviation; CI, confidence interval. Indirect effect refers to the relationship between quality of life and desire to telework via telework experience.



SD, standard deviation.

**FIGURE 3:** Simple slopes between employee teleworking experience and desire to telework at different levels of perceived organisational telework support.

Table 2 presents the subgroup differences in indirect effects on the desire to telework. The mediated relationship between perceived quality of life and desire to telework was significant and higher amongst employees with perceivably lower workload and higher organisational support. The confidence interval does not include zero and hence the result supports hypothesis 5. The converse is true; that is, the mediated relationship between quality of life and desire to telework was significant and negative amongst employees who reported higher workload and low organisational support, see Table 2.

Despite a perceived higher workload, the mediated relationship between quality of life and desire to telework was significant and positive amongst employees who reported higher organisational support, see Table 2. This suggests that organisational teleworking resources play a critical role in offsetting negative job demands when teleworking; that is, organisational telework support has a compensatory effect on a high workload. These results support hypothesis 3.

Almost 7 out of 10 employees (65%) expressed a desire to telework in the future. Men were significantly more likely to desire teleworking than women (69% vs. 60%; OR [95% CI] = 1.419 [1.210–1.615]; *p* = 0.036). Similarly, those working at national levels (OR [95%] = 1.70 [1.219–2.41], *p* = 0.02) and senior-level employees (OR [95% CI] = 3.10 [2.09–4.13]; *p* = 0.046) were more likely to prefer teleworking than those operating at subnational levels and junior staff, respectively. There was no significant difference by age. These results partially support hypothesis 4.

## Discussion

Based on the desire fulfillment theory of well-being and the COR theory, the study evaluated multilevel mediation and

moderation processes that explain the link between the quality of life and the desire of the employee to telework. The study proposed that the telework experience mediates the relationship between quality of life and the desire of employees to telework. In addition, it was proposed that the strength of the relation between quality of life and the telework experience and the relation between telework experience and the desire of employees to telework at a future time are moderated by employees' perceptions of the workload and organisational support for telework, respectively. The model was based on the assumption that the moderated and mediated effects on the desire to telework are influenced by different mechanisms related to demands and resources at each of the two levels. All the hypotheses were supported.

The results show how workload, as a first stage moderator, acts as a resource-depleting work attribute that diminishes the quality of the teleworking experience. As a second stage moderator, organisational telework support not only replenishes employees' resource reservoirs, but also significantly offsets the effect of a high workload on employees and promotes the desire to telework. By unpacking the resource-depleting and replenishing mechanisms that influence the telework experience and the desire to telework, this research sheds light on mechanisms that leaders could use to positively influence employee behaviour in an evolving work context. This is more important now given the transition to hybrid models of work.

By introducing quality of life and the telework experience of employees in the model, this study extends previous research on the aspects that establish meaning in the lives of employees. At the heart of the global Decent Work Agenda are employee rights at work (Rantanen, Muchiri, & Lehtinen, 2020). Workload and organizational support influence the extent to which rights at work are protected and promoted. Evolving work contexts offer an opportunity for organisations to undertake creative job redesigns that reduce employee workload and allow employees to disconnect at the appropriate times. Employers must generate resources that allow employees to carry out their jobs effectively without causing undue stress. Dedicated packages of telework support should be defined and offered without prejudice anyone, regardless of their level of work. Harm reduction initiatives also involve mindfully promoting the work and nonwork quality of life dimensions that bring meaning to employees. Organisational leaders will need to invest in understanding and supporting the quality of life dimensions that allow employees to bring to work, albeit remotely, their gifts of imagination and dedication.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new values, habits and norms that demand the adequate understanding of teleworking-specific job resources, demands and desires. This suggests the need for organisational leaders to protect themselves against traditional false consensus effects on the future of their workplaces. The workplace is assuming a new face and thus warrants agility on the part of leadership.

The study results further affirm a growing desire to telework. As postulated by the desire for fulfillment of wellbeing theory, satisfying this desire can positively influence employee behaviour and well-being. Recognition that work can be performed outside the traditional workplace should drive organisational changes, including policies and budgets that promote the availability and access to the resources necessary to support the 'new' workplace. The increasing desire to telework may suggest that, in the future, organisations that offer teleworking options, including the necessary support, may better attract talent.

The research further affirms that the desire to telework, and by extension teleworking, is a gendered phenomenon. Therefore, this warrants the attention of organisational leadership to effectively design mechanisms and create conditions that recognise the different needs and circumstances of men and women. One-size-fits-all approaches may not yield the desired organisational outcomes in the emerging workplace. Engaging different groups at work to appreciate what works for them and amplify targeted employee support whilst managing job demands will be necessary.

### Limitations and directions for future research

This study focused only on NGOs. However, the government and the private sector employ the bulk of the workforce in the study setting, hence the need to understand the situation for employees in these sectors. Future research should effectively comprehend emerging job demands and support needs in hybrid working contexts. This will aid organisations in planning, budgeting, implementing and monitoring processes.

### Conclusion

Organisational and leadership contexts are fundamentally evolving, creating new desires and expectations. The study provided insights into the mechanisms and pathways that influence the employees' desire to telework. Perceived quality of life and the evolving work context with its associated demands and resources influenced the teleworking experience and the desire to telework. Insights on employee desires and the associated influence levers offer leadership teams an opportunity to translate them into dedicated actions that enhance the employee experience, and by extension, create thriving organisations. Creating a good fit between telework demands and resources in a manner that enriches the employee quality of life and work experiences should preoccupy leadership teams of today as part of a dedicated organisational excellence agenda.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge Prof. Willie Chinyamurindi for his contribution as supervisor and his support in re-evaluating and updating the various aspects of this article.

The author would like to acknowledge the contribution and support of all survey participants. Their willingness to share information led to the success of this research.

### Competing interests

The author has neither competing interest nor financial interest that may have negatively affected the undertaking of this study.

### Author's contributions

H.S. conceptualised the study and contributed in the overall write-up of this manuscript.

### Ethical considerations

The purpose of the study was clearly explained on the survey landing page. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary (opt-in strategy). No personally identifiable or organizational information was collected, and the study adhered to strict rules of confidentiality and anonymity.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data will be availed upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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