

Indirect Relationship among Peer Support, Motivation and Work from Home Productivity of Higher Education Institutions during COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to assess the mediating effect of employees' motivation on the relationship between peer support and employees' work from home productivity among academicians and non-academicians in tertiary education institutions in Malaysia during the coronavirus disease 2019 (or COVID-2019) pandemic. For inner and outer model evaluation, the Structural Equation Modelling via Partial Least Square technique was employed. A total of 579 clean and usable data was analysed and the findings showed that there was a significant mediating effect of employees' motivation on the peer support and employees' work from home productivity relationship among tertiary education institutions' academicians and non-academicians during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. Tertiary education institutions should place more attention to strengthen peer support and motivation to achieve higher employees' productivity during work from home in the situation of COVID-19 pandemic or any crisis in the future. The findings also provided a direction for the tertiary education institutions in implementing a policy for their employees to work from home.

Keywords: *Peer support, motivation, productivity, tertiary education institutions, COVID-19 pandemic*

Introduction

The "new normal" age has begun since the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic started in November 2019. The government of Malaysia implemented the

Movement Control Order (MCO) from 18 March onwards, in order to break the chain of the virus. All economic activities were prohibited from operating their business, except for the critical services. Employees were forced to stay home during the pandemic situation in Malaysia. Everyone; organisational, society and individual are facing with many difficulties and uncertainty forcing most people to concentrate on survival and competition (Verstaen et al., 2020). It has negatively impacted many industries around the industry in Malaysia including higher institutions. All classes and tutorials need to be conducted online and most of the academic conferences had to be postponed or cancelled. Even though the government of Malaysia had relaxed the MCO by allowing several economic sectors to re-start their business beginning on 4 May 2020, higher education institutions were still not permitted to re-open. The closure of education sector has negative consequences such as financial pressure, risk of losing students and unprepared lecturers for online education which may lead to a new set of passive learners (Jena, 2020).

Academics and administrative workers were required to work at home by using any resources made available in their respective home. Due to the lack of preparation in facing the world issues, dealing with the integration of work and life demands an assistance from the employees and also the organisations. Seventy percent of business organisation in India show concerned on the lack of productivity among workers in lieu with prolonged working from home (Ernst & Young, 2020). Managers are concerned about the employee's productivity since the employees had to juggle between work and personal need (Kossek et al., 1999). Even though home guidelines have been outlined by the Human Resource Department for monitoring purposes, employee also requires social support from peer and motivations from the employer in order to stay productive in delivering the required task at home. In view of this, the purpose of this study is to examine the mediating effect motivation on the relationship between peer support and productivity among higher education institutions' employees who had to work from home during COVID-19 pandemic and MCO.

Literature review

Many business organisations today confront the need to improve the productivity of their employees and have become the organisations' crucial issue. Employee productivity is defined as an efficiency evaluation of an employee or a group of employees (Gummesson, 1998; Sels et al., 2006). Productivity can be assessed based on the employee's output for a certain period. Productivity can be gauged by referring to the units' amount of a service or product under employee handling for a specific period (Piana, 2001). Generally, there was a deficiency of effective and standardised methods for evaluating productivity.

According to Sharma and Sharma (2014), employee productivity is dependent on the amount of times an employee is physically present at his/her workplace, the extent to which he/she is "mentally present" or works correctly during a job presence. Companies will resolve certain problems to achieve high employee productivity. Ferreira and Du Plessis (2009) suggested that productivity can be measured in terms of the time spent by an employee actively doing the work he or she were employed to do to achieve the desired anticipated results from the job description.

Most studies have highlighted several approaches for evaluating productivity and since various strategies have been used, differentiating findings can be very complicated (Nollman, 2013). Cato and Gordon (2009) as well as Sharma and Sharma (2014) mentioned that as the employee's productivity determines the success of the organisation; it has become a primary business goal. Cato and Gordon (2009) indicated that mission and vision correlation with employee productivity is the crucial factor in the organisation's success. The outcome of this association may be a push factor for employees to be more innovative and

creative, thereby enhancing the performance of employees. Many previous studies have concentrated on the value of employee productivity that will cause the organisation's achievement. To be precise, the company's profits will be directly affected by the employee's productivity. Employee productivity improves with positive behaviour which increases profits and leads to good fame of the organisation (Tunio et al., 2020). High profitability, economic growth and social change resulted from employee productivity (Sharma & Sharma, 2014).

Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, peer support being described as an important attribute to improve group productivity (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019). Peers are more capable to offer supports needed in a specific situation. For instance, when there are certain issues occurred, they might discuss among the co-workers. By discussing and exchanging ideas, the issues seem possible to be overcome. It is in line with Hackman (1992) mentioning that co-worker performance may influence individual productivity and vice versa.

Peer support plays an important role in productivity across the workplace (Mas & Moretti, 2009; Herbst & Mas, 2015). Apart from organisation, studies also found that peer supports influence productivity towards academic success (Hoxby, 2000; Sacerdote, 2001), and environmental and energy management (Bollinger & Gillingham, 2012). The peer effects would therefore, possibly increase or decrease some employees' productivity (Bandiera et al., 2010).

However, the results were different in the agricultural sector. Kossek et al. (1999) shows that in certain circumstances such as weather shocks, an employee's short-term productivity would decrease compared to a group. Nevertheless, the group still be affected in the long run. It is important to ensure that the staff always cooperate and interact with the team member, especially the managers, to get possible guidance in achieving the desired result. Thus, during this challenging situation, it is important to find out whether peer support may influence work productivity towards employees.

Employee performance is affected by motivation because if employees are motivated, they will work harder and increase performance (Azar & Shafiqhi, 2013). Motivated employees can deliver the best results and achieve their goals. Managers are usually accountable for getting tasks done by employees of every organisation. A good manager must understand how to encourage the employees to accomplish organisational objectives, but that is simple to say than execution. Motivation allows employees to coordinate and cooperate to make the best possible utilisation human resources (Irum Shahzadi et al., 2014).

Each employee needs a personal motivation plan and managers must not adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy to motivate employees (Jones & George, 2013). Most studies have shown that motivated employees perform better, although some researchers claim that motivation, skills, supplies and equipment also lead to improved efficiency (Certo, 2003).

Emmanuel et al. (2008) investigation on the relationship between managerial motivation and performance verified earlier findings – managers who experience high levels of motivation are also likely to show high job performance. Abejirinde (2009) analysed the relationship between motivation and job performance within private and public companies in Nigeria and found that promotion (as a motivator) and performance of employees are positively associated with the promotion.

Research hypotheses

Based on the above conceptual development, the following hypotheses were proposed for this study:

H_1 : There is a relationship between peer support and motivation.

H_2 : There is a relationship between peer support and productivity.

H_3 : There is a relationship between motivation and productivity

H_4 : There is a mediating effect of motivation on the relationship between peer support and productivity.

Methodology

Academicians and non-academicians with private and public higher education institutions were chosen for this study. In this study, primary data were used and for the data collection, a survey questionnaire was utilised. The survey questionnaire was designed by a broad past studies evaluation to achieve appropriate measurements that being used and have a strong reliability and validity. The survey was done over a three months period. This study adopted convenience sampling which is non-probability sampling. Altogether, 20 observed variables constitute the measurement of the dependent variable of eight items for productivity (Bhatti & Qureshi, 2007), independent variable five items for peer support (Stewart et al., 2007) and seven items for mediating variable of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2010).

This study adopted a five-point Likert scales from strongly disagree to strongly agree to produce most of the response rate and response quality as well as reduce the "level of frustration" of the respondents (Babakus & Boller, 1992; Sachdev & Verma, 2004). The total of 935 questionnaires were distributed and 617 were returned. This represents a 65.98% response rate and it was sufficient to run data analysis by using the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique. After data screening and deleting the outliers, 579 questionnaires were found to be usable and ready for data analysis. In this study, SmartPLS3 was used to do multivariate data analysis and proposed hypotheses testing. To assess the model measurement and structural model procedures, the Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) technique was utilised due to its estimation ability (Hair et al., 2010).

Data Analysis

Common method bias

The variance inflation factor (VIF) greater than 3.3 implied that there is an issue of collinearity and it also point out the model is having a common method bias problem. Hence, if the VIFs at all factor-level produced from a full collinearity test are equal or lower than 3.3, it indicates that the model does not face any common method bias problem (Kock, 2015).

Table 1

Collinearity Statistics (VIF)

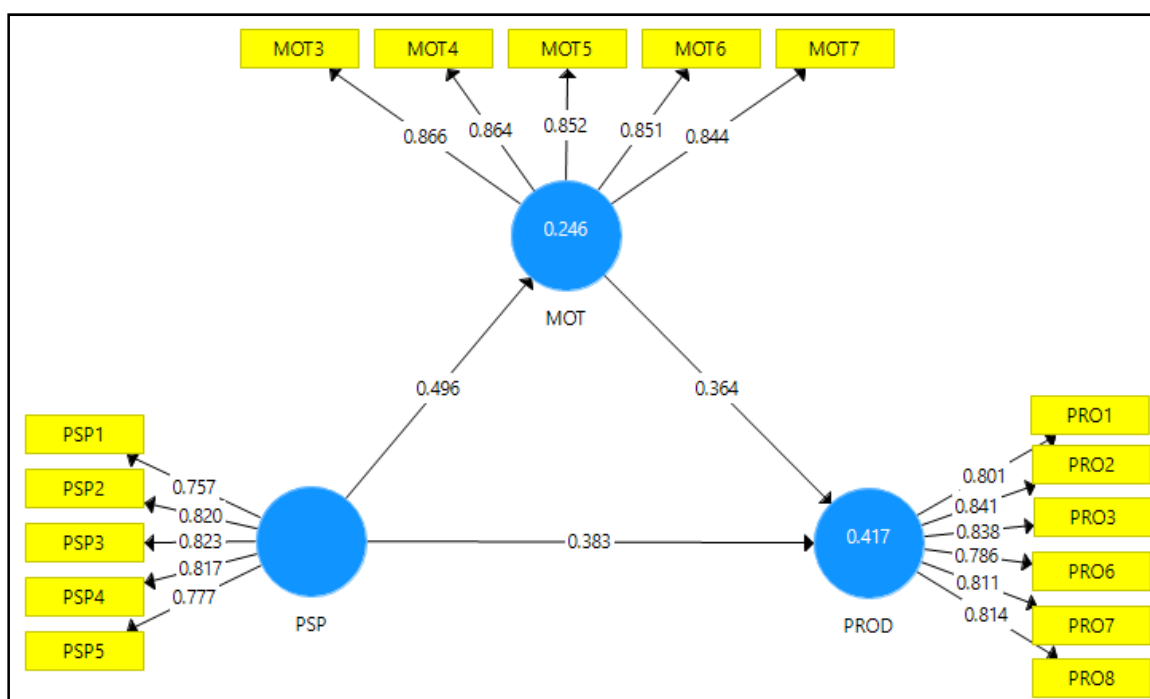
	PROD	PSP	MOT
PROD		1.518	1.462
PSP	1.492		1.417
MOT	1.364	1.326	

Measurement Model

For construct measurement validity and reliability, the measurement model was used by employing PLS-SEM algorithm (refer to Figure 1). Hair et al. (2014) proposed that reliability and validity were both vital elements to be applied in the analysis of PLS-SEM to confirm the goodness of the outer model. Table 2 depicted the figure of 0.858 to 0.908 which signifies the first-order constructs composite reliability, hence meet the threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2014).

Figure 1

Research Model



In addition, the results demonstrated that the convergent validity for all latent constructs was met with the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.638 to 0.732 which were all higher than 0.50 (Hair et al., 2014). Items cross-loading were assessed for additional discriminant validity validation in this study. The result indicated that all items' loadings were greater than their corresponding cross-loadings (refer to Table 2). The discriminant validity was further ascertained by assessing the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlation developed by Henseler et al. (2015). The outcome of the HTMT ratio analysis in Table 3 showed that all ratios met the HTMT criterion which was lower than 0.85 (Kline, 2011) and as a result, showed no problem with discriminant validity. Because of that, this study confirmed the reliability and validity of the latent variables (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 2

Items' Loadings, Construct Validity and Reliability

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CA	rho_A	CR	AVE
Motivation	MOT3	0.866	0.908	0.909	0.932	0.732
	MOT4	0.864				
	MOT5	0.852				
	MOT6	0.851				
	MOT7	0.844				
	PRO1	0.801				
	PRO2	0.841				
Productivity	PRO3	0.838	0.899	0.901	0.922	0.665
	PRO6	0.786				
	PRO7	0.811				
	PRO8	0.814				
Peer Support	PSP1	0.757	0.858	0.86	0.898	0.638
	PSP2	0.820				
	PSP3	0.823				
	PSP4	0.817				
	PSP5	0.777				

Table 3

Hetrotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	MOT	PROD
PROD	0.609	
PSP	0.559	0.629

Structural Model

In this study, path coefficient and the R2 value were employed to assess the structural model (Hair et al., 2012), and to verify the path coefficients significance, PLS bootstrapping with 500 sub-samples was used. For the results of hypotheses testing, path coefficients and t-values are shown in Tables 4 and 5. In Table 4, *H1* predicts a positive relationship between peer support and employees' motivation and the result shows that there is a positive and significant influence of peer support on employees' motivation ($\beta = 0.496$, $t = 11.464$, $p=0.000$); as a result, *H1* is supported. The result of *H2* also confirms there is a significant and positive relationship between peer support and work from home productivity ($\beta = 0.383$, $t = 7.829$, $p=0.000$). Thus, supporting *H2*. *H3* also confirmed that employees' motivation has a positive and significant influence on work from home productivity ($\beta = 0.364$, $t = 8.350$, $p=0.000$). Hence, *H3* is supported.

Meanwhile in Table 5, *H4* result also confirms that there is a positive and significant mediating effect of employees' motivation on peer support and work from home productivity relationship (indirect effect = 0.181, $t = 5.889$, $p=0.000$). Therefore, *H4* is supported.

Furthermore, the zero is not straddled between lower-level confidence of interval (LLCI) and upper-level confidence of interval (ULCI) which also further confirms the significant mediating effect.

Table 4

Direct Hypotheses Testing Results

	Beta	T Statistics	P Values	
H_1 : PSP -> MOT	0.496	11.464	0.00	<i>Supported</i>
H_2 : PSP -> PROD	0.383	7.829	0.00	<i>Supported</i>
H_3 : MOT -> PROD	0.364	8.350	0.00	<i>Supported</i>

Table 5

Mediating Hypotheses Results

	Indirect Effect	T Statistics	P Values	2.50%	97.50%
H_4 :PSP -> MOT -> PROD	0.181	5.889	0.00	0.123	0.244

Discussion

The above findings clearly show that employees' motivation does influence the relationship between peer support and work from home productivity in Malaysian higher institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is quite a fascinating indication from the results that many employees in higher institutions deem that peer support does affect their productivity when working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the Malaysian higher education institutions need to put greater importance on the peer support of their employees' productivity when working from home. This is true because the productivity of the employees can be increased significantly if the employees can have support from their co-workers even though they are working away from the office.

Higher education institutions need to provide an ecosystem that accommodates online peer support to function effectively and ensures productivity during work from home to increase. The importance of teamwork among the employee in Malaysian higher education institutions must be emphasized so that it will encourage online peer support to happen. Since the results have highlighted the positive and significant role of employees' motivation, much actions or strategies needed to be implemented to enhance their motivation so that the impact of online peer support will be more impactful on employees' productivity. This is vital to ensure the sustainability of the higher education institutions in the future and at the same time fulfil the needs of their stakeholders especially the students.

As stated earlier, academic employees' work from home productivity and online peer support in higher education institutions in Malaysia is positively and significantly mediated by motivation. There are a few implications from this study. Firstly, it indicates that higher education institutions leaders in Malaysia should strengthen their online peer support in work from home policy. The strong peer support will bring many positive things in their institutions especially with regards to their academic staff which is deemed as one of the important resources in higher education institutions. By enhancing the peer support alone is not sufficient, the employees' motivation must be enhanced together. The reason is, by

strengthening motivation, we can obtain a greater impact of peer support on employees' productivity during work from home.

The result of the above statistical analysis strongly demonstrates that through a direct relationship between peer support and work from home employees' productivity, there is a positive and significant relationship. However, after motivation was brought in as a mediator, the relationship was further enhanced. The total indirect effect of peer support to motivation and from motivation to employees' productivity was $0.496 \times 0.3641 = 0.181$. Because of that, the leaders of higher education institutions in Malaysia must ensure that through their peer support among their employees will be given serious attention. This is because it can bring up the productivity of the academic and non-academic employees in their organization in discharging their duties to the students specifically. After all, it is the central part of their organisations. Simultaneously, leaders in higher education institutions must be able to promote and uplift the motivation of their employees during work from home. Leaders of higher education institutions in Malaysia must take steps to formulate policies and strategies to lift the work from home productivity of their employees by incorporating their peer support and employees' motivation.

Limitation and Future Direction

In this study, convenience sampling was used in data collection for data analysis which is one of the drawbacks. Despite some advantages by adopting a convenience sampling technique, such as easy to find respondents, there is constrain such as unable to make generalisations. Another drawback is time limitation to fulfil the paper's academic requirement. This paper was put in order in line with academic research effort which there was a limitation of time. Therefore, there was the least of time on data collection to make it possible for data compilation and analysis. Given that, it is suggested that for future research, the study should be conducted by employing a longitudinal study to have a longer period for data collection. This will permit a better conclusion and thorough implications can be drawn out. Broader constructs that effect academic employees' work from home productivity should be given attention such as family support and organizational culture.

Conclusion

The central point of this study is on peer support, motivation, and work from home employees' productivity of employees in higher education institutions in Malaysia. The results have shown that there is an indirect effect of motivation on peer support and work from home employees' productivity. It was statistically revealed that all the four hypotheses proposed in this study are positive and significant. Leaders must be able to influence the work from home productivity of their employees by encouraging the employees to work in a way that they believe best for them with proper support from their co-workers. Teamwork should be encouraged so that they will support each other even though they are far away from their office to work. Employees must always keep their motivation at the highest level to be creative and innovative in their work which eventually will bring their productivity to the highest level during work from home.

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