



The mediating effect of flexible work arrangements, online wellness social responsibility and employee subjective well-being in the retail sector in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Two years post pandemic, there have been changes in work arrangements to allow for a greater degree of adaptability. Flexible work arrangements in the retail sector are considered to be a practical advantage that mostly focuses on managing employees' workload, rather than being specifically intended to enhance their subjective well-being. However, when it is logistically and operationally viable, flexible work arrangements (FWAs) may provide benefits to both employees and the organization.

Purpose

The study aims to determine the mediating effect of flexible work arrangements on, online wellness, social responsibility and employee subjective well-being in the retail sector in South Africa.

Methodology

A cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted among head office associates at an anonymous organization referred to as "Company X". A total of 1,500 online questionnaires were distributed to employees via Google Forms. The data analysis was performed using the SPSS PROCESS macro to evaluate the association between online wellness social responsibility, flexible work arrangements, and subjective wellbeing.

Results

Results suggest that there was no mediating effect of flexible work arrangements on the association between online wellness social responsibility and subjective well-being. Therefore, the subjective well-being of employees cannot be solely attributable to flexible work arrangements.

Conclusion

The research advocated prioritizing social accountability above social duties. This involves integrating employee well-being, organizational operations, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Hence, establishing a robust business culture and reputation.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Flexible Work Arrangement policy, Online Wellness Programmes; Social Exchange Theory; Subjective

GJMEDPH 2024; Vol. 13, issue 5 | OPEN ACCESS

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Conflict of Interest—none | Funding—none

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INTRODUCTION

Management techniques that promote Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA) are becoming prevalent in the corporate world. The FWAs give employees the choice to arrange how they accomplish their job deliverables according to their own needs, while still ensuring that the operational criteria are met. The impact of FWAs has demonstrated a beneficial association between FWAs and employee engagement¹. Additionally, FWAs have been correlated with several employee engagement characteristics identified in the literature, with the most striking of these being employee wellbeing.² Following the COVID-19 pandemic and a shift to remote working, workers have more flexibility in where and when they work. There are a lot of studies correlating FWA's to good outcomes including less work-family conflict, greater psychological health, and higher role satisfaction³. The intention of such policies is to create a work-life balance among employees, in addition to the promotion of employee well-being⁴.

The incorporation of employee wellness into the FWA policy supports the long-term sustainability of human capital within the organization. For instance, the Industrial-Organizational (IO) psychological model demonstrates how one can achieve economic, social, and environmental rejuvenation by attracting, developing, and retaining a competent workforce⁵. In addition to the employee wellness programmes there should also be an attempt to create a socially responsible organisation, and by extension socially accountable employees. Being socially responsible entails acting in ways that benefit society in addition to your legal and financial obligations⁶. Organisations should strive to create a culture of social accountability to promote well-grounded employee and ethical organisational goals⁷.

Most business sectors including the retail sector were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees, customers, and communities have been most affected, but other stakeholder groups in society have also been affected. The worldwide pandemic is testing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and research suggests that many organisations are rethinking their CSR strategies to adapt to the crisis and satisfy public expectations⁸.

In the retail sector, CSR initiatives provide businesses with a competitive edge by generating customer value⁹. Through the adoption of a sustainable FWAs Policy, the research aims to examine the mediating effect of flexible work arrangements on, online wellness social responsibility and employee subjective well-being in the retail sector in South Africa

Research Objectives

To Assess the influence of Online Wellness Social Responsibility on employee subjective well-being through the implementation of Flexible Work arrangement policies.

Literature Review

Online Employee Wellness Programme

Employers have a wide range of wellness initiatives that don't necessarily differ across business sectors. The commonalities across various wellness programmes include the adoption of innovative programmes designed to "improve awareness, alter behaviour, and create environments that support good health practices, which are provided by the employer¹⁰. A key aspect of business process and strategy is used in employee-centered approaches to designing processes and initiatives in the workplace¹¹. Under remote working conditions achieving employee wellness was not seen as a priority¹². However, following the shift to remote working, FWAs have become the preferred modality of operation in the retail sector. To promote sustainable FWAs organisation are now encouraged to factor in employee wellness programmes, that will differ from the norm and are designed to be administered from an online platform.

Online employee wellness programmes include focusing on positive employee culture, employee benefits, attractive recruitment, and retention strategies¹³. According to Ott-Holland, Shepherd, and Ryan (2019)¹⁴, employees that are involved in more wellness engagements were shown to have better performance evaluations, better work satisfaction, a higher desire to remain with their company, resulting in reduced employee turnover. Hence organisations are encouraged to promote employee wellness through online programmes.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility has grown in popularity in recent years as a positive strategy that can enhance a company's reputation and financial performance¹⁵. This idea has existed for a while and is grounded on the idea that, beyond only making money for the shareholders, corporations also have obligations to society¹⁶. Often organisations would use catastrophic events to leverage off, to provide relief for communities in need. This is beneficial in times of need, and it becomes a once off event that is discussed in annual meetings and financial reports. However, the missing gap in this type of CSR is creating a culture of social accountability and CSR sustainability within the organisation. To reinforce this statement, there was an article published in the Business and Economic Research journal by Marom and Lussier (2020)¹⁷, the article provided a list of company CSR contributions during the COVID-19 Pandemic which include big names such as PepsiCo: Donated and funded medical needs and food (50 million meals) to at-risk populations; Nestle: Donating food, medical nutrition products, bottled water and more;

Coca-Cola: Community relief programmes, medical supplies, etc. these are just a few amongst many that have assisted during the pandemic. The aforementioned examples of CSR mirror the traditional ways of being socially responsible. If anything, the pandemic has taught us that traditional modes of operations did not work for business continuity in the workplace hence the shift to remote working conditions. With that, perhaps there should be further attempts to move towards CSR initiatives¹⁸.

In line with the benefits of CSR, the research attempts to include remote CSR initiatives as a requirement of the "Flexible Work Arrangement". It is an opportunity to take a policy and make it work for the employees and the organisation. Employees benefit from FWAs because they accommodate overall work-life balance. This in turn promotes employee wellness and provides them with an opportunity to become socially responsible all within their operational requirements. The concept of employee well-being is closely related to CSR¹⁹. CSR has a good impact on employees, and

motivated staff members are essential for boosting productivity, creativity, and competitiveness in organizations²⁰

Subjective Wellbeing (SWB)

Ryan and Deci (2001, p. 142)²¹ define well-being as "a complex construct that is regarded most favourable in experience and functioning". It is important to note that the notion of subjective wellbeing doesn't merely mean excluding negative factors, but also highlighting the existence of positive factors²². Disasters, and in this instance the pandemic brought on a host of different emotions that were experienced by employees.. During the pandemic and under Remote Working Conditions (RWC) a lack of work-life balance due to heavy workload, stress, and work intensification were common issues related to working²⁴. These factors highly influence employee health, hence employee wellness programme under RWC needs to address these types of health-related concerns.

According to Stephens et al (2020)²⁵, organisation owners and managers realised that satisfied and healthy employees contribute to organisational productivity more than others. Employee relationships are an additional element that feeds directly into employee subjective well-being²⁶. The term "relationship" refers to an individual's ability to communicate as well as the relationship that exists between employees and their employers²⁷. According to Karacay, Rofcanin, and Kabasakal, (2022)²⁸ to define social well-being, some of the terms use concepts such as conviction, social support, reciprocity, leader-member interchange, collaboration, harmonisation, and inclusion. In addition, having a positive organisational culture encompasses shared vision, purpose, beliefs, and values. It results in improved teamwork, enhances employee morale, increases productivity, and increases employee retention rates²⁹. The true experience of subjective well-being is dependent on a combination of factors that includes but are not limited to all of the above crucial and complementary contributors.

The next section of this chapter discusses the theoretical framework that encapsulates the underlying basis of the current research study. It is

an attempt to link empirical research with theoretical findings to further substantiate the argument that forms the rationale of this study.

Theoretical Framework

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

The seminal works of Homans (1958)³⁰, Blau (1964)³¹, and Gouldner (1960)³² characterised the beginnings of Social Exchange Theory. Social Exchange Theory involves unspecified obligations where one party trusts the other and has no predefined period. The primary focus of the social exchange theory is on personal commitments, appreciation, and trust³¹. According to Gouldner (1960)³², reciprocity has two types: heteromorphic and homoeomorphic reciprocity. While the former relates to a trade in which the resources exchanged are different but considered to be equal in value, the latter refers to circumstances in which the resources exchanged appear to be the same.

The basic principle of social exchange theories is that balancing benefits and costs determines how people engage with one another. We base our choices about relationships on how much we believe a relationship will cost us and how much we believe it will provide us in return³³. The social exchange theory can be applied to the reciprocal benefits of the FWAs policy within the retail sector. Employees have more flexibility regarding their work arrangements and an opportunity to manage their work-life balance, which will enhance their level of subjective well-being. Organisations benefit from creating a socially accountable workforce thereby creating a positive business image and greater customer loyalty.

Methodology

A cross-sectional survey was undertaken among employees situated in the head office of Company X, which houses around 2,700 employees. The study's suggested sample size was obtained using a well-established method for sample size estimates in scientific research, as first proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970)³⁴. To ensure the validity of the experiment, it was necessary to have a minimum sample size of 337 for the use of this particular model. However, the survey was completed by just 158 participants.

Population Sample

The sample was selected from Company X, which is a South African, retailer with a total of 1 596 total stores. The total 158 Company X associates participated in the research. The sample was stratified into five strata: (1) Team member, (2) Team Leader or Supervisor, (3) Manager, (4) Functional Director or Head, and (5) Executive (C-Suite) or Managing Director portfolios.

Data Collection

The survey was created using Google Forms and the Google-generated URL link, to the online form, was emailed to the sample populations. For the study the independent variable will be the combination of two observable constructs: IV1: the Online Wellness Programme (OWP) and IV 2: Remote Corporate Social Responsibility (RCSR). The dependent variable will be employee DV 1: Subjective well-being. The significance of the relationship between these variables will be mediated by a flexible working arrangements policy. The establishment of the relationship between these variables will inform recommendations for the existing FWA policy that integrates socially accountable wellness programmes, that will promote employee subjective well-being.

The survey tool has been developed for the purpose of the study, using a 5-point Likert scale rating. The first section includes 6 questions that rate the current FWA options. The second section includes 9 questions that rate Employee Wellness Programme (OWP) options that employees feel will add value and enhance the existing "Flexi Work Arrangements Policy. The third section includes 4 questions to rate employees' need to be involved in Remote Corporate Social Responsibility (RCSR).

The fourth section of the survey includes The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was developed to assess satisfaction with the respondent's life as a whole. For the study, the survey was adapted. The measurement of the scale aligns to a 7-point Linkert scale that will be used to measure employee subjective well-being. The Normative data are presented for the scale, which shows good convergent validity with other scales and with other types of assessments of subjective well-



being³⁵.SWLS has demonstrated sufficient sensitivity to be useful in detecting changes in life satisfaction following clinical intervention. Furthermore, the scale has discriminant validity when compared to measures of emotional well-being. The SWLS examines an individual's conscious evaluative opinion of his or her life using the person's own criteria, the SWLS is recommended as a supplement to scales that focus on psychopathology or emotional well-being³⁵.

Ethical Consideration

A multitude of ethical actions were carried out throughout this study inquiry. The study received ethical clearance from the MANCOSA research Ethics Committee (MREC Reference number: 029/2021) at the start. In addition, a letter from the Chief People Officer of Company X was obtained, acting as a the gatekeeper.

Data Analysis

The quantitative research used SPSS version 27 for data analysis, considering the statistical nature of the inquiry. The software enabled the analysis of the data via the use of descriptive and inferential analytical methods. The statistical tests were performed using two-sided tests with a significance level of 0.05. The given p-values were rounded to three decimal places, with values less than 0.001 being expressed as 0.001. Statistical significance was established based on p-values below 0.05. The

following tables include a comprehensive study of the frequency of each item, along with the relevant scales used.

Results

An online survey was administered to 1,500 employees at the headquarters of Company X.A total of 15 8 participants successfully filled out the survey. Hence, the rate of response was 46.8%.

Flexible Work Arrangements Policy

The results indicate that a substantial proportion of the sampled participants (80.4%)saw flexi- time as a viable approach for facilitating flexible work arrangements. Furthermore, more than two thirds of participants, (79.7%), expressed their perception of flexi-place as an effective method. In relation to flexi-contracts, less than half of the participants (47.5%) expressed a positive perception of their effectiveness, whereas a smaller percentage (34.8%) maintained a neutral position on this approach. Most of the participants (88.6%) affirmed the efficacy of any combination of flexible alternatives, suggesting a preference for a certain level of autonomy in establishing their flexible work arrangement. Less than half of the participants (43.7%) expressed their perception of flexible work arrangements as effective, while an equivalent percentage of (43.7%) maintained a neutral position on the subject. More than two thirds of the participants (78.5%) indicated that they perceived Flexible Work Arrangements to be successful.

Table: Flexible Work Arrangements Policy (FWAs Policy)

		Ineffective	Neutral	Effective
1	Flexi-Time	12,7	7.0	80,4
2	Flexi-Place	12,7	7.6	79,7
3	Flexi- Contract	17,7	34.8	47,5
4	A Combination of the Flexi Options	11,4	13.3	75,3
5	None of the above options	43,7	43.7	12,7
6	How beneficial is the Flexible Work Arrangement Policy to you.	13,3	8.2	78,5



Online Wellness Programme

More than two-thirds of participants (76%) expressed the belief that Online Learning Platforms will serve as a viable means of enhancement. The majority of the sample group (86.1%) expressed a desire for personalised training and development programs. Furthermore, greater than half of the sampled participants (79.1%) of the employees, expressed their belief in the efficacy of counseling services as a viable option. A substantial proportion (83.6%) of participants said that having a coach or confidant with whom they could remotely discuss ideas would be seen as a valuable enhancement. Subsequently, (79.1%) of participants expressed their inclination for the implementation of a Peer Support "Buddy System." A majority (82.3%) of the

sample population had a favorable response about the efficacy of the possibility to exchange innovative concepts pertaining to the execution of conventional tasks. More than two thirds of the participants (72.8%) expressed their belief that the inclusion of design workshops would serve as a valuable enhancement to the current strategy. Additionally, (77.9%), expressed a desire for reward and recognition in response to their creative ideas and proposals. Finally, a substantial percentage (84.8%) of the participants saw the provision of weekly time off for health and wellbeing, including recreational activities, as an effective enhancement to the policy.

Table: Online Wellness Programme

		Ineffective	Neutral	Effective
1	Online Learning Platforms (LinkedIn learning, simply learn, udemy etc)	6,9	17,1	76
2	Customised training and development plans	5,7	8,2	86,1
3	Organizational Counselling Services	5,7	15,2	79,1
4	A coach or confidant with whom to exchange ideas remotely	5,1	11,4	83,6
5	Peer Support "Buddy System"	7,6	13,3	79,1
6	he opportunity to share innovative ideas on how to do traditional tasks.	6,4	11,4	82,3
7	To attend design-thinking workshops remotely	10,1	17,1	72,8
8	Reward and recognition for innovative ideas and suggestions	11,4	10,8	77,9
9	It would be welcomed to receive weekly time off for health and wellness, including recreation.	8,2	7	84,8



Corporate Social Responsibility

According to the results of the survey, more than two-thirds (67.7%) of the individuals surveyed expressed a preference for selecting the social cause to which they would donate, indicating a heightened level of interest in engaging in such activities. Furthermore, more than fifty percent (58.8%) expressed the view that the integration of CSR into their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) would enhance its effectiveness. More than half of the sampled population (60.8%) expressed their

belief in the efficacy of recognition as a catalyst for corporate social responsibility (CSR). Lastly, slightly more than two-thirds (67%) of the sample said that incentives and rewards would be advantageous and efficacious for promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. The results of this section suggest that associates express a preference for a certain degree of autonomy in relation to corporate social responsibility (CSR), together with the provision of recognition and incentives.

Table: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

		effective	Neutral	Effective
1	If I could choose the social cause, I would be more interested in remote CSR.	7,6	24,7	67,7
2	If CSR formed part of my Key Performance Indicators (KPI)	13,9	27,2	58,8
3	If I received recognition for my contribution to CSR	15,2	24,1	60,8
4	If I received incentives and rewards for my contribution to CSR	14	19	67

Subjective Wellbeing

The next component of the survey assessed the subjective well-being levels of the associates amidst the epidemic and while working remotely. Based on the results, more than two-thirds (67.8%) expressed agreement that their lifestyles, in various aspects, closely align with their ideal standards. Furthermore, (64.6%) have a positive perception of the quality of their living circumstances. More than fifty percent of the sampled participants (61.4%)

have expressed positive sentiments about their overall life happiness. More than half (71.5%) of the sampled participants affirm having accomplished the crucial facets of their existence. In conclusion, it was shown that (48.7%) of the participants in the sample population had a negative response to the statement "If I had the opportunity to relive my life, I would not make any changes."

Table: Subjective Wellbeing

		Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	67,8	5,7	26,6
2	The conditions of my life are excellent.	64,6	10,1	25,3
3	I am completely satisfied with my life.	61,4	12,7	26
4	So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	71,5	7	21,5
5	If I could live my life over, I would change nothing.	40	11,4	48,7

Mediating role of Flexible Work Arrangements

Regression analysis was also engaged in this study to investigate the impact of online wellness social responsibility on subjective well-being mediated by

flexible work arrangements using SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018).

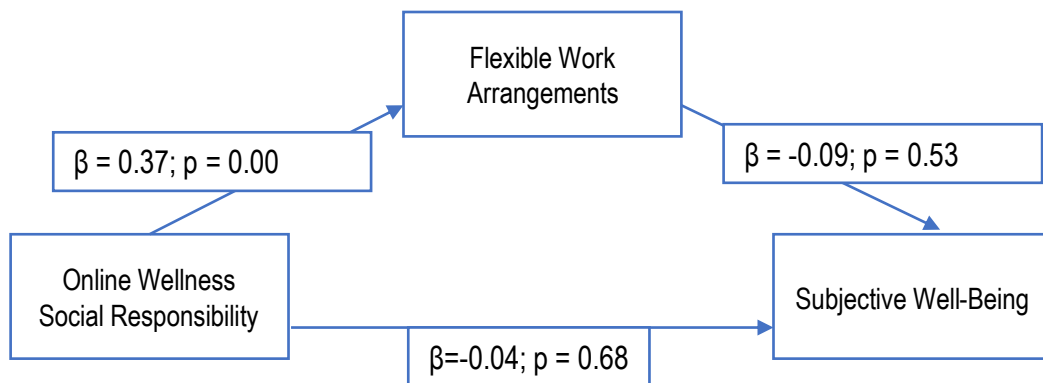


Figure1: The mediating effect of flexible work arrangements on online wellness social responsibility and subjective well-being

Figure 1 illustrates that online wellness social responsibility was a significant predictor of flexible work arrangements ($\beta = 0.37; p = 0.00$) and flexible work arrangements were not a significant predictor of subjective well-being ($\beta = -0.09; p = 0.53$).

These findings suggest that flexible work arrangements do not mediate the relationship between online wellness social responsibility and subjective well-being.

DISCUSSION

A FWA policy refers to allowing associates a reasonable degree of flexibility with reference to their working hours and their place of work. The FWA has been designed to assist associates with their “work- life balance” by giving associates the option to apply to structure how they complete their work according to their individual needs, while still ensuring the Group's operational requirements are being met.

The flexibility allows associates to apply for flexi-time or flexi-place or both. FWAs reduce work-family friction, improve psychological health, and boost role satisfaction, according to several research³. Such policies aim to promote employee well-being and work-life balance³⁶. The main findings from the study demonstrated that online wellness social responsibility was a significant predictor of flexible work arrangements (FWAs). Additionally, Subjective well-being was not significantly predicted by FWAs. Lastly, the relationship between online wellness social responsibility and subjective well-being is not mediated by FWAs. The results of the mediating variable, which was FWA's. Validated the notion that flexi-time is the most effective approach for implementing flexible work arrangements, with flexi-place ranking as the second most beneficial technique. There is a divergence of opinions among associates on the efficacy of the flexi-contract. In general, the implementation of flexible work arrangement solutions has been well accepted by the associates of Company X, with the majority (80.4%) of employees favoring flexi-time. The concept of Employee wellness programmes focused on positive employee culture, employee benefits, and attractive recruitment, and retention strategies. During a disaster, providing the employee with the necessary resources, leadership, and workload from part of an employee-centered programme³³. The results of this section of the survey are enlightening. As it provided valuable perspectives on workers' perspectives and their prioritization of tasks. Among the proposed recommendations for enhancing the FWA policy, the solutions that exhibited an efficacy rating over 80% were Online Learning Platforms, weekly time off for health and wellness, including recreation, and a coach or confidant with whom to exchange ideas remotely and a Peer Support “Buddy System”.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an organization's attempt to do good, to give back and to serve the community. The notion in question has been in existence for a considerable while and is based on the premise that companies, in addition to generating profits for their shareholders, also have responsibilities towards society¹⁶. This concept aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of the social exchange theory. The central emphasis of the social exchange theory is on the concepts of personal commitments, appreciation, and trust, as posited by Blau (1964)¹³.

Social exchange theories are founded on the fundamental idea that the manner in which individuals interact with one other is contingent upon their ability to effectively balance the advantages and disadvantages associated with such interactions. In this particular component of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to evaluate their perspectives on the integration of remote corporate social responsibility (RCSR) into the flexible work arrangements (FWAs) policy. Therefore, offering recommendations that facilitate the establishment of mutual advantages between the workers and Company X in accordance with the FWAs policy. The findings of this section suggest that associates express a preference for a certain degree of autonomy in relation to CSR, together with the provision of recognition and incentives.

Subjective well-being recognizes and emphasizes positive variables²². Disasters, like the pandemic, evoked many emotions among employees. Negative consequences, positive attitudes, and experiences make up subjective well-being²³. These issues heavily impact employee health. The analysis of results substantiates that the colleagues affiliated with Company X have shown a notably elevated degree of subjective well-being. Company X is positioned to gain an additional advantage from the aforementioned phenomenon, as several scholarly sources have affirmed the presence of a positive correlation between workers' subjective well-being and their degree of involvement within the organisational setting^{37;38}.

Conclusion

In most cases, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an initiative that is isolated to top-level management, or it is enforced by means or a

performance goal. This type of CSR engagement is obligatory and defeats the purpose of the act and intent behind the initiative. There needs to be an attempt to create social accountability, as opposed to social obligations, which leads to the linking of employee wellness, organisational operations, and CSR. Notwithstanding the extensive body of research on the concepts of CSR and employee well-being, the scope of calamities like the pandemic has left little knowledge of these concepts, and actions to address them are sparse.

Social exchange theories are based on the core concept that the way in which people engage with one other is dependent on their capacity to properly manage the benefits and drawbacks connected with these relationships. The above recommendations will aid and assist the policymakers in creating FWA's that are advantageous to both the organisation and the employee. By extension to the nature of the study, such recommendations can be applied to all organisations in the clothing retail industry.

From a managerial perspective, this creates added value for the organisation. It contributes to the sustainability of employee wellness and fulfils its social responsibility to the community and society at large. This creates a well-grounded culture and reputation for the business.

Limitations of the study

The sample size used in this study was comparatively limited, perhaps limiting its ability to accurately reflect the broader population. Hence, the findings of this research cannot be generalised to the wider population. Alternative research using different procedures, demographics, or situations may provide varying outcomes.

Recommendations

The study recommends that future research endeavors may include doing a comparable investigation inside other business sectors. Additionally, a qualitative methodology may also be used to delve more into the phenomena, hence enhancing comprehension of the subject matter

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