

Emotional Intelligence Influence in Mitigating Pandemic Induced Stress on Work From Home and Work Performance

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Abstract

In response to the World Health Organization's recent warning on January 18, 2024, regarding the potential resurgence of pandemics, this study investigates the impact of pandemic-induced stress, emotional intelligence, and work performance within the Malaysian automotive industry. While acknowledging certain limitations, the findings emphasize the necessity for organizations to fortify their resilience strategies by prioritizing emotional intelligence development and implementing supportive measures. As organizations brace for future challenges, this study offers actionable guidance for policymakers and industry leaders to enhance employee well-being and organizational resilience in the face of looming uncertainty.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligent, Stress, Remote Work, Pandemic and Automotive Industry.

Introduction

Throughout history, the definition of a pandemic has been a source of contention among scientists and medical experts, yet a consensus emerges: it denotes the widespread transmission of a disease exceeding normal levels within a specific geographical area. This global occurrence, notable for its magnitude and extent, has traversed epochs, leaving lasting impressions on human civilization. From the devastating plagues of ancient times to modern outbreaks of diseases like cholera, bubonic plague, smallpox, and influenza, pandemics have marked our collective story with accounts of hardship, resilience, and scientific pursuit. Particularly, the smallpox epidemic, which claimed an estimated 300 to 500 million lives over millennia, serves as a grim reminder of pandemics' catastrophic potential and humanity's vulnerability to microbial threats.

The emergence of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, commonly referred to as COVID-19, ushered in a new era of challenges for humanity. Originating in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, COVID-19 rapidly traversed borders, spanning continents and oceans with alarming speed and efficiency. Within a month, the virus had reached Europe, heralding the onset of an unparalleled global crisis. The ensuing pandemic would test the resilience of nations, communities, and individuals, reshaping societal norms and altering the fabric of daily life.

As the COVID-19 saga unfolded, predictions regarding its resolution remained elusive, obscured by uncertainty and conjecture. The World Health Organization's declaration in April 2022 highlighted the persistent threat posed by COVID-19, dispelling premature notions of endemicity and indicating the prolonged nature of the battle ahead. Similarly, former Malaysian Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin's candid assessment in September 2022 served as a stark reminder of the challenges ahead, stressing Malaysia's unpreparedness to embrace endemicity and advocating for sustained vigilance against evolving viral threats. Conversely, voices like those in Human Genomics presented a nuanced viewpoint, suggesting that while the pandemic continued to impact global affairs, it was time to contemplate its transition to an endemic phase, representing a pivotal moment in our collective response to the crisis. Such discussions underscore the importance of global cooperation and vigilance in navigating the uncertain landscape of pandemic management, emphasizing the necessity of unity and solidarity in confronting adversity.

Understanding the Effects of Pandemic Stress on Work Performance

Throughout the ages, defining a pandemic has sparked debates among scientists and medical professionals, yet a common understanding emerges: it signifies the widespread transmission of a disease exceeding normal levels within a specific geographical region. This global phenomenon, distinguished by its scale and reach, has spanned generations, leaving enduring imprints on human society. From the catastrophic plagues of ancient eras to contemporary outbreaks of illnesses such as cholera, bubonic plague, smallpox, and influenza, pandemics have shaped our collective narrative with tales of hardship, resilience, and scientific pursuit. Notably, the smallpox epidemic, claiming an estimated 300 to 500 million lives over millennia, serves as a sobering reminder of the catastrophic potential of pandemics and humanity's susceptibility to microbial threats.

The emergence of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, known colloquially as COVID-19, introduced a new era of challenges for humanity. Arising in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, COVID-19 swiftly crossed borders, spanning continents and oceans with alarming speed and efficiency. Within a month, the virus had reached Europe, signaling the onset of an unprecedented global crisis. The ensuing pandemic would test the resilience of nations, communities, and individuals, reshaping societal norms and redefining daily life.

As the COVID-19 saga unfolded, projections regarding its resolution remained elusive, clouded by uncertainty and speculation. The World Health Organization's announcement in April 2022 emphasized the enduring threat posed by COVID-19, dispelling premature notions of endemicity and indicating the prolonged nature of the battle ahead. Similarly, the candid assessment by former Malaysian Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin in September 2022 served as a stark reminder of the challenges ahead, highlighting Malaysia's lack of readiness to embrace endemicity and advocating for sustained vigilance against evolving viral threats.

Conversely, perspectives such as those in Human Genomics offered a nuanced viewpoint, suggesting that while the pandemic continued to affect global affairs, it was time to contemplate its transition to an endemic phase, marking a crucial moment in our collective response to the crisis. Such dialogues underscore the importance of global collaboration and vigilance in navigating the uncertain landscape of pandemic management, emphasizing the need for unity and solidarity in confronting adversity.

Studies indicate that emotional intelligence acts as a safeguard against the negative repercussions of stress, shielding individuals from the psychological toll brought on by traumatic occurrences like the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the development of self-awareness, self-regulation, social aptitude, empathy, and drive, individuals can boost their capacity to manage stress, diminish its influence on mental health, and sustain elevated levels of effectiveness and efficiency.

The Global Crisis of COVID-19 and Its Impact on Work Dynamics

The COVID-19 pandemic has ignited an unprecedented global crisis, transcending geographical boundaries and societal divisions. Its profound effects on the automotive industry, a pivotal driver of economic activity and employment worldwide, have fundamentally altered the landscape of work and commerce in unforeseen ways. Amidst this climate of uncertainty and upheaval, the psychological toll inflicted by the pandemic has emerged as a pressing concern, carrying far-reaching implications for both individual well-being and organizational performance (Mangla, 2021).

A wealth of research conducted across various contexts has illuminated the diverse ways in which the pandemic has intensified levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout among individuals (Soto-Rubio et al., 2020). From frontline healthcare workers grappling with the relentless demands of patient care to essential industry employees navigating the uncertainties of remote work and job instability, the pandemic's impact on mental health has been both pervasive and profound (Giorgi et al., 2020). Moreover, the protracted nature of the crisis, compounded by the emergence of new virus variants, has only exacerbated these challenges, emphasizing the urgent need for effective coping strategies and support mechanisms (Sun et al., 2021).

In the Malaysian automotive sector, the effects of pandemic-induced stress have been keenly felt as organizations confront disruptions to supply chains, production delays, and shifts in consumer demand (Rigotti et al., 2021). In this context, the role of emotional intelligence in mitigating the effects of stress on work performance assumes heightened significance (Sadovyy et al., 2021). Emotional intelligence, characterized by traits such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, offers a promising framework for understanding how individuals navigate the complexities of the pandemic and its aftermath (Farh et al., 2012).

Ongoing Pandemic Threats and Psychological Impacts on Employees

The pandemic's continuous threat and psychological effects on employees cannot be overlooked. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unparalleled challenges and uncertainties on a global scale, impacting various facets of individuals' lives, including their mental well-being and job performance (Carmeli, 2003; Karimi, 2014; Restubog et al., 2020;

Sun et al., 2021). Amidst these trying circumstances, it becomes imperative to discern factors that can alleviate the adverse consequences of the pandemic on employees. One such factor receiving significant attention is emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence encompasses the ability to recognize and manage one's emotions, as well as comprehend and empathize with the emotions of others. Individuals with heightened emotional intelligence are better equipped to handle stress, adapt to changes, and foster positive interpersonal relationships (Sadovyy et al., 2021).

The Malaysian automotive industry has been profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, grappling with disruptions in the supply chain, diminished consumer demand, and operational hurdles. In this challenging environment, the well-being and performance of Malaysian automotive employees are critical for the industry's recovery. Given the virus's persistent evolution and the emergence of new variants, understanding the moderating influence of emotional intelligence on pandemic-induced stress becomes even more important.

This study seeks to explore the moderating role of emotional intelligence on pandemic-related stress and its repercussions on job performance within the Malaysian automotive industry. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on individuals and sectors worldwide, and the Malaysian automotive industry is no exception, having faced myriad challenges and uncertainties as a result.

Remote Work (Work from Home) in Response to the Pandemic

Amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the global workforce confronts an unparalleled challenge: a widespread assault on mental health. This crisis not only represents a "pandemic of mental health disorders" but also presents a formidable obstacle for both organizations and governments (Giorgi et al., 2020). The welfare of employees and the sustainability of organizations hang in the balance, underscoring the critical need for effective strategies to alleviate the impact of pandemic-induced stress on work performance.

Factors such as competition, harsh working conditions, increased workloads, and escalating job demands all contribute to escalating levels of stress among employees (Prasad and Vaidya, 2020). When the expectations placed on an employee surpass the available resources—such as abilities, skills, or knowledge—stress inevitably ensues (Colligan and Higgins, 2006). Furthermore, shifting cultural dynamics, societal norms, demographics, and lifestyle choices further complicate the equation, disrupting the delicate equilibrium between work and personal life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these stressors, prompting organizations worldwide to swiftly implement remote work arrangements. What was once viewed as a privilege or exception has now become the standard for the workforce, with millions of employees transitioning to remote work environments practically overnight (Shareena and Shahid, 2020). This abrupt shift has introduced a myriad of stressors, impacting work performance, reducing life satisfaction, and causing distress (Gautam and Sharma, 2020).

Addressing the societal response to the pandemic necessitates more than just reducing uncertainty by providing accurate data and measures. It necessitates seizing the opportunity

to enhance mental health literacy and skills, equipping individuals across all professional sectors with the tools to effectively navigate pandemic-induced stress and sustain their work performance (Sanchez-Gomez et al., 2021). Central to this endeavor is the cultivation of emotional intelligence, the cornerstone of effective stress management and resilience in the face of adversity.

Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator

The concept of emotional intelligence involves the dynamic adaptation of our emotions to the surrounding environment and circumstances, fostering our ability to acquire social and personal skills alongside practical aptitudes. Theoretically, emotional intelligence is posited to enhance employees' performance in terms of both personal emotions and product quality (Nocola, 2005; Kenbach & Kim, 2010; Kaura, 2011; Komlosi, 2013). Moreover, it represents an emerging area of interest in the manufacturing industry and production (Golman, 1995; Mahyari, 2010). Concurrently, emotional intelligence significantly impacts business performance, a factor too significant to be overlooked (Rahim & Malik, 2010). Emotional intelligence influences production quality (Manisha, 2012; Mahyari, 2010), forming the bedrock of management loyalty, business expansion, and satisfaction (KenBach & Nicola, 2005; Manisha, 2012; Ghalandari et al., 2012).

Emotional intelligence plays a pivotal role in empowering individuals to foster resilience and well-being amid the challenges of remote work. By refining skills related to self-regulation, empathy, and effective communication, employees can not only manage their own stress levels but also contribute to a positive and supportive work environment, thereby impacting their work performance.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected various industries worldwide, and the Malaysian automotive sector is no exception (Gautam & Sharma, 2020). Beyond health concerns, the pandemic has significantly altered work dynamics, leading to heightened stress levels among employees (Giorgi et al., 2020). This elevated stress can detrimentally impact work performance, productivity, and overall well-being (Troll et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the evolving nature of the pandemic and the emergence of new variants necessitate ongoing exploration of the moderating influence of emotional intelligence on pandemic-induced stress and its repercussions on work performance in the Malaysian automotive industry (Soto-Rubio et al., 2020). Recent studies underscore the importance of emotional intelligence in mitigating the adverse effects of stress and fostering adaptive coping mechanisms.

For instance, a cross-sectional study conducted on nurses in Spain during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that emotional intelligence levels moderated the relationship between psychosocial risks, burnout, job satisfaction, and nurses' health (Soto-Rubio et al., 2020). Similarly, research on community nurses in Australia indicated that emotional intelligence significantly impacted well-being and job stress, highlighting its role as a protective factor (Restubog et al., 2020).

Moreover, professionals exhibiting high emotional intelligence levels and low COVID-19 stress demonstrated superior performance and lower counterproductive work behavior compared

to those with lower emotional intelligence levels (Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021). These findings underscore the potential benefits of emotional intelligence in navigating pandemic challenges and improving work performance.

Given the aforementioned research, it is evident that emotional intelligence holds significant potential for shaping individual well-being and work performance, particularly in the context of a pandemic. Like other sectors, the Malaysian automotive industry has grappled with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gautam & Sharma, 2020), experiencing disruptions in production, supply chains, and consumer demand. These challenges have undoubtedly strained employees in the Malaysian automotive sector.

Furthermore, with the ongoing evolution of the virus and the emergence of new variants, it becomes imperative to explore the moderating influence of emotional intelligence on pandemic-induced stress and its impact on work performance in this industry (Giorgi et al., 2020). By understanding the role of emotional intelligence in mitigating the adverse effects of stress and promoting adaptive coping strategies, organizations in the Malaysian automotive industry can better support their employees and enhance overall productivity and well-being.

Problem Statement

The recent pronouncements by the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) underscore the critical necessity of global readiness for forthcoming pandemics, highlighting the ongoing menace posed by infectious diseases and the imperative of proactive measures to mitigate their impact.

In an article dated May 23, 2023, the UN highlighted WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus's emphasis on the importance of reinforcing responses to COVID-19 and preparing for future pandemics and other health threats. Despite potential signs of easing in the COVID-19 global health emergency, Tedros cautioned against complacency, citing concerns over new variants and the emergence of potentially more lethal pathogens. He stressed the indispensability of robust global mechanisms to address emergencies comprehensively and equitably, advocating for decisive and collective action to confront future pandemics.

Furthermore, a statement from the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 18, 2024, reiterated the urgency of preparedness for future pandemics, urging proactive measures to anticipate and mitigate the impact of potential outbreaks. WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasized the necessity of readiness in confronting forthcoming health crises, acknowledging the uncertainties surrounding the timing and nature of future pandemics. He advocated for increased investment in healthcare and pandemic preparedness to bolster global resilience.

The concept of "Disease X," introduced by the WHO in 2018, underscores the unpredictability of infectious diseases and the need for proactive measures to address emerging threats. The WHO's call for preparedness in the face of Disease X highlights the critical need for robust health systems, effective surveillance mechanisms, and rapid response capabilities to detect, contain, and mitigate the spread of novel pathogens.

Amidst ongoing global challenges, the relevance of studying the moderating effect of emotional intelligence on stress generated by the pandemic and work performance in the Malaysian automotive industry is emphasized. The study aims to address gaps in understanding the relationship between pandemic-induced stress, remote work, and work performance while exploring the role of emotional intelligence as a moderator. Insights from this research can inform strategies for organizational preparedness and sustainability in an evolving landscape.

Research Question

This study examines the moderating effect of emotional intelligence on pandemic stress and work performance in the Malaysian automotive industry. To address the research gap, this study developed three key research questions:

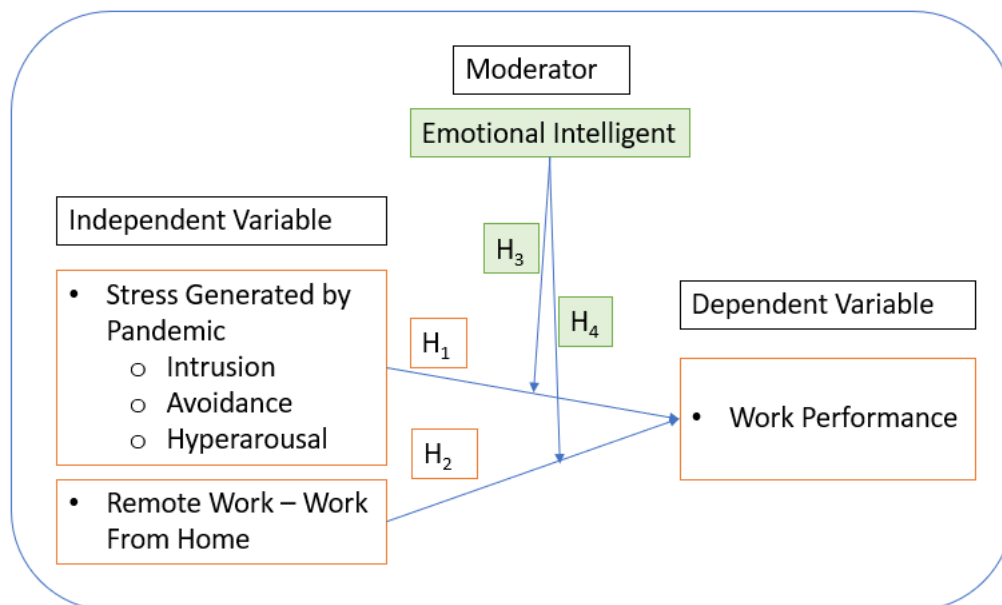
- RQ₁: What is the relationship between pandemic-induced stress and work performance among employees in the Automotive Industry in Malaysia?
- RQ₂: What is the relationship between remote work (work from home) during the pandemic and work performance in the Automotive Industry in Malaysia?
- RQ₃: Whether there is effect of the stress lead by the current pandemic on the work performance and the extent to which emotional intelligent can act as a moderator within this impact in the Automotive Industry in Malaysia.
- RQ₄: Whether there is effect of the remote work (work from home) and work performance the extent to which emotional intelligent can act as a moderator within this impact in the Automotive Industry in Malaysia.

Research Objective

The study's main goal is to understand and explain the moderating effect of emotional intelligence on stress generated by the pandemic and work performance in the Malaysian automotive industry.

- RO₁: To examine the relationship between pandemic-induced stress and work performance among employees in the Automotive Industry in Malaysia.
- RO₂: To examine the relationship between remote work (work from home) during the pandemic and work performance in the Automotive Industry in Malaysia.
- RO₃: To determine the effect of the stress lead by the current pandemic on work performance and the extent to which emotional intelligent can act as a moderator within this impact in the Automotive Industry in Malaysia.
- RO₄: To determine the effect of the remote work (work from home) on work performance and the extent to which emotional intelligent can act as a moderator within this impact in the Automotive Industry in Malaysia.

Table 1

Conceptual Framework

Adapted from M. Sadovy et al. (2021) & Susilo, D. (2020).

The study proposed the following hypotheses concerning the moderating effect of emotional intelligence on stress generated by the pandemic and work performance in the Malaysian automotive industry:

- I. **H₁**: There is a significant relationship between stress induced by the pandemic and work performance among employees in the automotive industry in Malaysia.
- II. **H₂**: There is a significant relationship between remote work (work from home) during the pandemic and work performance in the automotive industry in Malaysia.
- III. **H₃**: Emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between stress induced by the pandemic and work performance in the automotive industry in Malaysia.
- IV. **H₄**: Emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between remote work (work from home) and work performance in the automotive industry in Malaysia.

Significant of Study

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been considerable focus on biomedical aspects, yet the impact of pandemic-induced stress on work performance has been overlooked (Hamouche, 2020). This study aims to address this gap by examining the moderating effect of emotional intelligence on stress and work performance in the Malaysian automotive industry. While previous research has explored correlations between stress, work performance, and emotional intelligence, the specific impact of pandemic-induced stress moderated by emotional intelligence remains unexplored. This study hypothesizes that emotional intelligence acts as a buffer, altering the relationship between pandemic-induced stress and work performance. Understanding this dynamic can lead to insights for developing interventions to mitigate negative consequences.

Drawing from the Job Demands-Resources Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and the emotional intelligence ability approach (Mayer et al., 2016), this study aims to shed light on the role of emotional intelligence amidst the pandemic. Emotional intelligence has gained

attention in various fields, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis (The Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Work Performance During COVID-19 Crisis: A Cross-Sectional Analysis, 2020; Iqbal et al., 2021).

The Malaysian automotive industry, being vital to the economy, requires an understanding of emotional intelligence's impact on organizational dynamics, especially during the pandemic (Iqbal et al., 2021; Krishnan et al., 2018). However, there is debate on emotional intelligence's effectiveness amid the crisis. Some argue that the sheer magnitude and prolonged duration of the pandemic may diminish its influence (Hatta & Abdullah, 2020).

The study aims to explore these complexities and provide insights into strategies to support employees' well-being and optimize work performance amidst ongoing crises (Sadovyy et al., 2021). It acknowledges the limitations of emotional intelligence and calls for comprehensive approaches in the automotive industry, considering factors like job insecurity and remote work challenges (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021; Changkajonsakdi & Kaewkuekool, 2019).

Further research within the Malaysian automotive industry is crucial to understand the interplay between emotional intelligence, stress, and work performance amid the pandemic (Sigahi et al., 2021; Fregnan et al., 2022). By addressing this gap, the industry can develop resilient approaches to effectively supporting its workforce.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical role of emotional intelligence in moderating the impact of pandemic-induced stress on work performance within the Malaysian automotive industry. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, it has also underscored the importance of understanding and harnessing emotional intelligence to navigate crises effectively (The Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Work Performance During COVID-19 Crisis: A Cross-Sectional Analysis, 2020; Iqbal et al., 2021).

Despite debates surrounding the efficacy of emotional intelligence amidst the crisis, empirical evidence suggests its potential to buffer the negative effects of stress on work performance (Hatta & Abdullah, 2020). By delving deeper into the interplay between emotional intelligence, stress, and work performance, this study contributes valuable insights into strategies for supporting employee well-being and organizational resilience.

Moreover, the complexities of the automotive industry, coupled with the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic, necessitate a comprehensive understanding of emotional intelligence's role (Sigahi et al., 2021; Fregnan et al., 2022). This understanding can inform the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms to address the unique stressors faced by employees in this sector.

Furthermore, the findings of this study emphasize the need for ongoing research and dialogue regarding the role of emotional intelligence in times of crisis. As industries worldwide continue to adapt to the evolving challenges of the pandemic, a nuanced understanding of emotional intelligence can inform organizational strategies and policies aimed at enhancing employee well-being and performance.

In light of the study's findings, it is clear that emotional intelligence holds significant potential as a tool for fostering resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. By recognizing and leveraging the potential of emotional intelligence, organizations can cultivate a supportive work environment that promotes employee well-being and sustains productivity.

As we look to the future, it is imperative to continue exploring the complexities of emotional intelligence and its implications for organizational dynamics. Further research within the Malaysian automotive industry and beyond will be instrumental in deepening our understanding of emotional intelligence's role in shaping resilient and adaptive workplaces. In essence, this study underscores the importance of emotional intelligence as a critical resource for navigating the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the Malaysian automotive industry. By recognizing and leveraging the potential of emotional intelligence, organizations can foster a supportive work environment conducive to employee well-being and sustained productivity. As the automotive industry continues to evolve in the face of ongoing crises, a nuanced understanding of emotional intelligence will be instrumental in shaping resilient and adaptive organizational cultures (Sadovyy et al., 2021).

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