

DIGITAL WELL-BEING AMONG VIRTUAL WORKERS: THE ROLE OF WORK AUTONOMY IN THE NIGERIAN WORK ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The study looked into how work autonomy affected virtual workers' digital well-being in a Nigerian workplace. Using a cross-sectional survey research design, the study collected data from 209 remote workers from ten (10) different organisations via an online survey. More of the respondents, 116 (55.5%), were males, while the other 93 (44.5%) were females. Findings revealed that the dimensions of work autonomy (capacity for managing new situations and self-efficacy at work) accounted for about 23% of the variance in the digital well-being of virtual workers [$R^2 = .23$; $F(2, 207) = 12.90$; $p < .01$]. The direction of the beta value shows that the higher the capacity for managing new situations ($\beta = .19$) and self-efficacy at work ($\beta = .34$), the higher the digital well-being of virtual workers. According to the results, work autonomy has a major positive impact on virtual workers' digital well-being. As a result, companies should make sure that their virtual employees have the tools and resources they need to complete daily tasks without micromanaging. As their field of work evolves, virtual workers should be encouraged to further develop their professional skills.

Keyword: Digital Well-Being, Work Autonomy, Virtual Workers, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Well-being generally includes an overall assessment of life satisfaction and emotions. Well-being is a positive outcome that is important for many segments of society. Because it informs that people perceive their lives as good ones. However, good living conditions/physiological needs (housing, employment, and health) are essential elements for well-being (Dorian *et al.*, 2018). Digital well-being refers to how technologies and digital services affect people's mental, emotional, and physical health. Digital well-being has been defined as an experiential state of optimal balance between connectivity and disconnection that is dependent on a combination of person, device, and context (Mariek, 2021).

The field of digital well-being is gaining traction in higher education as a result of the global push for digital transformation. In terms of digital well-being and work autonomy, hedonism can be used to illustrate well-being, which has been defined as a philosophical perspective that reflects the meaning of life as being satisfied with pleasure. Although hedonism has various definitions, it is generally an approach that argues that pleasure is superior to all other emotions and that the importance of enjoying all actions that lead to the goal, as well as the effectiveness and accuracy of behaviour, is directly proportional to the pleasure received. Happiness is one of the most important factors influencing human life. As a result, many studies delve deeply into the concept of happiness. In this context, the hedonic approach is proposed as a modern subjective well-being theory, whereas subjective well-being refers to people's self-evaluation of their happiness (Diener & Chan, 2011).

The external environment (political, social, family, relationships, and so on) is thought to play an important role in determining happiness. Such a theory differs from the hedonic theory. This is because they argue that behaving only according to their desires is not a requirement for happiness and/or does not always result in well-being. According to the eudemonic theory, a good life, and thus long-term happiness and well-being, are objective rather than subjective.

In this study, an understanding of well-being was developed based on both hedonic and eudemonic theories, and it was felt during and after the use of digital technology or the presence of such media and tools. Today, the digitalisation of public and private services such as education, shopping, banking, and communication has gradually increased individuals' access to and interaction with these environments. Individuals feel liberated in these environments, have almost no boundaries in sharing, and routinely share the information they encounter without question (Ruut, 2003).

When scientific evidence on the problems associated with managing the use of digital technology in people's daily lives is examined, two major thematic concerns emerge. Some studies focus on "overconsumption", while others focus on "multitasking" (Frey *et al.*, 2007).

Overconsumption investigates how and why people consume more digital content than they want, whereas multitasking allows you to do multiple things at once, which is especially useful for employees who work remotely. Working virtually has been reported by scholars to enable employees to have a balanced work and personal life. However, some others reported that working virtually has made it even more difficult for employees to distinguish between their work and personal lives.

Working virtually has also been identified as a source of mistrust between line managers and supervisors and their employees, raising concerns about employee engagement. This reduces employees' autonomy and decision-making latitude when carrying out their assigned tasks. This study looked at how autonomy affects the digital well-being of employees who work virtually.

A series of changes has occurred in the workplace as a result of technological advancements; however, the most recent event that caused a significant change in traditional physical attendance at work was the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus (Wang *et al.*, 2021; OECD, 2021).

Following the COVID-19 epidemic, many organisations opted for a combination of remote work and in-person work, resulting in a sudden increase in the prevalence of remote working to 44%, for instance, among US employees (Sherif, 2023).

However, the literature fails to mention virtual workers in the banking sector, despite the significant contribution of these professionals. Considering the backdrop of micromanagement that organisations introduced. This study aims to discover how employees' autonomy affects their digital well-being as they work more with technological devices. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of autonomy on the digital well-being of virtual workers in selected Nigerian banks.

This ultimately led to the adoption of a hybrid work model. The hybrid working system has benefits, such as increased flexibility and reduced commuting time (Nakrošienė *et al.*, 2019), but it has also been linked to challenges such as stress, perceived isolation, inability to differentiate work and personal life, and ultimately, employee mental health (Bodner *et al.*, 2022).

Organisations play an important role in ensuring a successful virtual working model experience when workers and organisations are dealing with a novel and uncertain situation (Aprilina&Martianty, 2023). A systematic review conducted by Shirmohammadi *et al.* (2022) found that resources play an important and crucial role in understanding how virtual working links with the employees' well-being.

Having given the background and rationale to the study, the following hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. Work autonomy dimensions (capacity for managing new situations and self-efficacy at work) will significantly and independently predict digital well-being among virtual workers;
2. Work autonomy dimensions (capacity for managing new situations and self-efficacy at work) will significantly and jointly predict digital well-being among virtual workers in Nigeria.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design:

The study was conducted using a cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional research design is a type of observational study that examines data from a single population or subset at a given

time. It is frequently used to assess prevalence, attitudes, or behaviours, thereby providing a snapshot of a specific phenomenon. It provides efficient and cost-effective insights rather than tracking changes over time, as longitudinal studies do.

2.2 Sample and sampling technique

The study used snowball sampling and collected data from 209 virtual workers. Virtual workers are those who work for at least 30 hours per week remotely. Participants who worked less than 30 hours per week were excluded from the study. The majority of respondents, 116 (55.5%), were males, while the remaining 93 (44.5%) were women.

2.3 Research Instrument

A well-structured questionnaire (Sections A – D) was adopted to elicit responses from the participants. Section A consists of demographic information such as age and level of education. Section B comprises the Digital Well-being Scale, which is a 12-item scale developed by Arslankara *et al.* (2022). The scale was developed to assess an individual's mental well-being while using digital devices. The responses to the scale items were on a 5-point Likert scale, with SD indicating 'Strongly Disagree' and SA indicating 'Strongly Agree'. The scale has an internal consistency score of 0.80.

Section C includes the Work Autonomy Scale, a 23-item sub-scale measuring capacity for managing new situations ($\alpha = .77$) and self-efficacy at work ($\alpha = .79$). It was developed by Breugh and Becker (1987). The scale was developed to measure the extent to which individuals are independent while executing assigned tasks. Responses to the scale items ranged on a 5-point Likert response format: SD – Strongly Disagree to SA – Strongly Agree

2.4 Data Analysis:

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilised to analyse the gathered data. Descriptive statistics were used to obtain descriptive information about respondents. The stated hypotheses were tested using regression analysis. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.

2.5 Procedure

After obtaining the necessary approval, the researcher designed the research instrument in an online survey (Google Forms). The target sample was virtual workers. The snowballing technique was used to select participants, with one virtual worker introducing the researcher to others who used the WhatsApp platform. Filling out the questionnaire took about 15 minutes on average. Respondents were assured that their responses were confidential and anonymous. Respondents were also assured that their responses would be kept safe and that no unauthorised individuals would have access to them.

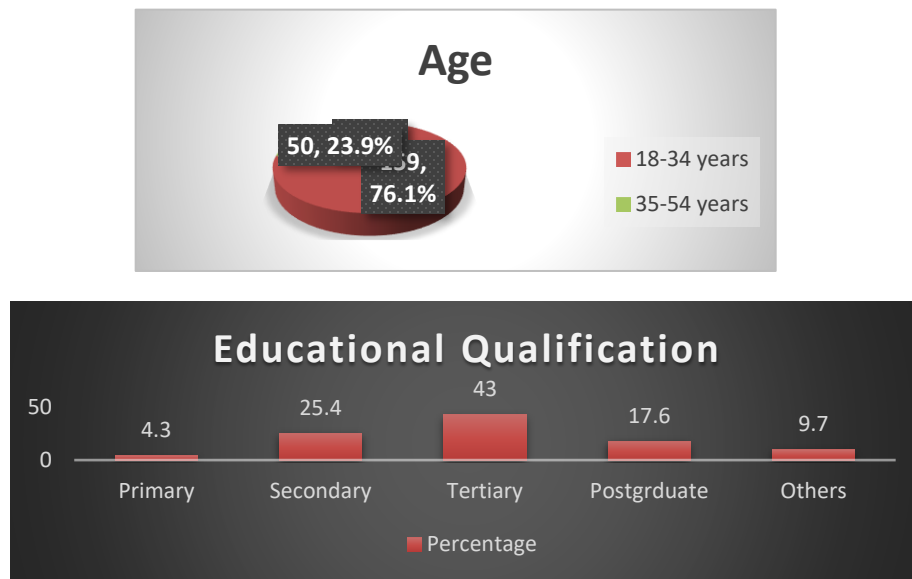
3. Results

This section presents the results of stated hypotheses.

Figure 1: Age distribution

Figure 1 presents results on the distribution according to the age of respondents. It is shown that more of the respondents (76.1%) were between 18 and 34 years old, while the other 23.9% were between 35 and 54 years old.

Figure 2: Bar chart on distribution according to educational qualification



It is shown in Figure2 that more of the virtual workers (43%) were tertiary degree certificate holders, while the least (4.3%) were primary school certificate holders.

3.1 Hypothesis one

Work autonomy dimensions (capacity for managing new situations and self-efficacy at work) will significantly and independently predict digital well-being among virtual workers. This was tested using multiple regression analysis, and the result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Multiple regression analysis summary table showing results on the influence of work autonomy on digital well-being

				.48	.23	12.90	< .01
Capacity for managing new situations	.19	2.34	< .01				
Self-efficacy at work	.34	4.65	< .01				

Table 1 presents results on the independent influence of the dimensions of work autonomy (capacity for managing new situations and self-efficacy at work) on digital well-being among virtual workers. It is shown that capacity for managing new situations ($\beta = .19$; $t = 2.34$; $p < .01$) and self-efficacy at work ($\beta = .34$; $t = 4.65$; $p < .01$) were significant independent predictors of digital well-being among virtual workers. The direction of the beta value shows that the higher the capacity for managing new situations ($\beta = .19$) and self-efficacy at work ($\beta = .34$), the higher the digital well-being of virtual workers. This confirms the stated hypothesis.

3.2 Hypothesis two

Work autonomy dimensions (capacity to manage new situations and work-related self-efficacy) will significantly and jointly predict digital well-being among Nigerian virtual workers. This was tested with multiple regression analysis, and the results are presented in Table 2. Virtual workers' digital well-being was significantly predicted by work autonomy dimensions (capacity for managing new situations and self-efficacy at work) [$R = .48$; $R^2 = .23$; $F(2, 207) = 12.90$; $p < .01$]. Capacity for managing new situations and workplace self-efficacy together accounted for approximately 23% of the variation in digital well-being among virtual workers. This supports the stated hypothesis and thus was included in this study.

3.3 Discussion

The findings revealed that the direction of the beta value indicates that the greater the capacity for managing new situations and self-efficacy at work, the greater the digital well-being of virtual workers. This is consistent with Pham's (2023) review of the impact of employee digital competence on the relationship between digital autonomy and innovative work behaviour. A systematic review reveals that digital wellbeing benefits organisations by providing access to digital tools, training, and a supportive work environment. It also demonstrates a strong positive relationship between digital autonomy, innovative work practices, and employee impact. Sonia *et al.* (2024) also emphasised that professionals/workers see themselves as more competent in areas such as information/data content, security measures, and technical problem-solving.

The study also found that the dimensions of work autonomy (capacity for managing new situations and self-efficacy at work) were significant joint predictors of digital well-being among virtual workers. This is consistent with the findings of Zhitanet *et al.* (2024), who investigated the dual influence of job autonomy on workplace wellbeing in the gig economy and discovered that job autonomy has a positive impact on employee workplace wellbeing in terms of work allocation and positive emotion.

4.1 Conclusion

First, it is concluded that the ability to handle new situations at work contributes to virtual workers' digital well-being. This is associated with possessing the necessary skill set to solve problems related to their job descriptions.

Second, it is concluded that virtual workers with self-belief in their abilities report higher levels of digital well-being. In other words, employees will be able to maintain positive well-being if they believe they can control their motivation, behaviour, and performance at work. Finally, it is concluded that the dimensions of work autonomy (capacity for dealing with new situations and self-efficacy at work) have a combined effect on virtual workers' digital well-being. The findings are also consistent with those of Abdulrazaq *et al.* (2024), who investigated the effects of digital overload on job autonomy and job satisfaction among Federal Ministry employees in Nigeria. Their research revealed that the use of information technology has a significant impact on job autonomy and satisfaction.

4.2 Recommendations

First, banks and other organisations that use virtual workers should strive to provide adequate training and professional development to their employees. This is to improve their ability to manage their work and solve problems on their own, without relying too heavily on management. Second, it is recommended that banks and related organisations hire professional psychologists to conduct periodic assessments of their employees' efficacy regarding their assigned tasks and duties. This will make it easier to quickly identify employees who could benefit from psychological intervention to improve their performance at work.

Finally, it is recommended that more studies should be carried out on other factors that may contribute to the digital well-being of virtual workers.

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