

Beyond the Workplace: A Theoretical Synthesis of Flexible Working Arrangements and Work–Family Dynamics in the Hybrid Era

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Abstract

Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) have been a major draw in the post-pandemic workplace in recent years, particularly in hybrid and remote employment arrangements. Initially promoted as a mechanism to enhance work–life balance, FWAs have increasingly produced contradictory outcomes, giving rise to scholars' description as the “flexibility paradox.” Flexibility increases work demands, blurs work–family boundaries, and raises expectations of continuous availability even as it gives decision-making and control over work schedules. This paper presents an extensive theoretical combination of the relationship between Flexible Working Arrangements and work–family dynamics in the hybrid era. Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory, Work–Family Border Theory, and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, the study shows that flexibility is a compromise that affects employees' time management, personal boundaries, and work habits. Continuous digital communication weakens the distinction between personal and professional life. This paper explains the changing ways of work in the Indian socio-cultural context, highlighting the influence of the joint family system and the growing trend of work becoming a routine part of daily life through WhatsApp-based communication. In this study, a framework has been created by combining several ideas, showing how company policies, such as the right to disconnect from work and the freedom to set personal boundaries, can reduce conflicts or stress between hybrid work and family. This helps in understanding FWAs and provides a foundation for future research and policy-making related to them.

Keywords: Flexible Working Arrangements, Work-life Balance, Remote Work, Work Family Dynamics, Hybrid Work, Flexibility Paradox, Digital Telepressure, Boundary Management.

1. Introduction

FWAs, or flexible working arrangements, are becoming an increasingly important part of contemporary employment systems. Conventional beliefs about where, when, and how work is done have been altered by technological developments, globalization, and changing employee expectations. Specifically, remote and hybrid work models have evolved from transient or ancillary agreements to entrenched norms across industries (Allen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Earlier, FWAs were introduced to increase employees' happiness, maintain work–life balance, and improve well-being. In earlier studies, it was seen as a way that helped employees manage both work and family responsibilities easily, because it allowed them to decide their work timings and location themselves (Hill et al., 2008; Kossek et al., 2014). Therefore, FWAs

are often seen as a beneficial arrangement for both employees and organizations. Recent research, however, raises doubts about this hopeful perspective and emphasizes the unforeseen consequences of extended use of flexible and hybrid work arrangements. FWAs are frequently associated with longer workdays, higher job demands, and blurred boundaries between work and family responsibilities; they may not always promote a healthy work-life balance. (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Chung & van der Horst, 2018). This contradiction has been explained in research as the “flexibility paradox,” where, despite having greater autonomy, work intensity increases and opportunities for psychological detachment from work decrease. (Putnam et al., 2014; Mazmanian et al., 2013). The expansion of digital communication technologies has further strengthened this paradox. Due to constant connectivity via email, instant messaging, and other digital collaboration tools, employees feel pressure to remain available and responsive even outside formal working hours. This phenomenon is often referred to as digital telepressure, which weakens employees’ ability to disconnect from work and increases work–family conflict as well as emotional exhaustion (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Santuzzi & Barber, 2018). The hybrid era, which includes both work-from-home and office-based work, has made these issues more persistent rather than resolved. As organizations increasingly adopt permanent hybrid models, the boundaries between work and personal life have become even more blurred. Therefore, it has become important to understand how employees manage and balance their roles, expectations, and resources in flexible work environments. (Raghuram et al., 2019; Kniffin et al., 2021) However, existing studies are fragmented and often focus only on separate outcomes such as productivity, efficiency, or job satisfaction. These studies do not clearly explain what actually connects FWAs with work–family relationships and how this connection operates. In the Indian context, understanding these relationships becomes even more complex. Cultural norms that emphasize collective responsibility, joint family structures, and strong interpersonal relationships interact differently with flexible work practices. In addition, the widespread use of informal digital channels—commonly referred to as the “WhatsApp-ization” of work—has normalized work-related communication outside regular working hours, further blurring the boundaries between work and personal life. (Sarker et al., 2022; Chakraborty & Biswas, 2023). Despite these peculiarities, the Indian socio-cultural context has not been adequately included in major theoretical discussions on flexible work. In this context, the study aims to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that can explain the connection between flexible work arrangements and work–family relationships in the hybrid era. By integrating Social Exchange Theory, work–Family Border Theory, and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, this study attempts to explain the flexibility paradox and its effects—such as boundary management, digital telepressure, and work–family conflict. This theoretical contribution provides a foundation for future empirical research and discussions on sustainable flexible work policies.

2. Research Gap

The current body of research on Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) has largely focused on their effects on employee outcomes, including productivity, job satisfaction, work-life balance, and organizational performance. Although these studies have greatly contributed to the understanding of flexible working practices, they frequently analyze these outcomes separately and depend on single-theory frameworks. As a result, the intricate processes through which FWAs impact work-family dynamics in hybrid work settings are still not well comprehended. Recent studies have brought to light new difficulties related to hybrid work, such as digital telepressure, ongoing connectivity, and the blurring of boundaries. Nevertheless, these challenges have typically been examined as separate issues instead of as related

processes within a cohesive theoretical model. Moreover, there has been a lack of focus on how organizational expectations, boundary management, and resource depletion work together to create the flexibility paradox. A significant limitation in the current literature is the lack of attention given to the socio-cultural context of India. Many theoretical frameworks have emerged from Western contexts and fail to sufficiently address cultural traits like collectivist values, joint family structures, hierarchical organizational dynamics, and the prevalent use of informal digital communication tools that influence employees' work-family experiences in India. To address such gaps, the present study develops an integrated conceptual framework by combining Social Exchange Theory, Work–Family Border Theory, and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. The theory describes how, in the era of hybrid work, Flexible Working Arrangements affect work-family interactions through mechanisms including digital telepressure, boundary erosion, and resource depletion. The study expands on current understanding and offers a thorough basis for next empirical research and policy development by integrating the Indian socio-cultural environment into this theoretical synthesis.

3. Theoretical Framework and the Flexibility Paradox

Theoretical foundations are essential to understand the complex process between Flexible Working Arrangements (FWA) and work-family relationships. It is often observed that flexible work practices are viewed as an organizational benefit; however, recent research indicates that their impact is not limited to flexibility. Rather, the outcomes are influenced by Resource based mechanism, psychological, and deeper social processes. This paper adopts a holistic approach, drawing upon Work–Family Border Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory to explain why the flexibility paradox persists in hybrid work environments.

3.1 The Flexibility Paradox in Hybrid Work

The flexibility paradox refers to a situation in which, despite increased autonomy over work time and location, work demands intensify, and boundaries between work and family life weaken. Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) provide employees with discretion and control, but they also create implicit expectations of extended availability, faster responsiveness, and higher performance. As a result, greater flexibility often comes with increased work expectations, and employees feel the need to be constantly available, respond quickly, and perform at a higher level. The benefits of flexibility can also become a source of stress and boundary erosion. (Putnam et al., 2014; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). In a hybrid work environment, where work and personal time boundaries are already flexible, this paradox becomes more evident as work begins to extend into traditionally non-work domains, such as home or family time. Rather than reducing strain, flexibility may redistribute it across time and space. Employees often compensate for the perceived autonomy by working longer hours, responding to work messages during personal time, and prioritizing organizational demands over family responsibilities. This paradoxical outcome cannot be fully explained through a single theoretical perspective, making an integrated theoretical framework necessary.

3.2 Social Exchange Theory

According to Social Exchange Theory, social relationships are based on exchanges that involve both tangible and intangible benefits, with an expectation of some form of return in the future. This process is similar to economic transactions, where individuals seek to maximize benefits and balance or minimize costs and sacrifices. Key elements of this theory include reciprocity, in which intangible favors are expected to be returned at some point in the future, even though the form or timing of return may not be clearly specified. In addition, power can emerge from unequal exchanges, and the idea that individuals

compare the outcomes of their relationships with their expectations and available alternatives influences relationship satisfaction or continuation (Blau, 1964). When flexibility is offered as a discretionary benefit rather than a formal right, employees may feel that they should reciprocate through increased effort, higher commitment, and greater availability. In a hybrid work environment, exchange relationships often manifest as an unspoken expectation that employees remain available beyond formal working hours. Employees may voluntarily extend their work time to demonstrate their organizational commitment and loyalty, even in the absence of explicit managerial pressure (Chung, 2022). As a result, flexibility becomes a conditional benefit that gradually increases work intensity rather than autonomy. Social Exchange Theory explains that FWAs, even when implemented with supportive intent, can produce outcomes such as additional responsibilities and weakened work boundaries. When employees feel the need to “repay” the benefit of flexibility, it becomes a means of self-imposed work extension, directly contributing to the flexibility paradox.

3.3 Work Family Border Theory

Work–Family Border Theory focuses on how individuals manage, negotiate, and balance the boundaries between their work and family responsibilities. According to this theory, work and family exist as distinct domains, which are separated by temporal, psychological, and physical boundaries that individuals continuously regulate in their daily lives. (Clark, 2000). The strength and permeability of these borders determine the extent to which individuals can transition between roles without conflict. Flexible and hybrid work arrangements significantly weaken the boundaries between work and family because the line of separation and spatial distance between work and home are reduced. When employees work from home and use digital technologies, they are required to engage in continuous boundary management. Frequent interruptions, messages received after working hours, and the simultaneous demands of multiple roles make it difficult to maintain clear distinctions between work and family responsibilities. (Kossek et al., 2012). In the Indian context, where joint family systems and shared living spaces are common, boundary management between work and family becomes even more complex. Collective responsibilities and family expectations coexist with organizational demands, increasing the likelihood of role conflict. Therefore, work–Family Border Theory helps explain that when an individual’s control over boundaries is limited or uneven, flexible work arrangements can intensify the conflict between work and family.

3.4 Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory provides a complementary perspective, focusing on how individuals acquire, protect, and utilize valuable resources such as energy, time, attention, and emotional capacity. According to the COR theory, stress arises when these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficient to meet situational demands (Hobfoll, 1989). FWAs are often viewed as resource-enhancing arrangements, but a hybrid workplace can actually accelerate resource depletion. Digital telepressure, continuous connectivity, and blurred boundaries demand cognitive and emotional resources, leaving fewer resources available for recovery and family life (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Over time, this leads to fatigue and reduced well-being. Therefore, the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory helps explain why flexibility does not automatically lead to a balanced work and personal life. Without adequate organizational safeguards and individual boundary management strategies, FWAs can trigger cycles of resource loss, which further reinforce the negative outcomes associated with the flexibility paradox.

3.5 Toward an Integrated Theoretical Perspective

Work–Family Border Theory, Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, and Social Exchange Theory together help explain how flexible work arrangements (FWAs) operate in hybrid work environments.

Social Exchange Theory highlights the social obligations and expectations associated with flexibility, Work–Family Border Theory explains the erosion of role boundaries between work and family, and COR Theory clarifies the depletion of individual resources. The interaction of these mechanisms demonstrates that flexibility can both empower employees and place additional strain on them.

4. Digital Telepressure and the Indian Context

4.1 Digital Telepressure in Hybrid Work Environments

The growth of flexible and hybrid work arrangements has coincided with an increase in the use of digital communication technology. The perceived need to react quickly to work-related signals across digital platforms is known as "digital telepressure." While these tools help with efficiency, coordination, and spatial flexibility, they also contribute to an increasing amount of it. According to Barber and Santuzzi (2015), telepressure is a psychological experience influenced by peer behavior, organizational norms, and managerial expectations rather than just a technical problem. In a hybrid work context, digital telepressure is intensified by the absence of clearly defined temporal boundaries. Employees often experience pressure to remain constantly reachable through emails, collaborative platforms, and messaging applications, even outside formal working hours. This Sustained connectivity reduces opportunities for psychological detachment from work, which is essential for recovery and well-being (Santuzzi & Barber, 2018). Progressively, the inability to psychologically disengage contributes to heightened stress, work–family conflict, and emotional exhaustion. Importantly, implicit expectations rather than explicit demands are the main way that telepressure works. Workers self-impose work extensions as a result of internalizing responsiveness and availability rules. This relationship is consistent with the flexibility paradox, which holds that having control over work schedules paradoxically leads to increased work engagement and decreased control over personal time.

4.2 Boundary Erosion and technology - Mediated Work

Digital telepressure is the internal driving force and psychological stress that compels employees to repeatedly check and respond immediately to work-related messages on digital devices. It blurs the boundaries between work and personal life and, despite technology being developed to provide flexibility, gives rise to stress, physical and mental fatigue, and poor sleep. The origin of digital telepressure lies in the “autonomy paradox,” where technological tools designed to provide employees with flexibility and independence actually keep them continuously tethered to work. This creates an underlying expectation of constant availability, which negatively impacts employees’ physical health and mental well-being. Digital telepressure is a significant factor in the rapid erosion of boundaries between work and family domains. The physical division between the home and the workplace served as a natural boundary in established work systems, allowing for seamless transitions between various job responsibilities. However, in remote and hybrid work environments, this physical separation disappears. As a result, employees must actively construct and maintain boundaries between work and family life, which often becomes challenging due to constant digital connectivity.

Technology-mediated communication disrupts these boundaries because it enables work-related interactions at any time and place. Notifications, instant messages, and virtual meetings intervene in family spaces and personal routines, making it difficult for individuals to maintain clear role distinctions (Derks et al., 2015). As a result, employees frequently engage in role-switching, which increases cognitive load and emotional strain. Boundary erosion becomes particularly problematic when employees lack work autonomy over communication norms or when organizational cultures reward constant availability. In

such contexts, flexibility becomes conditional on responsiveness and accountability, reinforcing patterns of work overload and ultimately undermining work–life balance.

4.3 The Indian Socio-Cultural Context of Hybrid Work

The effects of digital telepressure and boundary erosion are shaped by broader socio- cultural conditions, making context a crucial element in theoretical inquiry. In the Indian context, work–family dynamics are influenced by cultural norms that emphasize interdependence, shared responsibilities, and collectivism. Joint family structures, which remain prevalent in many parts of India, create living environments where multiple family roles coexist within the same physical space, thereby making the management of work–life boundaries more complex. Although joint family systems can provide emotional and instrumental support, in hybrid work contexts, they can also intensify role demands. Employees working from home are often expected to be available for family responsibilities alongside professional obligations. This overlap complicates boundary management and increases the likelihood of work–family interference, particularly when digital work demands are urgent or unpredictable.

4.4 Moderating Effect of Organizational and Cultural Factors

In this context, it can be stated that organizational practices and cultural norms together influence the impact of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) on work–family balance. Fear of negative evaluation, respect for hierarchy, and strong interpersonal relationships may discourage employees from establishing clear boundaries or disengaging from work-related communication. Additionally, the absence of formal policies regulating after-hours communication further strengthens digital telepressure.

Strong interpersonal ties, supportive family structures, and shared caregiving obligations may deter workers from setting clear boundaries or disengaging from work-related communication. But in other circumstances, cultural elements could also operate as a buffer. The degree to which people can exercise control over their work-life boundaries and the extent to which firms recognize and validate employees' ability to disconnect determine how successful these protective factors are. This study highlights the necessity of context-sensitive theoretical frameworks by placing border erosion and digital telepressure within the Indian sociocultural context.

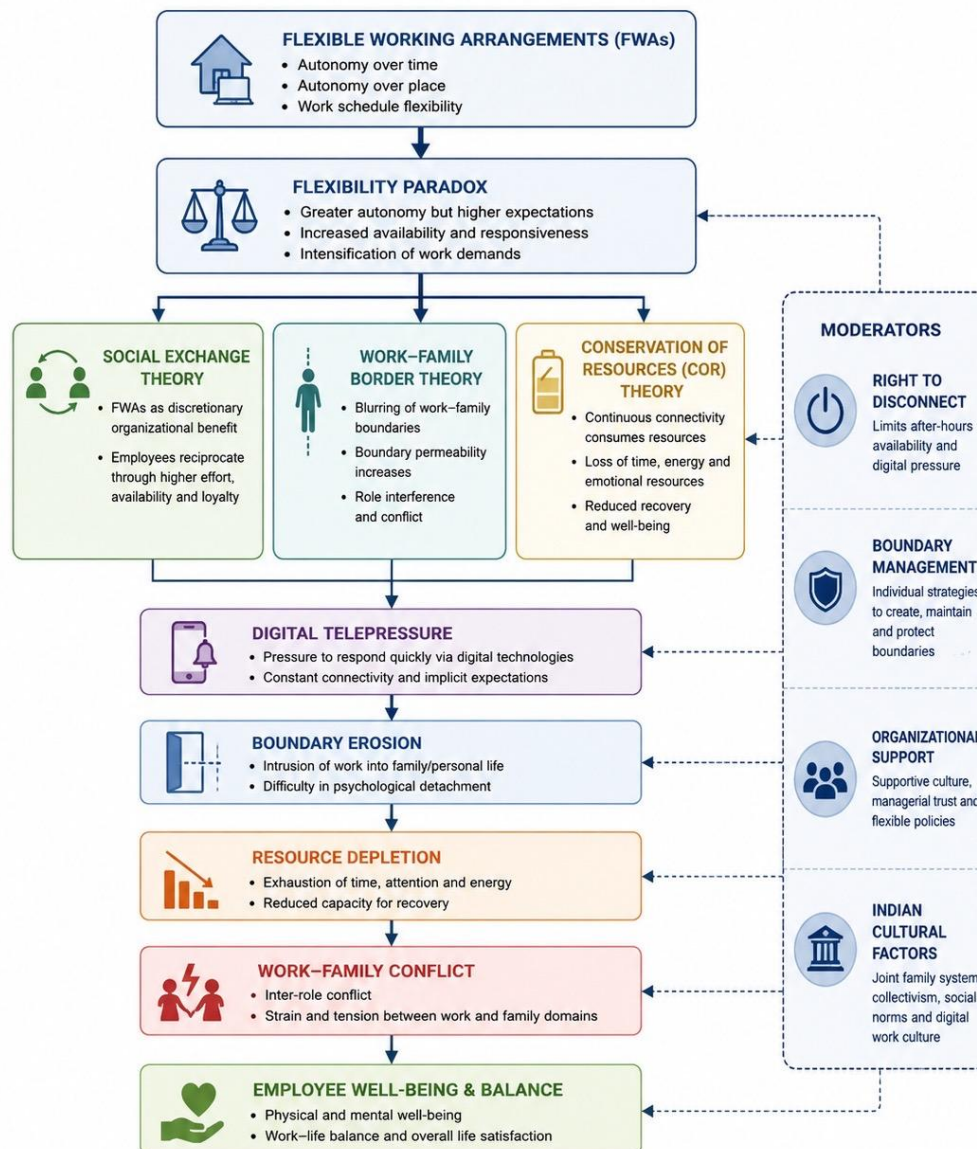
5. Integrated Conceptual Structure and Implications

5.1 An Integrated Conceptual Framework

This paper recommends an integrated conceptual framework to explain the relationship between Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) and work–family dynamics in the hybrid era. Rather than treating flexibility as a standardized benefit, the framework conceptualizes FWAs as a dynamic process shaped by social exchange relationships, boundary negotiation, and individual resource management. FWAs are a Developmental process shaped by boundary negotiation, social exchange relationships, and individual resource management. At the core of this framework lies the flexibility paradox, whereby increased autonomy over work time and location simultaneously intensifies work demands while weakening boundaries. Social Exchange Theory helps explain that when employees perceive FWAs as discretionary organizational provisions, implicit expectations of reciprocity emerge. Employees may respond to this flexibility by increasing their effort and availability, thereby internalizing the pressures of work intensification. Work–Family Border Theory complements this explanation by highlighting that hybrid work arrangements erode physical, psychological, and temporal boundaries between work and family domains. Digital communication technologies function as boundary-crossing mechanisms, allowing work-related intrusions into personal spaces and time. When boundary control is limited, employees

experience role interference and face difficulties transitioning between work and family responsibilities. Conservation of Resource theory strengthens the structural framework by illustrating how continuous connectivity and boundary erosion contribute to resource exhaustion. Energy, time, and emotional capacity are progressively consumed, reducing employees' ability to recover from persistent work demands and engage meaningfully in family life. The way these mechanisms interact explains why FWA does not constantly produce positive work-life outcomes. Digital telepressure plays a significant role as a mediating mechanism linking FWA to work-family conflict telepressure.

Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework Linking Flexible Working Arrangements and Work-Family Dynamics in the Hybrid Era



Source: Developed by the author based on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), Work-Family Border Theory (Clark, 2000), Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and related literature.

5:2 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on flexible working arrangements (FWA) by expanding an integrated analytical framework that clarifies the evolving relationship between work-family

dynamics and flexibility in the hybrid era. Previous research has broadly focused on fragmented aspects such as productivity, work-life balance, and job satisfaction. In contrast, this paper demonstrates that the effect of flexibility is influenced by resource-based mechanisms, interconnected social and psychological factors.

Firstly, the research broadens social exchange theory by examining how flexible working arrangement, viewed as organizational advantages, create unspoken norms of reciprocity. Employee may respond to flexibility by increasing their work effort and availability, thus leading to a rise in work intensification. Additionally, the study enhances the deployment of Work-Family Border Theory by indicating how hybrid work environment temporal, weaken physical, and psychological boundaries between family and work domains. the framework shows that the effectiveness boundary management has become of critical determinate of employee well-being in digitally connected workplaces (Clarks,2000; Kossek et.al., 2012).

third, the Conservation of Resource (COR) Theory provides More-in depth understanding of how continuous connectivity, digital telepressure, and role interference contribute to resource depletion. this outlook explain why flexibility does not affect automatically result in improved work-life balance and may alternatively create cycles of exhaustion and stress. (Hobfoll,1989; Hobfoll et al; 2018).

moreover, the present study introduces digital telepressure as a theoretical mechanism linking FWAs with work family role conflict by positioning tele pressure within the expanded flexibility paradox, the conceptual model explains how technology - mediated work practice can transform flexibility into a source of pressure (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Santuzzi & Barber, 2018).

5.3 Practical Implications

The study offers various practical implications for managers, organizations and policymakers seeking to execute sustainable flexible working arrangements (FWAs). whereas flexibility provides employees with enhanced autonomy over work location and time, this study indicates that such arrangements can also generate unanticipated consequences, including work family role conflict, digital telepressure and work intensification (Kelliher & Anderson,2010; Chung & van der Horst, 2018). Organizations should recommendations move beyond offering focus and flexibility on creating supportive structure that feasibility employee to manage work family boundaries. developing clear communication norms, limiting non-urgent after hour communications and encouraging a healthy right to disconnect culture can reduce the pressure of continuous availability (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; kinffin et al., 2021). Managers should also promote to appraise employee performance based on result rather than online visibility and constant responsiveness. Additionally mental health initiatives, employee well-being program and digital wellness training can support healthier work-life boundary and reduce employee resources. (Hobfoll et. al., 2018). From a policy perspective, organizations and government should consider applying formal guidelines regarding employee recovery time and after hour communication. Such measure can contribute to eco-friendly hybrid work systems that support both organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. (Eurofound,2021; ILO, 2023).

5.4 Conclusion

Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) have become a key characteristic of modern employment systems, especially in the hybrid work landscape shaped by the post-pandemic era (Allen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021). While flexible work practices are commonly linked to enhanced autonomy and better work-life balance, this research reveals that their effects are more intricate than typically believed. The flexibility paradox indicates that increased autonomy can also lead to heightened work intensity, greater

digital connectivity, and elevated work–family conflict (Putnam et al., 2014; Mazmanian et al., 2013). By uniting Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), Work–Family Border Theory (Clark, 2000), and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018), this study formulates a comprehensive theoretical model that illustrates how flexible work arrangements impact employees' work–family interactions. The model emphasizes that digital telepressure, blurred work–family boundaries, and ongoing resource depletion serve as critical mechanisms through which flexible work setups influence employee well-being (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Santuzzi & Barber, 2018). One major aspect of this research is the integration of the Indian socio-cultural environment into the theoretical framework. Elements like collectivist values, joint family dynamics, and the rising prevalence of technology-driven communication affect employees' experiences in a hybrid work setting and necessitate more attention in both academic research and organizational policy (Raghuram et al., 2019; Kniffin et al., 2021). The study further recommends that companies should create supportive policies, such as boundary management techniques, digital wellness programs, and the right to disengage, rather than just providing flexibility. In hybrid workplaces, these initiatives can support long-term employee well-being, improve work–family balance, and lessen digital telepressure (Chung, 2022; Chung & van der Horst, 2020). Furthermore, this theoretical framework constitutes a framework for subsequent empirical investigations. In order to better understand the long-term effects of flexible work arrangements on employee well-being, organizational effectiveness, and sustainable hybrid work practices, researchers may validate the suggested model across various industries, occupational groups, and cultural contexts.

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